

CURB APPEAL CASE STUDY

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Cambridge, Massachusetts, located across the Charles River from Boston has one of the nation's highest population densities, with 105,000 residents living across the city's 6.43 square miles. As such, it offers unique curb appeal challenges.

We spoke with Mike Johnston, executive director of the Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA), about the challenges of maintaining high standards of curb appeal in a dense urban environment. CHA has converted nine projects to RAD and expects to convert its remaining housing by 2018.

Question: You don't have the luxury of a lot of land OR green space to work with. So how do you pull off good curb appeal?

This is something we have been doing for over 26 years. It requires the executive director to visit the sites regularly to see how things look, and see if there are any changes to the sites and their conditions. This allows the executive office to identify ongoing concerns, and make plans to correct them through routine maintenance activities or long-term planning. For RAD, we tried to preserve as much of the original character of the sites, because wrought iron fencing, unique architectural features and older trees are not easy to replace.

In addition to a thorough maintenance routine and using existing building characteristics, we have added landscape features to draw eyes away from things such as garbage dumpsters and cars. Although we use drought resistant plants that thrive in our climate, we installed irrigation systems to protect the investment and help the plants to establish themselves permanently and grow. During the design, we were careful to put in only items that can be maintained regularly and simply by the maintenance team.

Question: Can you walk us through a few examples?

Yes. To illustrate, let's consider Woodrow Wilson Court, Roosevelt Towers and Jackson Gardens. These are all mid-rise family properties with brick exteriors. The properties were built in the 1930s and 1940s, and they have densities ranging from 40 units per acre to 80 units per acre. There's very little on-site parking, common areas or playground space. And, yet, we believe that we have been able to achieve very high levels of curb appeal.

Here are the things we've done, which have taken time,



Woodrow Wilson Court

RENTAL ASSISTANCE DEMONSTRATION – FEBRUARY 2018

www.hud.gov/rad/pha-curbappeal

as they could not happen overnight. Archway entries were popular during the time the buildings were constructed originally, so we repaired and cleaned the archways, and tied them to small courtyards with new flowerbeds. The beds are not too large, but just the right ratio for the building and natural space.



Roosevelt Towers

- In Roosevelt Towers, we renovated the low-rise apartments in the front. The back areas of the apartments had these large dumpsters that were the only thing you could see. By redesigning the small courtyards in the back, we used physical features, such as the existing building's rear wall, and added fencing and other items that helped the dumpsters blend in to the overall defined space. Shadowbox fencing and elegant, yet simple, landscaping made the courtyards more private instead of looking like one large, open and featureless area.

For Jackson Gardens, we performed a complete gut rehab, and focused on creating a space between the street and the units. Once again, we were fortunate to have kept the wrought iron fencing, and repaired and preserved the fencing to last another 70 years. With the open space between the street and the buildings, we were able to add landscaping – again, low drought and able to thrive in our weather, but with the security of an irrigation system. Finally, we added new LED lighting packs in the courtyards that provided the perfect amount of light, not too bright but bright enough for residents to see anything in the area. It also shows the improvements off well.



Question: Who does all this work? Do you have a central landscape upkeep crew?

Jackson Gardens

No. For ongoing upkeep, the site managers and maintenance staff keep an eye on the landscaping and create a schedule for maintenance. We are lucky to have an in-house staff member who is knowledgeable about plants and recommended the best plants to use for our region and climate – but it's worth noting that a PHA does not *need* to have a specialist. It comes down to good managers and maintenance staff paying attention to the landscape on a daily basis and following the planned maintenance.

While the older, established trees are a great asset, they do require more attention to keep clean as they produce a large number of leaves and acorns, and the large branches need to be maintained.

Question: What do you find is one of your biggest challenges in the curb appeal battle?

That would have to be our dumpsters, trash and recycling areas. You want to hide it, but the equipment is very large. We found that screening works very well. Decorative shadowbox fencing and taller shrubs mix well to smooth out the boxes. In one of our developments, we have a covered enclosure where the roof ties into and matches the building. There, each unit has a private entry with separate stairs. We used stainless steel material to replace the old stairway. The roofline and stairway allowed us to extend the cover over the trash receptacles.

Architects do a wonderful job coming up with solutions and knowing what other people did around the country. They helped us maximize parking spots while minimizing the view of many cars parked in one area. Besides needing variances for new parking requirements, Cambridge is one of the leading cities with bicycle traffic, and there is a requirement to have bike space at residential buildings. The architects and planners came up with a good blend of auto, bike and garbage storage and green space that complemented the buildings.

Question: Any good stories about your senior high-rises to share as well?

We are really proud of what is underway at Manning Apartments. Manning Apartments was built in 1976. It's a 19-story building with 199-units serving elderly and disabled residents. It is the tallest and most visible structure in the neighborhood.

The tower was originally constructed using a cast concrete plank system, which was common and cost-effective at that time. Lessons are learned from the past. Besides looking like a concrete monolith, the structure was subject to flaws, such as leaks, which traveled throughout the building, and very little insulation. The building received limited improvements over the years, and required comprehensive renovations to its façade, core systems, apartment interiors and common spaces.



The work performed on the exterior of the building allowed the PHA to fix the systemic leak problem, and add insulation and new windows to increase energy efficiency. It also gave the PHA the chance to remove the drab concrete look from the skyline by using modern architectural materials and styles.

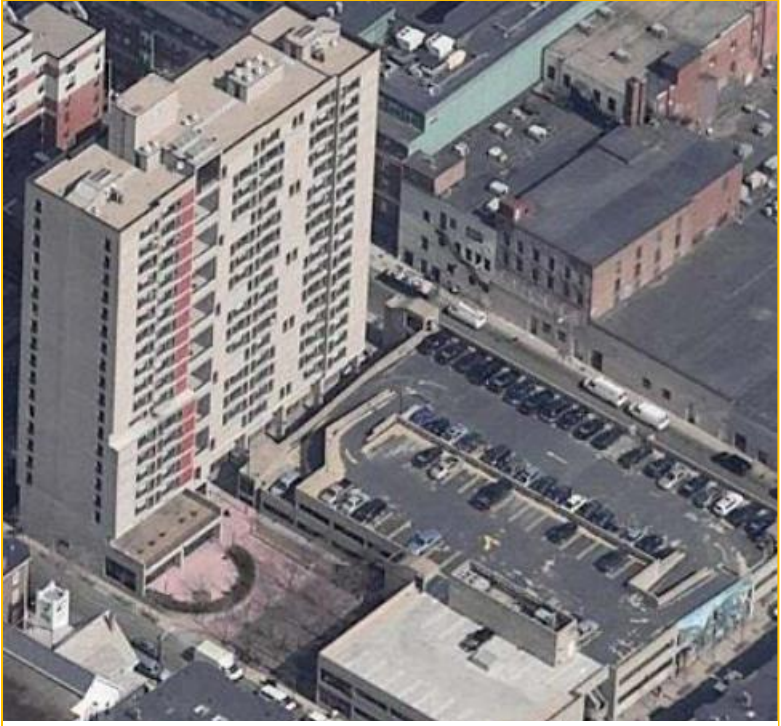
Manning Apartments

The architect selected metal panels with slight variations in texture and sheen to allow the building to blend into the skyline during any time of the day. By patterning the panels, whether sunny or cloudy, the building's new exterior blends and balances with subtle variations. It is no longer a glaringly obvious tower.



The building is laid out in the Martin Luther King, Jr. courtyard, along with a public library, and a concrete parking garage. Previously, the courtyard failed to tie the different uses together.

The layout of the original courtyard did not allow residents or visitors direct access to the building from the two streets surrounding the complex.



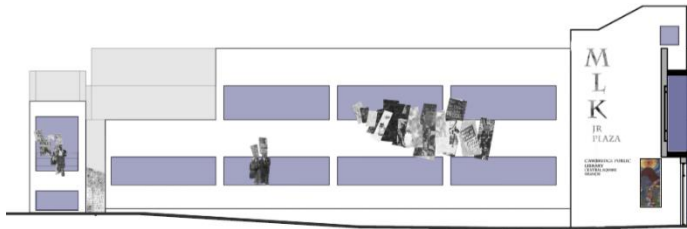
Manning Apartments - Before

The PHA was able to greatly improve the curb appeal, beyond the tower alone by reconfiguring the courtyard to allow access to all of the buildings and to remove the very plain industrial look and feel. A second-floor garden section was added to break up the monotonous building material by adding plants, and a canopy was added to cover people as they move through the courtyard.



Manning Apartments - New Entry

The original courtyard had a very small plaque honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., which was posted in an inconspicuous place. The PHA took the opportunity to better honor MLK, Jr. by adding metal artistic features to the garage wall. This covers the plain concrete wall and makes the courtyard a better place for people to gather.



Artwork in Martin Luther King, Jr. Courtyard.