NICHIHA USA CASE STUDY

Serenity Courtyard: Building Dignity Through Design

PROJECT DETAILS

LOCATION

9 Acres in Macon, GA

PRODUCT(S)

VintageWood Architectural Wall Panels (AWP)

TIMELINE

April 2024 - February 2025

PROJECT TYPE

Residential Community

ARCHITECT

Kamal Azar, AIA, Partner,
Azar+Walsh Architects

River Edge Behavioral Health faced a difficult and growing challenge in Macon, Georgia: individuals aged 55 and older living with mental illness had almost no access to stable, long-term housing that felt safe, dignified, and truly like home. Many were cycling between shelters, temporary rooms, or unsafe conditions, and nearly half of the individuals River Edge serves are between ages 50 and 64: an age where health complications and instability can quickly worsen without proper support. The pandemic underscored the urgency even further. As CEO Cass Hatcher described it, the team began asking, "How can we build houses for another pandemic?" They needed single-level homes where seniors could live independently, maintain privacy, socialize safely, and access case-management services without feeling institutionalized or overlooked.

CHALLENGE

River Edge Behavioral Health faced a critical challenge: adults 55+ with mental illness in Macon lacked safe, long-term housing that offered dignity, stability, and true community.

SOLUTION

Architect Kamal Azar used shotgun-style designs and Nichiha's VintageWood AWP to deliver warm, durable, low-maintenance homes suited for Georgia's climate.

RESULTS

Completed in February, 2025 and fully occupied, Serenity Courtyard shows how thoughtful design and durable materials can transform affordable housing into a true sense of home.

“We’re not warehousing people in need. We’re offering wrap-around services for our fellow Georgians.”

CASS HATCHER, CEO
RIVER EDGE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

UNIQUE CLIMATE CHALLENGES

Macon receives an average annual rainfall of 45.7 inches. For that reason, most residents are looking for alternatives that offer color and texture options without the upkeep of natural wood products.

When River Edge acquired nine wooded acres near the Nichiha plant after years of persistence, they set out to build something that hadn’t existed in Macon in decades: a warm, inviting neighborhood designed specifically for older adults with mental health needs. They partnered with **Azar+Walsh Architects**, longtime collaborators who understood their mission and their desire to reduce the stigma often associated with supportive housing. Together, they faced several challenges at once: fit 26 thoughtfully designed homes on the site; give residents both individuality and community; and select materials that were beautiful, durable, and cost-effective for an organization responsible for maintaining hundreds of units across Macon.

Architect Kamal Azar approached the project with a simple but powerful vision of designing structures that look like any middle-income home in Macon: familiar, warm, and rooted in local history. He drew inspiration from the region’s historic shotgun houses, creating single-level, 600-square-foot homes with A-frame roofs, straightforward layouts, and recessed front porches that immediately convey comfort and dignity.

From the beginning, Azar knew the exterior materials would play a major role in achieving that feeling. **Nichiha’s VintageWood AWP** provided the texture, warmth, and authenticity the project needed, but they also solved one of River Edge’s biggest practical concerns: long-term maintenance. The organization maintains nearly 400 housing units across Macon, making low-maintenance a necessity, not a preference. And Nichiha’s US-based production allowed the project to satisfy **Build America, Buy America (BABA)** grant requirements.

With greenspace equivalent to two football fields, Serenity Courtyard is designed to promote community and aging in place comfortably.

Nichiha's fiber cement cladding offered durability they could rely on, resisting Georgia's humidity, heavy rainfall, pests, and rot without the repainting, repair cycles, or warping that natural wood brings. Azar had used Nichiha's products on previous projects, and the performance record gave the team confidence that these homes would remain beautiful and dependable for decades. The materials also helped River Edge establish a consistent visual identity across multiple properties. Several of their facilities, including a new Peer Support Building and previous clinic projects, use Nichiha products to create a recognizable, uplifting look that signals care, stability, and professionalism. Maintaining that "look" was important to Cass and his team, who wanted residents and community partners alike to recognize the quality and pride put into every River Edge property.

While the homes needed to be identical in layout to keep construction simple and cost-effective, River Edge also wanted each home to feel unique to its future resident. Nichiha's range of colors and textures made this possible. By varying accent areas and finishes without altering core plans, the team gave each home a sense of personality: small touches that reinforced dignity and pride of ownership.

By early 2025, Serenity Courtyard was complete and fully occupied, quickly becoming one of the largest and most thoughtfully executed affordable housing developments of its kind in Georgia. Residents now have private, stable homes supported by wraparound services that help them manage their health, build life skills, and regain independence. The design accomplishes exactly what River Edge had hoped for: a place where older adults can feel safe, seen, and rooted in community.

"Nichiha's materials helped us achieve a residential look with the performance we needed. They added texture, warmth, and lasting value without the upkeep of real wood."

KAMAL AZAR, PARTNER
AZAR+WALSH ARCHITECTS

The project also proved several important truths. First, affordable housing does not need to look or feel institutional; thoughtful design elevates both the resident experience and neighborhood perception. Second, material choices can dramatically affect a nonprofit's long-term operations. Durable, low-maintenance products like fiber cement ensure that more funding can go toward services rather than repairs. And third, consistency matters. By building multiple facilities with similar materials and design cues, River Edge is developing a recognizable sense of place across Macon while also representing dignity, compassion, and stability.

Most importantly, Serenity Courtyard shows what's possible when design, purpose, and performance align. With the right partners and the right materials, housing for vulnerable populations can look and feel like any welcoming neighborhood while providing a place where people can truly come home.

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