

Affordable Housing That Feels Like Home



Ricardo Rodriguez and Javier Molina of Quatro Design at the Pueblo del Sol housing project in East Los Angeles.

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On land once marred by gang violence, a new kind of low-income housing project blooms in Los Angeles. Around playgrounds and park benches, through arbors and beds of roses, pathways wind and cul-de-sacs connect 377 multifamily units that may help change the way the public views low-income housing.

Formerly Aliso Village, the redeveloped Pueblo del Sol, the second-largest affordable-housing project in the state, offers master-planned, community-oriented housing to low-income families.

The development, the product of a collaboration between co-developers Related Cos. and McCormack Baron Salazar under the master design of the Quatro Design Group, owned by the Aliso Village Housing Partnership, comes with lofty expectations. Bill Witte, principal of the Related Cos., said something special would happen in Pueblo del Sol.

"I think that, in a period of three to five years, it will be as if a new community — a new neighborhood with its own heart — has been created," Witte said. Adding to the multifamily component, the Lee Group will construct 97 single-family homes at the site. Developers also will add a high school and a light-rail station to complement Utah Elementary School, around which architects built the \$103 million project.

Everyone involved with the development credits the federal department of Housing and Urban Development's HOPE VI program, the Housing Authority of Los Angeles, Fannie Mae and SunAmerica Affordable Housing Partners with making Pueblo del Sol possible through funding and tax credits.

The HOPE VI revitalization grant alone contributed \$38.2 million to the project, according to Bill Davis, HOPE

VI administrator. SunAmerica, Davis said, offered \$26.7 million worth of tax credits for Phase 1, which built 201 rental units, and \$25.5 million for Phase 2, which had 176 units.

Without the federal money and tax credits, the dream of Pueblo del Sol never would have materialized, according to Witte. "It was the whole ball game," he said. Because of the financial help, Witte said, the developers achieved something unique and special.

"We tried very hard not only to make it look nice but to make everything look like a home, not an apartment," he said.

Witte said that residents with whom he has spoken no longer think of their apartments as low-income housing, and that indicates good things.

"That's when you have achieved success, when the community doesn't view it as affordable housing, but housing," Witte said.

No Bars Necessary

Quatro Design Group, which also built the community center and will build an outdoor amphitheater, wanted to change everything about the old Aliso Village, according to Ricardo Rodriguez, principal.

Before selecting any developers, Quatro spoke with community members of the Aliso Village project who would inhabit the new development.

While holding a workshop at the Los Angeles Convention Center, the firm asked what the public wanted out of the project.

"People wanted this to be a gated community with bars on the windows," Rodriguez said.

Fear concerning the 14 gangs that once ruled Aliso Village remained within the community, he said.

"[The old project] acted as a fortress for everything outside that village," Rodriguez said. "It was kind of like an oasis in a bad sense. If you went into this project, you were going to get beat up. If you didn't live there, you

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couldn't go in."

At the meeting, Rodriguez asked community members to raise their hands and tell where murders or other violent crimes had taken place in the project. The responses surprised him. "People just kept raising their hands," he said.

After the meeting, the Quatro team decided to transform the prevailing mindset about low-income housing developments, according to Rodriguez.

"We started discussing how you could design the project to prevent crime from happening," he said. "That inspired the idea that, instead of a gated community, we could change the mindset. We needed to change perceptions."

Perhaps the finest example of the change, according to Rodriguez, comes from the outdoor lights found throughout the development.

Rather than select a more vandal-resistant product, Quatro opted for an aesthetically pleasing model. The low-hanging street lights on green poles blend in with the overhanging trees, groomed landscape and shaded walkways, which all formed what Rodriguez called a "walkable community."

"It made people feel that they were a part of a greater neighborhood," he said. Developer Tony Salazar of McCormack Baron Salazar also said that creating a cohesive community feeling was paramount.

"The overall goal is that ultimately you have a community where you have a community, where people live, work, play and pray with the access of the mass transit at its front door," Salazar said.

The development will change the landscape of East Los Angeles, he said.

"It sets a standard for new development in the area," Salazar said.

Pueblo del Sol will not meet the same fate as its predecessor, according to the developer.

The new management will make a greater effort to control the property. The tenant selection process, according to Salazar, will be lengthy and comprehensive. Should a tenant behave in a manner unbecoming of the development, the person would be evicted. "We're managing the development," he said.

Quality and Affordability

Designed by William Hezmalhalch Architects, Inc. in Phase 1 and Van Tilburg, Banvard & Soderbergh and Wraight Architects in Phase 2, the 377 two-, three- and four-bedroom affordable-housing units offer residents a variety of amenities.

Along with washing machines and dryers, apartments feature dishwashers, energy-efficient heating and cooling systems, garbage disposals, refrigerators and garages.

Families with incomes ranging from 20 percent to 60 percent of area median income will fill Pueblo del Sol. Rents in the project range from \$368 a month for a two-bedroom apartment to \$948 for a four-bedroom unit.

For Pueblo del Sol resident Maria Lopez, who previously lived in Aliso Village, the amenities are nice, but the safety is better.

"We now live in a brand new town house, where my children don't have to worry about gang violence on their walk home," Lopez said.

The surrounding area also will undergo major changes because of the new multifamily community, according to Witte.

Los Angeles and East Los Angeles, separated geographically by the Los Angeles River, will become, in a way, closer, he said.

"Those worlds will blur," Witte said.

Pueblo del Sol also will influence the area retail market, he said.

The residents of the development will have ready access to public transportation available with the introduction of the Metropolitan Transit Authority Red Line stop, which may also help attract shoppers from other

areas. The light-rail stop on First Street between Anderson and Utah streets was not planned in conjunction with the development, but it will serve its residents.

"You will see more retail on 1st Street," Salazar said.

As for the development, he said residents now occupy 274 of Pueblo del Sol's 377 units. The rest of the units soon will be fully leased.

"It's getting near complete," Salazar said.

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