

Affordable Design

This department seeks to identify and develop new, forward-looking planning and design solutions for expanding or preserving affordable housing. This department also reports on design competitions and their winners. Professional jurors determine the outcome of these competitions.

Historic Preservation and Affordable Housing

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The ACHP/HUD Secretary's Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) have partnered on the ACHP/HUD Secretary's Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation since 2017.¹ ACHP, an independent federal agency led by a presidentially appointed chairperson, promotes “the preservation, enhancement, and sustainable use of our nation’s diverse historic resources, and advises the President and the Congress on national historic preservation policy.” The HUD Secretary sits on the ACHP Council along with the heads of a number of other federal agencies, representatives from local and state governments, members of the public, and members of industry groups. ACHP’s activities include leading the Section 106 review process, supporting legislation and policy that further historic preservation efforts, and advancing sustainable and resilient communities (ACHP, n.d.).

The annual ACHP/HUD Secretary's Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation recognizes developers, organizations, and agencies for their success in advancing the goals of historic preservation while also providing affordable housing to low- and moderate-income families and

¹ From 1998 to 2015, the HUD Secretary's Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation was presented in partnership with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/about/HistoricPres-2024-callforentries.html#>.

individuals. Through this program, HUD and ACHP publicly recognize successes in rehabilitating, restoring, preserving, and interpreting architectural and cultural heritage (HUD, 2024).

Within HUD, the Office of Community Planning and Development (CPD) and the Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R) drive this award program. HUD's Federal Preservation Officer in CPD ensures that the award program reflects historic preservation principles and HUD priorities. PD&R provides program and infrastructure support.

The winner is selected by a jury of historic preservation experts selected by ACHP and housing experts selected by PD&R and CPD. Jury members consider a number of factors, including the historical significance of the site; its benefit to low- and moderate-income families and individuals; impacts on the community (e.g., economic benefits); quality and degree of difficulty of the project; use of HUD funds, financing, and other assistance (e.g., HOME funding); contributions to community revitalization efforts; HUD program activity in the project; uniqueness of the project; and compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. After a close review of the applications, the jury members deliberate and come to a consensus to select the strongest application for the annual award.

The following individuals were jury members for the 2024 award review:

- Jaime Blakesley, Field Environmental Officer, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Brian Lusher, Federal Preservation Officer, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Heidi Joseph, Director of the Research Utilization Division, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Jordan Tannenbaum, Vice Chairman and Expert Member, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
- Monica Rhodes, Expert Member, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
- Frank Matero, Expert Member, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation

2024 Award Winner: Public School 75

On September 30, 2024, HUD and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation announced the winner of the 2024 ACHP/HUD Secretary's Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation: Public School 75 in Buffalo, New York. The award was accepted by Gigi Grizanti Cooke, president and chief executive officer of the project developer, Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition (WNYVHC). She was joined by representatives from two of the key development partners: Daniel Bellgraph, formerly the development director at Norstar Development; and Philip Snyder, project architect at Stieglitz Snyder Architecture, a LaBella Company.

Public School 75 is in the William-Emslie neighborhood on the east side of Buffalo, New York. The neighborhood has a number of unique challenges, including a high poverty rate (WKBW ABC, 2024). Public School 75 operated as a public elementary school from its opening in 1925 until 1979. It was then used for other purposes until the early 2000s, when it became vacant. Left abandoned, it experienced damage from trespassers; vandals took radiators from the classrooms and threw them down the terrazzo stairs, significantly damaging the terrazzo. Vandals also broke the marble in the bathrooms to get to the copper pipes. Deer loitered in the courtyard, a reminder that the building was no longer an anchor for the community.²

As Public School 75 lay empty and fell into further disrepair, nonprofit WNYVHC found itself with the opportunity to make the building a vital part of the community once again. WNYVHC was looking at other projects and buildings in the area, but as a nonprofit developer, it rarely has the resources to move quickly; consequently, other developers are often able to buy properties before WNYVHC. This dynamic means that WNYVHC is often limited to publicly available properties such as schools.³

The City of Buffalo identified a number of abandoned school buildings and asked WNYVHC if it was interested in any of them. Of the potential properties, Public School 75 was the one that held the most potential. The physical structure of the building was strong, and WNYVHC was confident that the bones of the building would last for decades, even though it was already 99 years old. Although the building had cosmetic damage, it was not so badly damaged that rehab would be cost prohibitive. In addition, WNYVHC was drawn to Public School 75 because it was surrounded by many vacant properties. When the City asked WNYVHC if it was interested in developing the empty lots, the nonprofit jumped at the opportunity to acquire those properties to create an additional 18 two- and three-bedroom homes.⁴

Before the rehabilitation of Public School 75 and development of the surrounding vacant parcels, most of the coalition's housing portfolio was one-bedroom apartments, and it was not able to support families seeking housing assistance. "This is why we were attracted to this school. We could see the vision for it. We could see the vision in the neighborhood, improving the neighborhood and the opportunity to build those homes with true family living situations, backyards, front yards, downstairs, living rooms, dining areas," said Grizanti Cooke.⁵

At first, some members of the community had concerns with the rehabilitation of Public School 75 for supportive housing. The project was suspended for a year as WNYVHC staff met with members of the community. In 12 meetings over the course of a year, WNYVHC brought in its entire staff—including maintenance staff and case workers—to show members of the community how WNYVHC takes care of the residents of its buildings and properties. The coalition was able to assuage individual community members' concerns and show them the value that the new housing would bring to the neighborhood.⁶

² Interview with Gigi Grizanti Cooke, president and CEO of WNYVHC, October 9, 2024.

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id.

Exhibit 1

Before and After Renovation for Public School 75



Photo credit: Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition.

In 2022, the project was completed. The original school building houses 47 apartments, including 33 with supportive services for veterans and military service-disabled individuals. The infill development of the surrounding vacant parcels brought on line 12 new buildings with 18 additional affordable units. WNYVHC worked with community partners and Veterans services organizations to fill the 33 supportive services units, and the remaining units were leased using a lottery. All 65 units are affordable to households with incomes at or below 60 percent of the Area Median Income (New York State Homes and Community Renewal, 2023).⁷

Repurposing a historic building came with unique challenges. Grizanti Cooke advised, “You have to go into the project knowing that you will need to compromise. There are things that the historic preservation consultant is going to say no to, and things that you’re not going to be able to do.” Furthermore, rehabilitation of a historic property can add significant time to a project, and reconciling historic preservation requirements with livability is often a struggle.⁸

The broken terrazzo stairs proved to be particularly challenging during the historic renovation process. The terrazzo stairs had been significantly damaged over the years, and WNYVHC struggled to find a local craftsperson—even looking in the surrounding states—and were unable to find anyone willing to do the repairs. Even if the nonprofit had found a craftsperson to fix the stairs, in all likelihood, the job would have been financially impractical. As a compromise, WNYVHC received permission from its historic preservation consultant to put guards on the edge of the stairs instead (exhibit 2).⁹

⁷ Interview with Grizanti Cooke, 2024.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

Exhibit 2

Terrazzo Stairs Before and After Renovation



Photo credit: Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition.

Along with the challenges, the rehab of a historic property comes with unique benefits when the developer preserves key historic elements. For example, one of the units had been the school's art room. The new housing unit converted from the art room still has the original flooring, stained by ink and paint, tying it to the history of the building. Many WNYVHC staff have said they would love to live in that unit in particular because the flooring and other details add depth to the unit. Residents have also expressed a lot of appreciation for the preserved chalkboards that remain in many of the units and are regularly used by residents.¹⁰ Exhibit 3 shows an example of a residential unit featuring large windows and the original floors.

In addition to providing much-needed housing, Public School 75 also serves as the WNYVHC corporate offices. Founded in 1987, WNYVHC's original mandate was to provide housing and support to veterans experiencing homelessness and veterans with special needs. Since its founding, WNYVHC has broadened its reach. In addition to supporting veterans, the coalition also develops and manages "residential housing for low-income persons, severely disabled, homeless, and other persons who have special needs" (WNYVHC, n.d.). WNYVHC made the strategic decision to site its offices in Public School 75—even though it meant fewer residential units. "We probably could have put in more units had we not moved our corporate office here, but we wanted to let the community know that we were in this for the long haul. We weren't just going to put up units and not monitor our situation and not provide the services that we do," said Grizanti Cooke.¹¹

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id.

Exhibit 3

Residential Unit



Photo credit: Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition.

The total cost for the development—the rehabilitation of Public School 75 and the construction of the 12 new buildings—was roughly \$29 million. Grizanti Cooke provided insight into the funding process: “We got our funding in March 2020, and we had to lock everything in while the markets were very nebulous. It was a very unique time, and we didn’t have as much leeway, or get dollar-for-dollar on our tax credits. We almost had to walk away because of COVID because of the uncertainty in what tax credits were going to be at that time. At one point we couldn’t find the funders. We were very lucky to connect with a large local bank that took a leap of faith with us. Redstone and M&T Bank and our other funders were incredibly important, and we are so grateful that they had the confidence in us to help underwrite the project. I’m grateful as well for our development partners, who helped us cobble all of that together. We’re a stronger organization because of what we’ve learned with them during this partnership.” The funding breakdown and funding sources are noted in exhibit 4.¹²

¹² Id.

Exhibit 4

Funding Breakdown and Sources

Funding Source	Amount (\$)
Federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Equity	14,791,081
State Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Equity	1,217,111
Federal Historic Tax Credit Equity	3,338,810
State Historic Tax Credit Equity	2,782,343
NYS HCR Supportive Housing Opportunity Program Subsidy	4,159,895
NYS HCR Community Investment Fund Subsidy	580,808
HOME Funds Through the City of Buffalo	850,000
NYSERDA Energy Efficiency Incentives	72,000
Deferred Fee	1,073,895
Total	28,865,943

Use of Funding	Amount (\$)
Acquisition	91,325
Soft Costs	7,250,094
Construction	21,114,487
Reserves and Working Capital	410,037
Total	28,865,943

NYSERDA = New York State Energy Research and Development Authority; NYS HCR = New York State Homes and Community Renewal.

Public School 75 was renamed the Charlie Bush Building in honor of U.S. Army Specialist Charles E. Bush, Jr. A recipient of the Bronze Star Medal, the Purple Heart, the Army Service Ribbon, the National Defense Service Medal, and the Army Reserve Components Achievement Medal, SPC Bush was killed in action in Operation Iraqi Freedom on December 19, 2003 (NYS HCR, 2023).

Jurors who are professionals in the affordable housing and historic preservation fields noted the high level of disrepair of Public School 75 before renovation following years of flooding and vacancy, which made the renovation efforts particularly noteworthy. Jurors Jaime Blakesley and Monica Rhodes stressed the amount of consultation that WNYVHC had with members of the community at the beginning of the development process, noting that it set a high standard for such engagement. Jurors also gave Public School 75 high marks because it was part of a larger community revitalization plan for the Jefferson Avenue corridor. Juror Jordan Tannenbaum was impressed that WNYVHC placed its offices within the school building, noting the support they would provide to the veterans living in the building. Jurors were also impressed with the new infill construction, noting that the additional units from that new construction expanded the reach of the community revitalization realized through the project. Jurors noted that the infill construction was a great example of using a historic building as a launching point for a broader project, with the ultimate goal of bringing even more affordable housing units to a community.

The National Historic Preservation Act states, “The spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage...the historic and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.”¹³ This award program not only celebrates the physical rehabilitation of historic properties or the creation of affordable housing but also provides an opportunity to celebrate the importance of a community’s history. The projects recognized through this award program have stitched history back into the fabric of their communities, honoring the past while providing a foundation for a stronger community tomorrow. HUD and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation will continue to partner on the ACHP/HUD Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation, honoring outstanding efforts by communities across the country to protect historic properties while also providing affordable, high-quality housing to its residents.

The award program’s current and past winners are detailed on HUD User. To learn more, please visit <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/about/HistoricPres-intro.html>.

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¹³ Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. 2024. *The National Historic Preservation Act*. <https://www.achp.gov/sites/default/files/2018-06/nhpa.pdf>.

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