

PROJECT OF THE YEAR AND GRAND

CHATHAM SQUARE

Alexandria, Va.

ALEXANDRIA, VA.'S, OLD TOWN, with its historic architecture, quaint gardens, and European-styled streets, boasts some of the most coveted real estate just outside Washington. So when the city proposed the transformation of a crumbling, 100-unit public housing project into a mixed-income neighborhood spanning two urban blocks, stakeholders came out of the colonial woodwork to voice concerns about parking congestion, aesthetic preservation, and the potential displacement of low-income residents.

"The area was largely African American, and a lot of folks saw this as an effort to push them out of the neighborhood and make way for high-end housing," says William Dearman, CEO of the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority. Although the agency mandated public housing units as an essential ingredient in the redevelopment, lawsuits nevertheless ensued, and efforts were stalled for nearly a decade.

By the time builder/developer EYA joined the public-private initiative (whose players included the city of Alexandria, the Housing Authority, and Fannie Mae), a plan calling for a 198-unit, high-rise on the 4.16-acre site had been scrapped.

Working with architects at Lessard Group, EYA president Bob Youngentob envisioned a more sympathetic complement to a neighborhood largely populated by historic row homes. The thought was to downscale the prescribed density a notch, limiting the number of dwellings to 152 townhome residences (100 market-rate dwellings and 52 low-income rental units), with 25 percent of the site preserved as shared green space. Proceeds from the sale of the land for fee-simple, market-rate units would help offset construction costs for the low-income units.

Among Chatham Square's many design coups, its most notable is that affordable and luxury dwellings share walls and are indiscernible from each other at street level. The predominant building type is a 10-pack that includes four market-rate townhomes backing up to six public-housing units on the other side. Clever massing allows each cadre of low-income units to read as a mirror image of its back-to-back luxury counterparts, when, in fact, the low-income units are organized in a two-over-one configuration, with two-story townhomes stacked on top of ground-level accessible flats. All residences stand on top of a shared, underground parking garage spanning multiple lot lines. Garage doors



are hidden from the street and accessed via rear alleys.

At the community scale, Chatham Square's aesthetic is equally seamless. With their decorative brackets, window casings, trim work, and cornice detailing, the handsome dwellings could easily be mistaken for vintage, were it not for low-maintenance upgrades such as fiber-cement siding. Their façades—a blend of colonial, federal, Italianate, Victorian, Queen Anne, and second-empire elevations—are eclectic, and yet, of a piece,

in that they demonstrate an understanding of how the urban fabric developed over time. "We started with a palette of different styles and put them together [in groups of threes] as you would have seen streets naturally evolve," says Jack McLaurin, a principal at Lessard Group. Varying heights, roof forms, and veneer widths are similarly organic, scarcely letting on that all of the units are a uniform 31 feet wide on the inside.

Delivering on EYA's philosophical mantra of "life within

HUMAN SCALE

Residents of the public-housing project razed to make way for Chatham Square were initially skeptical of the city's revitalization plan, fearing they would be marginalized in the process. Fortunately, these fears proved unfounded. In keeping with a Hope VI funding requirement, job training was offered to incumbent residents, many of whom took on entry-level construction jobs and helped rebuild their own community. Upon the project's completion, former tenants of Samuel Madden Homes were given first dibs on the new rental units. Many of the housing pro-

ject's original residents now live at Chatham Square, and several are now employed full time by builder EYA or its subcontractors.

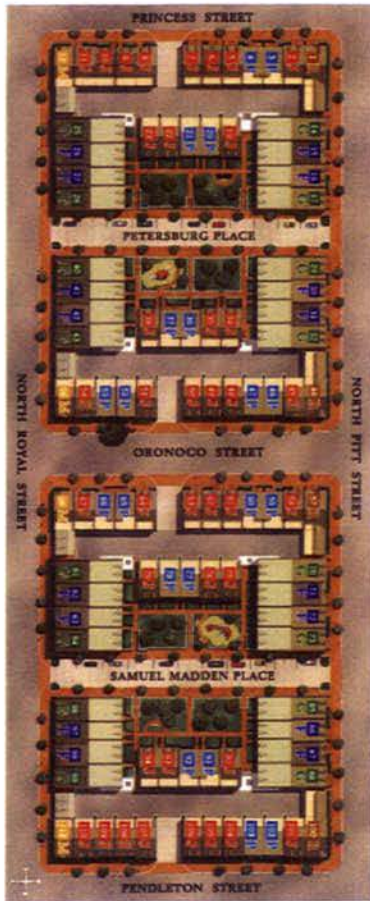


PHOTOS: TOP: CAMERON DAVIDSON; BOTTOM: DEAN ALEXANDER



PHOTOS: BOB NAROD

BUILDER'S CHOICE



walking distance," Chatham Square is mere steps away from retail, restaurants, public transit, and the city's celebrated promenade along the Potomac River. "We initially thought there might be a discount for the market-rate units relative to the affordable component of the project," says Youngentob. "That didn't happen. What we've found is that people who buy into an urban environment crave diversity and feel comfortable with mixed-income development. They see it as a social positive."

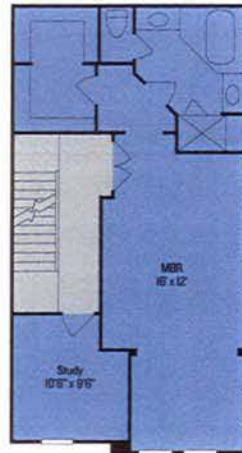
Case in point: A near stampede upon completion of Chatham Square resulted in a hefty wait list and a speedy sell-

out of its fee-simple townhouse units, with floor plans ranging from 1,977 to 3,621 square feet. The average price tag exceeded \$850,000. No mark-down required. —J.S.

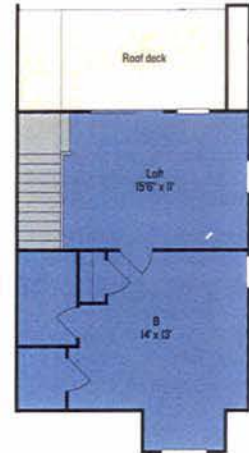
Categories: Project of the Year; Attached/Townhouse community (grand); **Entrant/Builder/Developer:** EYA, Bethesda, Md.; **Architect:** Lessard Group, Vienna, Va.



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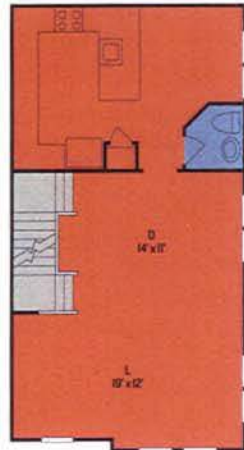
SECOND FLOOR



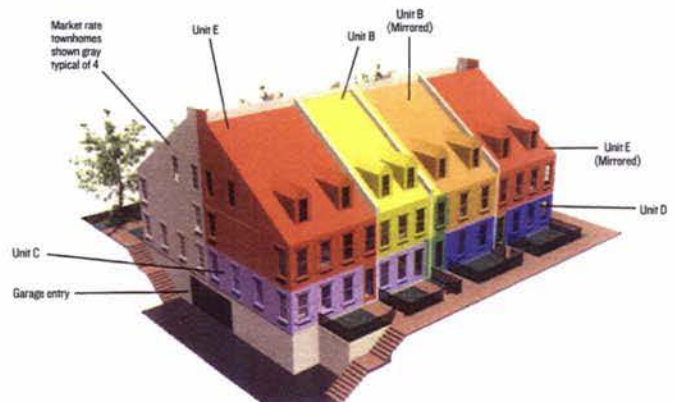
THIRD FLOOR



BASEMENT



FIRST FLOOR



BOTTOM ILLUSTRATION: FAKIN/VOUGNENTOR