

# The Blueprint

**Post-Sandy, New York's homeless problem is even more daunting. One building in Brooklyn shows how it might be solved.**

By [Justin Davidson](#) Published Nov 22, 2012



(Photo: Rendering courtesy of ©Cook + Fox Architects)

A few weeks ago, I watched a man who had spent much of his life living in doorways and cardboard boxes shamble into the sun-washed lobby of a new building on Hegeman Avenue in Brownsville, dig an I.D. card out of baggy jeans, swipe through the turnstile, and take the elevator up to a modest but clean

room equipped with a bed, an ample window, a closet, and a kitchenette. He was home.

Sandy has aggravated an already brutal housing crisis in New York. With 3,000 adults living on the streets, and another 47,000 people forced into homelessness by the economy, shelters are overflowing, and the city pays exorbitant rents for emergency lodgings. The danger is that temporary fixes and short-term squalor could become the new status quo. But housing the homeless, not in shelters but with dignity, is a less intractable challenge than it seems. Buildings like the Hegeman point the way. They are the product of an extensive network of nonprofit organizations and private developers that has accumulated enough experience, enlisted enough first-class architects, and slowly changed enough attitudes to put a solution within reach.

Built by the nonprofit organization Common Ground and designed by Cook + Fox (which also did the Bank of America tower), the Hegeman demonstrates how much quality architecture a scant budget will buy. Constructed for a modest \$43 million, it is the best building for blocks, a handsome brick arrangement of 161 energy-efficient studios, a gym, support-staff offices, and a computer lab, all wrapped around a landscaped garden. There's no mystery to making low-cost housing this well designed: Hire better architects. "You can always take the same ingredients and make a better cake," says Alexander Gorlin, who designed another elegantly frugal Common Ground project, the Brook in the South Bronx. Prodded by a combination of recession-induced need and the profession's resurgent current of idealism, many top architects now chase such public-spirited jobs.

These architects and developers have the tools to tackle homelessness on a vast scale, but every project must slog through a bureaucratic quagmire.

Fortunately, housing activists now have a powerful weapon with which to prod government officials into smoothing the way: data. Research by NYU's Furman Center shows that, far from blighting a neighborhood, high-quality supportive housing can actually increase property values. Multiple studies have shown that placing disabled, addicted, chronically sick, and mentally ill homeless people in facilities like the Hegeman saves millions in Medicaid payments. The numbers are proving persuasive. New York State has started channeling \$75 million a year in Medicaid money toward supportive housing, and it's trying to persuade the federal government to add more.

In a city as dense as New York, land can be even harder to come by than money. (That's why the Bloomberg administration's affordable-housing program depends heavily on coaxing private developers to sprinkle market-rate high-rises with low-cost apartments.) But while New York has few expanses of land left for massive housing developments, plenty of smaller lots are scattered around the city. To free them up, NYU urbanism professor Mitchell Moss proposes taxing fallow land at a high enough rate to prod owners to build now or sell to those who will.

The idea that it might be possible to conquer homelessness is so foreign to the city's bureaucratic apparatus that officials from the Department of Housing Preservation and Development wouldn't hazard a guess as to the resources it would take. Common Ground offered some back-of-the-envelope calculations, though, and they're hardly terrifying. Putting up 100 new Hegeman-quality buildings with units of varying capacities would cost roughly \$100,000 per apartment in public funds, with the rest coming from private lenders. The city's homeless problem, in other words, could be largely wiped out at a cost to taxpayers of roughly \$1 billion—which also happens to have been the total bill for Barclays Center.