

Affordable Housing Development Spearheads Neighborhood Revitalization



The Coral Street Arts House in Philadelphia became a model by replacing a nuisance property with a vibrant rental community.

New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC) has worked since 1985 to improve conditions in the Kensington neighborhood in Philadelphia. Kensington used to be at the heart of Philadelphia's industrial core. With the decline of industry, Kensington also declined. The neighborhood became known for vacant lots and buildings, drug sales and use, and other undesirable activities.

Large, vacant former industrial buildings cast a shadow throughout Kensington. Beatty's Mills Factory (or Powell Mills), a five-story red brick building built in 1886, was one of those buildings. It was home to textile manufacturing activities until the 1990s, but then sat vacant for decades and became a site for nuisance activities.

NKCDC's vision for Kensington has always been multifaceted and focused on the power of community and arts. NKCDC saw the Beatty's Mills site in a desolate corner of Kensington as an anchor for revitalizing the neighborhood. Aware that artists were getting priced out of other neighborhoods, NKCDC saw the potential for affordable housing for artists to bring an immense energy to the neighborhood. The Beatty's Mills site had the potential to become an anchor in turning the neighborhood around.

Regional Housing Legal Services (RHLS) provided legal and technical assistance to NKCDC in the acquisition of the site and in the funding and development of the project pursuant to the Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program, including the drafting and negotiating all project documents.



Following the success of Coral Street Arts House, NKCDC plans to spur redevelopment in the neighborhood by revitalizing a former industrial site with the Orinoka Civic House.

In 2003, an affiliate of NKCDC received an allocation of Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTCs) to rehabilitate the building.

The project also received historic tax credits and a number of other financial supports. The property was converted into a 27-unit rental housing development targeting artists and their families. The building is 37,000 square feet and contains 7 one-bedroom and 20 two-bedroom units. The building allows non-artist residents, but is clearly designed for artists with live/work space, an exhibition area/meeting space, and workrooms on each floor, hallway display areas, and a loading dock for easy transport of large and medium-sized artwork.

The property opened in September 2005. Today Coral Street Arts House is a regular host of community activities. The residents of Coral Street Arts House actively participate in the life of the community, regularly hosting gallery shows, sewing circles, and more.

The development of the Coral Street Arts House has had a transformational effect on the fabric of the neighborhood. Lou Campione, Captain of the Philadelphia Police Department's 26th District from 2002-2007 believes that Coral Street Arts House "improved the climate and made other residents want to improve their community." Lou cited the artists in Coral Street Arts House as people who "cared about the community, adopted it as their own, and felt a clear sense of commitment." He went on to add that the development of Coral Street Arts House seemed, in part, responsible for the economic revitalization that Kensington is currently experiencing.

The area around Coral Street Arts House is undergoing significant revitalization. By 2014, more than 40% of the surrounding vacant industrial buildings had been renovated or were undergoing renovation! In addition, there was significant residential development—\$400,000 townhomes were under construction directly across the street from the Coral Street Arts House.

NKCDC is building on its success with Coral Street Arts House by launching an effort designed to revitalize a nearby area. As with the Coral Street Arts House, NKCDC plans to spur redevelopment in the neighborhood by revitalizing a former industrial site. In the North of Lehigh Neighborhood Plan, NKCDC will rehabilitate a former textile mill into a 16 million dollar mixed-use building—Orinoka Civic House.