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Covering Boston's Historic South End

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Decorating for change

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Top South End designers take on the small studio apartments for formerly homeless individuals in Project Place's new home on Washington and East Berkeley streets.

Design Group and Terrat Elms are just some of the interior design companies that donated time, money, labor and goods to furnish and design affordable apartments in Project Place. The design effort, dubbed Adopt-A-Room, besides serving an admirable cause, could serve as a case study in inexpensive design for small spaces.

Each room is different, and each room reflects the tastes and styles of the designers that created them, noted Heather Wells, whose own modern design features soft colors and a "New England flavor."

"If you know the designers, [the rooms] do feel like them," said Wells, a South End resident. "Going room by room ... it's a lot like how they did their own houses."

The rooms are small, approximately 250 square feet in area, according to Suzanne Kenney, executive director of Project Place, though some are slightly larger and some are slightly smaller. Each room has a modern kitchenette and a relatively large bathroom. Each of the rooms is furnished with identical beds, dressers and desks, though most of the designers provided additional furniture.

Beyond those main features, however, the designers provided, and paid for, everything in the rooms: carpeting, teapots, towels, artwork, coffee tables, shower curtains, mirrors, sheets and blankets, upholstery, medicine cabinets and more. Each designer spent between about \$2000 and \$5000 on items the rooms, though some spent even more. This doesn't include time they volunteered designing and installing the rooms.

The people who will be living in these newly designed rooms are people who "need a second chance," explained Wells. The formerly homeless residents will be on their path to reentering society after struggling with unemployment and living in shelters and transitional treatment programs. They'll be alcohol and drug free and employed, on the path toward fulltime employment. "These are folks who have made a commitment, who have gotten themselves back in the workplace," said Kenney.

"People can stay there for the rest of their lives," she said, though she expects most residents will stay in the Project

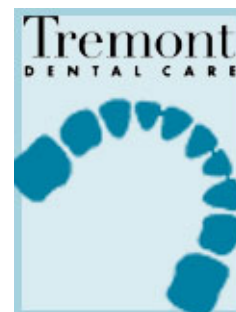
It's a concept that would make entertaining television. Take 14 top interior designers from Boston, hand each of them a small studio apartment, give them tight budgets and see what they can do. Better yet, make sure the project is for a good cause: providing housing for homeless men and women who are successfully reentering society.

This is exactly what's happened at the South End's Project Place, which moved into a new building at the corner of Washington and East Berkeley streets this week. The six-story facility houses two floors of affordable housing for formerly homeless people who have been improving their lives, have found jobs and are in need of a place to live. These 14 "efficiency" apartments — studios that include kitchenettes and bathrooms — seem like sophisticated college dorm rooms. Instead of Farrah Fawcett posters and beer bottle collections, however, the interior design motifs are more urbane. That's because each of these rooms has been designed by well-known Boston designers, many from the South End.

Heather G. Wells Ltd., Dennis Duffy's Duffy



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Place apartments for about six months to two years, depending on their needs. They'll pay about a third of their income for rent.

The idea for Adopt-A-Room started when Dennis Duffy, a South End designer and board member at Project Place, approached "a bunch of us in the South End" with the idea, said Wells. As the idea progressed, more and more designers signed on. "The idea of having 14 designers do these rooms was intriguing to us.

"It's mostly young designers. At least half of them live in the South End or have," Wells said. "It was nice to be asked to do something that was a direct path to helping."

For people who usually design homes for millionaires, complete with custom-made furniture and other pricey features, designing for small dormitory-like rooms was challenging in its own way. Each of the rooms is painted differently, with paint donated by Sherman Williams (thanks to a connection one designer has with the paint company). The designers were asked to keep color schemes gender neutral, and most designers used special carpeting, discounted from Interface FLOR, that comes in a variety of colors and patterns.

Shopping for furniture, appliances and other items at retail stores was another challenge for designers used to custom pieces. IKEA, West Elm, Design Within Reach and Mitchell Gold all became popular destinations for the designers.

Wells found that the younger, just out of college employees at participating design firms became valuable fountains of ideas since these young employees are more apt to design their own small apartments on tighter budgets.

Another challenge for designers was not knowing who would be living in the apartments. Most of the time, interior designers create ideas for clients they know. But multiple and unknown residents will live in the Project Place apartments. As a result, "I was consciously trying to be practical," said Wells. "Most of my clients have millions of dollars, so it's a different thing."

Over time the apartments will need to be "refreshed," Wells noted, since the spaces will suffer from normal wear and tear. A system for maintaining the apartments hasn't been created, but Wells said they might expand the Adopt-A-Room program to include regular maintenance.

Residents will start moving into the apartment units throughout March, though Project Place officially moved its offices from Rutland Street to the new building this week. The organization will celebrate the opening of the building with a ribbon cutting ceremony on Feb. 28.

In addition to affordable housing, the new Project Place building will house office space, a classroom, a computer room and an industrial kitchen. Project Place runs three businesses including one called HomePlate, a homemade food preparation business that employs homeless people. The industrial kitchen will allow Project Place to expand that business and hire more people. (The other Project Place businesses are called Clean Corners ... Bright Hopes, which has outdoor maintenance contracts throughout the city and Project Pepsi, a vending machine service business.) The ground floor of the new building will house a new restaurant called Rice, run by Joanne Chang of Flour Bakery + Café.

The complete list of designers participating in the Adopt-A-Room program includes Barnum + Company; Carter & Co.; Dietz & Associates, Inc.; Doreve Nicholaeff Architects, Inc.; Duffy Design Group; Duncan Hughes Interior; Eric Roseff Designs; Gauthier-Stacy, Inc.; Heather G. Wells, Ltd.; Homeworks; Space Design Studios; Mark Bombara Interior Design; Mark Christofi Interior Design; and Terrat Elms.



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