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**DAILY NEWS**

THE PEOPLE PAPER

AN EDITION OF *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

# BLOCK MAGIC

**THANKS TO THESE TWO, A DECAYING NORTH PHILLY NEIGHBORHOOD HAS GONE FROM SEEDY TO SCENIC**

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Rose Gray (left) and Nilda Ruiz on the roof of the PGW building on Berks Street near 9th.

JONATHAN YU / Staff photographer

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## EAST IS EDEN

**This rebuilt & renewed section of N. Phila. is becoming a garden spot**

By DAN GERINGER  
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## EAST IS EDEN

GROWING UP east of Temple University in North Philadelphia, amid frightening ethnic tensions and the blight of trash-filled vacant lots and boarded-up rowhouses, Nilda Ruiz was consumed by an urban dream:

Why, she wondered, can't inner-city Puerto Ricans and African-Americans live in harmony in beautiful houses with gardens, just like the suburban families she glimpsed through car windows on trips along Routes 611 and 29 to visit friends?

On a recent afternoon, Ruiz, 48, president and chief executive of *Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha* (APM), stood on the roof of a Philadelphia Gas Works building, on Berks Street near 9th, showing this *Daily News* reporter her dream come true - a transformed community of Puerto Ricans and African-Americans living as neighbors in pristine houses with gardens.

Standing beside Ruiz was her friend and colleague Rose Gray, 59, APM's vice president of community and economic development, who has spent 20 years getting those houses built and moving first-time home-buyers into them.

It takes two strong women to raise a village.

That's not a real proverb, but it should be in the former urban wastelands of eastern North Philadelphia where, spread over more than 10 square blocks between 5th and 9th streets, from York to Jefferson, APM has developed 210 low-income rental units, 136 home-ownership units, a Cousin's Supermarket and a TruMark Financial Credit Union.

APM also has stabilized 100 older neighborhood homes, through the city's Basic Systems Repair program, so that longtime residents are full partners in the community rebirth.

Total cost: \$70 million, from a Who's Who of private foundations and government agencies ranging from the city of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency to the Local Initiative Support Corp. and the William Penn Foundation.

"Our streetscaping, our landscaping, our little pocket parks make this a walkable community where people feel good about getting out and meeting each other," Gray said. "Greening is the thread that weaves our community together."



Rose Gray (left) and Nilda Ruiz on the roof of the PGW building on Berks Street near 9th. (Jonathan Yu / Staff Photographer)

She laughed at the irony of that statement coming out of her mouth.

"They had to drag me into greening," she admitted, "because back in the day, 20 years ago, on behalf of APM, I was faced with an extremely blighted area and my role was to make sure people got affordable housing."

"So my mind-set was that on every piece of available ground, I wanted to build a house. When I met with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society folks, they said, 'You're doing such a bad job greening these houses, let us give you a hand.' "

And they did, cleaning and greening dozens of vacant lots in the neighborhood, the largest of which is the future site of an independent middle school.

### A garden blooms

Walking through the neighborhood, Gray and Ruiz said hello to Sonia Rodriguez, who has lived there with husband, Abram Garcia, and their two daughters since 2007 but was meeting for the first time the two women who made it all possible.

"You have a green thumb," Ruiz told Rodriguez, admiring her garden.

"I never gardened until I moved here," Rodriguez said, smiling.

"They become like your babies," Ruiz said. "You have a relationship with them. My mom would talk to her plants. When I was a child, I laughed at her. Now, I understand. I think that as you get older, you become your mom."

"Wait!" Rodriguez said. "I don't want to become my mom yet!"

The two women laughed together as if they had known each other for years instead of minutes.

Rodriguez, a Philadelphia School District staffer who had been renting at D and Wyoming streets since 1989, told Ruiz that she was so anxious to own that "I watched these houses being built. I would peek in the windows. I was like a stalker."

Ruiz nodded knowingly. "Our construction sites are a nightmare for us because of the liability," she said. "We tell people not to walk around the site, but they can't help themselves. You tried to get into your house before it was built, didn't you?"

"The doors were locked," Rodriguez admitted. "I know this because I tried the doorknobs."

Both women laughed. Rodriguez invited Ruiz and Gray inside. Her living room - soothing blues and earth tones, hardwood floors, elegant furniture and accents - had the style of a professional decorator.

Rodriguez said that she did it herself, after watching home-decorating TV shows.

"You have such a beautiful home," Ruiz said.

## N. PHILLY REBIRTH

The Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM) has rebuilt its Eastern North Philly neighborhood by developing 136 suburban-style, low- to moderate-income houses; 210 affordable rental units; a supermarket stocked with ethnic foods, and a credit union, and by stabilizing 100 older homes.



DENISE HARPER / Staff Artist

Rodriguez beamed. "I moved around so much as a child," she said. "We were like gypsies - so many different houses, so many different schools. I waited two years for this house. I'm so happy it's mine.

"My older daughter, Jennifer, is 21," she said. "She has a good job. I don't want her to go through what I went through with rentals.

"My APM housing counselor, Evelyn Aponte, who helped me every step of the way, told me, 'If you see a hole in the ground, start applying. By the time you see houses, it's too late.' "

"That's true," Ruiz said. She noted that a waiting list already exists for APM's 13 energy-efficient homes under construction on Sheridan Street near Berks and that another one likely will form as soon as ground is broken for 164 townhouse-style "transit oriented" units near SEPTA's Temple University Regional Rail Station, on 9th Street near Berks.

The houses go quickly because construction is government-subsidized, substantial down payment assistance is available and APM offers low-to-moderate-income families the chance to own a new home for well below the market price.

"I got my daughter on the list," Rodriguez said. "I want her to own her own home."

The chance meeting with Rodriguez delighted Ruiz and Gray.

### **Inspired by her mother**

Ruiz said that her dream of creating first-time home-ownership for hundreds of families like Rodriguez's was inspired by her mother.

"My mother is my biggest hero," Ruiz said. "She worked as a machine operator in clothing factories for 34 years. She divorced my dad when I was 8. It was the '60s. Women couldn't do anything like get credit without a man's signature. She had a little girl - me - who was born with mild cerebral palsy that filled the first 12 years of my life with surgeries and hospital stays.

"Yet it was so important to her to always own a house for us that she found a way. She told me, 'I work my heinie off in the factory so you can go to college, get a good job, own a home.' I fulfilled her dream. Now, my dream is to make that possible for so many families in our community."

Ruiz's righthand woman, Gray, worked directly for three mayors - Frank Rizzo, Bill Green and Wilson Goode - as a zoning/planning expert, spent years as vice president of a suburban construction company and is a rare combination of nuts-and-bolts know-how and soaring vision.

"You come into a devastated area that had been written off for so long," Gray said. "You start building these nice homes. You see people of diverse backgrounds taking ownership and living and working together. Everything I've done in my life led up to this. This is where I was supposed to land."

Reflecting the neighborhood's diversity, of the homeowners in APM's eastern North Philadelphia developments, 40 percent are Latino, 40 percent are African-American and 20 percent Asian, Middle Eastern and white.

"My dream is coming true," Ruiz said. "There is no neighborhood like this in the city of Philadelphia. This makes me very happy."