



How Common Ground Builds Small To House the Homeless

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[The Schermerhorn. Photograph by Ennead.]

Long before former mayor Michael Bloomberg [created a design competition](http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2013/01/22/new_york_citys_future_microapartment_revealed.php) [for micro apartments](http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2013/01/22/new_york_citys_future_microapartment_revealed.php) [, Common Ground](http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2015/02/23/inside_the_brooklyn_factory_birthing_nycs_new_micro_units.php) was building them to house the **formerly homeless**. The 25-year-old organization is a [nonprofit developer and property manager](http://www.commonground.org) [that constructs supportive and affordable housing](http://www.commonground.org), with units averaging **225 to 300 square feet**—after all, the smaller the apartment, the more homes they can provide. These units may not be outfitted with pricey Murphy beds [or trendy foldable furniture](http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2015/02/27/meet_a_modernday_harlem_sro_where_rents_start_at_1099.php) [, but they do offer some design pedigree](http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2015/02/24/new_york_citys_14_most_famous_micro_apartments.php). **COOKFOX**, **Ennead Architects**, and **Robert A.M. Stern** have all designed Common Ground buildings.

Common Ground's work began in 1990 with the **rehabilitation of historic hotels**, such as the **Prince George** [in NoMad](http://www.commonground.org/our-buildings/the-prince-george/) and the **Christopher** [in Chelsea](http://www.commonground.org/our-buildings/the-christopher/#.VO4vYkl6nKA), which used to be the the Robert McBurney YMCA seen in the Village People's original "YMCA" [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CS9OO0S5w2k) [. The group expanded into new construction in the mid-2000s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CS9OO0S5w2k), and they currently operate **15 buildings** in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, plus Montrose, N.Y., Rochester, and Connecticut.



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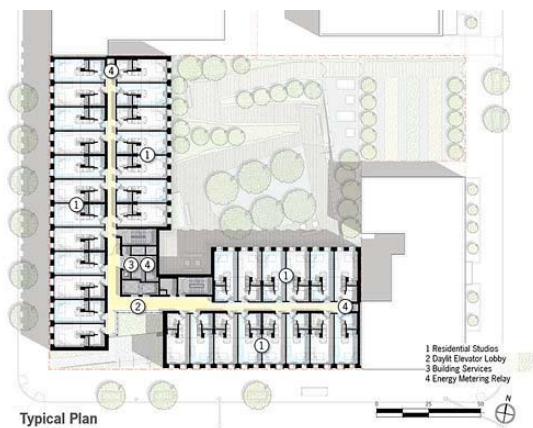
COMMON GROUND

COOKFOX



[The Schermerhorn. Photograph by Ennead.]

Common Ground CEO **Brenda Rosen**, a former attorney for the New York City Department of Homeless Services, first joined the nonprofit in 1999 as director of the Prince George. She says the organization gives people a "**second chance for success.**" "We're fortunate to work with some of the most renowned architects in the country, often whom have never done an affordable building before," she said. COOKFOX, whose [projects range](http://ny.curbed.com/tags/cookfox) from the Bank of America tower to many market-rate condos, designed [The Hegeman](http://www.commonground.org/our-buildings/the-hegeman/#.VO4vfEI6nKA) in Brownsville, Brooklyn; Ennead Architects created [The Schermerhorn](http://www.commonground.org/our-buildings/the-schermerhorn/#.VO4vj0l6nKA) in Downtown Brooklyn; and Robert A.M. Stern designed one of their properties in Connecticut.



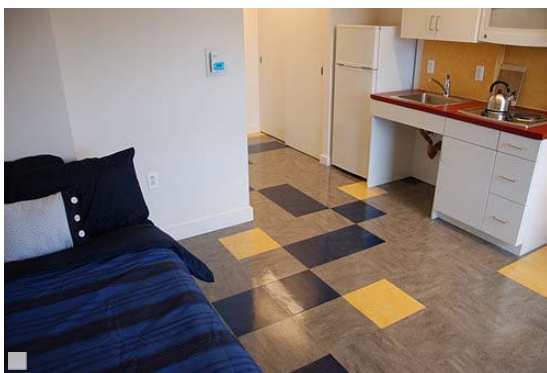
[The Hegeman. Credit: COOKFOX.]

In all of their developments, Common Ground uses **sustainable materials**, which, for example, makes cleaning floors easier and "better for the universe." Their new buildings are green and many are **LEED-certified**.



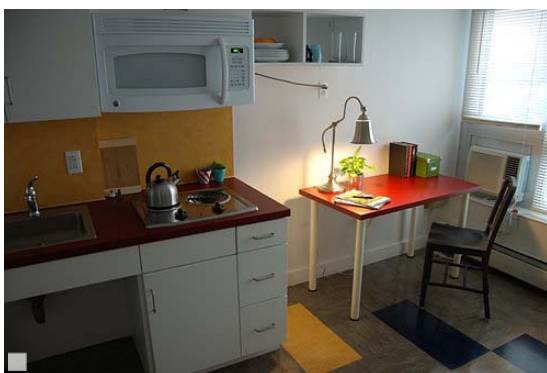
[Lobby of The Christopher. Photograph by Common Ground.]

With the exception of the [Lenniger Residences](http://www.commonground.org/our-buildings/the-lenniger-residences/#.VO4vpEl6nKA) in the Bronx, which has units with up to three bedrooms, all of Common Ground's units are singles. The average unit is between **225 and 300 square feet**. They come with a **kitchenette** that has a refrigerator, two-burner cooktop stove, and a combination microwave and convection oven. There is also a bed with storage drawers, a table, a chair, a bathroom, and a closet (sometimes in the form of a wardrobe).



[The Lee at 133 Pitt Street in Manhattan. Photograph by Common Ground.]

"[The thing] that we've gotten really deliberate and good at is taking that small space and being able to still divide it up such that **you have a discrete kitchen area and then a main living space**," Rosen says. "So even though you're only talking about 250 square feet or so, **you don't feel like it's that small**, and you don't feel like you're only in one [room]. You can be in the kitchen and you can be in your living room, essentially." The buildings are also designed to optimize natural light.



[The Lee. Photograph by Common Ground.]

David Beer, Common Ground's vice president for real estate development, said they are able to **build their micro units as-of-right** because they are not-for-profit institution. He said that under New York City zoning laws, they are considered **community facilities with sleeping accommodations**, not a Class A multiple dwelling like regular apartment buildings.

For many apartments, residents' rent is subsidized by one or more programs. For the affordable units, targeted for those earning 60 percent of the area median income (AMI) or less, the rent is usually between about **\$500 and \$700**.

People get into these apartments through the NYC Housing Preservation &

Development (HPD) lottery. Since they keep a waiting list, Rosen says they **never have to hold a second lottery** and rarely have to market their apartments.

Common Ground also houses veterans, seniors, the mentally ill, and those with HIV/AIDS. They do outreach to veterans on the streets in Queens, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, and 50 to 60 percent of the units in each building are set aside for those with special needs. "What that means to us is that people that are coming from the streets that have severe and persistent mental illness, and also for people with HIV and AIDS that are referred to us through the city's [HIV/AIDS Services [Administration]], there's no shortage of filling those units," Rosen says.

Every building has **community space**, including rooftop terraces, gardens, lounges, gyms, and laundry rooms. Rosen said having those spaces helps people get out of their apartments and engage with their neighbors.



[The Hegeman. Photograph by COOKFOX.]

Jessica DeSince, who is 35 and bipolar, has lived in the Hegeman for a year and a half. Before that, she was in the shelter system for two years. **"The building is beautiful,"** she said of the Hegeman. "The case workers, everybody here, they help us as much as they can. There's group care. We go on trips. There's bingo."

"When I first got here, they said a lot of homeless people would be here. So I figured it would have been like people living on the street, not used to having their own [place]," she told us. "But with the programs here, **you can learn how to have your own place.**"

"If it wasn't for Common Ground, I probably still would have been in a hospital," she said. She's now studying at Borough of Manhattan Community College to be a social worker.

Of her small space, she said, "It's so tiny, but it's just me. So, it's adequate." She hasn't had many challenges living with the small space, but said, "I would like an oven. The microwave, it takes away from the texture and the taste of the food and it's harder to cook healthy, but you know, **I've made it work.**"

The biggest challenge Common Ground faces is quite simply **the price of land**. But the future is bright for them. They have a **new building** <http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2014/09/12/new_views_inside_harlems_the_adeline_boston_road_tops_out.php> slated to open this summer at 1191 Boston Road in the Bronx that will have 154 units. They also hope to soon break ground on a two-building complex at 1974 Webster Avenue in the Bronx that will have a total of 418 units. That will be designed by COOKFOX.



[The Prince George Ballroom. Photograph by Common Ground.]

Some of the buildings' **communal spaces**, such as the [Prince George Ballroom](http://www.commonground.org/rent-our-venues/the-prince-george-ballroom/#.VO4vMEI6nKA) <http://www.commonground.org/rent-our-venues/the-prince-george-ballroom/#.VO4vMEI6nKA> , which can be rented out for parties and other events, with 100 percent of the proceeds going to help Common Ground run its programs and build new outposts. It has been used for weddings, bar mitzvahs, Fashion Week, and even TV shows, such as "Real Housewives of New York," "Mildred Pierce," "Madam Secretary" (that scene included an earthquake), "Forever," and "White Collar."

This ballroom is a prime example of how the organization, while it does strive to be efficient with space, **doesn't try to take up every inch of a building** at the expense of destroying any of its **historic fabric**. "Our overall philosophy with all of our buildings is that if we can design and operate a building for the same amount of money that you could do a cookie-cutter building, but we can do something that's really different and really special and really, really beautiful," Rosen said. "Then, especially for people that have had really difficult complicated pasts and who potentially have been out on the streets and homeless for years, **it's not only showing them that they deserve to have a home, but giving them a beautiful place to call home** that really helps restore their dignity, and helps them feel proud."

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· [All Micro Week coverage](http://ny.curbed.com/tags/micro-week-2015) <http://ny.curbed.com/tags/micro-week-2015> .

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