

## When Architects Run Your Building

Susanne Schindler • Apr 27, 2016



The Architects Housing entrance, 2015 | Photo by Susanne Schindler

This magazine generally limits its focus to the five boroughs, but occasionally a project in the New York metro area — a megacity the size of two-and-a-half Connecticut, stretching from Allentown to New Haven — draws our interest beyond city lines. The Architects Housing, in Trenton, NJ, is one such place.

Architect, writer, and [Urban Omnibus](#) columnist **Susanne Schindler** guides us through this unusual senior home in the New Jersey capital, which was once thought to be a new paradigm in housing. Its design was widely praised; one contemporary critic projected that the process of its creation could be an “alternative to the red tape and bureaucracy usually involved in producing publicly sponsored architecture.” In the years since its 1979 opening, The Architects

Housing has largely faded into obscurity. To those who call it home, however, it remains as clean and bright as the day it was finished — thanks in no small part to the folks who run it: architects. -H.G.

Trenton is often associated with a phrase affixed in large letters on a bridge across the Delaware, visible to anyone passing in a Northeast Corridor train: “Trenton Makes, The World Takes.” Built to indicate pride, the message now suggests resignation. The city’s role as a center of steel, cable, rubber, and porcelain production came to an end by the mid-1970s, and its population has declined from a high of 128,000 in the 1950s to 84,000 today. The only constants, in the New Jersey capital, seem to be poverty, racial segregation, crime, underperforming schools, and declining property values.<sup>[1]</sup>

Of course there have been repeated planning efforts to bring Trenton back to economic stability, from urban renewal in the 1950s to Model Cities in the 1960s to incentives in the 1990s to cajole the capital’s thousands of state employees to live near their offices. Yet over the past 30 years the majority of investment has been either in (untaxed) facilities for state agencies and higher education, or in (mostly untaxed) deed-, income-, and price-restricted — so-called affordable — housing.<sup>[2]</sup> The most recent efforts to re-launch Trenton have been Plan 250, a soft visioning process, and Restoring Trenton, a hard inventory of abandoned properties.<sup>[3]</sup> Based on this new, publicly accessible database, the mayoral administration of Eric Jackson, in office since 2014, has begun to fine delinquent owners and seize, bundle and redistribute properties for development. The aim is to stabilize housing prices and rebuild the city’s tax base. The strategy recalls New York’s policy for getting tax-delinquent buildings that had fallen into city ownership back onto the private market.



The Architects Housing, rear facade facing the Assunpink Creek during completion in 1979 | Vereen Archive

On the one hand, this isn't surprising: the scale of disinvestment in Trenton much more closely resembles New York 40 years ago than New York today. On the other, the urban resurgence driven by the ceaseless need to increase property values (and, thereby, property taxes) has produced its own inequities. Isn't there an opportunity in Trenton to revise this model, one that implicitly devalues low-income residents and non-profit housing?

It turns out that Trenton was the site of a novel approach to housing development in the 1970s. It has largely escaped broader notice but prompts us today to rethink not only the entrenched relationships of municipal government and real estate, but those between developer and architect, and between schools of architecture and the trade's professional organizations.



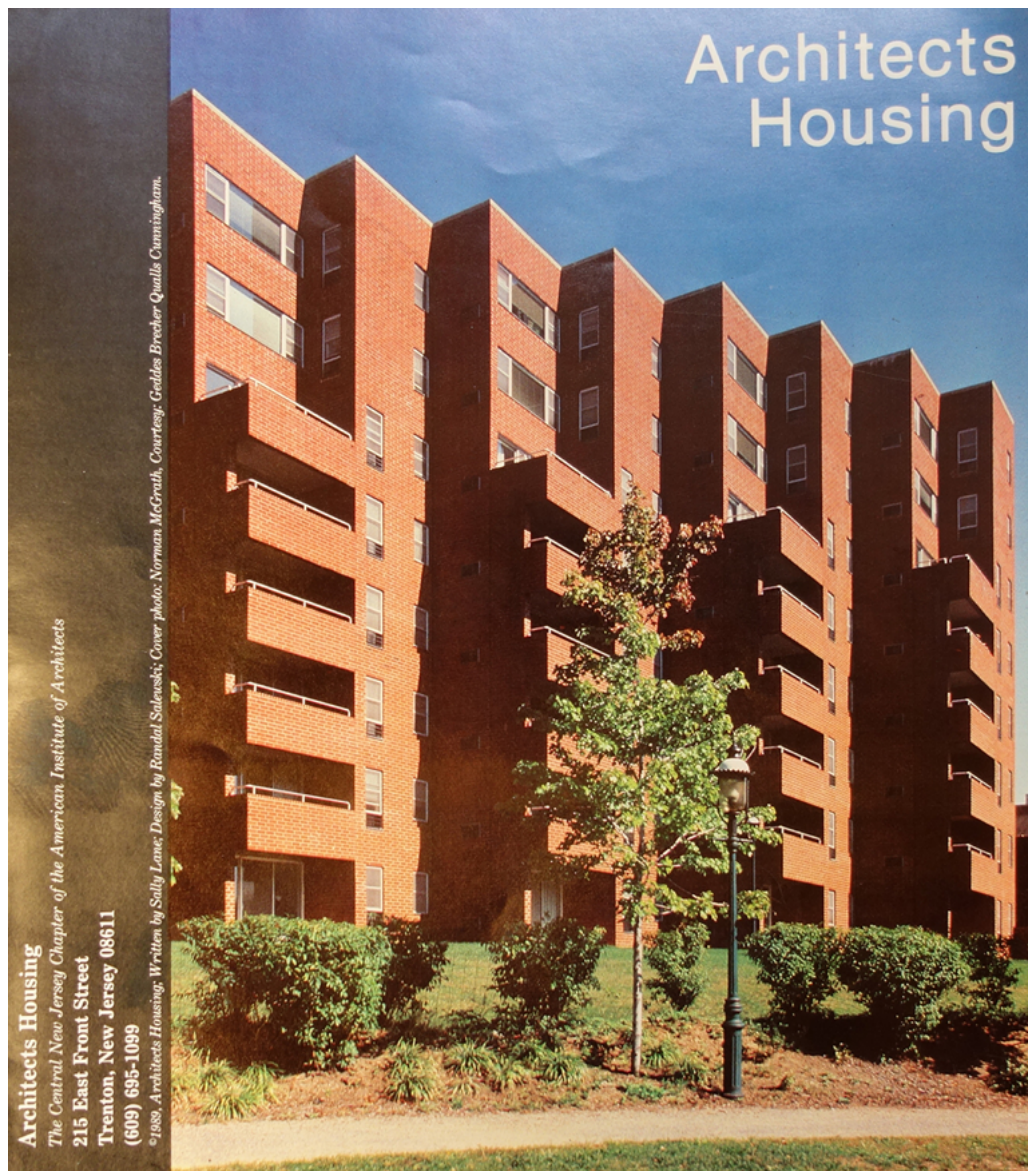
The Architects Housing, front facade, 1979 | Vereen Archive

The building, whose two wings, one of five, the other of eight stories, merge at an acute angle, would stand out even if it weren't in Trenton. The punched brick facade, with a subtly changing fenestration from lower to higher floors, drew me in when I spotted it from nearby East State Street, Trenton's commercial corridor. I wondered what it was. Approaching across a parking lot, I found, to the left of the entrance, the words "The Architects Housing" applied in chrome letters. I had spent too much time thinking about the discursive opposition between "architecture" (so-called design) and "housing" (in its crudest terms, shelter) in the United States to just pass this by. Architects Housing? What was this supposed to mean? All housing is designed by architects. Some housing is built for architects. Architects housing whom or what? An apostrophe was oddly missing. The phrase struck me as equally strange, if not at all resigned, as the one communicated from the bridge over the Delaware.

The building, it turns out, was developed by the 501c3 non-profit Architects Housing Company, Inc. Set up by members of the Central Chapter of the New Jersey Society of Architects (now AIA) in 1974, the group sought to demonstrate that architects could not only design, but develop and operate better housing than governments or developers. To this end, it organized a design competition with a brief that corresponded to federal housing guidelines for senior housing. The program specified 123 one-bedroom apartments for the elderly plus common spaces. It was



supplemented by research on independent living for the elderly that had been conducted at Princeton University's School of Architecture and Urban Planning.<sup>[4]</sup> The City of Trenton, seeking sponsors for cleared urban renewal sites, provided the land.



Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham marketing brochure for Architects Housing, front cover, 1989 | Courtesy Bob Geddes



Architects Housing, circled in this 1988 aerial photograph of central Trenton, was completed in 1979 at the total construction cost of just under \$3.7 million, or \$29,100 for each of the 602 sq. ft. units. Twelve per cent of the apartments have special features for the handicapped. The structural system-masonry bearing walls with concrete plank floors, is finished on the interior with gypsum wall board and VCT flooring. The red brick exterior blends well with the adjacent historic neighborhood.

*Photo: The Leigh Photographic Group,  
Courtesy: New Jersey General Services Administration*

Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham marketing brochure for Architects Housing, back cover, 1989 | Courtesy Bob Geddes

The jury, comprising the who's-who of the New York City housing establishment at the time, voted unanimously to award the project to the Princeton-based firm Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham from a field of 27 submissions.<sup>[5]</sup> The partner-in-charge, Bob Geddes, also happened to be the School of Architecture's dean. The 12.6-acre site had already been cleared and was donated by the city, which would receive a percentage of income in lieu of property taxes.<sup>[6]</sup> Construction and permanent financing for the \$5.2 million project was provided by the New Jersey Housing Finance Agency through the sale of 40-year tax-exempt bonds; and rent subsidies for the residents were secured through project-based Section 8 funds.<sup>[7]</sup> In this way, the Architects Housing was built and opened in 1979.



The process was much lauded at the time. Paul D. Spreiregen dedicated more pages of his 1980 book *Design Competitions* to “Trenton Housing for the Elderly” than he did to far more prominent designs arrived at through competition processes, including the Sydney Opera House and the Centre Pompidou. “The competition produced such fine results and was conducted so intelligently that one wonders if it might not be an alternative to the red tape and bureaucracy usually involved in producing publicly sponsored architecture,” he wrote. “The whole experience can really speak for itself, so we will let it do just that.”<sup>[8]</sup>

...

Of course, it hasn’t much spoken for itself. I had never heard of architects acting as sponsors of housing. Labor unions, yes. Pension funds, yes. Churches, yes. But architects acting not as architect-developers, in the vein of Alloy or Gluck+ today, but intent on managing and operating non-profit housing in the long-term? Furthermore, in an age where “competitions” have generally been maligned for producing pie-in-the-sky proposals, or are equated, wrongly, with developer-driven RFP processes, this should serve as a reminder that a competition process can produce excellent results.<sup>[9]</sup>



Images of The Architects Housing can be found throughout the building. A coaster celebrating the building’s 35th anniversary sits on a resident’s coffee table. | Photo by Susanne Schindler



The annual Architects Housing wall calendar on display in the lobby | Photo by Susanne Schindler

Process aside, The Architects Housing counters two entrenched housing narratives. First, the project was conceived of and realized after 1973, the year typically discussed as marking the end of public housing, due to what would be an 18-month moratorium on federal subsidies for low- and moderate-income housing imposed by President Nixon that January. When the administration subsequently introduced a new housing policy, it was based on vouchers — subsidies to tenants, not developers — and block grants to states and cities for more broadly

construed “community development.” This rupture was severely felt at the time and has often been cited as one cause of the end of the social engagement of architects. The Trenton project, the magazine *Progressive Architecture* argued, was a counter-point: “The social commitment of architects may have declined sadly since the 1960s, but a few tangible results are still coming to completion.”<sup>[10]</sup> Whatever your definition of “social commitment,” The Architects Housing reminds us that it cannot translate into built work without adequate funding.

Second, The Architects Housing belies the trope that Modernist and high-rise design in low-income housing were definitively out. (Pruitt-Igoe, demolished in 1972, was and remains a symbol of the conventional wisdom.) Yet in Trenton we have a mid-rise building, which in its surroundings would qualify as high-rise, that’s not in the least incompatible with its low-rise surroundings.<sup>[11]</sup> Yes, elevator buildings continued to be a design option for senior public housing even in the age of New Urbanism and HOPE VI. But the low- and mid-rise mantra has stayed strong throughout the country nonetheless.

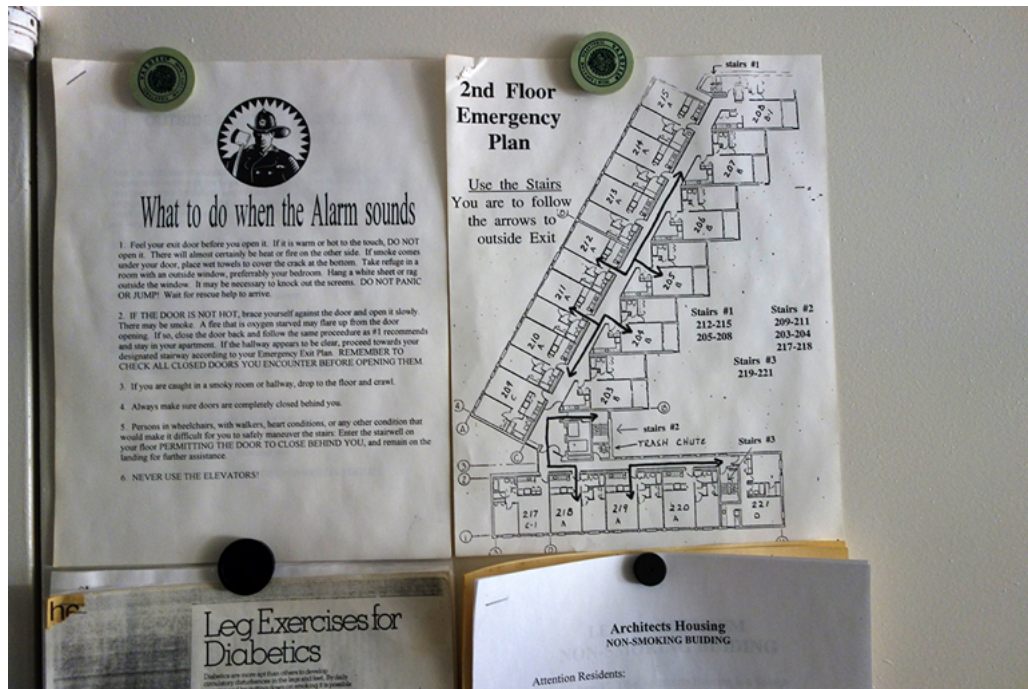
Perhaps the most surprising and important thing about The Architects Housing is that it is still owned and operated by the original nonprofit. Unlike so many other buildings financed through similar mechanisms, it has neither “gone market rate” nor been sold to another entity. I asked Bob Russell, a partner at Holt Morgan Russell Architects in Princeton who has been on the five-person board for 30 years, to explain. He stresses that the group is committed to keeping the project true to its original purpose, and has, over the years, turned down several offers from tax-credit syndicators seeking a property to refinance. Instead, in 2010, the building was refinanced with the original mortgagor to pay for new elevators, windows, and other physical improvements. It will remain income- and price-restricted as senior housing for another 30 years.

I asked Russell what, if anything, makes architects better managers. He describes his group as “enlightened owners” who know “what’s good for the building.” Russell explains that, as architects, his board members can better evaluate options for necessary repairs (i.e. the concrete block shrank while the brick facade expanded, requiring the introduction of horizontal joints) or how to add uses not part of the original brief (i.e. the kitchen on the ground floor). Architects may be known as lousy businesspeople, he jokes, but TAH is a non-profit.<sup>[12]</sup>



View of Trenton from an upper floor | Photo by Susanne Schindler

That the building remains in exemplary shape likely has to do not only with the commitment of the owners, but with the manager, who has been on board since the opening. Fred Vereen, now in his eighties, runs the ship with an obvious sense of pride. Vereen got his start in community development in the mid-'60s, working on racially integrated housing in nearby Lawrenceville, and seems keenly aware of the uniqueness of this building and its mission. He understands the opportunities the building affords, and he allows residents to take charge, within limits: the day-lit corridors are furnished with diverse plantings and used as seating areas; the small spaces created by the geometric shift in plan at the doors to the west-facing apartments are personalized with door mats and seasonal ornaments; the shared spaces at the ground level, both on the interior and the adjacent exterior, boast unexpected artworks and framed photographs, and connect the building and its residents to what is going on outside.<sup>[13]</sup> The one apartment I was able to visit was in impeccable shape. The architects had configured the interior spaces to maximize connections or ensure privacy. Thanks to a pass-through to the living area, the kitchen received daylight; a small hallway between bathroom and bedroom shielded the latter from view.



The Architects Housing floor plan, on the lobby bulletin board | Photo by Susanne Schindler

What about the architect who designed the building? Over lunch last December, Bob Geddes, now in his nineties, was sharp, articulate, and unapologetic about the social goals of modern architecture. As he sketched the parti of his proposal as it relates to other parts of Trenton, he insisted that a separation between good design and the so-called social responsibility of the profession makes no sense. It was under his leadership as the founding dean of Princeton's School of Architecture and Urban Planning that sociologists and architects collaborated, that community design storefronts were set up not only in Trenton but in Hoboken and Newark, that research was coordinated with state institutions, and conferences organized on issues including "Cooperation of the Private and Public Sectors in Housing." Asked about the conflict of interest entering a competition that he helped to set up, he shrugged and laughed. "Wouldn't it have been strange if we hadn't won?"





The competition results published in the Trentonian, 1975 | Vereen Archive

The question that remains is why The Architects Housing, specifically set up to demonstrate a model process, and still operating under the original goals 40 years later, was never replicated. The main issue, both building manager Vereen and board member Russell say, is that in an age of tax credits and shrinking congressional appropriations for low-income housing, putting

together the financing for another project became too complicated. Architect and founding board-member Elizabeth Moynahan, who is also in her nineties and attended the Harvard Design School with Geddes during the Truman administration, puts it more bluntly: "You couldn't do it now. With HUD, we had a pot of gold. Then the population got stingy." She also adds: "The economy got better. Architects started getting jobs again." In short, there was no more need for architects to think outside of their established roles as service providers. In the 1990s, Architects Housing considered expanding at a handful of nearby sites, including the Roebling complex in Trenton, an industrial site in Hightstown, and a site in Princeton.<sup>[14]</sup> In the end, those alternate visions were too costly, and the board already had one building to take care of.



# 10/29/89 Success of pioneer housing for elderly yet to be copied

By ANNE LEVIN  
Staff Writer

TRENTON — For the elderly and handicapped residents of Architects Housing, the red brick building along the Assunpink Creek, it is more than the weekly visits by a doctor and nurse, the monthly trips to places like Atlantic City, the quarterly birthday parties and the weekend breakfasts in the community room.

It is a feeling of light and open space, of architectural integrity and aesthetics that makes this pioneering project in subsidized housing different from others. There is no institutionalized feeling here at this structure on Douglass Square, on the edge of the Mill Hill Historic District.

A flower and vegetable garden behind the building is the pride of its residents. Plants are everywhere, soaking up the ample light that streams through the windows. There is art on the walls. Little nooks and recessed corridors please the eye, and a circular sitting room facing Douglass Square is nearly always filled with residents, who enjoy surveying the activities on the square.

Yet Architects Housing, celebrating its 10th anniversary this month, was not a multi-million-

dollar luxury building. It is a subsidized housing project that was completed for just under \$3.7 million, or \$29,000 for each 602 square-foot unit. The project began life 10 years ago with a unique mission.

The first subsidized housing project in the United States to be developed and managed by a local association of architects, Architects Housing was planned as an ongoing demonstration project. The Central New Jersey Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, AIA, made up of architects from Mercer, Middlesex, Hunterdon and Somerset counties, wanted to show that it didn't have to cost a fortune to build an interesting, well-designed structure aimed primarily at the elderly.

The chapter wanted to provide low-cost housing and act as architect, client, owner and landlord. To do so, they established Architects Housing as a non-profit corporation in 1974. The group bought a 1.26-acre urban renewal site from the City of Trenton for \$1, and received federal rent assistance from the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency.

A design competition was launched and the Princeton architectural firm of Geddes Brecher

• see HOUSING, AA2



Staff photo by Herman Laesker

Fred Vereen Jr., left, administrative manager of Architects Housing, visits with Walter Paul, a 10-year resident of the building.

Perhaps there was a hesitation, all along, for a group of architects to professionalize a labor of love. Architect Laura Citron, a colleague of Russell's who has been on the board for 15 years — a short time relative to her peers — explains that the board meets every month or two to decide on maintenance, financial, and other matters. But all board members have full-time jobs, and if they worked full-time on managing housing, something would have to give. The building's biggest challenge these days is maintaining full occupancy; while a waitlist was typical for many years, options for senior care have expanded. Many newer facilities enable a gradual transition from independent to assisted living to nursing care, which The Architects Housing does not. Just a few vacant units put the revenue stream at risk.

Walking around and through the building conveys such a sense of professionalism and sensitivity to detail in all regards — even the recently installed new toilet paper holders in the restrooms were atypical, a model I had never seen — that there must be something here that we not only can, but need to learn. It's not enough to simply assert the anomaly. Yes, architects are still architects if they become developers and managers. Yes, architectural institutions need to link research and practice. And most fundamentally, yes, we need to rethink development models. What better way to reframe the social engagement of architects than the idea that “what's good for a building,” as board-member Russell put it, may also be what's good for people — and cities? Not just in Trenton.

- [1] This article has been long in the making and I would like to thank all, besides those mentioned in the text, who have contributed to my thinking on Trenton, largely shaped by my experience living in nearby, yet very-different Princeton. These include Trenton resident Russell Clayton, a crossing guard at my children's school; Purcell Carson, filmmaker and lead of the [Trenton Project](#); the Princeton Mellon Initiative in Architecture, Urbanism, and the Humanities which hosted a fabulous symposium on New Jersey Urbanism in 2015 (all lectures can be viewed [here](#)); as well as Marty Johnson and Julia Taylor of [Isles, Inc.](#), a community development corporation in Trenton. Finally, I am also indebted to Zillow, which supplemented my physical daytime visits to Trenton with multiple virtual tours and gave me a sense of the merciless rationale of the metrics, language, and imagery of real-estate.
- [2] As housing expert Alan Mallach pointed out to me several years ago, the term “affordable housing” bears a certain irony in Trenton since often the rents of subsidized new construction are higher than those found in existing market-rate housing.
- [3] Restoring Trenton was conducted under the auspices of the Trenton Neighborhood Restoration Campaign, a collaborative of stakeholders that have been working together since 2011 to reduce the number of vacant and abandoned properties. In partnership the City of Trenton, Isles led the first comprehensive field survey of every parcel in the city, as others have done in Detroit and elsewhere. The results of that survey show that approximately 21 percent of properties are vacant, many of them abandoned.
- [4] This research, by Architect Tom Schumacher and sociologist Galen Cranz, was co-funded by the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, and later published as *The Built Environment for the Elderly: A Planning And Design Study, Focusing on Independent Living for Elderly Tenants* (Princeton: Princeton University, School of Architecture and Urban Planning, 1975).
- [5] The jury consisted of: William Wilson of Gruzen & Partners, responsible for residential projects including Chatham Towers in Lower Manhattan; Ted Liebman, chief architect of the Urban Development Corporation, which was running the Roosevelt Island competition the same year; Samuel Brody, partner of Davis Brody, designers of seminal New York City housing developments, including Riverbend and Waterside Plaza; David Todd, designer of many NYCHA projects as well as, in 1977, the Mitchell-Lama building Manhattan Plaza; Sandra Howell, PhD; and Harold Edelman, partner at Edelman Salzman, well-known for their brownstone renovation work in the Upper West Side Urban Renewal Area.
- [6] According to building manager Bob Vereen, The Architects Housing pays 6.28 percent of its gross shelter rents (the Department of Housing and Urban Development's term for what remains from rent revenue after utilities, trash, etc. is deducted) to the City of Trenton in lieu of property taxes. This is a typical arrangement, and one that HUD requires before agreeing to any deal.

- [7] This simple, single-stream financing process was not unusual then, but seems surprisingly simple from today's vantage point. These days, funding affordable housing typically involves many more players and a variety of tax incentives. Project-based Section 8 funds — that is, operating subsidies tied to a building, not to a resident, as Section 8 vouchers are — are no longer available for new construction. More information on the financing is contained in Urban Land Institute, Project Reference File, Vol. 10, No. 17, October-December 1980.
- [8] Accordingly, Spreiregen included the unabridged program, press release, and jury report, likely in the hope that it would be directly imitated. (Paul D. Spreiregen, *Design Competitions*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1980. Quote from page 100.)
- [9] In terms of architect-initiated competitions, Via Verde comes to mind; the celebrated Bronx project resulted from “New Housing New York,” a competition co-organized by the AIA of New York and the NYC Department of Housing Development and Preservation (HPD) in 2005. But to enter, architects needed a developer to partner with, as is typical of HPD's Request for Proposals, and even if design was more highly weighted than usual, economic criteria and prior experience tends to tip the balance in awarding the commission. In contrast, the AHC's process engaged an independent jury to select a proposal based on the proposal's architectural merit, not on the credibility of a developer's funding sources.
- [10] David Morton, “Competition for Longevity: Architects Housing, Trenton, NJ,” *Progressive Architecture*, August 1981: 69-71. Quote from page 69.
- [11] Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham are the architects of some of New Jersey's best modern architecture, from the cafeteria and extension of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, to Stockton State College in the New Jersey Pinelands, to Hill Hall at Rutgers University-Newark. A new appreciation of this work is making itself felt, including a [Docomomo Tour](#) Day of the Newark campus planned for October 2016. New Jersey's most relevant one-hundred buildings, including many late-twentieth-century works, selected and commented by Gabrielle Esperdy, will be accessible on the Society of Architectural Historians' [Archipedia](#) by late 2016.
- [12] Architect Elizabeth Moynahan has been part of the board since its inception. She tells a slightly different story—and one that does, in fact, show that architects can be very good business people. She recalls that with \$1,000,000 in reserve, they had nothing to gain from being bought.
- [13] I am not the first to write on the central role of Vereen in the success of The Architects Housing. Virtually every article published since its opening features Vereen as the man who makes this happen. See, for example, Ellen Rand, “The Fruits of a Bicentennial Project,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 1980: 275; or Thomas Hine, “A Design to Prove the Rule,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 8, 1980; Anne Levin, “Success of pioneer housing project for elderly yet to be copied,” *Trenton Times*, October 29, 1989.
- [14] There have been multiple partial projects at the former wire-cable factory's grounds since its closing in 1975, including by federal and state agencies. The first residential uses are now coming in the form of the “[Roebbing Lofts](#)” as part of the “Roebbing Center” by HHG developers, which secured financing this February, and broke ground in March.

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