

# Arbor Heights, Norristown, wins award from the Urban Land Institute

By Carl Rotenberg, [The Times Herald](#)

**NORRISTOWN** >> The promise of new residential construction in an aging neighborhood is that it will spark new renovation projects around it and lift the neighborhood higher.

That is exactly what has happened with the fully occupied, 12-unit Arbor Heights townhouse project at the corner of DeKalb and Elm streets which was completed in 2012.

And the \$2.5 million conversion of two formerly dilapidated homes was honored in June with the Willard G. “Bill” Rouse III Award for Excellence from the Philadelphia chapter of the Urban Land Institute (ULI). The project by Progressive Housing Ventures (PHV) was one of seven winners that represented a variety of mixed-use, historic preservation and adaptive reuse winners in and around Philadelphia.

“This year’s winners and finalists represent some of the most innovative real estate developments in the region,” said Christopher Hager, the chairman of ULI Philadelphia chapter. “The winners both this year and last year demonstrate how responsible land use has the ability to transform the built environment into something that revitalizes and reshapes our communities.”

The \$2.5 million project was heavily subsidized by \$1.2 million from the federal HOME program and the Montgomery County Affordable Housing Trust Fund, said Sarah Peck, the president of PHV. Eleven of the 12 buyers were first-time home buyers, and six of the buyers qualified for financial help with down payments and closing costs, she said. The average cost of each three-bedroom townhouse was \$135,000.

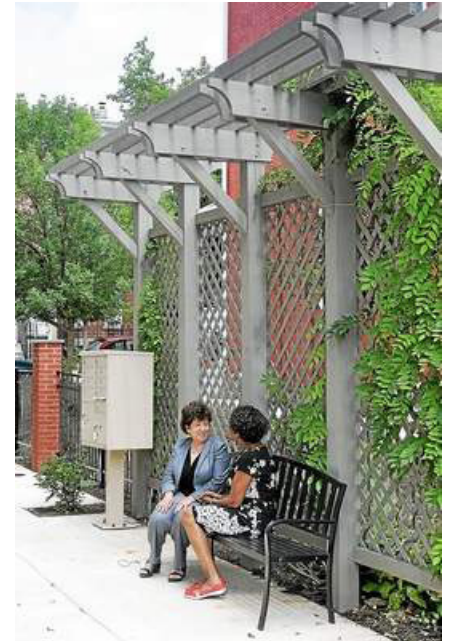
“I’m honored, totally, to be in the company of these six other awardees. It is humbling,” Peck said. “I was a partner with (the late) Bill Rouse. The award is in keeping with Bill Rouse’s legacy and his standard of land use excellence. It means a lot to me personally.”

Peck ran Rouse Chamberlin Homes for 15 years, she said.

Peck said her in-fill townhouse project had jump-started renovation projects in the neighborhood around Arbor Heights.

Another developer converted 1014 DeKalb St., next to Arbor Heights into three condominium units that are now for sale. Across the street at 1009 DeKalb, the building has been rezoned for a first-floor internet cafe and two upstairs condominiums. Genesis Housing Corp. renovated the house at 1003 DeKalb Street and sold it to a homeowner. Two homes located behind Arbor Heights are currently being renovated by Genesis Housing Corp. for a resale to homeowners, Peck said.

PHV is completing construction this fall on 24 townhouses at Arbor Mews, which is located two blocks away on



Sarah Peck, president of Progressive Housing Ventures, sits with townhouse owner Geraldine Savoy outside her Arbor Heights residence in Norristown July 9, 2015. Arbor Heights received the Urban Land Institute’s Willard G. “Bill” Rouse III Award for excellence.  
Gene Walsh – The Times Herald

DeKalb Street. The project already has reached 12 townhouse sales.

Why did Arbor Heights get the award from ULI?

“It is the design and how it fits into the community,” said Jayne Musonye, the Norristown director of planning. “They were able to provide some low-income housing and market-rate housing in a very challenging neighborhood. It was critical because we wanted to add to our home ownership stock in Norristown.”

Musonye pointed out that DeKalb Street is a main thoroughfare in Norristown.

“It is our face to the world,” Musonye said. “We want it to look good.”

Geraldine Savoy lived in a Swede Street apartment in Norristown before becoming a homeowner at Arbor Heights.

“I like the idea of homeownership. It gives a person a feeling of stabilization. You want your community to grow,” Savoy said. “What I love about Norristown are the old houses.”

Savoy likes the 3-foot metal fences that define the perimeter of Arbor Heights, the high ceilings in her townhouse and the energy efficient electric heat pumps.

“When they put in the metal fences,” Savoy said, “it made the townhouses compatible with the other homes in the neighborhood.”

The retired FDIC bank liquidation specialist serves on the Norristown Historical Architectural Review Board.

(Two townhouse owners explain why they like their homes at Arbor Heights at <http://www.tout.com/m/jtx3rf> and <http://www.tout.com/m/7ruvuk>.)

Said Salomon lived in rental apartments in both Jenkintown and Langhorne, Bucks County, before he purchased his three-bedroom townhouse in June 2012.

“It was a great monetary value,” said Salomon, a database administrator for a Plymouth insurance company. “When you have a new place everything is new.”

Salomon, who is also a vice president of the Arbor Heights Homeowners Association, looked at “a number of homes” in the area before making his final choice.

“It seemed like a logical step,” he said, “My wife, who was my best friend at the time, talked me into it.”

The other ULI winners were the 3737 Science center, Chestnut Square, on the Drexel University campus; the Fresh Corner Store Showcase conversions, FringeArts and The View at Montgomery, all Philadelphia projects and the Allentown Arena Complex in Allentown.

Norristown Council Vice President Sonya Sanders called the Arbor Heights project “a wonderful opportunity for Norristown.”

“We want to see home ownership as part of the revitalization of Norristown,” Sanders said. “The whole design almost makes DeKalb Street look like a different block.”

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