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# Allston's Green District: High-end housing without high-end prices

By [Tom Keane](#) | GLOBE COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 23, 2014

LUXURY HOUSING is booming in Boston, and policy makers and politicians are concerned. It's not that they don't like rich people. But they worry the middle class is getting priced out and they fear a city of just the rich and the poor. Cheap talk doesn't help much, however. What's needed is cheaper housing, and a model for that, perhaps, can be found in Allston.

One of Boston's 23 neighborhoods, Allston is filled with what some call character and others call grit, graced with an eclectic mix of ethnic restaurants, interesting watering holes, and funky shops — the kind of places once found in Harvard Square or upper Newbury Street before high rents and high-end retailing drove them out. It is also ground zero for lousy landlords and oftentimes overcrowded, dangerous housing that feeds on students and post-grads looking for a cut-rate place to live.

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Standing in sharp contrast is a new residential development, billed as the Green District, that offers up two interesting lessons: It's possible to build high-quality, middle-market housing, and — especially to younger folks — environmental responsibility sells.

The Green District is a moniker attached to eight buildings bounded north-south by Commonwealth Avenue and Brainerd Road and east-west by Griggs and Redford streets. Five are rehabs; three are brand new. The idea was hatched by local developer Bruce Percelay just as the market was crashing and some were predicting even more gloom to come. Instead, Percelay bought land, demolished some derelict, industrial-style buildings, and set about trying to create a new community.

In retrospect, it all seems so logical. But at the time, the risks were huge. Percelay signed personally for the needed loans. “I bet the farm,” he says. As it turns out, it’s a wager he won; he’s reached a deal to sell the three new buildings to National Development of Newton for \$150 million, installing him firmly as a member of the one percent. His real estate firm, Mount Vernon Co., continues to manage the buildings, however, so he finds himself around there most every day.

Rents at the Green District buildings are 30 to 50 percent below those high-end developments. That doesn’t make them inexpensive, but “you don’t need to make \$200,000 to live here,” Percelay says. At the same time, the residences have all of the amenities found in their more deluxe brethren: workout spaces, media and club rooms, roof decks with gas grills (one also has a small putting green), and pet grooming stations. The new buildings are LEED certified (one gold, two platinum — the best possible). Solar panels dot rooftops, producing all the electricity needed for common areas. High heat-flow resistance values conserve energy. Roofs are painted white, a way to reduce the urban “heat island” effect. Water is separately metered (a practice Percelay says reduces consumption 40 percent). Recycling and composting are made easy, there are secure sections for residents’ bikes, and filtered water dispensers discourage the use of throwaways. Zipcars, a Hubway bike stand, and a T stop out front make a car-free life possible although parking is also readily available.

How was Percelay able to build all of this and still price below the competition? It helps that the land was cheaper than downtown. Then too, his buildings aren’t expensive steel but rather are wood-framed. Apartments are smaller too, a common trend in new urban housing, without being claustrophobic.

The result is high-end housing without high-end prices. And the green image adds to the appeal. The last of the buildings just opened this month, and it’s already full.

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*Boston could use a lot more developers like Percelay.*

Percelay's brainchild reminds me of the Millennium Partners development in what used to be the Combat Zone. Its sheer scale had a transformative effect, changing for much the better the once-troubled character of the area. One can see the same thing happening with the Green District, remaking Allston as well.

But the change is more subtle, edging Allston upwards rather than pushing out the old. The Green District buildings have a modern feel but they're not ostentatious; five stories tall, they're in keeping with the area's modest skyline. Longtime residents seem delighted with the results. Sustainable living, moderate pricing, and a community focus: Boston could use a lot more developers like Percelay.

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