

UNITED STATES HOUSING AUTHORITY

Interoffice Memorandum

May 8, 1939.

TO: Project Planning, Technical, and Management Review Divisions

FROM: Romer Shawhan, Director of Project Planning

SUBJECT: Suggestions Derived from Jacksonville Rent Computations
Directed Toward Lower Rents on Subsequent Projects

After the award of the major construction contract for the Brentwood Park Housing Project, Jacksonville, FLA-1-1, project plans and specifications were thoroughly analyzed to determine whether or not the anticipated shelter rents might have been materially lowered had the project been set up on a slightly different basis.

The result of this study was an indication that approximately \$2.50 per dwelling unit per month could have been saved. The purpose of this memorandum is to report the suggestions which were made and to discuss the validity thereof as a guide to Project Advisers on future projects.

The Brentwood Park Project consists of 230 dwelling units (1 and 2 story row and semi-detached houses) covering 13.7% of the site. The dwelling units range in size from 3 to 5½ rooms, 998 rooms, 4.34 rooms per unit, and 7.9 families per acre. Six play areas including sitting areas of 2500 square feet each are provided.

Construction is semi-fireproof with poured concrete footings, masonry block walls painted on the exterior and plastered on the interior. Floors are framed poured concrete throughout with asphalt-tile except bathrooms with tile floors and kitchens with linoleum. Interior stairs are metal pans filled with concrete. All interior walls are plastered and painted. Roofs are pitched roofs covered with interlocking shingle tile. Attics are ventilated and insulated.

Electricity is furnished for cooking, refrigeration and lighting. Space heaters and hot water heaters are provided and these are operated with oil supplied by the tenant. Kitchen equipment includes a sink and tray, kitchen cabinet, work table and utility closet.

The introduction to the report reads as follows:

"In examining the computation of rents for this project, we have noted the points which occurred to us on which savings could have been made had the project been designed differently. The

following does not, however, purport to be an exhaustive or final treatment of this subject.

"The cost of management seem to absorb a considerable portion of rent. The Management Division should give great attention to devising the most economical supervisory and accounting systems in order to reduce the expense in every possible way.

"As noted above, we should work toward having the city assume the general costs of its local housing authority as a city expense rather than allocate such costs to specific projects."

The remainder of this memorandum includes quotations from the report followed by a discussion of each such item.

"If arrangements could be made for the city to pick up garbage directly from the entrance to houses rather than at garbage collection stations, a portion of the janitorial expense, perhaps amounting to 5¢, could be saved."

In principle the preceding statement is quite correct but there are a number of factors which should be taken into consideration in this particular question. In planning the site the question of garbage disposal is one of the first points for determination and may properly be studied in connection with the system of heating to be used in view of the fact that individual heating plants will require driveway access for the delivery of coal and the removal of ashes. In such cases the same driveway will, of course, be available for the pick up of garbage directly from each dwelling unit. In this event the above quoted suggestion may be readily met.

On the other hand, a project with central or group heating, or one which involves the use of gas fired heaters of any nature can be designed more economically and more attractively with a very limited amount of service drives. In this event it is probable that garbage collection stations will prove more economical in the long run. The number of such stations should be minimized, both for the sake of initial cost and janitorial expense. It is not possible to fix an arbitrary maximum distance which the tenant will be required to walk to the collection station, but it is believed that as a general rule 200 feet, the maximum recommended length for row house structures, is not too long.

"It is suggested that the cost of electricity and gas might be reduced if it were possible to meter each tenant's supply and charge him for the amount actually consumed, while, at the same time, purchasing electricity and gas at wholesale. This would have a further advantage of giving careful tenants the benefit of their care. It is suggested that the Utility Rate Section Legal Division explore the possibilities of such arrangements beginning with a few favorable cities."

It is believed that this suggestion should be adopted in every case where possible. The experience to date has indicated that only in rare instances will utility companies permit the resale of gas and electricity. An alternative procedure, and one which has been used in the case of some of the PWA Housing Division Projects is to install 100% check meters, billing the tenant with the excess cost of the service which he has used above a predetermined fair amount.

"The cost of grounds maintenance, now amounting to 88¢, could have been somewhat reduced if the project had been so laid out as to permit more tenant maintenance. In this connection it is pointed out that if tenants are to maintain grounds, storage space must be provided for the necessary equipment owned by the tenant."

The above statement is so self-evident that little comment may be made. From the particular example cited it is difficult to see how the amount of tenant maintained areas could have been materially increased. While this principle should be continually borne in mind, it should also be remembered that where project maintained areas are necessary these should be treated as secondary areas to the fullest extent possible.

"The floors in this project are asphalt tile and linoleum. Had cement floors with proper hardener and color been used there would have been a saving in floor repairs amounting to 19¢ per unit per month. There would also have been a reduction in capital costs and in USHA annual contributions."

This is probably one of the most difficult problems to resolve. Undoubtedly strong prejudices do exist against bare concrete floors and these objections are not necessarily limited to regions where cold weather is prevalent.

There is only one PWA Housing Division Project, Liberty Square, Miami, Florida, with bare concrete floors. The tenants are said to object to this but nevertheless, in spite of the fact that this project is located at a considerable distance from the places of employment of the tenants, the project has been almost entirely rented from the date of initial occupancy. In this case it has been noted that many of the tenants purchase inexpensive floor covering in the nature of linoleum for the kitchens and that they generally seem to have little difficulty in obtaining old rugs and other floor covering for the other rooms. The opinion has been expressed that the prejudice against bare concrete floors is largely psychological and that some of this prejudice is eliminated when the normal color of concrete is modified. Paint on bare concrete is not desirable as it will probably involve nearly as much maintenance expense as asphalt tile. The introduction of integral coloring matter in the top surface and the use of hardener is probably the least expensive method of producing a satisfactory finish.

"Had open terraces been provided for the tenants instead of covered porches, there would have been a saving in rent of 16¢ per unit per month. There would also be a reduction in capital costs and USHA annual contributions."

The difficulty with this recommendation is the belief held by many of the Project Advisers familiar with the housing problem in the deep South that some form of front porch is absolutely essential. Undoubtedly, covered porches involve expensive maintenance through the necessity of repairing, roofing and sheet metal repairs and the replacement of decayed woodwork, etc. The rule should be to avoid the use of such porches wherever possible, but when considered vital to the success of a project to reduce the design and construction of the porches to the most simple form.

"The present project has sloping roofs with overhanging eaves. Management Division believes that lower operating costs would be obtained with flat concrete slab roofs sloping slightly in one direction and with copper gutters and leaders on one side."

The above recommendation is in the same general category as the preceding one. Undoubtedly the general prejudice against the so-called "box like" appearance of small buildings which do not have pitched roofs continues. However, it is believed that the architects should strive to produce the most pleasing effects possible with the minimum expenditure, and it is also believed that with proper ingenuity satisfactory results can be obtained through the use of flat roofs, possibly varied in some instances by the use of pitched roofs. In any event, however, careful cost analyses should be made since it is altogether possible that in some localities the sloping roofs may cost little, if any more.

"The exterior walls of the residences are of concrete block which require painting. Proper brick walls would have eliminated this cost and made possible a saving of 21¢ per unit per month."

This is an individual problem which cannot be disposed of by generalities. It is entirely possible that the statement did not take into consideration the fact that the use of brick walls frequently involves maintenance expense. Moreover in some localities it is possible to secure concrete blocks of satisfactory appearance and which do not require paint for protection against leakage. The local situation should be studied in each case.

"The rent estimates on this project include interior wall painting with lead and oil every four years. Suggestions have been made as to requiring tenants to paint their own wall. The resulting saving would be only 20 or 25¢ per unit per month. Because of the unsatisfactory work which would undoubtedly be done and because of eventual expenses by the project in remedying such work, it does not appear

advisable to attempt such saving on any plaster project at this time. If local authorities build any projects without plaster the question of wall painting should be reexamined."

There is a general agreement with the preceding statement except that it has been suggested that the painting of plastered ceilings might be deferred, although the only saving, if any, would be in capital cost.

"The rent estimates on this project do not include the supplying of roller shades by the project. The cost of these is estimated at 9¢ per unit per month. Because of the capital cost to the tenant in supplying such shades, it is recommended that consideration be given to their supply by the project."

Concurred.

"Rent estimates do not include the initial supply of electric bulbs or their replacement. This is deemed sound policy."

Concurred.

"Rental estimates include the cost of supplying space heaters and ranges. It is believed that it is in general wise to have the project supply these except in cities where it is definitely known that a substantial proportion of the tenants already own such equipment."

The preceding statement is concurred in but subject to the condition that in most cases where it is decided to have the tenant furnish his own cook stove the kitchen layout should provide more space for this item than is normally allowed in order to permit variations in size.

"The rent estimates include 71¢ per unit per month for the supplying of a refrigerator and 39¢ for current for their operation. If the tenants to be served actually require refrigerators, it is certainly desirable to have them supplied by the project which can do so very much more cheaply than the tenants can themselves. There is grave question, however, as to whether most low income families actually do have enough perishable food on hand to warrant the cost of refrigerators. In the earlier projects approved by the USHA mechanical refrigerators were almost universal, but in more recent projects they have been more increasingly omitted. Further study is needed as to the living habits and requirements in this respect especially in cities where families have extremely low incomes."

It is not believed that this question should be determined on the basis that low income families do not have enough perishable food on hand to warrant the

cost of refrigerators. While such an assumption is unfortunately warranted at the present time, it seems quite obvious that even a small amount of perishable food, particularly milk, should not be jeopardized by failure to provide a proper place for its care. Therefore, in normal cases the decision should be that all tenants do actually require some form of refrigerator, whether mechanical or iced, leaving only for determination whether or not the project, or the tenant, should supply these and bearing in mind, of course, the fact that the gas or electric consumption of mechanical refrigerators is frequently necessary in order to get the rates down.

"Insurance economies should be effected on all projects. After we know the lowest available rates for various types of construction, the economies of fireproof as against semi-fireproof construction should be carefully reexamined."

"All possible economies in interest rates should, of course, be effected for all projects."

Concurred. In this connection it should be noted that the probable tendency resulting from the reexamination of insurance rates in progress will be to reduce the wide differential which now exists between fireproof and nonfireproof construction.

The committee which prepared this general memorandum does not feel that, in considering the problems enumerated above, any distinction should necessarily be made between white, negro, or Latin American projects but should make such distinctions in each case as are warranted.

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