

The Charlotte Observer

Saturday, June 22, 2002

Home

Aglow over The Bungalows

JERI FISCHER KRENTZ- Staff Writer



GAYLE SHOMER / THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

Martha Baxter loves her apartment in The Bungalows in Davidson.

DAVIDSON - Affordable-housing project wins prestigious award and becomes home to grateful tenants When the weather is nice, Martha Baxter likes to take her morning coffee outside to sip on the front porch.

That's just one of the things she enjoys about her new home. After 25 years of living in a nearby apartment building, Baxter now has space of her own outside. "I sit on the front porch whenever I can," she says. "We all do. I can look up the street and see lots of people sitting on their front porches."

Baxter, 58, lives in The Bungalows, a 32-unit housing project that opened in November 2000 as the first affordable rental complex built in Davidson in more than 20 years. The Bungalows are on Jetton Street, just east of Exit 30 on Interstate 77, and are an easy walk from downtown Davidson.

The \$2.5 million project, which has a two-year waiting list, recently won the national Maxwell Award of Excellence for Affordable Housing Design from the Fannie Mae Foundation.

Fannie Mae is the nation's largest provider of mortgage funds to lenders. Five other municipalities also received awards from the mortgage giant, including New York, Chicago and San Francisco. The honor carries with it a \$50,000 prize.

"It was an amazing honor," says Margo Williams, president of the Davidson Housing Coalition, the nonprofit organization that built The Bungalows. "When we made the application last summer, we laughed and said, 'This really takes nerve.'

"But we wanted the opportunity to describe the project. We were so proud of it. It was such a gift to have our work validated."

Filling a need

The effort began out of a growing concern that steep housing prices in the north Mecklenburg town were making it difficult for low-income families to stay in the community.

A 1998 survey showed the percentage of housing available to low-income residents had dropped to 12.1 percent of the total housing stock. The average home price in 1999 topped \$250,000, keeping many people who worked in Davidson from living there, such as teachers and police officers.

Town leaders, worried the situation would only worsen as the town grew, passed a zoning law requiring 12.5 percent of all new development to be affordable housing.

Two groups -- the Davidson Housing Coalition, established in 1997, and the Affordable Housing Group, established in 1966 -- joined forces to develop The Bungalows.

The town of Davidson donated 2.75 acres, the site of a razed water tower, along with street and sidewalk improvements.

Three years of planning included several community meetings that gave neighbors a chance to voice opinions about size and architecture.

That neighborhood involvement, organizers say, led to The Bungalows design, with 32 units spread through nine buildings and each looking like a separate house.

Architect John Burgess of Burgess Design Studios gave the project a look that matched neighboring single-family homes.

"Before the public meetings with the neighbors, we thought we'd do rowhouses, putting as many units on the site as we could fit because we knew there was such a need," says Burgess, who works in Davidson.

"But because of the input from the surrounding neighborhood, we tried instead to design apartments that looked as much like single-family homes as possible. The bungalow cottage design came up, which is a design that's very common in north Mecklenburg."

Burgess said the architecture is appealing because such details as tapered columns and roof brackets are historically accurate.

He credits Crosland Contractors, which built the project, for discovering ways to include such important details on a tight budget. Keeping the costs down was important not only to make units affordable, but also because the state funding agency limited how much could be spent per unit.

"The result," said the Fannie Mae judges, "represents a triumph of consensus."

Each apartment has a separate entrance and a front porch. Interiors have features of single-family homes, including lots of windows that create light, airy spaces.

"Every room has a window on every exterior wall, which makes the apartments feel less like apartments," Burgess says.

An instant hit

More than 180 people asked about the units in the first month, and The Bungalows has been fully rented since opening. A selection process gives preference to very low-income people who have ties to the Davidson area.

Rent for a one-bedroom unit is \$359 a month.

About \$1.9 million of the project's cost came from tax-credit funding. Other money came from the N.C. Housing Finance Agency, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta, local churches and other donors, loans and in-kind gifts from the town of Davidson.

Betty Mullins, from Kentucky, moved into a two-bedroom unit to be close to her children and grandchildren in town.

"So many people think these are condominiums," says Mullins, 53. "We've had people stop and try to buy them. When we say, 'This is affordable housing,' they're incredulous."