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Ward 8's Arc Floats Above The Skepticism

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If you had a choice, you'd probably steer clear of living in a place where there are no supermarkets, no theaters, high crime and thousands of children wandering around afternoons with no place to go.

Yet people are clamoring to live in the District's Ward 8, the long-troubled and neglected southeast corner of the city. Several thousand new units of housing have been built in the past few years. Local residents are moving up to better places, hundreds of families have confounded the experts and moved in from the suburbs, and prices, still far more modest than the rest of town, are climbing impressively.

But let's not get carried away. Ward 8 is still the core of the city's poverty problem, and though more than half of the city's children live east of the Anacostia River, the grim state of the schools offers little hope.

What Ward 8 needs for its kids, many people have long said, is an ark, a sanctuary from the storms of drugs, low expectations and ingrained dysfunction. Next month, the Arc -- Town Hall Education, Arts and Recreation Center -- will open on Mississippi Avenue SE. Several of the region's top cultural institutions are collaborating on the arts center, just across from a townhouse project where new units sold for \$99,000 six years ago and now go for \$200,000.

The Arc, a \$27 million complex that ranks architecturally with the beautiful new Strathmore arts center in North Bethesda, will provide dance classes from the Washington Ballet, music instruction from the Levine School of Music, studios run by the Corcoran Gallery of Art and a 350-seat theater -- as well as a clinic run by Children's Hospital, a spiffy Boys and Girls Club featuring a double gym that outclasses any District high school facility, and a new home for the private Washington Middle School for Girls, which serves underperforming girls with high potential. At least 300 children a day will learn and play here.

"Kids in this area are being slammed by politicians with the wrong idea," cutting the arts to focus solely on test scores, says Peter Jablow, president of the Levine School. "This place is necessary in part because the public school system hasn't done what it should have."

Arts groups say the District schools regularly rebuff outside help. Levine has music programs in four D.C. charter schools, not because of any ideological bent for charters but because the public schools spurned its offers.

The Arc -- a project of the nonprofit arm of William C. Smith & Co., which has built more than a fifth of the new housing in Ward 8 -- faces similar skepticism from neighbors who have heard too many promises over too many years. Almost any new building in Ward 8 sparks suspicion that rich white people intend to claim the area from its longstanding black population.

"It's so far from reality that I don't spend a minute worrying about it," says Skip McMahon, a former Smith executive who has shepherded the complex to completion. "This is an African American community, and we have no intention of changing that. It's like the fact that we had 65 percent minority participation in constructing these townhouses. You'd never know that from what you hear on the street, but it's the truth."

The original idea was simply to build a gym for the Parklands townhouses across the street. But as McMahon sees it, "Building housing is one piece. To bring a community back, it needs all kinds of amenities. It needs restaurants, stores, health care."

When the Arc opens, it will include bigger music studios than at Levine's main branch in Northwest (and practice rooms, because kids here don't have pianos at home), as well as a glass-walled ballet studio that will draw people just to stand outside and watch.

Raising money to build a snazzy facility is easier than finding cash to run the place. Arts groups at the Arc will have to subsidize tuition to the tune of about 90 percent per child. For Levine, that could mean \$500,000 a year.

When the doors open, no one quite knows who will come. Children who grow up without the arts in school may not see that the Arc is theirs. But the building's gleaming, airy design will lure people, as will Saturday movies, the computer lab and the gym.

"We will always get the kids who have music in their heads -- they're driven," Jablow says. "But there are lots of kids who don't know what they have, and they need to be exposed to music to find that out."