

CURB APPEAL CASE STUDY

HAGERSTOWN, MARYLAND

The Hagerstown, Maryland, Housing Authority (HHA) owns and operates 1180 units of public housing across eleven different properties. Hagerstown is about 60 miles west of Baltimore and 70 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. It is currently converting its first RAD project and has submitted an application for the second phase

We spoke with Sean Griffith, executive director.

Question: You have some “classic” 1950s-era public housing, with long rows of brick buildings. This a style that is very common throughout the mid-Atlantic region. And yet you’ve made those DEVELOPMENTS look very warm and inviting. How did you pull that off?

We knew these properties had “good bones.” We could not afford to lose them. And, we didn’t have the funds to completely transform them. So, we worked hard on a design strategy that was not over-the-top but that would still create a sense of identity, a sense of boundaries, and, importantly, a sense of pride.



Therefore, some of the tricks we used included:

- We added shutters, which was not a big-ticket item, but helped soften the buildings.
- We replaced the concrete canopies with awnings. Like the shutters, the awnings weren’t very expensive, but softened things up and took away some of the institutional feel to the buildings. It would have been

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more expensive to install formal porches, but we also thought that porches, for these buildings, would have been “over-kill” and would not have looked appropriate.

- We added some new shrubs up against the buildings to make it look “softer.”
- We created “entrances” to each development, with signage and featured landscaping, wrought-iron fences and brick columns. The fencing is clearly not sufficient to



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keep out intruders, but it gives the development a sense of defined boundaries and, thus, becomes a soft deterrent.

- We added some plantings and trees.
- We sculpted around the trees and filled with mulch. This is really inexpensive, but helps to give the development a “dressed-up” look.

Question: That’s impressive. In fact, the buildings almost look “historic” and blend in with the architecture of the surrounding neighborhoods.



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Yes, it’s worked out nicely. We aim for that “charming” look. As with other PHAs, we’ve also learned that it’s best to hire out the landscaping (we weren’t very good at it!). But we really try to stay on top of things. We’re very big on keeping things tidy. Otherwise, we lose that visual attractiveness that is so important.

Question: We’re also very impressed with how clean the back of your units look. Some of your properties have very narrow rear yard-lines, almost like an alley. And yet these spaces are very well kept and create a nice visual line. While it’s not specifically “landscaping,” it adds to the positive visual appearance from the sidewalk. That’s not easy to pull off. How do you keep that up?



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Mostly, that’s resident education. As with other areas of “shared expectations,” we communicate this with residents during orientation – and then reinforce those standards during the manager’s regular walk-through of the properties.



Parkside Homes

We've also implemented a Clean Yard program back in 1999 that helps support the "shared expectation" through our inspections department. Each community has a thorough review once a month with follow-up inspections, as needed, to reinforce the program's purpose. Tenants have taken pride of their communities knowing that unsightly conditions are handled in a timely manner.



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Another program that our agency applies, for the betterment of all communities, is a quarterly site inspection that complements the clean yard program. This program is part of our plan to maintain Real Estate Assessment Center (REAC) standards for a safe, decent neighborhood, while adding an extra set of eyes for curb appeal.