

## What's on my Mind

# Art is a Necessity, Not a Luxury

Well-thought-out art can improve resident health and increase property reputation.

By Rochelle Mills

As the president and CEO of Innovative Housing Opportunities (IHO), a developer of affordable and permanent-subsidized housing, I'm passionate about the beneficial role that art can play in uplifting the communities in multifamily housing developments, especially seniors housing.

When I joined IHO in 2006, then-board president Mary Watson-Bruce, a Ph.D. in geriatrics, emphasized to me the importance of the arts on well-being, mental health, sense of calm, blood pressure and more for the senior population. At the time, there was no budget for art in affordable housing, and only a casual acceptance that it was any more than a nice, albeit occasional, activity to provide residents.

As we would see time and again, engagement with art and artful design can significantly uplift the communities of those living around it. Art provides a sense of place, fosters community connections, provides opportunities for engagement and creative expression, and has a positive local economic impact.

Developers who are interested in engaging with art and are working with a limited budget can explore creative opportunities in project requirements, such as incorporating art into the functional areas of a development.

### Budget-friendly touches

For example, when we addressed the necessity of building a gate at the El Verano development in Anaheim, California, we convened an art committee, which designed a beautiful enclosure with a concentric circle motif. The committee also designed a compass rose, which echoed the circular design of the fence, in the concrete pad that was a turnaround surface for the fire department.

The centerpiece of El Verano is a large topiary sculpture with five overlapping circles filled with drought-tolerant plantings — a “living mural” — at the exterior entrance of the building. It's adjacent to the driveway entry whose paving pattern of concentric circles mirrors the forms of the other art pieces. For the living mural, residents at El Verano helped install and then care for the work.

Another example of incorporating art into our designs is the 2016 Rockwood apartments project in Anaheim, located next to El Verano. We worked with the City of Anaheim to select artwork for the property. Though there was no budget, we worked with the landscape architect on the project to fabricate sculptural outdoor lighting that incorporated ornamental fig tree leaves, which are indigenous to Anaheim. We also commissioned a Tiffany-style stained-glass front door.

I fondly remember Steve Faessel, the mayor pro tempore of Anaheim at the time, saying that the project would set a new standard in local multifamily housing. For me and IHO, it was a turning point, where we saw the incorporation of art as a vital element of our work, rather than as a bonus — if the budget allowed. Now, the cities we work with encourage us to be creative and incorporate art into each of our projects.

IHO's first project — and the first 100 percent affordable development in the city of Irvine, California — Woodbridge Manor recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. As part of that celebration, we worked with the community residents to produce a grand mural in the lobby at the main



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entrance. The piece comprised more than 165 individual square tiles that were created with the residents to reflect the 165 units in the building.

The project represents the pride, diversity and spirit of community embodied by places such as Woodbridge Manor. It's a great example of how art brings residents together, to work as a team across language and cultural barriers, and to make meaningful contributions to their own community.

### Art is important

Our experience proves that the communities we create for our residents and the neighboring public alike appreciate and benefit from the art at those locations.

We established arts committees in many of our developments to bring together residents, community members, local arts organizations and elected officials around a common goal: enhancing their environments.

We found that doing so provided residents, many of whom had never participated in a leadership role, an opportunity to reduce isolation, and to grow and connect with their communities and others. Many continue to feel empowered to engage and speak up, organizing trips to museums, walks around their neighborhoods and more.

When we learned that one young Rockwood resident was going to art school, we invited her to join the El Verano Arts Committee. She also participated in intergenerational arts programming between Rockwood and El Verano that included an art fair featuring live performances from opera singers, musicians and ballet dancers, as well as artmaking stations and a gallery of residents' work. These kinds of events help build rapport and trust between community members and the public. They also encourage socialization, which is especially important for seniors.

While making room in budgets for art might be challenging, it's important to note that many of the projects mentioned above turned a mandatory obligation (a fence, lighting, a fire lane) into an experience. Details like these change “housing” into “home.” We seek out opportunities in design to ensure that residents feel special and that our developments represent IHO's highest standards and best efforts.

I urge developers of seniors housing to prioritize including art in their designs and budgets, and to find other creative ways to incorporate the arts into their communities.

Incorporating art into a development is not just a luxury. It should be part of a successful strategy for creating a holistic and fulfilling living experience for all people, and especially seniors.

Residents who feel engaged and empowered are healthier and happier, reducing conflicts, which in turn reduces maintenance and staffing costs. Incorporating art is good business. It can also be a source of pride for the community, attracting visitors and boosting local businesses.

So long as developers, designers and building managers can pursue art opportunities creatively, the benefits will far outweigh the costs.

Rochelle Mills is president and CEO of Innovative Housing Opportunities (IHO), a non-profit developer of high-quality affordable housing, including for seniors. She has a background in architecture, design, construction administration, community planning and cultural tourism.

### What's on YOUR mind?

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