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SAN FRANCISCO

Infamous projects are rebuilt and reborn

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It's like a modern-day Mayberry landed in the heart of the Mission.

Flowerpots rest on front stoops, and bicycles and basketballs sit on wooden back decks. Newly planted trees line the clean streets down which moms walk, holding their children's hands. Finger-painted masterpieces decorate the day care center downstairs -- and all 260 apartments have washing machines, dryers, eat-in kitchens and wiring for Internet access.

Passers-by may guess it's a new cluster of condominiums, but it's the rebirth of Valencia Gardens -- the public housing development in San Francisco's Mission District once infamous for its decrepit block structure, drug dealing, violence, rodent infestation, and obsolete plumbing and sewage systems.

The new development, which fills the 5-acre block bordered by Valencia and Guerrero streets and 14th and 15th streets, will officially premiere today with a lineup of speakers including Mayor Gavin Newsom, former Mayor Willie Brown, state Sen. Carole Migden and Christine Pelosi, daughter of soon-to-be Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Unlike the development originally built in 1943 with an institutional design, the new Valencia Gardens is supposed to look like any other San Francisco neighborhood -- with individual homes lined up one after the other, all of which have a front door on the street and a private backyard or back deck.

"It's supposed to blend into the urban fabric," said David Brown, an architect with Van Meter Williams Pollack, the firm that designed the new Valencia Gardens. "It's supposed to be part of the city and not just be 'the projects.' "

One particularly popular feature is the artwork that dots the entire development. The eight granite statues of animals by famous sculptor Beniamino Bufano are back in the lobby and outdoor plaza after being housed at the Randall Museum during the construction work.

And \$25,000 was used to purchase additional works -- including paintings from artists with disabilities at Creativity Explored, a nonprofit visual arts center; a collage of photographs depicting the Mission by local



artist J. Michael Tucker; and abstract construction photographs by architect Brown.

Rebuilt by the Mission Housing Development Corporation and managed by John Stewart Co., the new Valencia Gardens cost \$66 million and was paid for with a mix of public and private funds. Just over \$23 million came in the form of a federal grant under a program known as Hope VI, the Clinton-era initiative designed to revitalize public housing developments nationwide.

The San Francisco Housing Authority has received \$118 million in Hope VI funding and has used it to revamp five crime-ridden, crumbling developments in the Mission, North Beach, Bernal Heights, the Western Addition and Hayes Valley.

But the money has now dried up. President Bush has proposed abolishing Hope VI, but it has been spared by Congress. Still, the pot of money available for grants has dwindled.

Even if there were more money, the Housing Authority wouldn't qualify because it sits on the federal housing department's "troubled" list, due to the fact it has failed to pay three long-standing court judgments against it.

Eight additional public housing developments around the city -- in Bayview-Hunters Point, Potrero Hill, the Western Addition and Visitacion Valley -- desperately need the same work received by the others, but finding the \$245 million it will take to complete the task with no federal support could be tough.

Newsom believes he has the answer: a local version of Hope VI called Hope SF. He said in September that he will devote all of his political capital to ensuring city voters approve a \$100 million bond, which could then be used to leverage additional private money.

A task force of about two dozen members -- including public housing residents, housing activists, people representing downtown businesses and other community leaders -- met last week at City Hall to "try to put some meat on the bones of that initiative," according to Gregg Fortner, the Housing Authority director.

Newsom and Supervisor Sophie Maxwell attended part of the meeting. No decisions, including when the bond might go before voters, have been made.

Fortner said he supports the Hope SF idea, but also is optimistic that Democratic control of Congress -- and a House speaker from San Francisco -- will loosen the federal purse strings for public housing.

"There's a new climate in Washington, so you never know what opportunities are going to present themselves in the future," he said.

City officials and housing activists say it's important to have residents of varying income levels living within each development so the rent the wealthier residents pay can help cover the operating costs of the complex; the mix also provides an element of economic diversity. Of Valencia Gardens' 260 units, 52 are

reserved for households who earn significantly more than the poverty level but are still considered low-income.

Fortner has said the revitalization of the public housing developments in Hunters Point will include market-rate housing, though critics say that could gentrify the area and push current residents out. Fortner has vowed that every public housing resident who's there when construction starts will have the right to return when it's done.

Back at the revitalized development in the Mission, new resident John Sandles, 41, said he grew up in San Francisco and was always aware of the infamous Valencia Gardens.

"It was bad -- just bad," he said. The new buildings "don't look like the old Valencia Gardens. A lot of my friends who come by -- they don't think it's low-income housing."

Jennifer Eaton and Maribel Madrid are both 34-year-old single moms raising three children apiece. They both lived at Valencia Gardens before the redevelopment and are happy to have moved back in.

They both said the biggest change is the physical structure; they enjoy bigger apartments with better appliances, nicer carpeting and private outdoor space.

"It's more comfortable," Madrid said. "It looks better for sure."

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