Design

All in the detail

Thoughtfully designed affordable housing can help remedy social problems, writes Mark Ellwood

These days, when not changing the nappies of his latest adoptee, Brad Pitt spends much of his time in New Orleans helping to run the Make It Right foundation. Founded with billionaire businessman Steve Bing, the charity aims to provide new homes for long-displaced victims of hurricane Katrina. Yet though Pitt's pet project champions low-cost houses, the film star and design buff has tweaked the standard brief for affordable homes: he's challenged architects to find ways to build cheap houses that are both architecturally interesting and also eco-friendly. Starchitect David Adjaye has already signed up.

Pitt's celebrity status has ensured widespread attention for Make It Right but in some ways his project has already been gazumped. For several years, in fact, the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America and Habitat for Humanity have been working on a similar, if not celebrity-endorsed, initiative. Its far-reaching goal is to identify exactly what makes affordable housing recognisable and problematic, then encourage architects to remedy the problem across America. The ideal outcome: a design-savvy blueprint for 21st century low-cost living – or, put more simply, cheap, durable, beautiful homes.

So far, the programme has produced prototypes in two US cities – Savannah in Georgia and Rochester in upstate New York – with more to come. There's also a pattern book, compiled by a core team of architects, that any company can download for inspiration.

Both the project and the pattern book were championed by architectural icon Ray Gindroz, a one-time Yale professor and founder of Urban Design Associates. He started his firm during the civil rights movement and from the outset has focused on how social problems can be solved – or at least, eased – through architecture.

He believes any house that looks or feels like a low-cost afterthought will be treated that way by its residents. "Every neighbourhood in the world has a set of physical as well as social characteristics and our approach is to create dwellings which are consistent with their surroundings," he explains.

One experience in particular helped Gindroz refine his design theories – a public housing do-over in Norfolk, Virginia. The city's renovation budget had been approved and standard plans to replace windows and kitchens readied; then Ray was brought in to reimagine the project. "We met extensively with the residents and they identified the particular elements of a 'regular neighbourhood' – and they did call it that – which they didn't have."

For example, there were no chitchat-ready porches; the red brick everywhere was utilitarian and lacked finishing white trim; and without ornament of any kind, homes more resembled barracks than residences.

"They didn't have fences to define the backyards and there was no way of protecting their front lawns from gangs that tramped over them. And the police chief told us the best security is a front garden with flowers in it: it's a [psychological] signal to the drug gangs that this is not an easy place to do business," Gindroz explains. "All that was needed was a little white fence at the corner of each garden."

What's more, when Gindroz and his team retro-fitted porches on to the Norfolk houses, they decided to use neo-classical columns made from wood instead of cheap industrial siding.

"It was to the absolute horror of the maintenance crews of the housing authority," he chuckles. "But it turned out that they havee been carefully maintained by the residents because they hav become objects of pride, a touch that makes the area feel like 'a regular neighbourhood'."

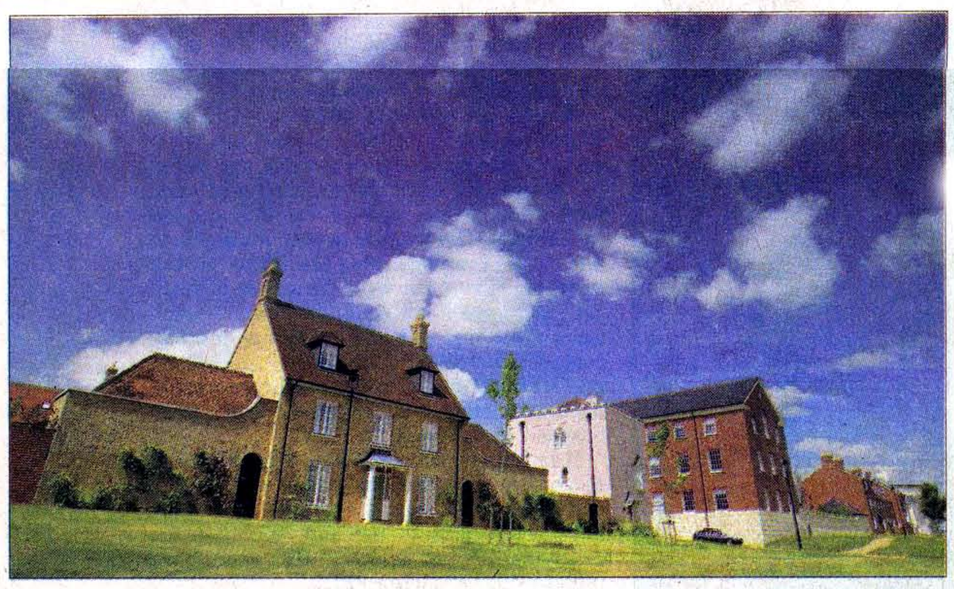
Opting for wood is a crucial upgrade for architects keen to avoid a low-cost look. "The institutional approach to affordable housing is to use indestructible materials, whether concrete blocks or metal, which means the interiors tend to be prison-like. It sends a message to the residents that they can't be trusted with their homes," explains Gindroz.

But while the psychological impact of upgrading to less institutional materials is priceless, the fiscal impact is significant. The Savannah pilot house in Gindroz's programme cost $101,000 to build; about 30 per cent more than a standard Habitat for Humanity home because wood was substituted for aluminium siding, as required by historic district preservation laws. Long-term, however, it was a crafty choice, since the more user-friendly materials better hold their value: the completed three-bedroom home was valued at $208,000.

Materials aren't the only thing that matter, though; Gindroz rails against one widespread affordable housing set-up that runs contrary to all his hard-learned theories. It's the so-called "Radburn Plan", where houses are ranged round an internal shared courtyard with back yards facing out to the surrounding streets. "It's fatal for an American urban neighbourhood because security is always a problem [back doors open on to the street, meaning it's essentially an open invitation to break in while front doors face inwards, out of view of passers-by, so they can also be easily jemmied]. One resident told me with great indignation: 'That house is backwards – what idiot would ever plan a house like that?' ".

The movement towards appealing, affordable homes isn't limited to America, either. Gindroz and his team are consulting on projects in Scotland and Yorkshire, northern England, aiming to ease the social problem of brutalist housing estates in the UK too. Gindroz cites the village of Poundbury, adjoining Dorchester in south-west England, as an example that could be followed worldwide. This new town was vocally supported by Prince Charles, built on Duchy of Cornwall land and employed a mould-breaking concept – there's no zoning, homes are designed to echo the architecture of surrounding villages and there are factories embedded within the housing areas to promote work/life balance and minimal commuting. But though grand plans such as Poundbury might be admirable, Gindroz emphasises it's the smallest details that make the difference. "Porches provide a way for people to come out of their houses and engage with each other," he enthuses, "but it's white columns and white windows that transform the image from barracks to a collection of houses."

www.classicist.org/resources/habitat-pattern-book



Appealing The white columns and windows transform US affordable properties; Residential houses at Poundbury

Andy Olenick/ Alamy/Stephanie Halley