



Louis Nine, Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter, Bronx



Georgia's Place, Community Counseling and Mediation, Brooklyn



St. Nicholas House, Project Renewal, Manhattan

A Survey of Common Spaces in Supportive Housing Projects

By the NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development and the Supportive Housing Network of New York

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INTRODUCTION

To better understand use of common space in existing supportive housing buildings and inform future project design, the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and the Supportive Housing Network of New York (the Network) conducted a survey study of six supportive housing projects. Staff from HPD Division of Special Needs Housing Supportive Housing Loan Program (SHLP) and the Division of Architecture & Engineering (DAE), and the Network interviewed building management, social service staff and tenants, to get their feedback on usage of the different common areas, what they felt was effective and ineffective about the design, and what they thought could be improved. This is the first stage of a larger study on how common space design and programming impact tenant stability in supportive housing.

THE PROJECTS

The survey included six HPD-funded supportive housing residences, all of which opened in the past seven years. These six residences were chosen because they represented a typical HPD supportive housing project; they were located in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan; were between 46-90 units; all housed formerly homeless, disabled or at-risk individuals; and five of the six buildings were built with HPD's standard supportive housing mixed income model of 60% supportive housing units and 40% low-income units for people in the community making less than 60% Area Median Income. All six were designed and built by different architects and developers.

All projects had a common multipurpose room or lounge (up to about 700sf, some with a kitchen), offices and conference rooms for program and social service staff, access to rear yard or rooftop gardens and laundry facilities. Most also had computer labs and some had storage space.

See Appendix A for project details.



Cooper Square, Community Access
Manhattan



Liberty Avenue, Bowery Residents Committee
Brooklyn



Edith MacGuire House, Jericho Project
Bronx

METHODOLOGY

HPD and the Network interviewed building management, social service staff, and tenants at each project site using a pre-developed survey instrument. The surveys, which were slightly different for each of the three groups interviewed, included two sets of scaled questions regarding frequency of use of different types of common spaces, and opinions on the importance of the different spaces in fostering tenant engagement. Staff and tenants were asked to rank the spaces on a scale from 1 to 10 (on the frequency question: 1 being used all the time, 10 being never used; on engagement: 1 being very important for fostering tenant engagement, 10 being not important at all). The survey also included a number of open-ended questions to drill down about what people thought was good about the current design and programming, and what could be improved.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Overall, the buildings were perceived as very attractive, well designed, and an improvement for the neighborhood. Most tenants expressed pride in living in the building, and the staff felt the building design enabled them to do their job well.

The multipurpose room and program offices consistently ranked high, by both tenants and staff, when asked how often the spaces were used (receiving rankings of 1s or 2s on the 1-10 scale), and were clearly critically important elements of the buildings. Outdoor yards and computer labs, while used, consistently got slightly lower rankings (3s or 4s).

Also, the location of common space in buildings is key. Common space close to the ground floor was used frequently, but spaces far from the ground level clearly were rarely or almost never used.

Overall, the amount of common space was perceived as sufficient by tenants and staff. One surveyer noted that “at first glance, the design documents lead you to believe that the individual supportive housing common spaces are gracious, but after a site visit, the real perception of these spaces are relative to the site and program”.



Left to right: Georgia’s Place waiting area; Cooper Square waiting area; Liberty Avenue kitchen



OVERALL DESIGN

Both tenants and staff expressed that high-quality building design was important for a number of reasons directly related to design characteristics of materials used, uniqueness or high-quality of design, and openness of the plan. This included long conversations about:

Pride of Place: A number of tenants used the words, “pride” and “uplifting” to describe the building, and stated that the attractiveness of the building “makes it easy to take ownership and responsibility”. For disabled tenants who have largely been disengaged from any community throughout their lives, they stated “there is a sense of responsibility, you feel invested”. Staff expressed a similar pride and noted that the attractiveness of the physical environment contributed to job satisfaction; there is often high turn-over with caseworkers who experience burnout from working with difficult tenants in a challenging physical environment.

Interior open space: Tenants also described that they like the openness of the buildings, and had a feeling of “serenity”. Though sitting in the lobby is sometimes discouraged by staff, the attractiveness and openness of the lobby is essential to the mood of the building for tenants, staff, and the neighborhood. In some buildings, the lobby, when offset from the entry, is a hub of activity.

Safety: Both tenants and staff also expressed that the open layout, natural window lighting, and security measures made them feel safe. Not only is this sense of security important for tenants with chronic mental health and substance issues, but important for long-term staff retention as well.

Community Improvement: Survey respondents also stated that the buildings have upgraded the neighborhood and surrounding area, and have helped to clear misperceptions about supportive housing among neighbors.

MULTI-PURPOSE ROOM OR LOUNGE

Staff interviewed estimate that 50-75% of tenants utilize multipurpose rooms on a regular basis, whether to socialize, watch TV, bake/cook in the common kitchen, or attend groups, game night or holiday events. Often described as “free space”, the room allows for informal interaction, a space where tenants are less guarded and more likely to open up. Social service staff saw this as an important element of tenant recovery.

The rooms, generally 600-700sf in size, were described as “comfortable” and “inviting” with couches, tables and sometimes a kitchen. The most successful rooms were those that had multiple layouts, couches and tables facing different directions so that different tenants could use the room simultaneously. Tenants also spoke appreciably about the “openness” of the common area.

Location close to the first floor or high circulation areas is important. It was clear that buildings with multipurpose rooms on the first floor had the heaviest traffic. In one project where the lounge was located toward the back of the building, tenants stated that they would use it more if it were closer to the lobby. In one project that had tenant lounges two floors below ground level, the common spaces were clearly used only for large scheduled events. Staff stated that tenants did not even use the subbasement lounge while waiting for their laundry to finish.

Also, staff noted that a common kitchen in the multipurpose room was often a great way to engage tenants. They said that while it was often difficult to get tenants to join groups or meetings, they were almost always interested in cooking classes (so they don't waste money on outside food), wellness classes, and events around food. Staff also pointed out that because tenants don't have ovens they would come down to bake.



corridor and front desk,
Georgia's Place



common area
Edith MacGuire,
Georgia's Place

Finally, staff felt that providing outside community groups access to the use of a multi-purpose room or conference room was important. Staff felt that this access allowed neighbors to familiarize themselves with the building, helping to relieve misperceptions about the population, and build relationships with local organizations. For example, one residence invites the local police officers to eat lunch there, and another building had weekly public meetings which helped to inform the public about programs in the building and reinforce the mission of the sponsor.

LOBBY

Lobby use as a common area varied widely: in buildings that encouraged tenants to ‘hang out’ in the lobby both staff and tenants said the lobby was often the best place to gauge a tenant’s mood each day and interact casually. However, other buildings discourage tenants from congregating in the lobby for security reasons.

PROGRAM OFFICES

Like the multipurpose room, program offices also ranked highest in terms of usage and success in tenant engagement. Staff and tenants felt that residences should include private offices since tenants needed privacy in order to open up.



Except for one building which had both private offices and cubicles, it seemed most caseworkers had private offices. Generally, a 50 unit building had 1-2 administrative staff including a program director, 3-4 social service staff, and 1-2 building maintenance staff. Typically there were 4-5 offices. Casemanagers had a 15-20 tenant caseload. In the one residence that provided cubicles, staff were comfortable with having a single private office set-aside for sensitive conversations.

Offices generally ranged from 75 to 130sf. Staff indicated that an open and inviting atmosphere was needed to engage tenants. Location, layout and natural light were often mentioned by staff as critical design considerations, so that, as one staffer put it, “the tenant doesn’t feel trapped”.



Like multipurpose rooms, proximity of program offices to the ground floor was found to be key. However, since it is HPD’s policy to place offices in the basement level as much as possible so that residential units can be maximized on the ground floor, design on future buildings needs to keep in mind that tenants need to have easy and open access to program offices and building staff. To make the basement office welcoming for tenants and staff, where possible and economically feasible, designing with as much natural light as possible is ideal.



One staff member mentioned that offices need to have easy access to exits for security reasons.

Office space may also play an important role in staff retention; both staff and tenants spoke of high staff turnover rates.

office space at Edith MacGuire, stairs to ground floor and office space at Cooper Square

Dedicated conference room space for program staff was also deemed important. One building had a joint conference room and tenant multipurpose room. As a result, when staff needed the room for conferences with tenants, the tenants enjoying the multi-purpose room would have to vacate. The layout of a conference room typically includes a large conference table, which is valuable not only for staff meetings, but also workshops, tenant consultations and interventions.

YARDS/ROOF GARDENS

Rear yards and roof gardens, designed with tables or places to sit, were used by tenants on occasion but not as frequently as multipurpose rooms. These common spaces received rankings of 3s or 4s on the 1-10 scale for usage

and engagement. Staff posited that underuse was tied to both seasonal considerations and programming limitations. However, several tenants said they enjoyed the yards and roof gardens, stating they were quiet places to go to think. This is an important space to have for tenants recovering from mental illness and substance abuse.

Attractiveness of both front and rear yards, and roof tops were perceived as necessary for neighborhood buy-in.

COMPUTER LABS

Many buildings had computer labs with 3-6 stations. Labs were used, but again not as frequently as multipurpose rooms or the program offices, consistently also receiving 3s or 4s on the 1-10 scale for usage and engagement. This is possibly due to the restriction of hours of computer labs (some projects had computer training classes before 5pm when most tenants may be out of the building, or closed after 7pm), insufficient staffing or programming, and/or because tenants have their own computers. Computer usage may also vary by population.



Gardens at Louis Nine, Georgia's Place

In one building, spaces originally set-aside for use as a classroom and a computer lab in the sub-basement (two floors below the ground floor), were later turned into program storage due to underuse.

One possible solution is to place labs near or in well-used common spaces, multi-purpose rooms, possibly a laundry room, and tie open hours to increase tenant usage. However, HPD and Network staff will need to investigate lab usage further.

SECURITY

Overall, tenants in all the buildings felt very safe and that security was sufficient. Most of the buildings had at least 30 security cameras.

Staff, though pleased with the security technology in the building, expressed the need for a dedicated security guard to investigate and intervene in security concerns in the building.

STORAGE

Most buildings had ample storage for program staff and building supplies that were being utilized. Only one building had dedicated tenant storage. The issue of tenants' storage did not seem to come up as much as some individual sponsors have mentioned to HPD staff in the past.

One building had very little storage as they had a commercial space on the site, and staff stated that the lack of storage space had contributed to items being stored in hallways and mechanical rooms.

DESIGN IMPROVEMENTS

When asked how they would improve the building, tenants and staff had very few suggestions and said they were generally very pleased with the design.

At two buildings, there was a request to enlarge the size of the multipurpose room as there was high usage at times.

For the two buildings where the multipurpose room was far from the lobby, tenants stated they would move the rooms to be close to the lobby so that it would be visible by tenants.

Some tenants mentioned they would like an exercise room but building staff also stated participation in yoga and aerobics classes had been low in the past. There was some interest in several buildings for a basketball court, or a basketball/volleyball team. Bike racks were also suggested.

PRELIMINARY DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Both tenants and staff indicated that the attractiveness and openness of design and layout was very important to them, helped staff do their job better, and increased their feeling of safety and security. Future projects should be designed keeping in mind the importance of openness in the common areas, in multipurpose rooms and program offices especially. Though there has been debate in the past about size of lobbies, it is clear from the surveys that the openness of lobbies not only adds to the building, but is critical for tenant engagement and staff interactions. We need to find a middle ground so we continue to build attractive, open buildings, within reason at affordable cost. Future design should also factor the importance of natural lighting in fostering a sense of well-being and safety in supportive housing buildings.
- 2) The multi-purpose room should be placed in high circulation areas (often the ground floor near the lobby). As participation is an important element of tenant recovery, it is recommended that this room be placed in high circulation areas, in order to entice tenants to participate with the building community.
- 3) The multi-purpose room should also be open and large enough to accommodate different tenants at one time. Different seating and table layouts may allow this.
- 4) Rooms with less therapeutic functions, such as a laundry room, storage rooms, etc. may be placed in the basement, or away from high circulation areas, as tenants will seek these rooms out if they need to.
- 5) Program offices may often have to be placed in the basement due to limited floor area. However, since tenants are not required to meet with their social workers it is critical to make the offices easily accessible, i.e. if the social service staff are hidden from view there is a concern that this will limit the frequency of visits. Natural lighting where physically and economically viable should also be maximized so that offices are inviting for tenants and staff (possibly with lightwells).
- 6) Program offices should also be carefully designed to ensure the privacy of the tenants.

NEXT STEPS

HPD and the Network will continue to survey supportive housing buildings throughout the fall. The goal is to produce a final report by the end of the year and host a number of workshops, highlighting best practices in both the design and programming of common space.

In order to make more definitive recommendations, the buildings surveyed will be expanded to include:

- 1) Buildings that have overall less square footage of common space to understand impact on tenants and staff.
- 2) Rehab buildings, as well as, new construction, where design must cater to existing space limitations.
- 3) Larger buildings (100+ units) with different populations, investigating whether different special needs populations require different common spaces.
- 4) Buildings with more programming and offices in the basement level as overall space limitations will dictate that a large amount of common space be located in the basement.
- 5) Supportive housing buildings funded by other City and State agencies (e.g. NYS Office of Mental Health).
- 6) Additional assessment on the best design and programming for computer labs, rear yards, roof gardens, and lobbies. Also assess buildings with fitness rooms.

For further questions about the Common Spaces Survey, please contact Cha Lee, HPD, at 212-863-6838, or Nicole Branca, the Network, at 646-619-9642.

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Brian Baldor
Mauricio Estarellas
Souzan Maly
Bernard Marshal
Rona Reodica
Jomo Stuart

**New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development
Division of Special Needs Housing Supportive Housing Loan Program (SHLP)**

Yolanda Gibbs
Peggy Jean-Nicholas
Cha Lee
Kelly Johnstone
David Rouge

The Supportive Housing Network of New York

Nicole Branca
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APPENDIX A – THE PROJECTS

Bowery Residence Committee, 902 Liberty Avenue, Manhattan

46 total, 31 studios, 8 1br, 7 2br, 3 story, 35,646sf, L-shape

Architect Cindy Harden, Harden Van Arnam

Completed Construction December 2010

Basement: partial cellar, super's office, small storage, mechanicals

1st floor: 5 offices, conference room, 2 multipurpose room (650sf) /lounge (400sf) leading to rear yard

2nd floor: 150sf library/computer room, open to below

Community Access, Cooper Square, 29 East 2nd Street, Manhattan

54 studios, 6 story, 34,050 sf, rectangular shape,

Architect: Pratt Planning & Architectural Collaborative

Completed construction December 2007

Basement: 4 offices & conference room (easy access to 1st floor), laundry, bike storage, mechanicals, commercial storage

1st floor: 803sf common room, 241sf kitchen, 2300 sf Heartbreak Restaurant

Has computer lab

Jericho Project, Edith MacGuire Residence, 89 West Tremont Avenue, Bronx

80 studios, 7 story, 40,000 sf, irregular shape

Architect: Peter Woll

Completed construction in November 2005

No basement, due to sloping elevation

1st floor: 7 offices, conference room, laundry room, and mechanicals

2nd floor: 681sf multipurpose room leading to rear yard

Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter/WHEDCO, 1323 Louis IX Blvd, Bronx

46 studios, 4 story, 26,700sf corner triangular lot

Architect: Peter Franseze

Completed construction in January 2008

Basement: laundry room, ample storage, vocational program offices and computers, 5 offices (several used for storage?)

1st floor: 5 offices, 654sf multipurpose room with kitchen (138sf of it doubles as staff conference room), computer lab

2nd-4th floors: 130sf vocational office on each floor

Rooftop garden

Community Counseling and Mediation, Georgia's Place, 691 Prospect Avenue, Brooklyn

48 studios, 5 story, 26,505 sf, rectangular shape

Architect: Richard Vitto, OCV Architects

Completed construction in March 2006

Basement: laundry room, mechanicals, ample tenant storage

1st floor: 6 private offices, 5 cubicles, 500sf multipurpose room, 500sf dining room, 240sf kitchen, courtyard and patio with basketball court

Top floor: multipurpose room, roof farm

Project Renewal, St. Nicholas House, 646 St. Nicholas Avenue, Manhattan

94 studios, 7 stories + 2 underground, 49,320 sf, trapezoid shape

Architect: Saki Yakis

Completed construction in 2004

Subbasement: mechanicals, resident lounge (being used as storage), dining area, laundry, garden storage, access to rear terrace.

Basement: 8 offices, library/computer room (being used as storage), mechanicals, conference room, staff lounge with kitchenette

1st floor: one office, lounge with kitchenette