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Urban Excellence

Philip Langdon
with Robert G. Shibley and Polly Welch



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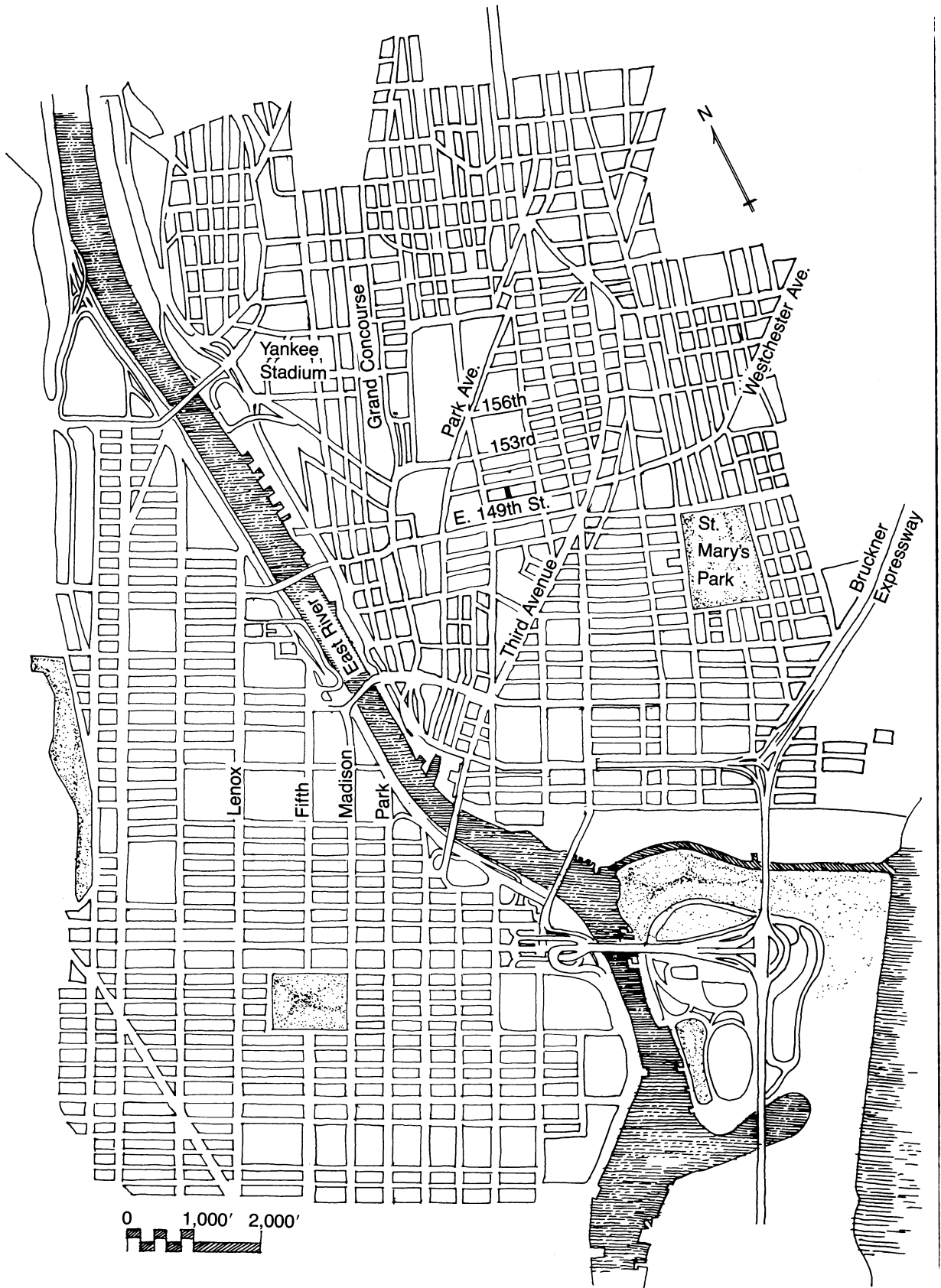
A Humane Response to Homelessness

Casa Rita, the Bronx, New York

Homelessness is one of the major scourges of our time. It tells us, if we care to notice, that something is seriously out of order in American cities and in society as a whole. Homelessness is not a minor problem, to be dealt with after issues of greater magnitude have been addressed. Shelter is one of the basic conditions for life, and in one of the world's wealthiest countries it should not be impossible to ensure that everyone in need of housing has a place to live. This is an issue of monumental importance for cities, in part because the cities have always been gathering places for the poor, and when poor people lack a decent place to live, their physical health and psychological well-being are endangered. Beyond the damage that homelessness inflicts on those in need of shelter, it threatens the urban community as a whole by undermining its order, souring the temper of the public domain, and interfering with a city's attractiveness to commerce, thus harming its economic prospects. Homelessness, if prolonged, jeopardizes the sense of justice on which a good, self-governing society depends.

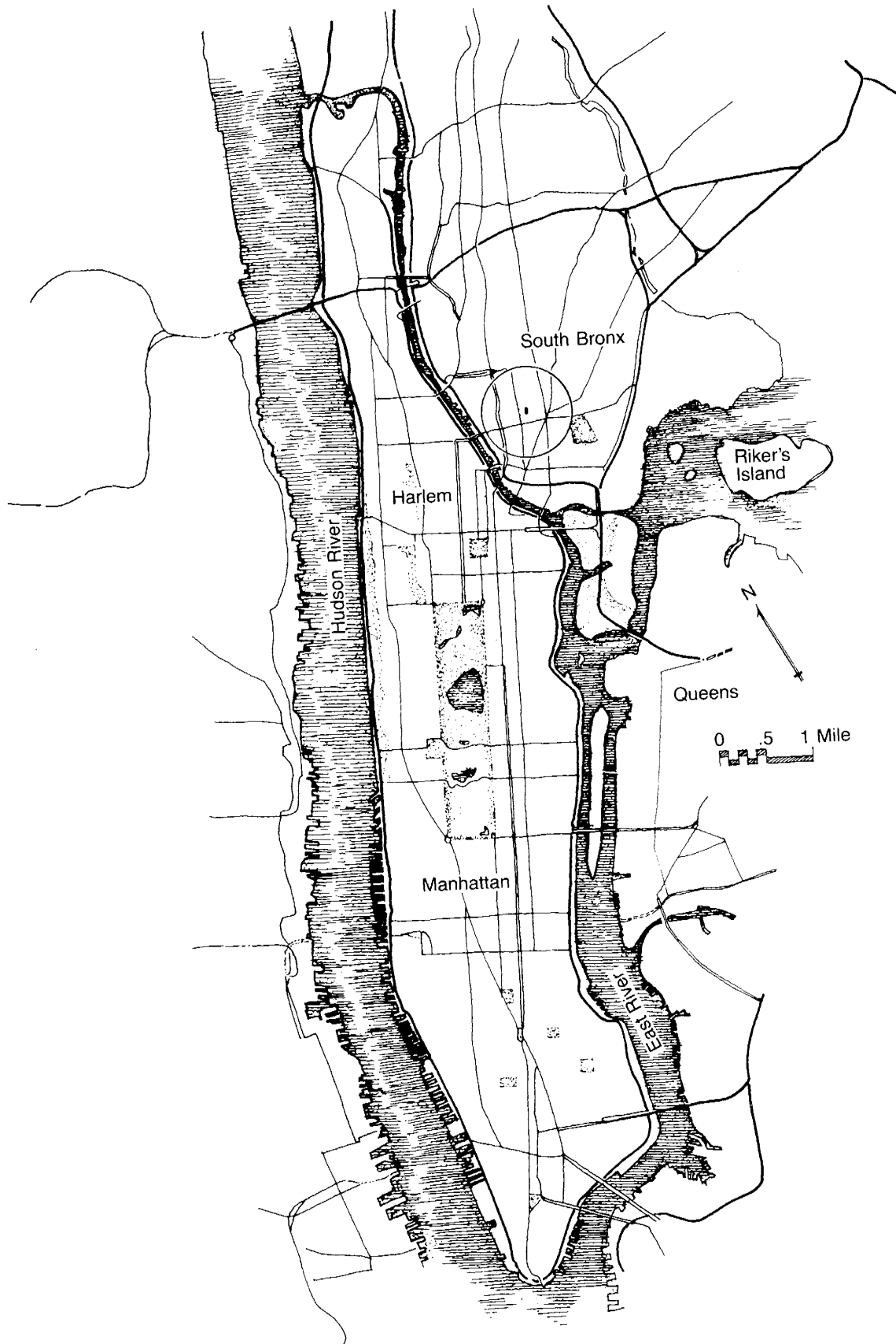
These things need to be said because Casa Rita, a shelter for homeless women and children in New York's South Bronx (fig. 5-1), is a thoughtful response to a problem that often is not taken seriously enough. Casa Rita offers several lessons about dealing with homelessness:

1. Small shelters are generally preferable because they offer a friendlier, more personal atmosphere—one in which the residents may have more of an opportunity to share knowledge and assume responsibilities.
2. An effective shelter should make social services available, so that residents can overcome problems and begin to master skills they will need. Empowerment of the residents may reduce future homelessness.
3. The shelter and its residents stand to gain from involvement with the neighborhood and its political and social agencies. The neighborhood, in turn, can benefit from the shelter's presence as an organizer and employer.



a

Fig. 5-1. Location of Casa Rita in the South Bronx, New York.



4. A small, private, nonprofit organization can function especially well as a shelter developer and operator. Such an organization can do things that a government agency would be hard pressed to accomplish.
5. Tapping sources of support such as local celebrities and businesses can ease the sponsor's financial burden and get more people involved in solving the homelessness problem, but problems may arise if businesses are asked to donate materials or equipment for the shelter's construction.

Homelessness: A Growing Problem for Women and Families

Throughout the United States, homelessness has been worsening for years, but the reaction all too often has been an attempt to downplay it—to find explanations in the faults of the homeless themselves and in some instances to sweep people from the streets as if they were litter from a fast-food restaurant. Several years ago, when Americans began to notice a growing number of “shopping bag ladies” and solitary men living full-time on sidewalks, in public parks, and in such hard, unfriendly places as bus and train stations, some attributed the increase to the widespread shift toward deinstitutionalizing the mentally ill. There was some truth in this. Tens of thousands of mental patients have been released because of government economizing, new therapeutic methods, and a concern for the rights of individuals. A sizable number of them have joined the new homeless, a population more disoriented and disturbing than the alcoholics who for generations have inhabited the shabby fringes of downtown.

But if a sizable number of the homeless are former mental patients, many of today's homeless lack housing for reasons other than their mental or emotional state. Many women have become homeless because of abuse or desertion by their husbands or boyfriends and because of evictions and high rents. Economic forces, reinforced by federal policy in the 1980s, have left an increasing number of people with little choice of where and how to live. In 1979 the wealthiest 20 percent of the American population received 34.0 percent of family income. By 1984, their share rose to 36.8 percent. The top 5 percent fared even better. By contrast, in 1979 the poorest 20 percent of the American population received 8.7 percent of family income, and by 1984 their share had declined to only 7.3 percent (Lekachman 1988).

Inequality increased, and we see the results in our housing and on our streets. Affordable housing is in short supply. Rents have shot upward in many cities. Some of the old buildings that used to provide cheap, small apartments or rooms for the poor have been turned into relatively expensive housing for middle-class people with a taste for city life. Older public housing projects have been allowed to run down, with too little money to repair their apartments and keep them occupied, and other housing programs have been sharply cut at the same time. From 1981 to 1987 the Reagan Administration slashed federal support for low-income housing from \$32 billion a year to \$9 billion a year, a reduction of more than 70 percent. And since appropriations for housing programs achieve their

impact only after moving through the bureaucratic process, the full results of the cutbacks may be yet to come.

The jobs that in the past helped poor urban residents get started up the economic ladder have been disappearing. Manufacturing, an important source of employment for people with little education, has declined in recent years, and companies have continued to leave the city for the suburbs or low-wage regions or foreign locales. For many people near the bottom of the economic hierarchy, especially those suddenly faced with a combination of personal setbacks, such as a major illness, a layoff, or a divorce, there simply is not enough money to pay for any form of traditional shelter.

In 1984, a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development study indicated the number of homeless people nationwide, including those in emergency shelters and abandoned buildings, probably ranged between 250,000 and 586,000. Some advocates of the homeless believed the number was higher then and it undoubtedly is higher now. Whatever the number may be, it has been growing to distressing proportions in many cities, nowhere more dramatically than in New York, where the housing squeeze has been intense. Demolition and abandonment of housing has exacerbated the problem; between 1980 and 1983 New York City lost approximately 69,000 rental units. From 1975 to 1981, the number of single-room occupancy units in the city dropped 60 percent (Breen 1985). As this happened, homelessness increased. By 1988, New York had, by one account, nearly 70,000 homeless people, of whom 28,000 lived in emergency shelters.

Women in Need's Approach to Homelessness

Rita Zimmer, a public health administrator who had worked with alcoholics and the needy in the Bowery, saw in the 1970s that there was a lack of emergency housing for homeless women—that, indeed, services of many kinds were much more rarely available for women than for men. Public shelters made only a small number of their beds available to women at that time, and few of those accommodated women with children; in many instances, a mother taking refuge in a shelter would have to leave her children with relatives or friends or place them in foster care. Most of the shelters provided only a place to sleep, not a twenty-four-hour facility with social service assistance.

In 1982 Zimmer and several other women working in the Bowery began taking steps to combat this. They founded an organization called Women in Need, or WIN, with Zimmer as its executive director. In February 1983 WIN opened its first emergency residence, St. Mary's House, in an empty mission house of the Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, on West 46th Street in Manhattan. WIN was among a number of organizations seeking ways to respond to the unique needs of women and children. In New York, since the early 1980s, the number of emergency shelters available to women and children has grown substantially. According to Jonathan Kozol, who has studied homelessness in New York, families with children have come to compose a large proportion of the population in the city's emergency shelters—18,000 parents and children, as compared to

10,000 individuals. The 18,000 make up about 5,000 families, with an average of one adult and two to three children per family (Kozol 1988).

But as Kozol and others have observed, the quality of most of the temporary housing is abysmal. Thousands of the homeless have been warehoused, at enormous public expense, in decrepit hotels unfit for family life. In hotels where crime and cockroaches flourish, where in some cases there is lead paint flaking from the walls and sewage overflowing in the bathrooms, where the elevators often do not work and where there typically are no cooking facilities for families or play areas for children, the residents languish and tomorrow's social problems undergo their incubation. One hotel alone, the Martinique at Broadway and 33rd Street, has contained nearly 400 families, including about 1,200 children.

Zimmer saw a need for small emergency residences for women with children—"dignified, safer and more compassionate" places where families would not have their self-esteem trampled as part of the price of receiving assistance. There they would be helped to find permanent housing and restore order to their lives. The WIN residence on West 46th Street, supported in its early months by Zimmer's savings, a \$20,000 federal grant, and donations of money, food, and other goods, has housed a small group of women and their children, with additional common dormitory space for single women and with a drop-in center that often feeds some of the destitute women and children from nearby welfare hotels. In November 1983 WIN opened its second residence, Monica House, in a former convent on Claver Street in Brooklyn, providing housing for an average of twelve families and four single women. Funds for WIN's shelters have come from private donations and reimbursement payments from the city.

Zimmer and WIN see homelessness as a squeeze caused primarily by large forces in the economy and society. As the availability of affordable housing has shrunk, homelessness has increased. "The bench is only so long," says Zimmer. "Somebody had to fall off." The first to fall off were transients. Since then, families on the fringe, such as welfare mothers, have also been falling off the bench. Now some of the working poor are similarly finding it impossible to afford housing. There are a sizable number of individuals, mostly men, who "have jobs as porters, busboys, stockmen, cook's helpers" and who "live in shelters and go to work every day," according to Zimmer. Many people trying to cope with the shortage of affordable housing double up in apartments with relatives, but after a while, conflicts erupt, and somebody has to leave. Pregnant teenagers often start out in their parents' home, but conflict over the rearing of the child results in the young mother and baby being without a place to live. WIN recognizes that people do not want to be homeless, and that people require a calm and caring place in which to organize their search for permanent shelter.

Making Contact with the Neighborhood

WIN's experience with assisting single mothers has led it to favor small shelters rather than large ones. Casa Rita, on 151st Street in the Melrose section of the South Bronx, contains room for sixteen women and

about thirty-nine children, a far cry from the Manhattan hotels in which hundreds of the homeless are dumped.

WIN knew there was a need for temporary housing in the South Bronx. It found an available building on 151st Street in November 1983 through contacts with the American Red Cross, which had considered using the building but discovered that it was too small for Red Cross purposes (fig. 5-2). The area is not nearly so dismal as outsiders who have read about the South Bronx devastation might expect. Across the narrow



Fig. 5-2. The parochial school building before the Casa Rita renovation. (Courtesy of Conrad Levenson.)

street from the shelter is an empty city-owned lot full of tall weeds and trash (fig. 5-3), but Casa Rita's side of the block is an intact row of two- to six-story buildings of brick or wood, mostly residential (fig. 5-4). A half-block to the west is a mixed commercial and residential street, Morris Avenue, lined on one side with small retail businesses—among them a bridal shop, a mirror retailer, an upholsterer, grocery stores, Tailors 'R' Us, an office furniture distributor, and Chinese, Italian, and Puerto Rican restaurants and take-out shops (fig. 5-5). On the other side are handsome brick housing complexes that stand close to the street. Two blocks away is 149th Street, a thoroughfare with a major subway station and a series of merchants who appear to be successful, as well as the defensive-looking Lincoln Hospital, its edges protected by a chain-link fence topped by barbed wire (fig. 5-6). Depending on what time of day you come and which part of which block you travel, you will see men and women in business attire, mothers pushing baby carriages, young men hanging out on the streets, and working-class people going about their jobs. On the sidewalks, both English and Spanish are heard. The Melrose area has problems, but it also exhibits signs of healthy urban life. "It's up and coming," one resident said. Amid this, Casa Rita is little noticed. It occupies what had been an empty, graffiti-besmirched three-story parochial school (two stories of classrooms above the ground floor) attached to the side of Our Lady of Pity Catholic Church (fig. 5-7).



Fig. 5-3. Across 151st Street from Casa Rita.



Fig. 5-4. Other houses on the street are well kept.



Fig. 5-5. A supermarket at the end of the street.

Fig. 5-6. The closest commercial area is two blocks away on 149th Street.

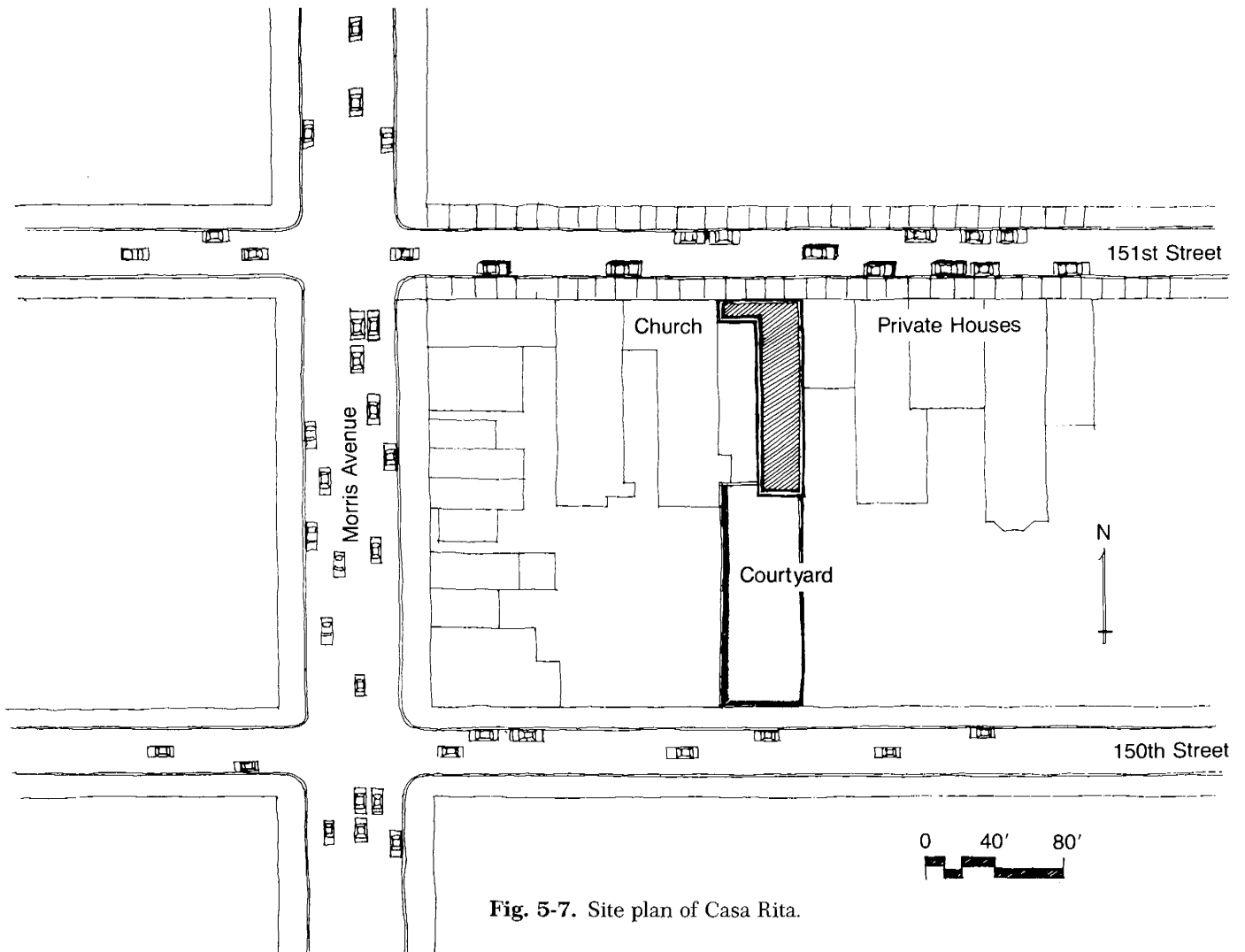
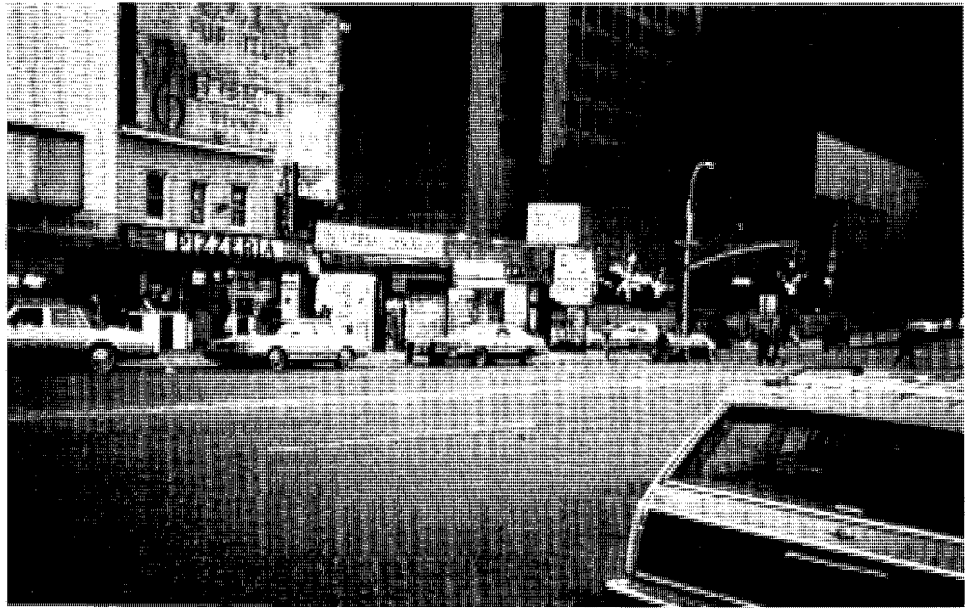


Fig. 5-7. Site plan of Casa Rita.

Shelters for the homeless often run into neighborhood resistance, especially when the shelter is large and the neighbors feel they are being forced to assume the burden of solving a citywide social problem. WIN has tried to show from the outset that the shelter would be an asset rather than an albatross for the neighborhood. Often WIN works with churches, which are natural allies not only because their mission includes helping the needy but also because many urban churches own buildings that they have little use for and would be happy to see serving new purposes. Declining neighborhood parishes and congregations often own parochial schools that have been closed or social halls that are rarely used, not just in New York but in cities throughout the country. (Former convents also are often about the size that suits WIN's purposes.) The school attached to Our Lady of Pity was an eyesore that undermined confidence in the neighborhood. The parish itself was financially shaky. When WIN offered to lease, renovate, and occupy the school building and to make rental payments that would support the church, the blending of interests promised to serve both parties. The neighborhood would see a refurbished building and members of the church would be pleased at the alleviation of the parish's financial problems. While weak churches may not have great influence in their neighborhoods, nonetheless it is hard to think of a better fellow advocate for a potentially controversial project than a local church. Projects sponsored by government agencies are often targets for criticism, but churches enjoy a special status. They command respect and deference, not only because of their religious status but also because they are one of the few institutions that still function at the community level. Churches can spread the news about a new shelter in a way that makes the shelter better accepted. Father Villa, the priest at Our Lady of Pity, observed, "The neighborhood thrives on rumors. Don't squash it; use it to get word around that something good is happening."

"When others who propose shelters meet local resistance, it is almost always because the community leaders and constituents were not part of the process," Zimmer says. WIN approached important elements of the South Bronx governmental and institutional structure. From Karolyn R. Gould, director of human services for the South Bronx Development Organization, Zimmer sought introductions to community leaders and help in identifying the community-based agencies that Casa Rita's residents would turn to for health and social services. Gould introduced Zimmer to community board leaders, vouched for the high quality of WIN's work, and assured the community board that WIN would establish "no large warehousing facilities" for the homeless. Community boards, with members nominated by the borough president, review plans for sanitation, schools, fire protection, and other matters. Though they can be overridden by the city, some of the boards wield considerable influence, and the community board in the Melrose area was especially important because it was already on record as opposing shelters. Board members thought the big need was for permanent housing, and they believed there were too many shelters. Zimmer responded to the board's concern by talking with individual members, and in doing so, she was able to obtain their support for a *small* shelter. During her discussions, she indicated that WIN would give Bronx residents preference for the housing at Casa Rita, even though the city requires

shelters to take whomever applies first; she had to clear this promise with the city.

WIN also met with the Bronx Coalition for the Homeless and the Teen Pregnancy Network—experts on identifying who in the community needed to be served and what resources were available. These meetings, Shibley and Welch note, were useful for at least two reasons. First, they averted a turf issue, which might have arisen had Zimmer not approached the pregnancy group. Second, the various groups that Zimmer met with helped her to identify a particular unmet need: shelter for Spanish-speaking mothers. This prepared WIN to make better choices about such things as the language skills of the staff and the kind of food to be served.

WIN advanced a valid argument that the shelter would help support the area's economy. WIN chose a South Bronx contractor, Banana Kelly, which employed minority workers and subcontractors. Upon opening in September 1986, the shelter hired a permanent staff of six, three of whom were previously unemployed residents of the neighborhood. Casa Rita has bought much of its supplies from vendors in the area, further attempting to bolster the South Bronx.

The Rudy Bruner Award evaluation team of Robert G. Shibley and Polly Welch point out that an important part of getting community support is a commitment to open negotiation. WIN listened to community representatives and provided things they wanted, such as preference for Bronx women as residents of the shelter. In return WIN received an important expression of support from the community board and received information that has helped in running a more effective shelter. Moreover, the effort to maintain a good relationship with the community continued after the shelter had gone into operation. Zimmer set up a community advisory committee that helps the shelter director stay in touch with the area and provides opportunities to educate nearby people about homelessness.

Organizing, Financing, and Designing Casa Rita

Some people walking along 151st Street past Casa Rita believe it is still a religious institution, perhaps a convent. The ambiguous, low-key appearance was intentional. A shelter for the homeless is best for its residents and its neighborhood when it is clean and neat, but not an attention grabber. Many homeless women have been victims of domestic violence and find it crucial to live in a setting where their abuser cannot find them. The small former grade school, by blending easily into the neighborhood, also avoids tarring the neighborhood with a potentially troublesome institutional identity.

Long before Casa Rita opened its doors, Zimmer worked out an organizational arrangement that would help WIN draw on needed expertise. Instead of filling WIN's board with individuals chosen mainly for fundraising potential, Zimmer selected for the eighteen-member board a group of women who had skills in a variety of fields useful to the shelter. She saw the importance both of teaching women how to be effective on a board and of familiarizing them with the kind of people they were serving. At the first shelter, she organized coffee hours so that board members could gain a

better understanding of WIN's clientele. The staff and homeless families were invited to work with the board on new development projects. In acts such as these, Shibley and Welch identify some important values—a willingness to go against conventional wisdom, an eagerness to include many people in the process, and a belief that the empowerment of women on the board was just as desirable as the empowerment of homeless women.

On February 14, 1984, WIN kicked off its fund-raising drive for Casa Rita with a celebrity event in Manhattan's Bonwit Teller store, featuring such theater and entertainment industry figures as Candice Bergen, Penny Marshall, Jeremy Irons, and Mike Nichols. It was a gathering that, along with the promise of manufacturer-donated \$200 Tourneau watches for everyone who gave \$1,000, succeeded in attracting what any fund-raising effort needs: publicity. The fund-raising drive went on for two years. Astute local organizations draw on the strengths of their community, and WIN capitalized many times on New York's entertainment industry. Annabel Nichols, wife of play and movie director Mike Nichols, served on WIN's board of directors and helped involve celebrities in the fund-raising events. The cast and production crew of *The Real Thing*, a Broadway play directed by Mike Nichols and starring Jeremy Irons and Glenn Close, gave a benefit performance. Over the course of the fund drive, sources of support were highly varied. Corporations and individuals gave. A Sunday school class at Riverside Church donated seeds for a garden patch. Late in the project, a woman from California asked how much more WIN needed to complete Casa Rita. "We still have about \$35,000 to raise," Zimmer replied. Two weeks later a check for that amount arrived. In all, donations, events, and benefit performances such as these raised more than \$200,000 for the shelter.

But donations were not the sole reason for Casa Rita's existence. WIN applied for a grant from the state's recently established Homeless Housing Assistance Program, and in July 1985 was told that the shelter would receive \$159,500. At that time, construction had just begun, and the additional money spurred WIN to modify its plans for the building. The original idea was to divide each classroom into two rooms, one per family, separated from each other by a movable partition. With the extra funds, WIN was able to install permanent partition walls, providing much-needed privacy. Closets were added, giving the women and their children essential storage space. A room with a sink and toilet was built at each end of the two bedroom floors. The added toilet facilities reduced the number of rooms available for families, so WIN had to rework both the program and the financial components.

For WIN, a difficult part of the financial process was the coordinating of donation and other fund-raising efforts over a two-year period and then the rearranging of the project's financial affairs when money or goods that had been promised did not arrive on time. The state grant, for instance, arrived very late—two months after the project's open house and only two months before the first residents moved in. The delay would have been much longer except for extraordinary efforts by Zimmer and the regional office that administered the homeless assistance program. Small organizations with tight budgets often find themselves struggling with regulations. After construction was already under way, changes in fire department

regulations forced WIN to redesign the shelter's sprinkler system and apply for approvals of the revised plans—raising the cost of the project substantially and delaying the shelter's completion by several months. Having been through all this, Zimmer says organizers of a successful project must not underestimate how long it will take to complete the job. But she also emphasizes the advantages of a group such as hers. A small organization, she says, can get around bureaucratic red tape more easily; small organizations are less visible and less threatening, so agencies do not pull out their big guns against them.

WIN hired as its architect Conrad Levenson, Architects and Planners, of New York. Although the design issues were relatively straightforward, the project had some unique aspects that made its administration more complex. Not only was the architect to turn grade-school classrooms into bedrooms and convert the ground floor into common living and dining facilities, he was to use large quantities of donated goods—some \$60,000 worth of sinks, toilets, cabinetry, refrigerators, stoves, flooring, and other items that WIN managed to get ten companies in the home furnishings industry to donate. Zimmer describes the resulting complications.

Coordinating donated goods from ten separate companies required incredible amounts of time on the phone with the vendors and with the public relations firms. This meant selecting products and goods which had to be coordinated with the design of the shelter and then arranging for deliveries, storage and installations.

The combination of donated goods and services, WIN's lack of experience in building, and the later infusion of government funds (which led to time-consuming revisions of the project design) all helped to drive up the design fee to \$90,000, which was high in relationship to the \$310,000 of construction costs.

Should other community groups follow Casa Rita's example and use donated goods and services? Some of the disadvantages are:

- “You sacrifice some quality and some design control, and you get some discontinued items,” according to Levenson. For instance, Casa Rita's toilets had stylized, squared-off bowls and lids, which posed replacement problems.
- The contractor may not accept the usual responsibility for materials and installation.
- The architect may have to put in longer hours and charge a higher fee.

On the other hand, there are these advantages:

- Free goods and services provide important savings.
- The project's support base is broadened. “Any time you can involve more people in a project, you involve them in the solution,” according to Zimmer. The donation campaign brought the homelessness issue into the corporate world and made companies aware that they could do something.

- An organization like WIN may be able to turn to the donating companies for additional help in the future.

Zimmer still likes the idea of seeking donated goods. “I might be more *selective* if we do it again,” she says.

The total development cost was \$550,000. The challenge was to stay within a tight budget, yet get as high-quality an environment as possible. The facade, with three glass block windows and an openable fourth window with a round top, still is relatively innocuous—not drawing unnecessary attention to itself—but the building looks much more attractive than before (fig. 5-8). The facade displays fresh white paint, which Zimmer chose carefully, since she wanted a color that was cheerful, that was already in the neighborhood, and that would be liked by the Italians and Hispanics who are predominant in the area. Inside the former school, the goal was to avoid expensive structural changes, yet make the building pleasant and functional. Instead of making two bedrooms of equal size in each classroom, the space was divided unevenly (fig. 5-9). This has allowed

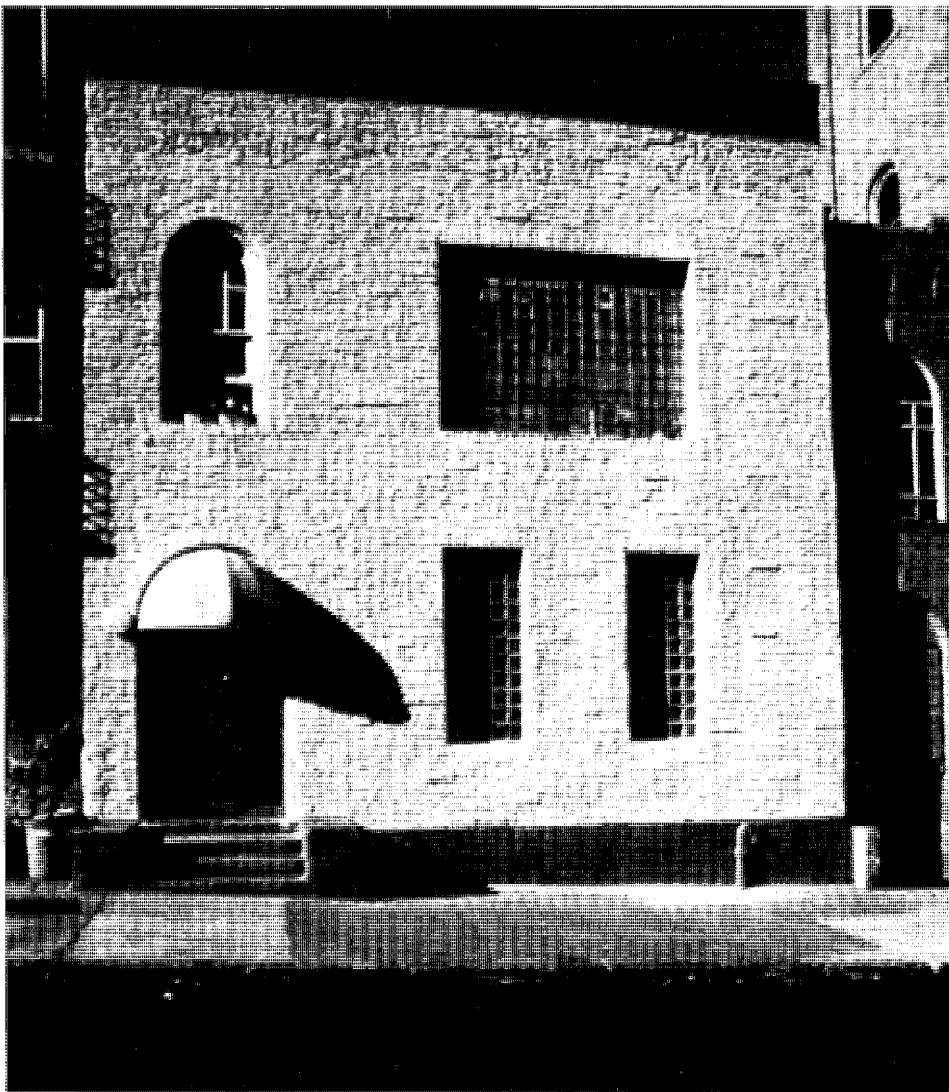


Fig. 5-8. The renovated building is intended to be anonymous and yet look like home. (Courtesy of Conrad Levenson.)

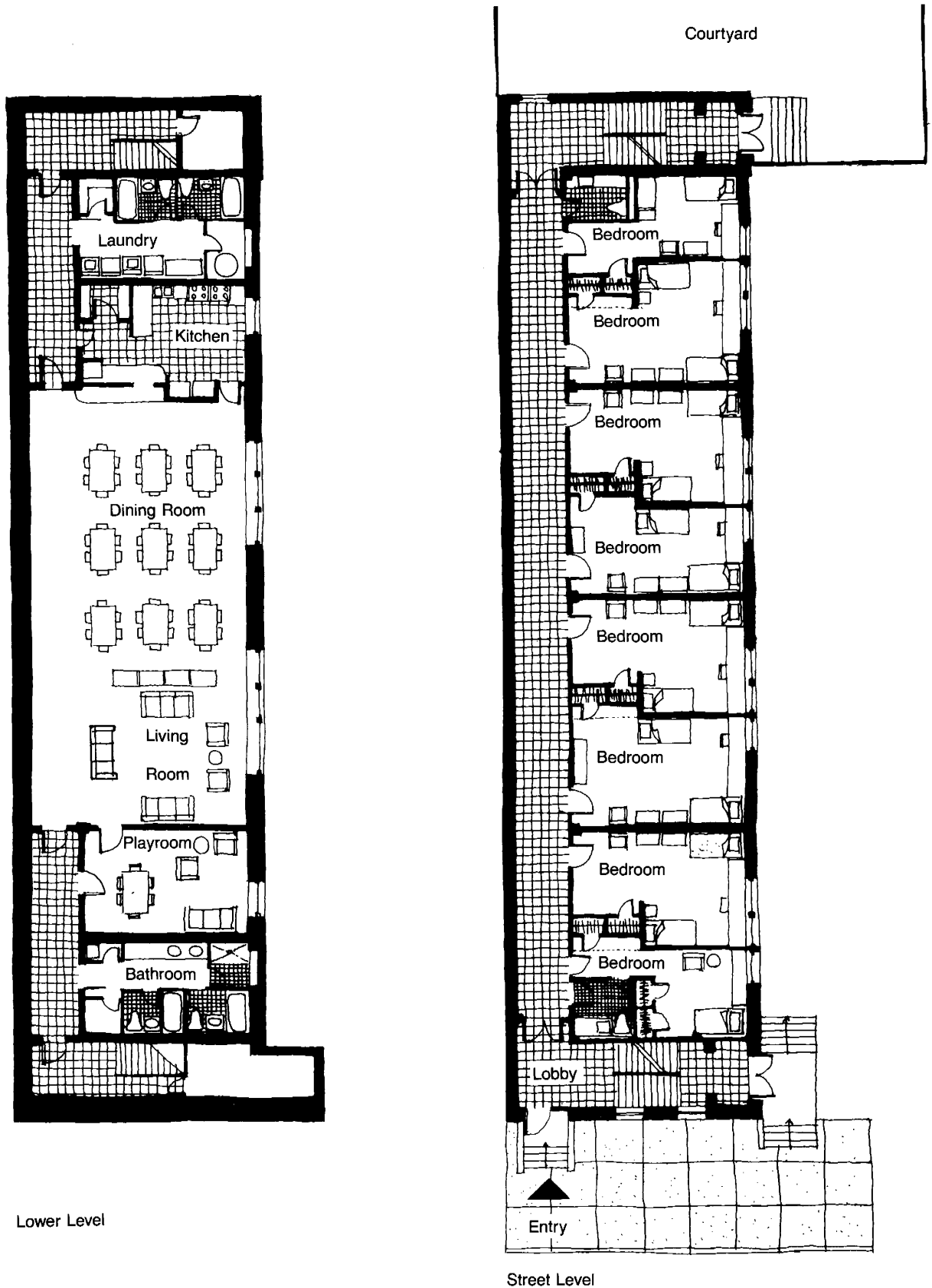
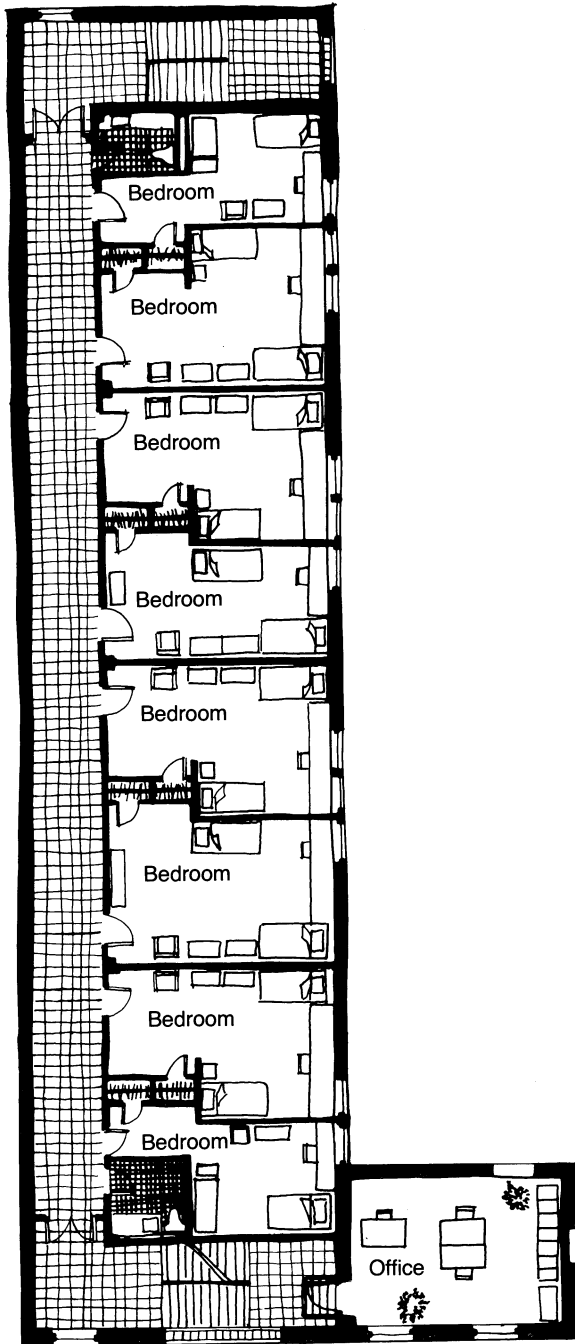
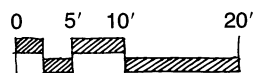


Fig. 5-9. Casa Rita floor plans.



Upper Level



Casa Rita to accommodate families of different sizes, from one to three children, and it has made each room feel more distinctive. Families do not get a sense of having been issued a “cell” just like everyone else’s.

The residents have been encouraged to personalize their rooms, in the process learning about decoration (fig. 5-10). Each room contains a small refrigerator—a prized convenience for a family trying to live on a tight budget and in an institution. The question of how much kitchen equipment to put into each room is an important one. A full kitchenette in each room would isolate families and probably also cause a code or zoning problem. By contrast, a small refrigerator in each room avoids such problems. It allows mothers to take care of children’s food needs during the day, and it reduces the potential for stealing; food is the most valuable item that many poor women have. At the same time, the absence of an entire kitchenette in the room ensures that mothers will meet one another in the group kitchen and the common dining room.

There are splashes of bright color in the hallways—powder blue doors and blue bulletin boards on the second floor, bright yellow on doors and bulletin boards on the third floor, reducing the impression of sameness.



Fig. 5-10. Residents personalize their rooms even for the short time they spend at Casa Rita.

Overhead trellises in the hallway outside each pair of doors were intended by Levenson “to give identity to pairs of rooms” (fig. 5-11). Shibley and Welch credit them with breaking down the institutional feeling of the long corridor. Combined with benches, they suggest to some the image of a street—a place to meet neighbors.

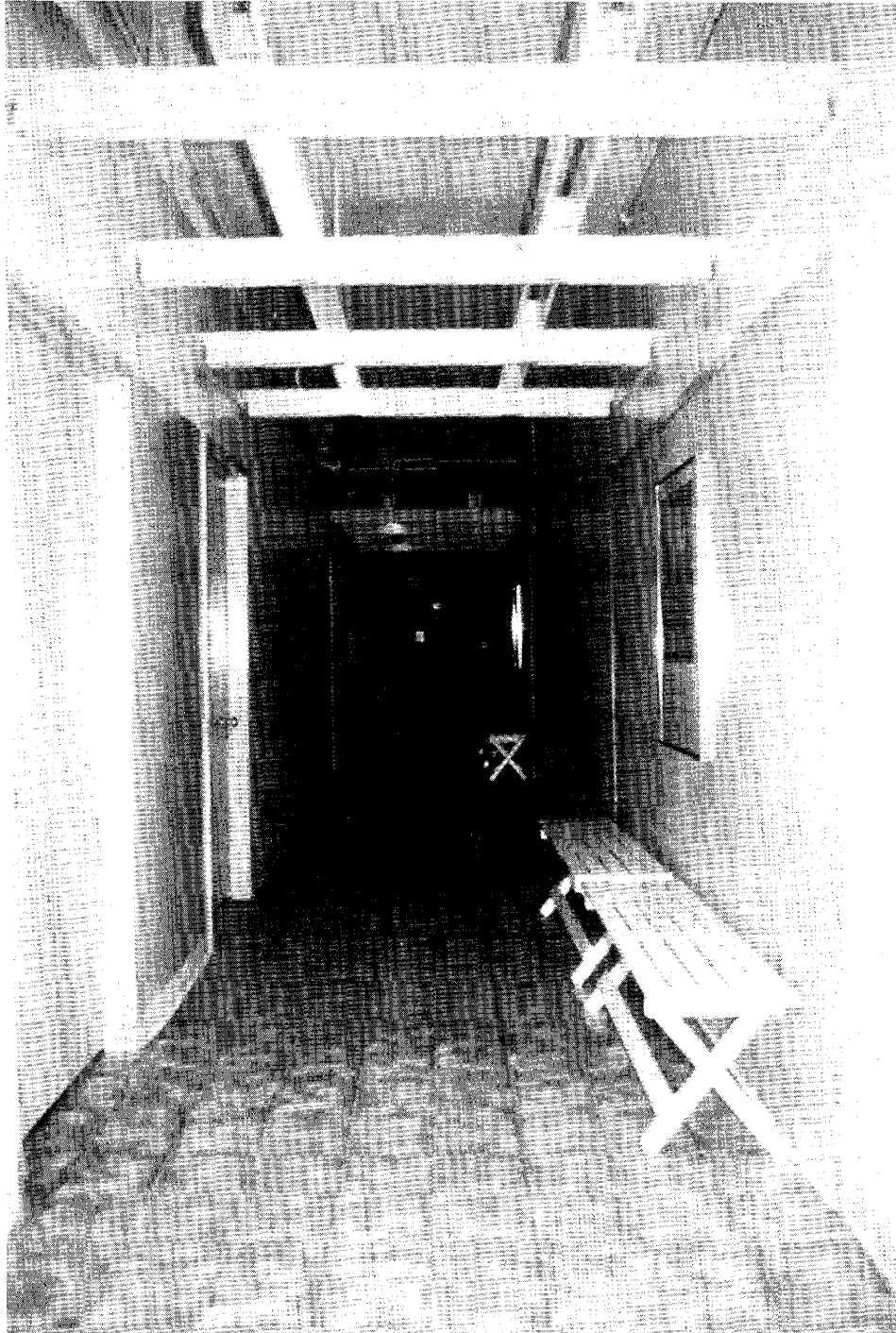


Fig. 5-11. Painted blue and yellow, long institutional hallways are broken by benches and overhead trellises at each pair of bedroom doors.
(*Courtesy of Conrad Levenson.*)

Ideally, every room would have a private toilet. Because of limited money and space, full bathrooms with tubs and showers as well as sinks, toilets, and areas for changing diapers were provided only on the ground floor, where plumbing already was in place. It is significant, however, that the bathrooms were designed like traditional, private residential bathrooms instead of dormitory style, with toilets, showers, and sinks together (fig. 5-12). Other communal facilities, including the kitchen, the dining area, an adjoining social area (with a TV set), the laundry room, and a counseling office that sometimes serves as a child-care center, have been clustered on this level for the residents' convenience (figs. 5-13 and 5-14).

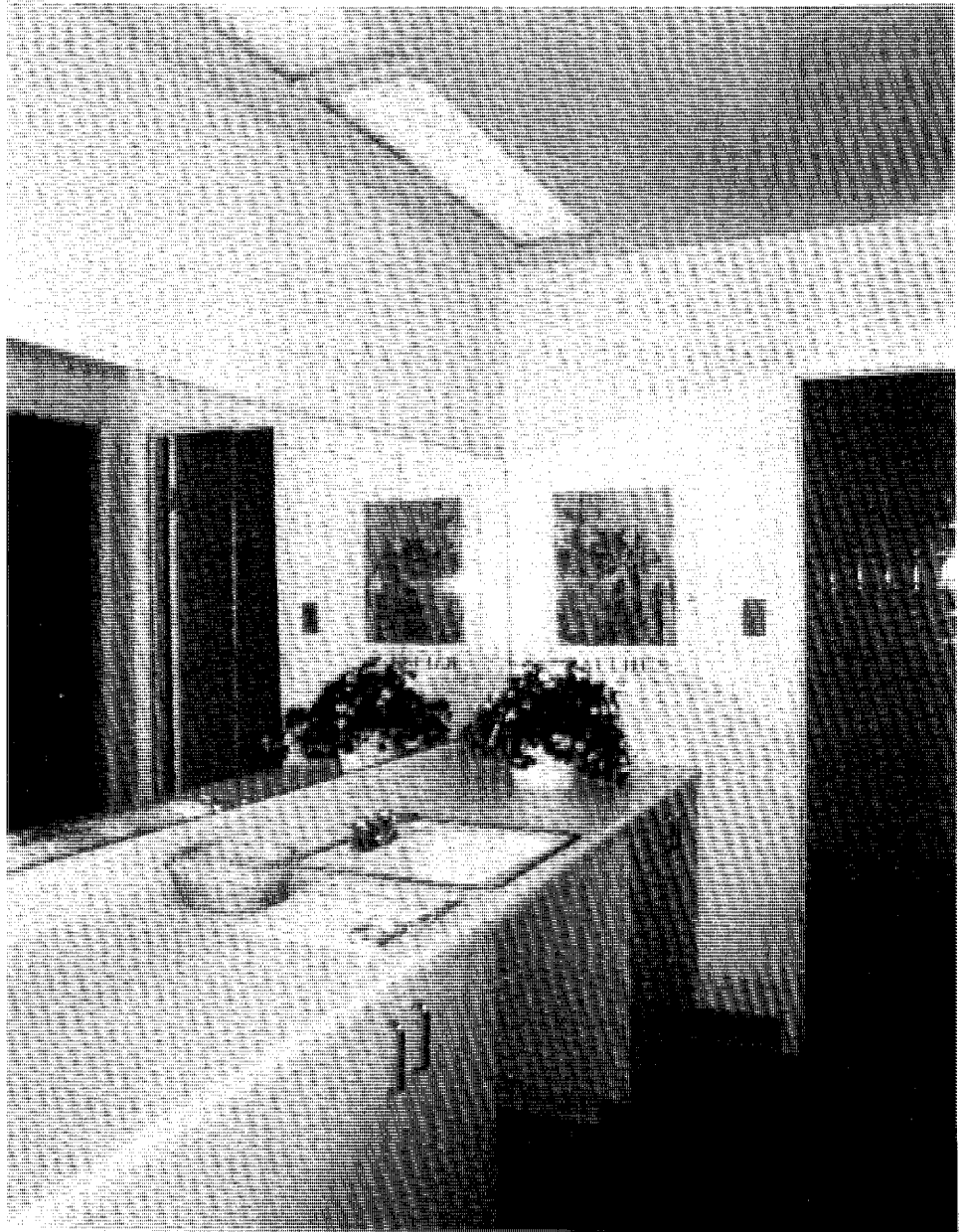


Fig. 5-12. The shared bathrooms are made to feel as residential as possible and support needs such as counter space to change diapers.
(Courtesy of Conrad Levenson.)



a



b

Fig. 5-13. The dining room and adjoining social area for residents are both homey and functional.

Most of the women are between eighteen and twenty-five years old and have children under six years old. "Many of the mothers had little experience living independently and were unaccustomed to or unfamiliar with using community resources and referrals," according to Zimmer. It was felt that they would benefit from having "as much common space as possible to facilitate networking, self-help, sharing similar tasks (i.e., laundry or cooking), cooperative child care, group problem-solving, and general communication during the day." The kitchen was made large enough so that several people can work in it, learning from one another about cooking and food preparation. The shelter's cook prepares a group dinner, but through much of the day and evening the kitchen is open for the residents' use.

Behind the shelter is a yard roughly paved with asphalt. WIN has not found the money to turn it into a usable play area, which would be desirable as part of the women's training, since many mothers do not know how to play with their children (figs. 5-15 and 5-16). Welch and Shibley note that play areas for young children function best if the parent can watch the children from the family's room or at least from common areas inside the building. In Casa Rita, the shape of the building and its lot dictate that the only way to watch children from inside is to stand at a window at the end of a hallway or sit by the rear door; the mother cannot easily handle other tasks while keeping an eye on the children. This is an issue to keep in mind when selecting a building or site for a shelter.

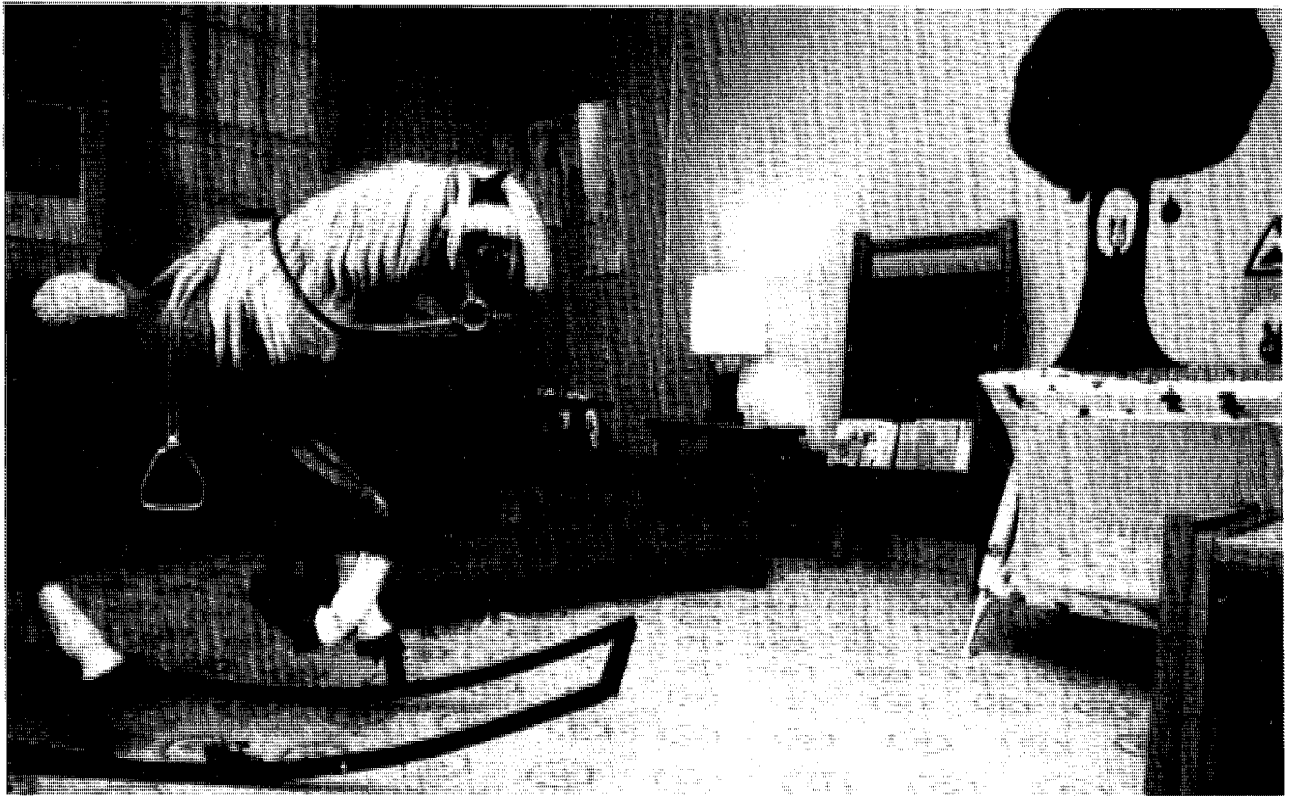
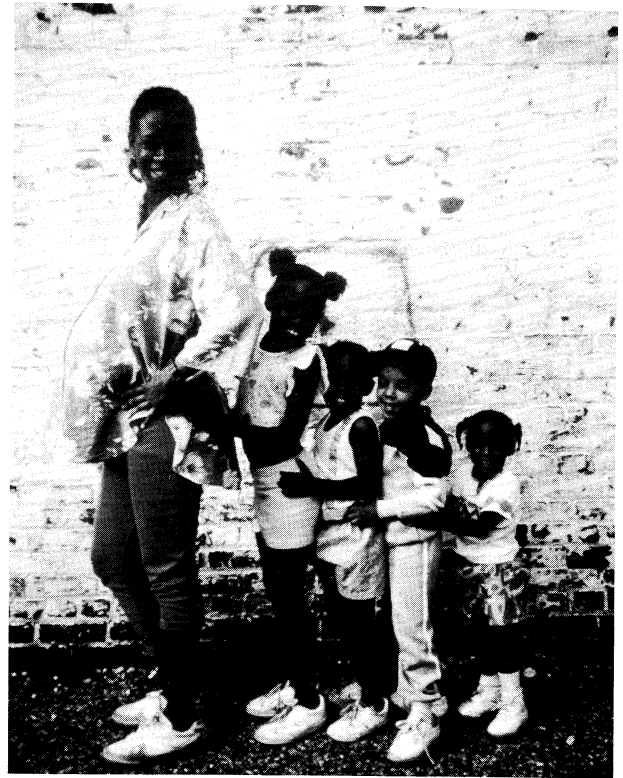


Fig. 5-14. The space originally intended as a living room is now a playroom because the toys and noise can be contained.



a



b



c

Fig. 5-15. The backyard provides a space for relaxation and typical backyard activities. (*a,c.* Courtesy of Women in Need; *b.* Photograph by Nancy Stout.)

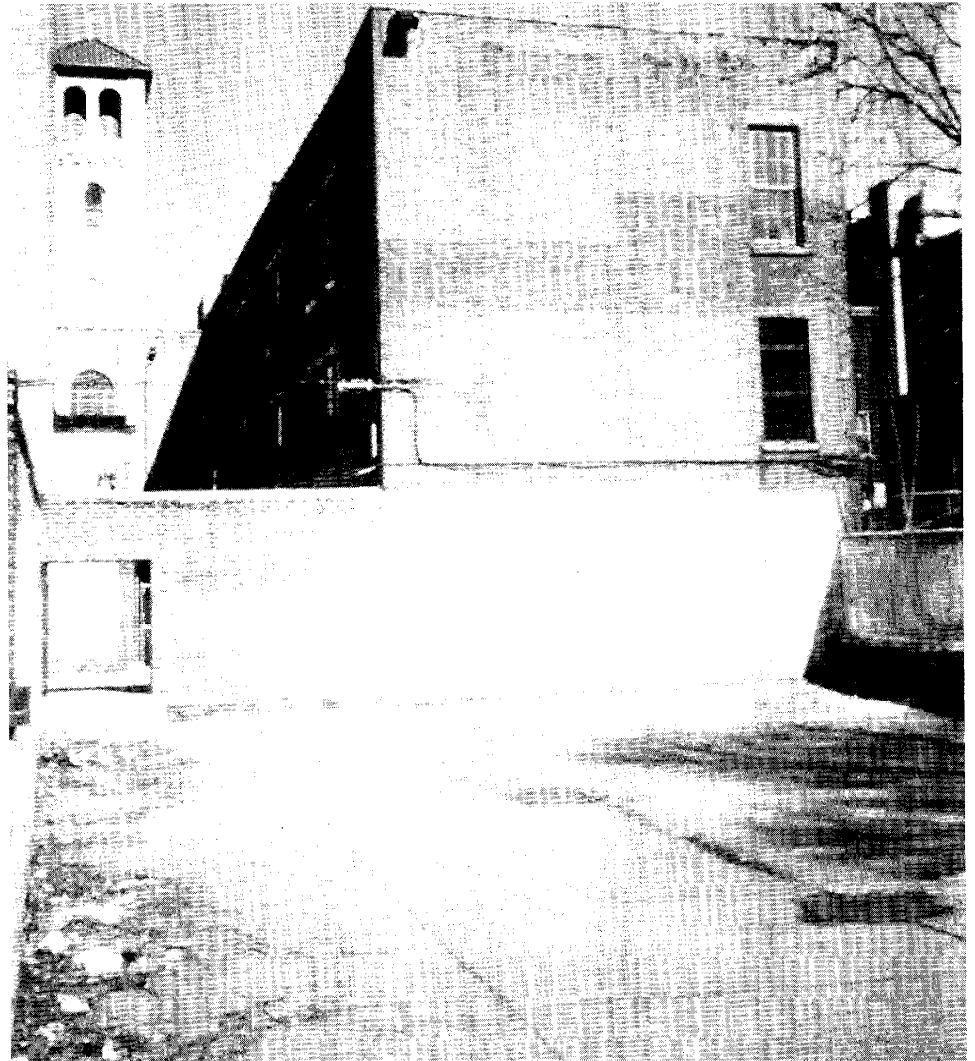


Fig. 5-16. The courtyard at the back of Casa Rita awaits funds for landscaping.

Managing a Shelter That Empowers Women

WIN set out to develop shelters that would help women learn to work in the world in both interdependent and independent ways. Reducing the dependence of the women and families who come to Casa Rita is an important goal, and to attain it, WIN provides much more intensive social services than are offered in welfare hotels.

Youth workers visit Casa Rita, arranging, among other things, such children's activities as trips to the Bronx Zoo, Chinatown, an amusement park, and a state park. Two counselors work full time in the shelter, handling all kinds of subjects, from child rearing to problems with family members who do not live in the shelter, to searching for housing or jobs. Many of the women are inexperienced in dealing with the adult and institutional world, and the counselors coach them on how to talk to landlords, how to present themselves to housing coop boards, how to go through the welfare system, and how to apply for other programs.

The women are expected to go out weekly to look for an apartment.

Many of the apartments that the women can afford are in tenant-run or city-owned buildings. Some are in apartments subsidized by the federal Section 8 program, which often involves a lengthy wait, since the demand far exceeds the supply. "Finding apartments on their own, without city programs, is rare," observed one counselor at Casa Rita. Housing counselors at WIN's 46th Street location in Manhattan also help with the search for a permanent place to live, conducting workshops to prepare the women for apartment hunting, providing some necessities (such as kitchen utensils) when a family moves out, and checking on the families after they have settled into permanent housing. WIN has had to struggle to get the city to provide reimbursement for the services of a housing specialist and more recently for an "after-care" person.

WIN has attempted to involve the residents in the maintenance and operation of the shelter—something that is easier to accomplish in a small place like Casa Rita. For a while, the shelter shifted the job of night manager among many of the residents—trying to provide some experience in self-government and also to supply the holder of this job with a small stipend. This was changed after administrators began to wonder whether such an arrangement, which puts a resident in the position of enforcing rules on other residents, was a good policy. Now the shelter employs paid staff members twenty-four hours a day. One ex-resident works as night manager, and another ex-resident works as a "family monitor"—maintaining the shelter's security and responding to emergencies from the time the professional staff leaves in the afternoon until midnight. Residents, however, can still earn stipends by working as weekend cook and weekday assistant cook.

While living in the shelter, each resident, unless she is in the last stage of a pregnancy, must help with chores, such as washing dishes or cleaning the dining rooms. Residents must obey rules, including a nightly curfew. Many of the women have boyfriends, or have husbands who are unemployed or working at jobs that do not pay enough to support an apartment. The men are allowed into the common areas—kitchen, dining area, social area, and laundry room—during the daytime and evening on Saturday and Sunday and during the afternoon and evening three other days of the week. Children are not allowed in the social room after 10 P.M. unless accompanied by a parent. "We try not to have so many rules that they become oppressive," Zimmer says. Patricia A. Reeberg, the shelter's manager, observes, however, "You'll always have a problem of people not going by the rules. You expect some kind of rebellion; they have to fight somebody. Basically it's a matter of chores or breaking the curfew." A woman who is ordered to leave for not following the rules can request a hearing, which is conducted by an impartial person from outside the shelter.

One measure of Casa Rita's success is how long its residents take to find permanent housing. The average length of stay at Casa Rita has been six to eight months, which is about ten months less than the average period of dependence on emergency shelter in New York City. The cost economy of WIN—better facilities that can serve more than twice as many families in a given period of time than in other types of emergency shelter—is significant. It is especially impressive when contrasted to the exorbitant costs of lodging families in deteriorating hotels.

Issues and Values at Casa Rita

One of the lessons of Casa Rita is that shelters built on a small scale can work well—for their residents, for their neighborhoods, and probably also for the taxpayers. Large shelters generate opposition in part because they threaten to overwhelm their surroundings. New York City in 1987 went through intense political wrangling in deciding to build eleven new shelters for the homeless, which were to provide housing for a total of 700 families (about 2,600 people) and 800 single adults. And no wonder; this is an average of about 300 persons per shelter—more than five times the number of people at Casa Rita. The Rudy Bruner Award Selection Committee considered Casa Rita an example of how a shelter could fit the needs of both its neighborhood and its residents.



Fig. 5-17. Residents are encouraged to feel at home through attention to detail.



Fig. 5-18. Casa Rita has given women dignity and power over their lives.
(Courtesy of Women in Need.)

Big shelters may achieve certain economies of scale in construction and administration, but Casa Rita's small size allowed it to be especially attentive to the needs and the potential of its residents, probably more attentive than a large institution. A small scale—and the personal concern that is easier to provide in a place of limited size—helped prepare families for permanent housing faster and perhaps better than is usually the case in large institutions (fig. 5-17).

Casa Rita demonstrates the value not just of small shelters but also of small, nonprofit agencies as organizers and managers of such shelters. A small nonprofit group can behave flexibly, seizing opportunities and trying approaches that would ordinarily elude a big, government-run program. The small size of Women in Need made Zimmer's group less threatening. Zimmer believes the arguments she has made on such matters as using a housing placement specialist have helped to move the city and state toward rethinking their goals and policies. Casa Rita stands as an example of why small shelters—which are sometimes denied government assistance because of their supposed inability to deliver social services economically—should continue to receive such aid.

Casa Rita has shown the effectiveness of emphasizing the empowerment of the women it serves. The shelter has tried to prepare poor women with children to make decisions and exert power over their lives rather than remaining dependent. It has done so through a comprehensive strategy: providing social services, providing training in finding housing and running an apartment, providing opportunities for women to learn from one another, and providing some responsibilities and jobs within the shelter. At the same time, WIN has also set out to prepare women to serve on its board of directors. The result is that many people develop new abilities or enhance the abilities they already possess (fig. 5-18).

The process of involving WIN and Casa Rita in the neighborhood and in political and social agencies has set a high standard for shelters. Casa Rita has contributed to the neighborhood's well-being—turning a derelict building into a well-maintained and solidly managed shelter. The fixing up of the building has spurred some work on buildings nearby. It has benefited the area economically and has communicated well with those nearby.

WIN's process also shows how a small nonprofit agency can draw on support from those who might otherwise have little involvement with solutions for homelessness—local sources of support such as entertainers and businesses. In doing so, WIN has helped to bring the homelessness issue to the attention of the public and the corporate world.

In New York State, Casa Rita has earned a reputation as a humane, well-run shelter. Many groups interested in operating shelters visit Casa Rita, some of them at the urging of the state's homeless housing assistance staff, to look at its design, talk with and train with its staff, and discuss financing and operational aspects. Casa Rita has become a model for small-scale shelter development in New York City and across the nation.

Casa Rita, says selection committee member Cressworth Lander, "is the story of a very persuasive individual who exemplifies the kind of person who makes things in the community happen almost singlehandedly." Casa Rita is an important model for transitional housing for the homeless. "It's local, small-scale, it employed minorities in doing the physical work," says Clare Cooper Marcus. "It serves a local community, reuses an old building, serves an important social need, and it could be replicated."

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