

A Green Affordable Housing Lesson From the Bronx

Omni New York Co-Founder Eugene Schneur reveals details about North America's largest Passive House development, but also shares his views on NYC's affordable housing market and clean energy ambitions.

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MAY 23 2019



Eugene Schneur, CEO & Co-Founder, Omni New York.

Building affordable housing projects in New York City is definitely a challenging task. And if developers want to add a sustainability component, it's even more problematic due to exorbitant land prices, rising construction costs and strict green standards that need to be met. However, it's certainly not impossible.

Omni New York, a company that has owned and managed more than 14,000 units of affordable housing in 11 states, has recently completed Park Avenue Green, a 154-unit mixed-income community at 2980 Park Ave. in the South Bronx, dubbed [North America's largest building to earn Passive House certification](#) for energy efficiency. Eugene Schneur, CEO & co-founder of the real estate development company that focuses on affordable housing, shared some insights on the record-setting project as well as his views on the market and the current state of the energy sector in NYC.

Park Avenue Green is touted as North America's "passive housing guinea pig," at this large of a scale. What were the most valuable findings during the construction phase?

Schneur: During the construction phase of Park Avenue Green, we realized we were underutilizing land at Maria Lopez, another building of ours close to the site. We recognized the opportunity to build additional housing on the vacant land, without requiring any change in existing zoning. This allowed us to commit to building 330 mixed-income units, the construction of which took place in two phases.

Phase I was a building that achieved LEED Gold status and utilized photovoltaic panels and a cogeneration micro turbine. Park Avenue Green, phase II, allowed us to continue to push the envelope, employing both solar panels and a cogeneration plant, while achieving a higher standard of sustainable design through the PHIUS certification.

Construction for Park Avenue South began months before New York City's latest energy-efficient building initiative. Now that the building is complete, it is even more energy-efficient than the city requires.

Eugene Schneur
Co-founder, Omni New York

How do these certifications set it apart from regular passive house projects and what makes it different from zero-net-energy buildings?

Schneur: What sets Park Avenue Green apart from other projects is the combination of its large size, commitment to being energy-efficient and the affordable housing aspect of the project. Specifically, the passive house aspects of Park Avenue Green include: an extremely airtight building envelope, seven inches of continuous insulation and high-performance windows that wrap the building to minimize conditioned air loss.

The building was designed to limit thermal bridging or the phenomenon in which certain materials can act as pathways for heat and cold transfer between the building's exterior and interior. Insulation between neighboring apartments was also installed to improve energy performance and create a more comfortable and quieter interior environment. Park Avenue Green also contains an energy recovery ventilation system, which helps control the transfer of heat and moisture between outside and inside and reduces the energy required to heat and cool the apartments.

Finally, in addition to measures to control thermal and moisture transfer, Park Avenue Green contains an on-site energy production plant housing a 34-kilowatt solar photovoltaic array to power common spaces and a 65-kilowatt microturbine to convert gas to electricity. The excess heat, a by-product of the conversion process, is sufficient to act as the main hot water heater for the building's residences.

What's it like to run an energy-efficient building in one of the world's largest cities?

Schneur: To run an [energy-efficient building](#) in one of the world's largest cities—particularly in a city constantly in the midst of conversations around pollution and energy inefficiency—is rewarding. Construction for Park Avenue South began months before New York City's latest energy-efficient building initiative. Now that the building is complete, it is even more energy-efficient than the city requires.

How can real estate better pair with energy-efficient practices?

Schneur: Real estate can better pair with energy-efficient practices primarily by changing the materials used during the construction of projects. Whether it is putting in an energy recovery ventilation system or improving insulation, these seemingly small steps can make a tremendous difference in the way buildings use energy.

What can you tell us about the state of energy in New York? What's on the forefront?

Schneur: The state of energy in New York is currently changing, as Mayor de Blasio recently signed "The Climate Mobilization Act," an initiative many are calling "[New York's very own Green Deal](#)." This new legislation is forcing New York developers to step up and make changes to their buildings, particularly developers of some of the largest properties in the city, as climate experts believe 70 percent of the city's greenhouse gas emissions come from the largest buildings.

The new regulations will require private building owners to retrofit their property to meet these new emissions ceilings requirements or face costly fines. While the majority of developers oppose the new initiative, we need to recognize that these changes are important and vital to our overall well-being and the overall well-being of NYC.

What about affordable housing? What should NYC's strategy for the next five years include?

Schneur: Affordable housing continues to be in great demand in NYC. Over the next five years, NYC agencies and affordable housing developers need to continue to partner to produce as much affordable housing as possible. To get an idea for the demand for affordable housing, the lottery for Park Avenue Green received more than 50,000 applications.

One way to obtain more affordable housing is to allow more density bonuses to developers providing affordable housing.