

The Star-Ledger Bridgeton News

BNR wins design award

Saturday, May 09, 2009

By **JOE GREEN**

jgreen@sjnewsco.com

BRIDGETON - A group partnering with Hope VI and others here to build affordable housing received a national award last Friday for the homes nostalgic yet forward-thinking design.

Bridgeton Neighborhood Revitalization (BNR) won the 2009 "Excellence in Affordable Housing Design" award from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

The other organizations receiving similar awards were Homeless Assistance Center, of Dallas, Project Place-Gatehouse, of Boston, and Irvington Terrace, of Fremont, Calif.

Torti Gallas and Partners Inc., the architectural firm hired to design the Bridgeton homes, has offices in Silver Spring, Md. and Los Angeles.

"Hope VI is often focused on a lot of the larger cities, so it's nice to receive an award for a smaller city like Bridgeton," said Torti Gallas architect Murphy Antoine, who has worked on the Bridgeton project.

A HUD press release on the award acknowledged as much: "Hope VI grants have typically gone to large cities, addressing huge swaths of distressed public housing through urban revitalization projects."

HUD also pointed out that the Bridgeton project targeted separate sections rather than a contiguous area, parts of which might not have been good sites for building.

These parcels were physical barriers to pedestrian and social connectivity, and presented havens for illicit activity. Conversely, the former public housing site was revitalized by removing the existing buildings and restoring the site as a park, reconnecting the neighborhood to the Cohansey River parks.

Units of the former Cohansey View housing project were torn down to make way for the Hope VI units.

Developers built on areas just south and east of the former Owens-Illinois plant site, which was right next to the Cohansey, and near Siebel Street, among other parcels in the city's northern quarter.

The closing of the Owens-Illinois site in 1984, dealt a crippling blow to Bridgeton's economy and helped plunge the city into the distressed city category.

Hence the need for affordable housing projects that developers and officials hope will encourage new growth.

"They wanted to start to bolster those pieces (where Hope VI homes were built) of the city and set the tone for revitalization of neighboring parts," Antoine said.

"From the outside, we're trying to make the homes fit in with the historical image of the city, with Victorian architecture," he added. "On the inside, it's more of a 21st century plan."

Units do hearken to Bridgeton's 19th century heyday, when this riverside town pulsated with the profits that domestic industry and commerce once provided.

Often double (twin) units, they typically have peaked roofs and slightly, though not overly-ornate trim. They also have front porches with columns typical of a Victorian reverence for Classical Greek architecture.

But Bridgeton Housing Authority Executive Director Raymond Maier said the homes present a good deal for families seeking modern conveniences.

They are fitted with fire suppression systems, fire resistant materials, washer and dryer hookups, energy-efficient appliances, and other features, Maier said.

"What was there before was deteriorated housing or old factories...Now what we have is an area that encourages people to fix up."