

Common Ground provides affordable housing for formerly homeless at prestigious New York addresses

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Fancy living here? Chances are you wouldn't be able to. Source: Supplied

JUST a stone's throw from Times Square, Fifth Avenue and minutes from Central Park, this New York address is some of the most coveted real estate on the planet.

But it's not money that will get you a spot at the grand former hotel on West 43rd street. The luxurious building contains 652 apartments dedicated to New York's low-income residents and "hardest to house" homeless people, many of whom have spent up to a decade on the streets with mental illness and substance abuse.

"It's such an interesting place. Our buildings, especially in Manhattan, are right next door to multi-million dollar apartment complexes and by and large nobody blinks an eye that the building next to them has low income individuals and formerly homeless people living there," said Brenda Rosen, the president of non-profit organisation [Common Ground](#).



In the lobby of the former hotel. Source: Supplied



The Times Square has been restored to provide low-income housing in a luxury environment. Source: Supplied

The 25-year-old group restored the famous building to its former glory after it became overrun with drugs and crime and fell into disrepair.

It's now the flagship property in a portfolio of more than 18 buildings with 3200 units including the Prince George, where a former ballroom now serves as a community asset.

Youth-focused property The Christopher opened in 2004 with 207 units, while other buildings in the Bronx and Brooklyn designed by renowned architects and fill an important niche in the city which has a population of more than 60,000 homeless people and uniquely provides a “right to shelter” for residents.



The sustainably designed properties have green roofs and are made to be energy efficient. Source: Supplied



Temperatures below -15 degrees led fountains to freeze in New York and forced the city to employ a 'code blue' where workers check on homeless people every two hours. Source: AFP

It's a necessity in a place where temperatures routinely reach -15 degrees celsius, forcing a "code blue" where outreach workers walk the streets to bring inside people left outdoors — something that often proves not as simple as one would think.

Ms Rosen said long-term homeless people often have mental illness and substance abuse issues and trust has to be built before they come inside.

“That person could be a veteran that has PTSD and has not been on medication and it often takes us time to build that relationship with the person on the streets so that they trust that we can help them and they can basically take a leap of faith and come inside.

“For most people it would just be easy and make sense, if you're offered a place to come inside you would. [But] a lot of people have been on the streets, they know how to survive on the streets, they feel safer on the streets than they do initially inside.”



The small but well designed apartments are filled with light and made from energy efficient materials. Source: Supplied



The eviction rate across the portfolio of 3200 properties is less than one per cent. Source: Supplied

Once inside, residents have access to medical and psychiatric services in the energy efficient and sustainably designed buildings. The 'come as you are' model is also fully integrated and has an eviction rate of less than one per cent across the entire portfolio.

“You do not have to be sober. You do not have to have gone through any kind of a program. You do not have to be on medication. You can come into Common Ground housing as you are and we will provide everything you need to ensure your success and to give you another chance to rejoin society at large,” Ms Rosen said.

It's a successful approach that has been emulated in Sydney and helped raise the profile of supportive housing in New York. Ms Rosen said it also shows how being around people living normal lives can help long-term homeless adjust back to normal life.

“[It shows] when you bring people in that have not assimilated into society for quite some time and you provide services and you give them a beautiful place to live and they're living right next door to people that they're seeing get up and go to work every day, they have a sense of pride that you're enabling them to regain their dignity and they get motivated to be successful and that can mean a lot of different things.

“It can mean that you'll enter the work force, it can mean that you'll stay in stable housing and pay your rent every month. It depends on your capabilities. But we firmly believe that the model of integration is the one that works.”