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Higher Ground

Rosanne Haggerty has found a way to use good design and business savvy to take the blight out of the city

By Alastair Gordon

When the Prince George reopened in 1999, it offered job-training counselors, health services, psychologists, therapists and even acupuncturists. “We make it easy for people to succeed,” Haggerty says. And that luxe ballroom? “We organized a job-training collaboration with four other not-for-profits who restored the space,” Haggerty says, explaining that this reduced the cost to \$1.5 million. The ballroom now generates \$800,000 in annual rentals.

“Rosanne takes conventional wisdom and turns it on its head,” says Alexander Gorlin, an architect who designed the recently opened The Brook in the South Bronx, a housing facility built on a former cockfighting venue at 148th Street. “People on the street stop by and ask, ‘Is this a new condominium building? How do I get in?’” Gorlin, who is best known for designing high-end homes in the Hamptons and Manhattan, gave the shelter open-air terraces, a community vegetable garden and a shared green-roof landscape.



Courtesy of Common Ground

The Prince George Hotel's ballroom was restored and now generates income for the facility.

Instead of polarizing neighborhoods, Common Ground's facilities become anchors of stability and cohesion.

“Supportive housing is not reducing the long-term value of neighboring properties,” says Ingrid Gould Ellen, director of NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, who co-authored a study that demonstrates the positive impact this type of housing can have on the surrounding neighborhoods.

In a way, all of this has been in preparation for the group's biggest challenge to date: the Brownsville Partnership—taking on one of the most blighted and seemingly hopeless neighborhoods in New York. This is not a single building with a few hundred residents. This is 13,000 people living in a dysfunctional housing project in a crime-ridden section of Brooklyn. “Can you imagine what it takes to raise a family there?” asks Haggerty, who admits

trepidation about the sheer scale of the undertaking. The project is still in the planning stages, but Common Ground will collaborate with a variety of city agencies, including the Department of Health and the Department of Housing Services, to rehabilitate the four crumbling buildings, adding 300 units using capital investments of more than \$100 million over the next four years.

“Brownsville is another example of Rosanne's tenacity and focus,” says John Feinblatt, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's chief adviser for policy and strategic planning. “You can't play one-note here. She recognizes the interdependencies of all the problems. She understands you have to have a wide lens.”

Common Ground's approach in Brownsville is preventive: to create safe, neighborly environments, to stop homelessness before it occurs. Still, it builds on many of the lessons they've learned along the way.

“There's no silver bullet. We're using many of the same ideas that worked in our smaller projects,” Haggerty says. “You have to know everyone by name and localize what you're doing.” She and her staff attend weekly coffee klatches in the neighborhood, where locals can share their concerns, and they've already begun helping families at risk of eviction get aid.

Once again she's enrolled architects, landscape designers and planners to envision what the future might look like: to improve circulation, foster connection and help to heal old scars. A master plan by architect Gorlin projects a giddily hopeful vision, built upon the

ruins of the crumbling 1950s/1960s infrastructure. He shows the grim brick buildings transformed into a lush green utopia with rooftop gardens, wind turbines, solar collectors and urban agriculture in the common areas. Is this real or is this science fiction? “Alex did it as a way of starting a conversation,” says Haggerty of the speculative plans. “Ultimately, it’s about getting the community involved in engineering a new kind of neighborhood.”

The insight that runs through all of Common Ground’s work, its buildings and now the Brownsville Partnership, is that taxpayers are spending a fortune to maintain a broken status quo in neighborhoods like Brownsville, and that it is possible to fix these problems with practical investments for no more than what we’re spending to maintain them.

“Each of the 205 evictions we’ve prevented in the last two years among families on the verge of homelessness saved taxpayers \$32,000 for the cost of sheltering a family in the NYC shelter system,” Haggerty says. “In the end it’s actually cheaper to do the right thing. It costs less to solve the problem than maintain this vast system of emergency services.”

Haggerty and Common Ground are now partnering with 19 other U.S. cities, helping them organize their own resources to house 100,000 vulnerable homeless cases over the next three years. (To reach that goal, they’ll eventually need to expand the program to 200 cities.) “She’s driven. She’s engaged. She’s always reaching out for another idea,” says David Panagore, COO of the City of Hartford, who has worked with Haggerty on the development of the Hollander, a 70-unit residence in downtown Hartford. “And she’s a closer.”

See more on Haggerty’s foundation at [Common Ground](#).

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