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Affordable Senior Housing as an Engine for Urban Revitalization

Michael Malinowski, AIA

Housing is essential to urban revitalization. This is particularly true for development in “challenge areas”—areas where projects are designed to challenge the *status quo* and lead to new patterns of use and livability. In recent years, senior affordable housing has played an increasing role in strategies for city shaping. Looking at some of the factors that contribute to success of affordable senior urban projects points to new opportunities for architects, planners, and developers interested in the rebirth of our cities.

Growing Demand

Considering the increasing population of 55+ people and the low rents in affordable senior developments, it’s no wonder that Sharon Christen of Mercy Housing Inc., which specializes in affordable housing, including urban housing developments, reports, “We never have problems finding tenants for our units.”

Bolstering the incentive of below market rents is a demand for walkable urban living. Christopher Leinberger, University of Michigan professor and partner of Arcadia Land Company, points out that people today have about a 50/50 preference split between what he terms the only two types of development: “drivable suburban” and “walkable urban.” With 85% of new buildings in the last 45 years having been of the drivable suburban type, there is a pent-up demand for new walkable urban housing. With transit access and nearby services, shopping, and amenities, transportation drops from a typical 25% of annual household expense down to 9% or less. With a significant number of 55+ people already living in urban settings seeking more affordable accommodations, while being comfortable and familiar with both the positives and negatives of city living, the size of the potential market becomes apparent.

Parkview Terraces, San Francisco, 2008

Architects: Kwan Henmi and Fougeron Architecture

Developer: AF Evans

Public Partners: Chinatown Community Development Center,
San Francisco Redevelopment Agency

Photographer: Rien Van Rijthoven

The ground floor includes community spaces, counseling, health services, and a hair salon in a site adjacent to a public park. Forty-seven units are wheelchair accessible.



Armstrong Senior Housing, San Francisco, Opening 2010

Architect: David Baker Architects

Developer: Bridge Housing

Public Partners: Redevelopment Agency of the City and County of San Francisco, HUD, City of San Francisco Mayor's Office of Housing,

Part of a larger development that includes an affordable family townhouse development, this TOD includes on-site, neighborhood-oriented retail. The exterior design was influenced by the colors and patterns of the historically African-American neighborhood. The units, which are above the ground level shops, library, and community center, frame an interior courtyard. A car-share pod is planned, along with facilities dedicated to bicyclists, including storage, showers, and lockers.

non-profits like Bridge Housing and Mercy Housing, as well as for-profit firms. To make the projects work, local government is invariably a partner—usually through housing/redevelopment agencies. Many times there are other public and public benefit entities involved, as well. Low cost is not the primary consideration, since tax credits are based on project cost; up to a point, investing more in quality can help a proposal be competitive. The process administered by the State through the Tax Credit Allocation Committee could push the envelope much further in months and years ahead, as there is great potential to encourage better design by granting points based on design quality. Since projects are committed to a 55 year or longer term of affordability, and cash flow returns are minimal, some teams help mitigate the risks of these ventures by taking on multiple roles—property management and even the contractor role, for example.

Maximizing the value of the public's investment

In the hands of an urban planner, every building project has the potential to be a tool in city shaping. With many urban problems complex—often having roots going back decades—public investment in urban development ideally will try to get the biggest bang for the public's bucks. It is not uncommon to have urban affordable senior projects go far beyond their housing mandate to address such disparate city needs as historic preservation, infrastructure upgrades, public services like libraries or fire protection improvement, and brownfield toxic site clean up. Revitalization of urban areas is inherently green and sustainable, as it makes use of infrastructure that was created decades ago.

Opportunities for architects

Affordable housing development sometimes begins in traditional ways—an RFP issued by a Redevelopment Agency for a parcel it controls, for example. In other cases, affordable housing projects arise from grass roots efforts launched at the community level. The motive force might be a church with surplus property, a toxic abandoned industrial site, or even an individual architect looking past urban blight and crystallizing a vision that might act as the nucleus for assembling a development team. ©



City Heights Square, San Diego, 2007

Architect: Dominy + Associates

Developer: City Heights Square, L.P. which consists of Chelsea Services Corporation and Senior Community Services of San Diego

Public Partners: City of San Diego Revopment Agency and the San Diego Revitalization Corporation

This development includes senior affordable housing for ages 62 and over, offices, retail, a pocket park and a medical clinic. It is part of a wider ranging, \$71 million revitalization effort in City Heights. The project covers a city block footprint of 2.7 acres. Support services for tenants include one meal a day, counseling, abuse intervention and legal programs. Tax credits were part of the financing.



Mission Creek Senior Community, San Francisco, 2006

Architect: HKIT Architects

Consulting Architect: Santos Prescott and Associates

Developer: Mercy Housing California.

Public Partners: San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, San Francisco Housing Authority, San Francisco Department of Public Health, San Francisco Branch Library Improvement Program, Catholic Healthcare West, State of California Department of Housing and Community Development (through Proposition 46), HUD

Mission Creek incorporates ground floor, neighborhood-oriented retail and a branch of the San Francisco Public Library. It targets very low income and frail seniors (ages 62 and older), and rents are limited to 30% of income.

