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Project of the Month: NEI General Contracting completes renovation of 490,000 s/f Rivermark Towers

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Rivermark Towers before renovation

Rivermark Towers after renovation

Cambridge, MA NEI General Contracting, an award-winning general contracting firm, has completed a 490,000 s/f occupied renovation of an affordable housing complex for Homeowners Rehab, Inc. (HRI). Located at 808-812 Memorial Dr., the Rivermark complex contains 89 apartments in a 10-story building, 211 apartments in a 19-story building, 38,000 s/f of commercial space, and five levels of parking. Of the 300 units, 212 will be for low-income residents and administered by the Cambridge Housing Authority. The remaining 88 apartments will be rented at market rates. Designed by Bruner/Cott, work began in 2020 and was completed in December 2022.

HRI is a 501(c)3 organization founded in 1972 by a group of concerned residents who recognized the need to stabilize their community. With an initial focus on homeownership, HRI strived to support mixed income communities, rich in ethnic and racial diversity. HRI shifted its focus from homeownership to include rental properties in the 1990s, as a means of creating new opportunities for families who could not access Cambridge's housing market post-rent control. HRI continues to further its mission by developing and preserving affordable, high-quality rental housing and empowering residents through services and programming.

“When HRI acquired this property in 1997, we were able to complete some upgrades, but we knew the property would require an extensive renovation. Legal battles with a former investor preceded years of planning for this large-scale undertaking, including a long process to assemble financing. An occupied rehab of this scale and scope offers an exceptional opportunity to address property issues raised over the years by management staff and by residential and commercial tenants. We knew that we needed a uniquely qualified architecture firm and general contractor, and selected Bruner/Cott and NEI. Our incredible team identified bathrooms and kitchens, on-going leaks from the exterior, the existing inefficient envelope, and general aesthetics and functionality of the common spaces as high priority for this renovation,” said Sara Barcan, HRI executive director. “Both NEI and Bruner/Cott worked closely with our HRI development and resident services staff. Our beautifully upgraded community spaces align with reimagined programming that meets residents’ needs and aspirations. We and our residents are thrilled by the new and improved Rivermark.”

To achieve a sleek, modern look while improving energy performance and boosting air filtration to improve indoor air quality to increase residents’ comfort, more than 320,000 s/f of the towers’ ribbed face concrete façades were overclad with a custom, unitized 12-inch-thick panel wall system. Installation of the new, high-performance façade and window systems refreshed the appearance of the building, supported mechanical system upgrades, and significantly reduced residents’ cost of living.

The project scope also reworked the landscape and community courtyard to improve lighting, circulation, and accessibility. Indoors, common spaces such as the community room, activity room, and computer lab were reconfigured to improve functionality. Lobbies, elevators, and corridors were updated with modern and vibrant finishes, flooring, lighting, and signage, in addition to select interior

unit renovations. Amenities include on-site daycare; retail space; designated outdoor areas on site and a playground; community spaces including a programmed activity room and computer lab, large community room with kitchen; communal laundry rooms; on-site fitness center; on-site parking (garage); in-unit air conditioning and heat controls.

From a construction and management point of view, the combination of occupied rehab and the start of construction at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was an ongoing challenge for the two and half years of construction. Constant daily communication between all members of the team was required to address resident needs while maintaining the construction schedule and staying on budget as residents were temporarily relocated to on-site units while work occurred in their apartment. Careful planning with construction workers on-site, relocation team, movers, cleaners, and property management avoided large disturbances to tenant life by keeping everyone safe through careful PPE policies and relocation plans.

The project pursued and received Enterprise Green Communities Certification, a program aimed at transforming the quality of affordable housing in America, meeting criteria related to integrated design, site improvement, resource conservation, operational energy considerations, and more.

Project Team included:

- Homeowners Rehab, Inc. (HRI) - Owner
- NEI General Contracting - General Contractor
- Bruner/Cott - Architect
- Kaydon Integrated Technologies - Security
- Folan Waterproofing - Waterproofing
- Norfolk Companies - Cabinets
- Monahan Technologies - HVAC
- Peterson Engineering - MEP/FP Engineering
- Sunrise Erectors Inc. - Cladding/Glazing/Storefronts

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