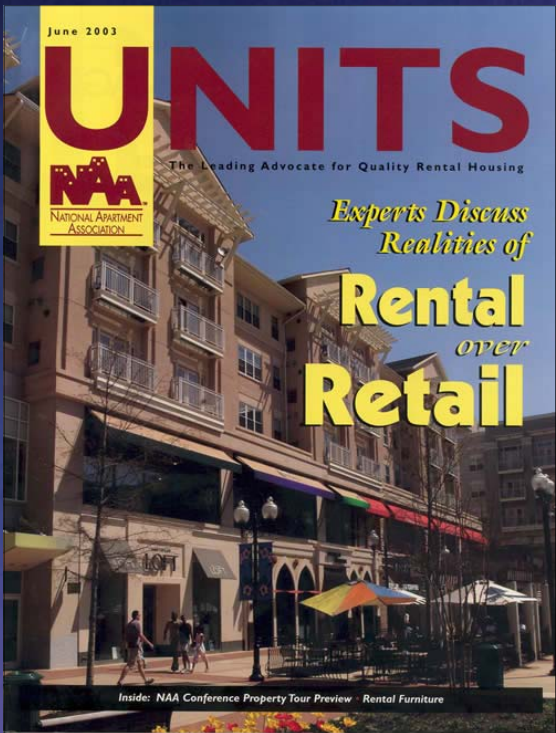


Before You Build, Build Consensus

Listening to the Resident

BY JANICE MYERS

Apartment community designers find that by meeting first with prospective residents, their work improves greatly and brings greater satisfaction for those who take up residency there. Myers offers several examples of how pre-build interviewing paid off.



Market research can describe anything from a teenager with a clipboard asking questions at the mall to highly structured experiments in human behavior. Despite its elusive definition, however, everyone agrees on one point: Not researching the market is an entrepreneurial death wish. Lending institutions won't even consider funding housing projects that are not backed up by research.

Although housing trends are tracked nationally, there is no substitute for talking to folks on the street—literally. Tenants' expectations can vary sharply from region to region, even neighborhood to neighborhood. Market research for new apartment construction often consists of architects and developers comparing notes with appraisers and realtors, and putting together what they think will be a winning package.

Albuquerque, N.M., commercial realtor Todd Clarke advises developers on various aspects of the city's rental market. His firm, New Mexico Apartments, uses focus groups of 15 to 40 people who are recruited through targeted mailings. By the end of a 90-minute session, participants must reach a consensus on what amenities they would like and what they would be willing to pay for them.

"When I worked on the Villa de San Felipe [a downtown urban infill apartment complex], conventional wisdom was that there was no market for smaller units," said Clarke. "But the focus groups indicated other-

wise. When the building was completed, its 161 units were leased immediately, with a waiting list of 325."

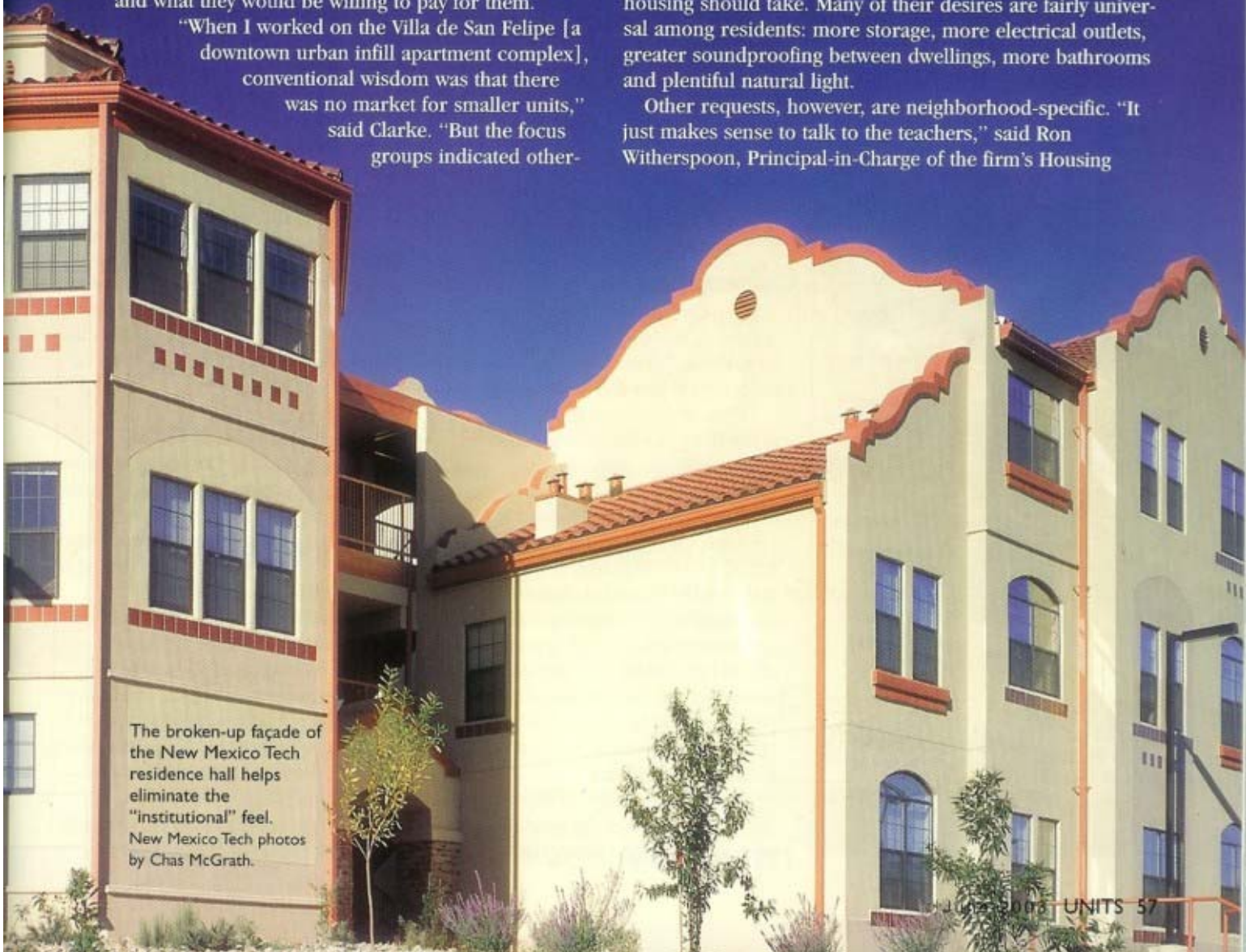
Learning From Teachers

The Villa de San Felipe project was designed by architects at the firm of Dekker/Perich/Sabatini in Albuquerque. On other apartment projects, where the actual tenants are already identified, the firm has taken a far more direct approach: Architects hold forums with the future tenants during the design process, so that the target group's ideas can be more satisfyingly incorporated into the design.

Most recently, the firm held public forums with teachers at three sites in rural Gallup-McKinley County, N.M., to solicit ideas for new "teacherages"—rental apartments that the county constructs to attract and retain teachers for these remote areas. Because the schools are on Native American lands, teachers are not able to build their own homes, and the county builds these teacherages on land leased from the Pueblo or Tribe.

The teacherage meetings were especially interesting because the future tenants have had years to identify the shortcomings of the obsolete units in which they currently live, and they have definite opinions about the shape the new housing should take. Many of their desires are fairly universal among residents: more storage, more electrical outlets, greater soundproofing between dwellings, more bathrooms and plentiful natural light.

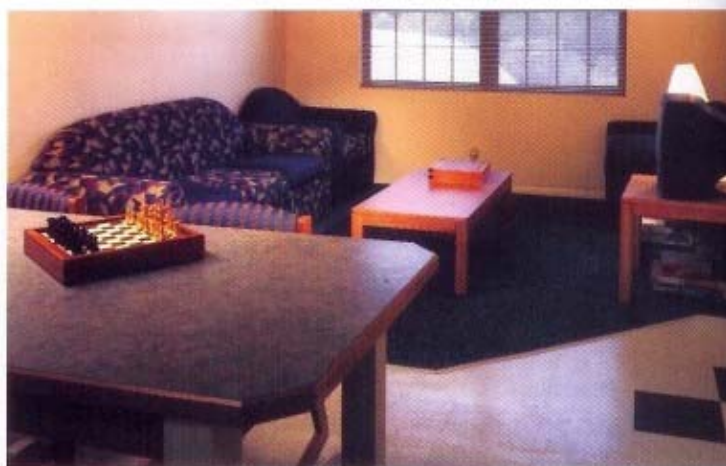
Other requests, however, are neighborhood-specific. "It just makes sense to talk to the teachers," said Ron Witherspoon, Principal-in-Charge of the firm's Housing



The broken-up façade of the New Mexico Tech residence hall helps eliminate the "institutional" feel. New Mexico Tech photos by Chas McGrath.



Traditional architecture integrates the Pojoaque Pueblo apartment complex into its surrounding environment.



Soothing colors, movable furniture and plenty of light make New Mexico Tech student housing feel more like home.

Group. "It's their neighborhood."

For example, fenced yards were important to teacherage residents, not only to provide privacy, but especially to address the very-local problem of stray dogs and wandering livestock. The positioning of the duplexes (which the teachers adamantly requested, reduced from four-plexes) was critical. The old teacherages face west, from which powerful winds pummel the homes with dirt that finds its

way inside through building cracks.

Teachers also expressed an interest in solar design, which the architects have addressed by incorporating passive solar. "A few wanted active solar or windmills," said project architect David West, "but the cost was prohibitive."

A one-bedroom unit was eliminated based on teachers' need for an extra room to accommodate the occasional guest; a unit featuring two smaller bedrooms was designed to take its place.

consists of eight four-bedroom units with two bathrooms each, and two two-bedroom units with one bathroom each.

Happy residents and full occupancy are reason enough to involve the end-user in design decisions, but perhaps the biggest payoff is the feeling of ownership that all the parties feel in the finished product.

Each unit includes two or four single bedrooms of approximately 100 square feet (not including a spacious closet), a 140-square-foot kitchen/dining area and a 140-square-foot living area. A common bathroom serves each pair of bedrooms.

Contributing to the home-like feeling of the complex are amenities seldom found in older student

housing. Each student has a private bedroom; the furniture is movable; and wood frame and drywall take away the institutional feel of painted concrete block walls. Thanks to light wells, the units enjoy significant daylight, as well.

Ancient Culture Meets Modern

In New Mexico, Native American Tribes and Pueblos also commission multifamily units. It might seem like a mixed metaphor, but the design of modern apartments for Native Americans is often influenced by traditional beliefs.

Dekker/Perich/Sabatini Navajo Intern Architect Michele Pfeiffer explained, "Home is the center of Navajo life. The front door to the hogan faces east to greet the morning sun. Traditionally, Navajo homes are dispersed across the land, with extended families clustered near water, grazing and firewood resources."

Although the Navajo have made many concessions to modern housing needs,

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Speaking With Students

When the New Mexico Tech campus in Socorro, N.M., needed additional housing for students, Dekker/Perich/Sabatini architects engaged in a dialog with students.

"What we found was that they wanted to live in a place that felt more like home," said Ron Witherspoon.

To soften the institutional feel of the buildings and bring them down to human scale, the complex is designed as a combination of two- and three-story buildings that together house 144 students and resident advisors. The façade is broken by intermittent setbacks that give the impression of being several smaller buildings. Because of the site's limitations, the complex consists of two wings that form an "L" with laundry and study spaces located in the buildings' "elbow."

Architects also sought student input on the interior design of the apartment-style units. In the resulting design, each wing

new apartments must still face east.

Ron Standiferd, the majority owner of S&S Joint Venture, a Native American-owned construction enterprise, has been involved in building apartment units for Native Americans for years.

"In the Tsigo Bugeh development in San Juan [N.M.]," he said, "the tribal housing authority required that the buildings be sited to coincide with the equinox and the solstice."

The buildings are grouped around a plaza, which, Pfeiffer said, is typical of Pueblo Indians.

"Traditional Pueblo housing is clustered, creating exterior plazas for annual dances," she said. "The front door doesn't necessarily need to face a certain direction."

Standiferd also helped build an apartment community for a Native American Pueblo where the Tribal Housing Authority wanted the buildings to be arranged in the shape of a bird that held symbolic meaning for them. The subsequent site plan reflected their request.

Colorful Details

Santa Fe developer Don Tishman,

whose latest undertaking is Zocalo, an upscale condominium community that evokes a colorful Mexican village, explain the process he and his partner followed to research their target market. "We designed very specific focus groups based on income [high] and age [older]. For many of our buyers, a place at Zocalo is a second home, so we brought in people from out of state to see what features were important to them."

There were a few surprises. Zocalo was designed by renowned Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta, a modernist, in saturated hues of purple and red stucco. The developers thought that the bright colors might not be well received.

The focus group indicated that the colors were fine, but that vigas—heavy horizontal beams on ceilings, a traditional New Mexican design element that the architect had eliminated—were very important to them. Vigas went back into the design.

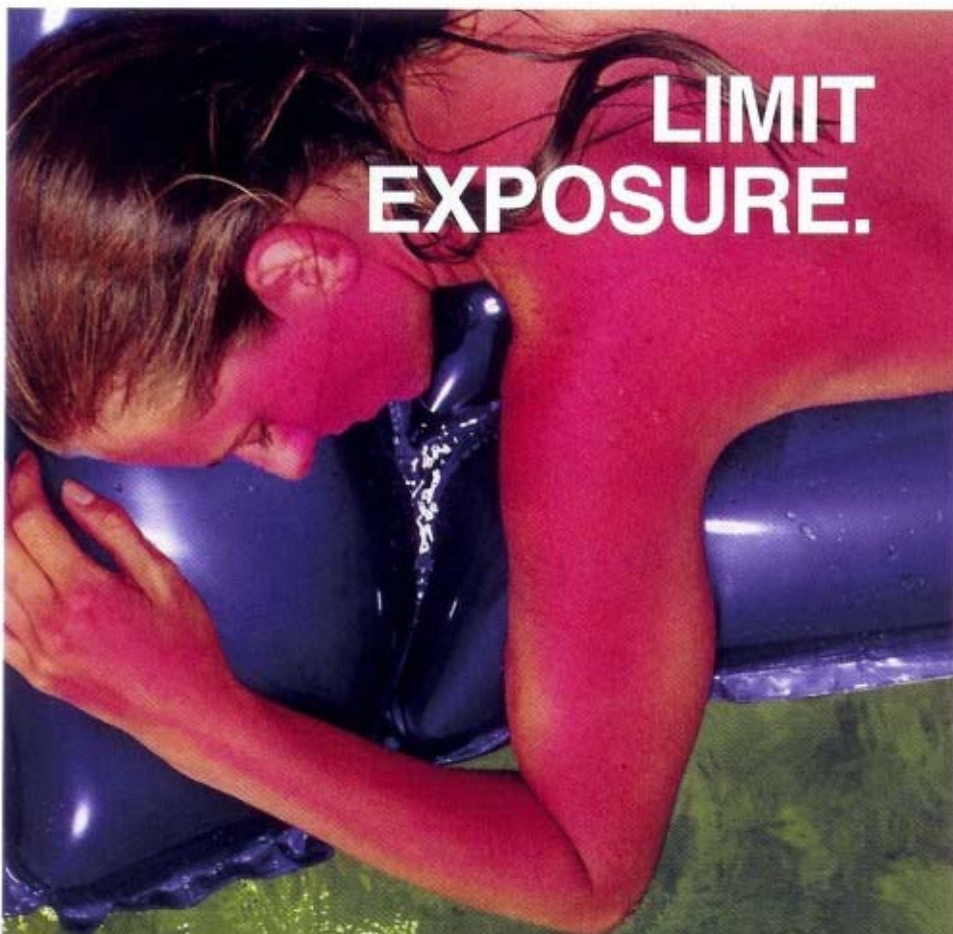
As far as apartments go, however, Tishman engages in his own very simple form of market research. "The secret to designing a successful apartment complex," he said, "is talking to the manager of a successful complex to find out what tenants like and don't like about it."

'You Actually Listened'

Whether design by consensus means adding an extra bathroom, eliminating concrete block or orienting the front door to a specific direction, it is clear that everyone wins in the process.

Happy residents and full occupancy are reason enough to involve the end-user in design decisions, but perhaps the biggest payoff is the feeling of ownership that all the parties feel in the finished product. When the Dekker/Perich/Sabatini design staff held a follow-up meeting with the Gallup-McKinley County teachers to show them the modifications that had been made to the design for the teacherages, one teacher remarked, "I thought this would be a mere formality. You actually listened to us." ■

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