

ARCHITECTURE

The beautiful triumph of Tent City

By Robert Campbell
Globe Correspondent

One of the many things they got right at Tent City is the name. At one time, its sponsors were planning to call it Leighton Court, a name with the kind of literary ring that appeals to real estate people. But "Tent City" prevailed.

Tent City is a new cluster of 269 apartments next to Copley Place, across Dartmouth Street from Back Bay station. Long ago, back in 1968, a group of protesters pitched tents on the site — Tent City, they called it — to protest the lack of affordable housing in Boston. The land was then a parking lot.

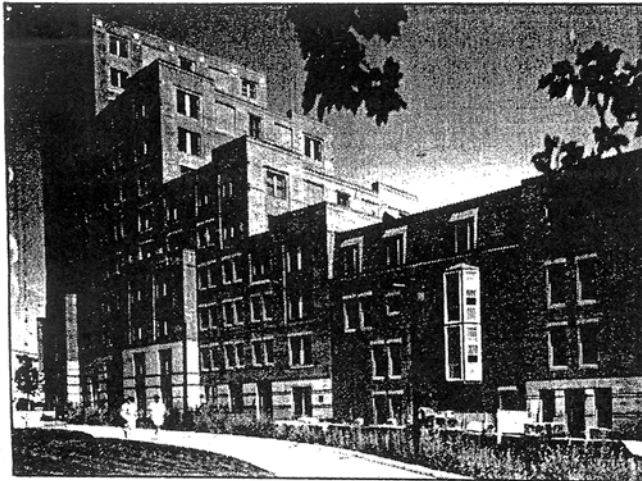
It took twenty years, but the protesters made their point. Today's Tent City, of brick instead of canvas, is the result. The old, polemic name gives Tent City meaning by reminding us of its history. The name is contextual: it places the project in the temporal context of history. In the same way, the project's excellent architecture places it in the physical context of the South End.

Goody, Clancy & Associates, the architects of Tent City, have found a way to make it look entirely fresh and modern and at the same time very Bostonian. To do this, they've taken some cues from another good building not far away — Church Court, at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Beacon Street in the Back Bay, designed a few years back by Graham Gund. At Church Court Gund invented a new kind of architecture for Boston. He took the flat, relatively featureless facades that are often mandated by today's economics and enriched them with a pattern of inset bricks and tiles of different colors. The result was a kind of abstraction of the architecture of the past, very beautiful in its own right.



Steve Rosenthal photos
The changing colors of brick — red and buff, with gray accent stripes and an occasional bright tile — make all the difference.

Gund's tile patterns have been popping up all over Boston ever since Church Court but they've never been handled with a surer touch than at Tent City. In this building, built under a tight budget, the changing colors of brick — red and buff, with gray accent stripes and an occasional bright tile — make all the difference. They humanize and personalize what might have been a boxy, alienating presence. Even the gentle, sail-



like curve of one of Gund's facades, which seemed so right on the Charles River, has been reinterpreted at Tent City with equal success.

Tent City's architectural virtues go far beyond surface treatment, however. Ingeniously, the architects have heaped their building up high at the corner of Copley Place, where it holds its own next to that regrettable behemoth, then stepped it gradually down toward the bowfronts of the South End, into which it seems to merge seamlessly. As a result Tent City bridges the Back Bay and the South End and sews them together. The architects have found room in the budget, too, for enough bay windows to look Bostonian. They've created an entrance that really is an entrance, a bold arched opening with a proud civic presence that instantly recalls the rugged entrance arches built by the architect H. H. Richardson and his followers in so many Boston buildings in the late 19th century.

That entrance penetrates right through the building to a lovely landscaped courtyard. Across the courtyard are smaller duplex townhouses. A new street, Yarmouth Place, loops through the court, tying it into the street pattern of the city and avoiding the sealed-off, precinct-like character of too many housing developments.

Perhaps the best thing about Tent City is that it doesn't look like a "project." It doesn't seem to be set apart, either architecturally or socially, from the world around it. It is simply an extension of that world. It isn't set back behind a meaningless pad of grass or asphalt, like so much institutional-looking housing, but comes forward, lining up along the sidewalk like older houses. Its grass is inside, in the protected courtyard. Although it is in every sense a modern building — it sits, for example, on top of an invisible 700-car underground garage, part of which serves Copley Place — it is entirely at home among the brick bowfronts and leafy squares of the South End.

The apartments at Tent City are mixed-income, with one quarter of them set aside for low-income tenants and one half for moderate-income. An amazing variety of funding sources — federal, state, city and private — had to be coordinated to make the development possible. One greatly admires the Tent City Corporation and the other people who pulled off this miracle of financing while at the same time wishing that miracles weren't necessary in our country in order to create decent housing.

No better affordable housing than Tent City has been built in the United States in recent years. As architecture and urban design, created under the most difficult conditions, Tent City is a triumph. As an expression of the collective will and endurance of a community over one whole generation — qualities well commemorated in its name — it is moving.