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"More than shelter": Community, identity, and spatial politics in San Francisco public housing, 1938--2000

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“MORE THAN SHELTER”:

Community, Identity, and Spatial Politics in San Francisco Public Housing,
1938-2000

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Amy Lynne Howard

2005

APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

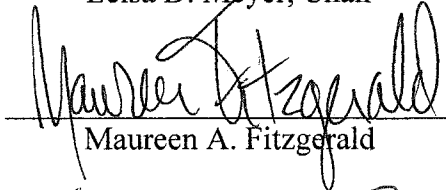


Amy Howard

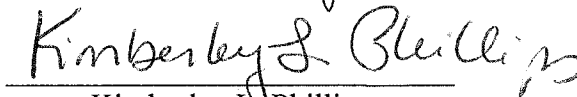
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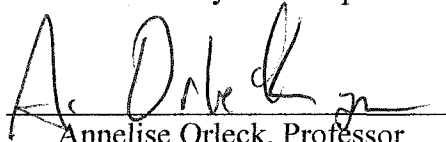
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For my parents

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ABSTRACT

During the second half of the twentieth century, scholars and journalists documented the failures of the public housing program in the United States with a range of studies focusing on the Midwest and East. Problems such as displacement, criminal activity, high vacancy rates, racial segregation, and the isolation of tenants informed critiques of federally-subsidized housing for low-income tenants. These aspects contributed to the national image of “the projects” as high-rise ghettos, populated primarily by African Americans, and located in run-down areas. The realities of public housing with its position at the crossroads of national, state, and local policies, politics and practice, however, defies simple categorization.

This study expands the history of public housing to the West and in doing so complicates the image of where public housing is located, what it looks like, and who lives there. Examining public housing in San Francisco, a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, politically liberal city, reveals the important role regional, local and spatial politics play in project design, location, and population. The three projects examined here, Ping Yuen in Chinatown, North Beach Place in North Beach, and Valencia Gardens in the Mission District, are located in thriving urban areas near public transportation, shops, and hospitals. Nonetheless, tenants over the years experienced a range of difficulties including mismanagement and racial segregation by the San Francisco Housing Authority, rising crime rates, in-fighting, and at Valencia Gardens and North Beach, the scorn of district neighbors. Despite these challenges, many tenants came together to form communities. Coming across racial and ethnic lines, tenants relied on formal and informal networks to make their rental apartments into “homes.” Demonstrating part of the hidden history of public housing, tenants at Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens became politicized by living in the projects and challenged the state to improve their living environments. These case studies highlight public housing’s contribution to the affordable housing stock and tenants’ roles in making the projects livable spaces.

**“MORE THAN SHELTER”: COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, AND SPATIAL POLITICS
IN SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC HOUSING, 1938-2000**

INTRODUCTION

When the golden sun sinks in the hills,
 And the toil of a long day is o'er
 Though the road may be long, in the lilt of a song
 I forget I was weary before
 Far ahead, where the blue shadows fall
 I shall come to contentment and rest;
 And the toils of the day will be all charmed away
 In my little grey home of the west...
 It's a corner of heaven itself
 Though it's only a tumble-down nest,
 But with the love brooding there, why, no place can compare
 With my little grey home in the west.
 Lyrics from *Little Grey Home in the West*¹

In the early part of the twentieth-century “the American Dream of homeownership” began to permeate politics, policies, and culture in the United States.² The preference for owned homes and the ideology linking individual property with fiscal, civic, and moral responsibility has long been a significant thread in the fabric of American life. In the late nineteenth century, the upper-class migration from urban to suburban living strengthened the cultural link between class status, “good” citizenship, and private homeownership. Wealthy city dwellers in the 1870s— using improved transportation systems— led the way to the suburbs and displayed their privilege through

¹ D. Eardley-Wilmot, *Little Grey Home in the West*, (London: Chappel Ltd., 1911).

² Fannie Mae Foundation advertisement promoting homeownership in the United States, National Public Radio, 2004.

their large estates.³ They moved away from the urban core with its overcrowded tenements, factories, and dangerous and dirty streets to experience the touted benefits of living in a more “natural setting.” Homeownership became possible for the middle class not long after with the further development of mass transportation systems that created new neighborhoods outside cities and the balloon frame house design which allowed builders to construct cheaper houses faster.⁴ As a result, by the mid-1880s, as historian Kenneth T. Jackson has described, single-family dwellings became the paragon of middle-class housing, a symbol of a fixed place in society, and a goal to which families aspired.⁵ By the beginning of the twentieth century, buying a home had come to signal moral rectitude and good citizenship as the notion that industrious Americans could and should own homes became embedded in cultural discourse.

After World War I, the U.S. government— realizing the housing industry’s importance to the national economy— joined business interests in bolstering home buying. In 1920, the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) and the U.S. Department of Labor promoted the “Own Your Own Home” campaign, in an effort to make increased rates of nonfarm homeownership the major goal of American housing policy. Drawing on the image and ideal of the independent yeoman, the NAREB equated homeownership with freedom and masculinity in pamphlets and advertisements with copy that included “‘His Castle,’ HomeOwning Breeds *Real Men*,” “The HomeOwner is

³ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 20. Jackson outlines the major technological advances that led to the “erosion of the walking city.” He describes how the introduction of the steam ferry, the omnibus, the commuter railroad, the horsecar, the elevated railroad, and the cable car between 1815 and 1875 “gave additional impetus to an exodus that would turn cities ‘inside out.’”

⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

the Most Efficient Workman,” and “The Owned Home Makes Life More Worth While in Every Way.”⁶ The ads, building on cultural constructions of manhood, targeted hard-working “real men”— and not women— as “rightful” homeowners. The NAREB made a moral distinction between homeownership and renting, emphasizing “the unwholesome and not infrequently contaminating ideas of the floating classes that predominate in the close in rental districts.”⁷ Homeownership, as packaged by the NAREB and culturally sold to Americans, served “as an index of self-esteem and control,” as well as “a mechanism of class segregation.”⁸

The Depression created a crisis in the housing market and disrupted the ideological connection between property ownership and good citizenship. The ability to buy “home sweet homes” was out of reach for most Americans. According to a report by Edith Elmer Wood, two-thirds of the country’s population could not afford to buy new homes.⁹ Responding to the disruption in residential construction and purchasing, President Hoover convened the President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership in December 1931.¹⁰ Clearly demarcating the difference in status between renters and owners in his address, Hoover claimed that the country’s “immortal ballads,

⁶ Lawrence Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 121-123.

⁷ M.W. Folsom, *A Home of Your Own* (Chicago: National Association of Real Estate Boards, 1922) quoted in Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 122.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 127. The Committee on the Relationship of Income and the Home at the Housing Conference stood behind President Hoover's call to promote homeownership, despite Wood's findings in *Recent Trends in American Housing*.

¹⁰ In 1922, the U.S. Department of Labor joined the home-boosting organization, Better Homes in America, Inc. to launch the Better Homes movement. The organization worked to uphold "high standards in homebuilding, home furnishing, and home life." Herbert Hoover served as president of the organization until 1927 and Calvin Coolidge was chair of the advisory committee. Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 126.

Home, Sweet Home, My Old Kentucky Home, and The Little Gray Home in the West, were not written about tenements and apartments....They never sing songs about a pile of rent receipts.”¹¹ Homeowners— not renters— would enjoy the pleasures of love, family, and security captured in the lyrics of these popular songs. A nation of homeowners— implicitly defined as white, middle- and upper- class, native-born Americans— conference members reasoned, would further democracy and strengthen the country. Drawing on interwar housing programs, the conference proceedings recommended “increased homeownership of single-family dwellings, a home mortgage reserve banking system, and a national housing institute.”¹²

As the nation’s depression deepened, the federal government under the new leadership of President Roosevelt intervened in the field of housing. By the late 1930s the government created what historian Gail Radford has labeled a “two-tiered housing policy.” The top tier supported pro-market initiatives and grew out of proposals promoted by business groups beginning in the 1920s. This tier, as Radford points out, “consisted of mortgage insurance and other institutional arrangements organized and subsidized by the federal government. These allowed financial markets to provide low-cost capital to producers and consumers of market-supplied housing.” The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), Home Loan Bank Board, the temporary Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), and the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae)

¹¹ Hoover quoted in Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: Norton, 1983), 17.

¹² John M. Gries and James Ford, eds., *Home Ownership, Income, and Types of Dwellings: President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership* 18 (Washington, D.C.: President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, 1932) summarized in Janet Hutchison, "Shaping Housing and Enhancing Consumption," in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth Century America*, John F. Bauman, Roger Biles, Kristin M. Szylvian eds., (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 93.

managed these initiatives aimed at helping middle-class Americans in their quest for homeownership.¹³

Public housing emerged as the lower-tier New Deal housing program. In the planning stages, a group of housing reformers led by activist and writer Catherine Bauer promoted modern housing as the optimal approach to public housing. Bauer, in her 1934 book *Modern Housing*, called for a “universalistic policy... rather than a two-tier approach consisting of building housing for very poor people and reviving the commercial market for everyone else.”¹⁴ Bauer and other modern housing proponents called for the federal government to employ innovative architectural concepts, to decommmercialize residential property, and to build garden-style apartments and row-houses that would appeal to “a standard of majority acceptability.” These clustered units, Bauer and other advocates contended, would attract both working- and middle-class Americans by providing parks and playground space, new technologies in the units, daycare, and recreational opportunities for older children and adults. Public housing in this vision served as a viable, attractive alternative to homeownership. Instead of supporting one type of housing for the majority and “an inferior and visually stigmatizing alternative for the poor” Bauer pushed the modern housing plan as a way “to make good

¹³ Gail Radford, *Modern Housing: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 118.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103. For more information on the modern housing movement see Gail Radford's *Modern Housing: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*. Radford's main arguments are summarized in her article "The Federal Government and Housing during the Great Depression," in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes* edited by John F. Bauman et al., pages 102-120. Catherine Bauer put forth tenets of the modern housing program taken from her studies of European housing in her groundbreaking book *Modern Housing*. Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934). Bauer examines the possibilities for modern housing in the U.S. in her chapter "Modern Housing for America?" 237-260.

housing of a similar character available to everyone.”¹⁵ This pattern of urban development, modern housing advocates argued, would encourage a stable, vibrant community life for residents. Despite Bauer’s advocacy of “modern housing,” public housing policies beginning with the 1937 Housing Act diverged from this model and over time set up obstacles to the creation of public housing communities based on this ideal.

Answering Lawrence Vale’s call “to look locally, to see how the various programs that emerged under the shared name of ‘public housing’ have played out over time in very different neighborhood contexts, subject to very different local political pressures,” this study examines the history of three public housing projects in San Francisco.¹⁶ Viewing the projects “as wholly interlinked” to the broad currents of social and economic change within neighborhoods, the city, and the region, this study explores tenants’ relationships with each other, with the built environment of the project, with the neighborhood, and with the state to understand the complexities of community formation in public housing.¹⁷

Standing in stark contrast to the Midwestern and eastern high-rise projects populated primarily by African Americans on which scholars and the media have

¹⁵ Radford, *Modern Housing*, 103.

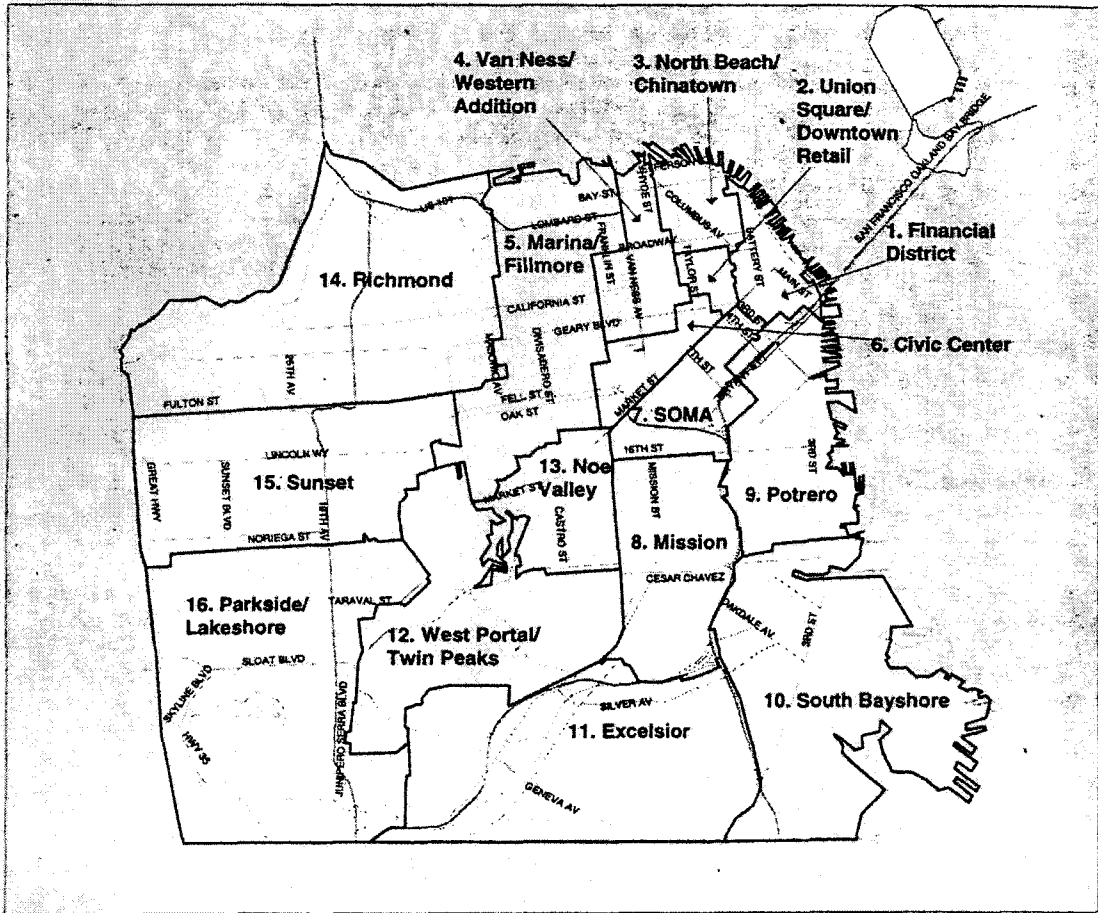
¹⁶ Lawrence Vale, *Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 27. For the purposes of my study I am defining “projects” by the definition listed in the Oxford English Dictionary: a government-subsidized block of houses or apartments available at low rents, i.e. *housing project*. The OED lists the first use of the word in the *American City* in 1932, preceding the Housing Act of 1937. The headings read “Federal Aid Now Offered for Low-Cost Housing and Slum-Clearance Projects” and “All housing projects should be large-scale developments.” Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “project,” <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/oed.text>. The term “the projects” became increasingly pejorative during the mid to late twentieth century, and like the word “slum,” is steeped in ideology.

¹⁷ Vale, *Reclaiming Public Housing*, 27. This project supports Vale’s contention that it is not useful to view public housing as “an independent enclave.” He aptly notes that it does public housing residents “no service to perpetuate the stereotype that housing projects are independent outposts, subject only to the will of housing management or the wavering generosity of public subsidy.” Vale, *Reclaiming Public Housing*, 27.

focused, public housing in San Francisco has been architecturally diverse and multi-racial. The projects studied here, Ping Yuen, North Beach, and Valencia Gardens, further complicate popular stereotypes because of their location in thriving urban areas that attract locals and tourists. The influence of racial politics on public housing in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit and New York City has been established; however the ways in which the racial and ethnic diversity of the West shaped public housing in the second half of the twentieth century has not yet been explored.¹⁸ In contrast to the well-established narrative of black occupancy and white opposition, public housing in San Francisco with its diverse tenant population adds a complex layer to public housing history. Unlike many cities in the United States that had become segregated by race in the 1950s and 1960s, San Francisco's North Beach Place and Valencia Gardens housing projects offered rare sites of inter-racial, cross-cultural residential living. A city known to be liberal and racially diverse yet possessed of the highest real estate prices and rental rates, San Francisco provides a critical locale for analyzing the spatial politics of public housing. In particular, this study considers the intersection between the image of public housing and the lived experience of tenants, the significance of project location within different districts over the past sixty years (Figures 1 and 2), and the ways in which tenants have created "homes" out of rented public housing units.

¹⁸ See Lawrence Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects and Reclaiming Public Housing* on public housing in Boston; Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Family Life in a Federal Slum* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970), and Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) on Chicago. John F. Bauman, Norman P. Hummon, and Edward K. Muller examine the "contentious literature on black families and public housing" in "Public Housing, Isolation, and the Urban Underclass: Philadelphia's Richard Allen Homes, 1941-1965," *Journal of Urban History* 17 (May 1991): 273-86. John Bauman, *Public Housing, Race and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974*. Thomas Sugrue studies Detroit housing in *The Origins for the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

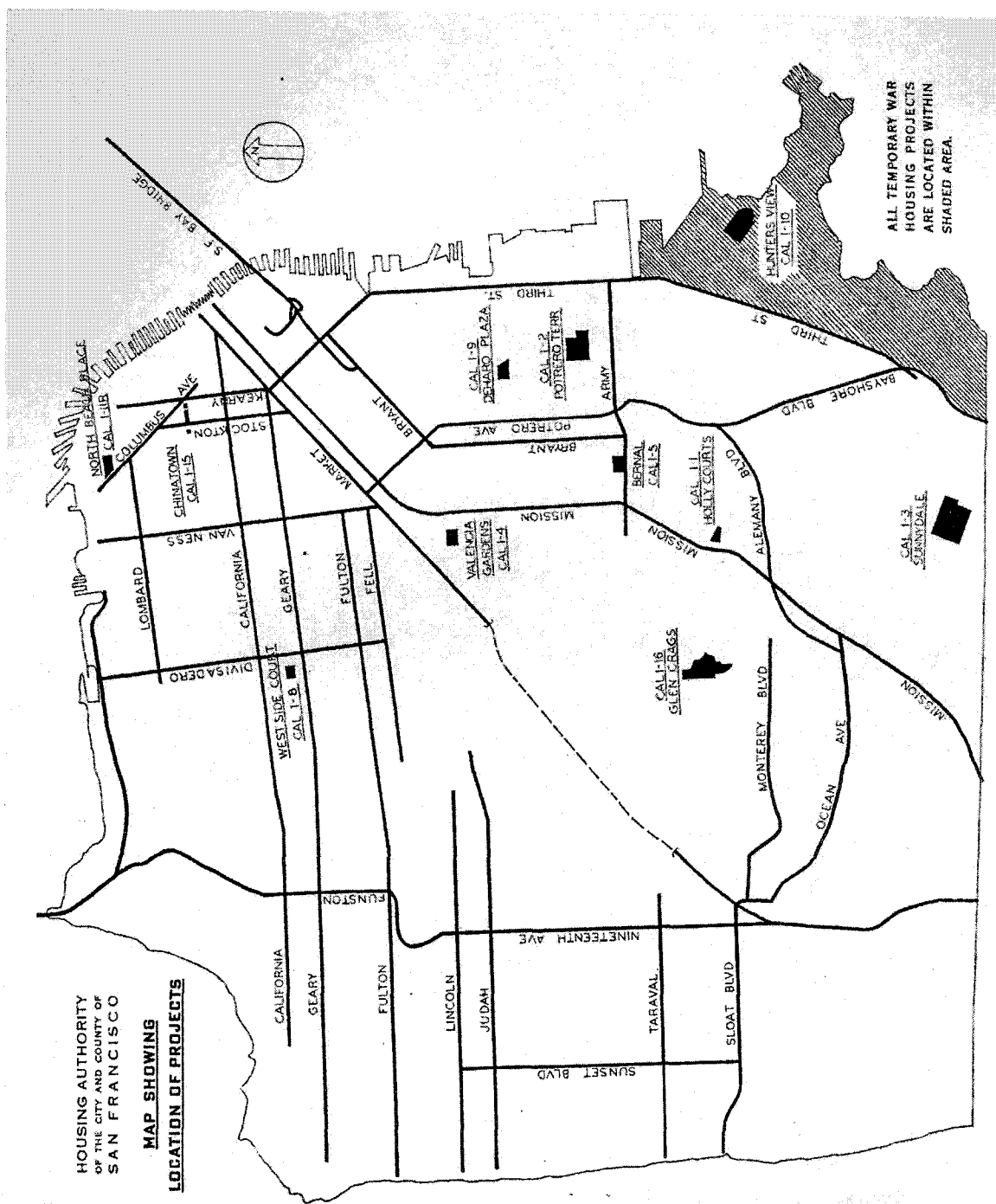
San Francisco Neighborhood Boundry Map



Source: San Francisco Planning Department



FIGURE 1



HOUSING AUTHORITY
OF THE CITY AND COUNTY OF
SAN FRANCISCO
MAP SHOWING
LOCATION OF PROJECTS

FIGURE 2

San Francisco Housing Authority Map of Public Housing Projects

From the *San Francisco Housing Authority's Fifth Annual Report, 1943*

The first city in California to establish a housing authority, in 1938, San Francisco led the way in building and promoting public housing as a way-station for Americans who hoped to one day buy their own “little gray house in the west.” In its early years, the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA) tried to foster a specific kind of community within public housing and between tenants and the surrounding neighborhood. The agency’s vision of community drew both on environmental determinism—good housing could improve the character of tenants—and the dominant (white, middle-class) ideal of family home life. This middle-class “model” consisted of two-parent families with fathers employed outside the home and mothers working as housewives. “Home” emerged as a space to raise children to become good citizens and to showcase a family’s morality and worth through its décor and cleanliness. The SFHA, following federal recommendations, tried to implement a housing program “to raise the living standards of typical **employed** families of very low income, who are independent and self-supporting but who have not been able to afford the kinds of homes in which independent and self-supporting Americans **should** live” (my emphasis.)¹⁹

Granted control over tenant selection by the federal government, the SFHA staff, like other agencies across the nation, preferred “complete,” “stable” families—two parents with children and an employed father—holding fast to the belief that “the experience of living in public housing would make their children better future citizens.”²⁰ Applicants had interviews with social workers, employment verifications, police record

¹⁹ USHA pamphlet, *What the Housing Act Can Do for Your City*, quoted in Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 183.

²⁰ Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 230.

checks, and home visits “which rated both the inadequacy of the family’s living conditions and their readiness to change in new surroundings.”²¹ Approved applicants moved into projects where the SFHA worked hard to control and regulate their environment and behavior. Public housing residents had to follow strict regulations dictating paint color, laundry schedules, visitor policies, yard maintenance, and income levels.²² Taken together, the application process and resident restrictions created “exclusive” public housing available only to families SFHA officials believed would one day become part of the middle-class.

With the admission of poorer families in the late 1950s and early 1960s in response to significant changes in federal policy, the SFHA began to shift away from its aim of creating public housing communities that replicated the white, middle-class cultural ideal of “family” and “home.”²³ By the 1960s, the SFHA, like the federal government, had abandoned all facets of its initial plan for public housing to serve as a stepping-stone to middle-class “respectability.” With the introduction of less economically stable tenants, whom the SFHA considered as having little, if any, chance

²¹ Ibid.

²² The specific regulations the SFHA used are not available. However, most local housing authorities followed federally recommended guidelines. The regulations listed in the text were standard at other housing authorities. A tenant who grew up in Valencia Gardens a decade after it opened verified that the SFHA upheld such regulations in San Francisco public housing.

²³ By the 1960s, the clientele living in public housing had begun to change. In response to the Civil Rights Movement and Johnson's "Great Society," the federal government and local housing authorities abandoned minimum income requirements for admission. As scholar Roger Biles notes, in the early days of public housing "working class families with at least one employed member (usually the male head of the household) predominated; by the 1960s, single-parent families— many headed by mothers— frequently collecting some form of public assistance, became the norm." Roger Biles, "Public Housing and the Postwar Urban Renaissance, 1949-1973," in John F. Bauman, et al. eds., *From the Tenements to the Taylor Homes*, 151. By 1966, nearly half of the households being admitted to public housing did not have an employed family member and half were headed by a single parent. A nationwide survey conducted that year by the National Commission on Urban Problems concluded that data on public housing showed that applicants admitted to public housing were the lowest income families who applied. Vale, *From Puritans to the Projects*, 315.

of moving “up” into the middle-class, the agency’s model for “training” public housing residents in middle-class mores dissolved. The SFHA and federal government could not conceive of public housing populated by poor tenants as a viable community in and of itself. As time went on, cutbacks in federal funding, negative press, growing problems in housing projects nationwide and trouble in the agency contributed to the decline in the quality of management and maintenance of SFHA projects.²⁴

Even as the ideal of creating “community” dropped out of federal and local housing discourse and maintenance and security decreased in projects across the nation, tenants in San Francisco public housing sustained modern housing reformers’ aim of community building in their own complicated ways. In spite of federal policy changes and limits that undermined improvements in public housing and the increasing mismanagement of the SFHA, tenants created communities within the contested space of public housing in an effort to make their project apartments into their own “little gray homes in the west.” The actions taken and relationships fostered by these “undistinguished Americans” challenge the way many people think about public housing, the tenants who live there, and the definition of “home.” Similarly, tenants’ mobilization and activism to improve their project homes highlight a critical piece of the “hidden history” of public housing. As public housing policies, projects, and tenants have undergone intense national scrutiny over the past five decades, few Americans have stopped to consider that residents who live in public housing, some for years, have taken strides to make their apartments into homes for their families. Many of the residents

²⁴ See Chapter 1 for details on the SFHA.

whose histories infuse this project are actively engaged in their project communities and consider their public housing units, despite problems, home.²⁵

Both scholars and the media have documented the failure of public housing over the past four decades. From reports on disastrous projects (Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and Cabrini Green and the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago) that isolated tenants and created crime zones, to studies on public housing policies, historians, public policy analysts, sociologists, and journalists have examined the problems of federally-subsidized policies and the projects they created.²⁶ While policy studies have provided broad coverage on changing federal housing policies, the majority of scholars writing case studies on public housing in cities have limited their analysis to the Midwest and East with Chicago receiving the most attention. Public housing in the West has received little scholarly attention, a gap this study begins to fill.

²⁵ Hamilton Holt, ed., *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told by Themselves* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

²⁶ Works on St. Louis include Lee Rainwater's *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970) and Eugene Meehan's *Public Housing Policy: Convention Versus Reality* (New Brunswick: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1975) and Joseph Heathcott's book *The Projects and the People: Public Housing in the Life of an American City* (Place: Publisher, forthcoming.). Chicago public housing has received the most attention. There are more than eight studies ranging from Devereux Bowly's *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago, 1895-1976* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978) and Gerald Suttles *The Social Order of the Slum: Ethnicity and Territory in the Inner City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) to Nicholas Lemann's popular study *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1991) and more recently Sudhir Alladi Venkateh's *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). John Bauman has examined Philadelphia public housing in *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). Lawrence Vale has provided two in-depth studies of Boston public housing. His *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors* traces the attitudes toward housing the poor from the colonial period to the present and provides an important institutional history of the Boston Public Housing Authority and the politics of subsidized housing in the city. His follow-up book *Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) examines the lives of public housing residents at three projects in Boston. Numerous policy studies have been written including R. Allen Hays' *The Federal Government and Urban Housing Ideology and Change in Public Policy* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1995). John Bauman, Roger Biles and Kristin Szylyan's *From the Tenements to the Taylor Homes* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978) provides an overview of federal housing programs from the early twentieth century to the present.

Until the 1990s policy analyses and case studies of projects focused primarily on the negative aspects of public housing. These aspects included displacement, high vacancy rates, decreased security and maintenance, racial segregation, increased crime rates in projects and surrounding neighborhoods, and the isolation of residents. Such problems informed scholars' and journalists' critiques of federally-subsidized housing for low-income families and their conclusion that the public housing program had failed. Recent studies have offered a more nuanced view of the complexities of the public housing program by addressing tenants' lived experience. Both Lawrence Vale in *Reclaiming Public Housing* (2000) and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh's work on tenants' experiences in the Robert Taylor Homes in *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* (2000) demonstrate how tenants in Boston and Chicago public housing, respectively, have grappled with policy shifts, stigmas, and state intervention in their lives by trying to create a livable environment for themselves. Rhonda Williams' work on Baltimore public housing from the New Deal to the early 1990s in *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (2004) examines the political activism of black female tenants as they struggled "against urban inequality and racism" to negotiate "better lives for their themselves and their families."²⁷ Importantly, these works show tenants' adaptability and agency in dealing with the state as well as the hardships and frustrations attendant in project living.

In the early 1990s, the federal government started the HOPE (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) VI program to award funding to housing

²⁷ Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Quotes from Rhonda Williams' "Rhonda Y. Williams Explores Interplay of Race, Gender, Class in Public Housing," *ChickenBones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes*, <http://www.nathanielturner.com/politicsofpublichousing2/htm>.

authorities to redevelop “troubled” projects into mixed-income “communities.” The program returned public housing to its early emphasis on “improving” low-income tenants—specifically by placing them in a project with middle-class residents. This new phase of the federal public housing program has emphasized privatization and the need to reform the “failed” projects of the past. This effort has sought to change the look and composition of public housing in the twenty-first century. Consequently, it is critical to fully understand the way public housing has operated in cities around the country and to deconstruct the stereotypes of “the problem projects” that the HOPE VI program purports to correct.

Despite inadequate policies and problems at different projects, public housing has afforded many tenants in San Francisco the opportunity to live in the city in convenient urban districts they would be priced out of otherwise. In trying to create homes out of their state-run apartments, tenants have both worked with and challenged public housing policy and their actions demonstrate the varied and contested meanings of home and community. The gaps between the SFHA’s policies, procedures, and vision of public housing and tenants’ individual conceptions of what public housing means to them opens up space for thinking about and interrogating meanings of home and the cultural connection between class standing and citizenship.

Chapter One traces the tumultuous institutional history of the San Francisco Housing Authority from its inception in 1938 to its attempts to improve its reputation and credibility in the 1990s. Here the SFHA’s push to impose a specific vision of community onto public housing receives close attention. Steeped in the language and ideology of white, middle-class moral superiority and enacted through racial and ethnic segregation

and other regulations, the agency's notion of community clashed with San Francisco's image as an inclusive, welcoming city. The SFHA became increasingly corrupt during the late 1960s and 1970s and by the mid-1980s was one of the country's most troubled housing authorities. Tenants across the city suffered as a result. In recent years, the SFHA has tried to regain the respect of the city and the federal government by redeveloping troubled projects through the HOPE VI program, with indeterminate results as discussed in Chapters Two and Four.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four present case studies to examine the ways in which tenants reacted to federal housing policy, the local implementation of federal housing policy, and the SFHA's definition of and actions in their "communities." These chapters highlight the perspectives of tenants who until recently did not have a place in public housing studies. Their varied experiences living in public housing challenge the stereotypes of who lives in public housing, what it is like living in the projects, and why residents stay. The tenants who shared their stories continually voiced their frustration with being stigmatized for living in the projects. It is my aim to unsettle these generalizations about "what kind of people" live in public housing. For my purposes, these narratives create a framework for analyzing different definitions and functions of community in federally subsidized housing. They also illuminate the varied and changing views of home and community that exist among tenants— and neighbors living near the projects. These differing and at times contested definitions have had an impact on the image and reality of public housing.

Chapter Two explores the history of the Ping Yuen project in Chinatown. Ping Yuen housed primarily Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans mirroring the

surrounding neighborhood. This project complicates the historiography on race and public housing with its focus on the segregation of black tenants. Welcomed by the district and praised locally, nationally, and internationally, the post-World War II Ping Yuen housing project demonstrates the importance of community ties between project residents and the surrounding community. By forming an active tenants' association, Ping Yuen residents, many of whom were immigrants from China, challenged the SFHA through petitions and rent strikes to create a safer, cleaner project. Creating strong ties within the project and between the tenants' association and district social service organizations, Ping Yuen residents have worked to improve their homes and the greater Chinatown community. The cooperation between social service agencies and these tenants provides a model of the possibilities for creating livable project environments.

North Beach Place, the case study in Chapter Three, raises questions about the politics of development and redevelopment and examines the difficulties of community formation in a multi-racial and multi-ethnic housing project. The history of North Beach Place demonstrates the importance of understanding and exploring regional racial and ethnic patterns and attitudes and how they play out in public housing. The project, as a result of a 1952 lawsuit brought against the SFHA by African American applicants, became the first racially integrated public housing complex in the city. Located on prime real estate in one of San Francisco's most popular tourist districts, North Beach Place complicates the image of public housing through its look and location and challenges assumptions about the way urban gentrification operates.

Chapter Four examines the Valencia Gardens project in the Mission District. Built by the SFHA in 1942 despite an outcry from district residents, the project has

remained a contested space for five decades. Over the years tenants have endured crime sprees and the scorn of district neighbors and the city as their project morphed from what the SFHA viewed as a “model” community into what outsiders now see as a fearful space— a dangerous and stigmatized place they want to avoid. Residents living in the project, however, have formed relationships and come together to construct a community much different than the SFHA envisioned. Born out of a need for relationships and assistance, and nurtured by the stigma separating tenants from the neighborhood, this community has aided and encouraged many tenants over the years. By creating bonds through the tenants’ association and informal networks, many tenants in this racially diverse project have overcome the problems of the project and seized psychological ownership of their “homes.”

Taken together the history of these projects demonstrates that for many tenants public housing has served as more than shelter. Through the formation of various types of communities within public housing, residents have found ways to cope with the shared and individual problems in their respective projects. They have also collectively organized for change. The communities studied here resist— and in some ways disrupt— the declension model of public housing. In contrast to J. S. Fuerst’s recent argument in *When Public Housing Was Paradise* that public housing in Chicago prior to 1960 was a positive program that housed “good citizens” and declined when poorer families began moving in, this study demonstrates how a number of low-income residents refashioned federal housing, rebuked stigmas, and fought for a modicum of control to

create homes for themselves and their families.²⁸ While problems with other tenants, with district neighbors, and with the state plagued tenants over the years, many residents came together and in doing so made their apartments into homes. Living in good locations in the famed “City by the Bay” when increasing numbers of low-income families have left the city in search of cheaper rents, tenants living at Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens offer a new perspective on public housing in the United States.

²⁸ J.S. Fuerst, ed. with assistance of D. Bradford Hunt, *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Westport, Conn.: Prager, 2003).

CHAPTER I

“TO PROVIDE SIMPLE, SAFE, AND SANITARY HOUSING FOR FAMILIES OF
LOW INCOME”:
SAN FRANCISCO’S HOUSING AUTHORITY

“COMMUNITY STARTS AT ‘HOME’”

In 1940 the San Francisco Housing Authority unveiled the city’s first public housing project. Widely hailed in the architectural press as “the first USHA project to be completed West of the Rockies” and for replacing “blighted” buildings with a “refreshing Modern design,” Holly Courts opened in June.¹ Designed by architect Arthur Brown, Jr., creator of the Department of Labor and Interstate Commerce Commission buildings in Washington D.C., the Federal Office Building, San Francisco’s City Hall and Coit Tower, the modern project consists of ten two-story blocks with separate entrances, flat roofs, and small garden plots behind or in front of each two-story row house dwelling.² Located on Patton Street and Appleton and Highland Avenues near Holly Park, Holly Courts sits on a 2.68 acre lot. The buildings use 36% of the land leaving space for interior

¹According to Arthur Brown, Jr. biographer and scholar Jeff Tilman, Brown originally planned to build Holly Courts in the French Country style with tiled roofs. Federal restrictions led Brown to change to a modern design with flat roofs. Jeff Tilman, interview by author, San Francisco, California, 16 July 2001. “Two-Story Rows and Flats,” *Architectural Forum*, November 1940, 4. The *Architectural Record* also ran a piece on Holly Courts and on April 27, 1940 the *San Francisco Call Bulletin* printed a long article, “Holly Court Has ‘Em Agog,” about the first tenants at Holly Courts.

² Jeff Tilman, interview by author, San Francisco, California, 16 July 2001. Brown went on to build San Francisco’s domed city hall. For a brief biography on Brown and a list of his projects through 1938 see “A Fair Architect,” *The Architect and Engineer*, January 1938, 54.

courts, gardens, and “off-the-street playgrounds.”³ SFHA Executive Director Marshall Dill proudly described the agency’s first public housing project as “integrated into the neighborhood” with residents who “will trade in local stores, attend local churches, (and) send children to local schools.” The project, he claimed, would seamlessly fit into the neighborhood with a social hall “for the use of the community” and “sand boxes, slides, swings, (and) play spaces for all the children of the neighborhood.”⁴ In an attempt to allay neighbors’ fear about the “character” of the new low-income working families, Dill assured area property owners that Holly Courts residents shared their “moral” values. He claimed that the new residents living in the well-designed project had been carefully screened by the SFHA to ensure they “believed in the wholesome values of family life,” and would make “a contribution to this community.”⁵ Endorsing public housing as a transitional space for “industrious” families on the way up to middle-class respectability—symbolized through homeownership—the SFHA set out to build a community at Holly Courts culturally constructed as white and upwardly mobile.

The Housing Authority demonstrated its commitment to this specific notion of community by aiding tenants in their transition to project living. In an effort to provide tenants “with more than mere shelter,” the Housing Authority formed a “tenant adjustment service” for Holly Courts. Drawing on European public housing strategies, the Housing Authority hired a “Consultant for Homemaking.” The consultant, Else

³ “USHA San Francisco Housing Project,” *Architectural Record*, October 1940, 46.

⁴ Outline of Marshall Dill’s Speech, Marshall Dill Papers, folder 35, North Baker Research Library, The California Historical Society.

⁵ San Francisco Housing Authority, “Holly Courts: Special Bulletin of the San Francisco Housing Association,” 1940, 3. The second quote is from the outline of Marshall Dill’s Speech, Marshall Dill Papers.

Reisner, had previously worked with the Tenant Selection Division researching the applicants' backgrounds to determine their eligibility for admission. As a consultant and member of the Tenant Aid Committee, "a volunteer committee of five **civic-minded women**" (my emphasis) (a description reserved for "upright" members of the middle class) Reisner was in charge of decorating a model dwelling at Holly Courts. She furnished the model unit using a budget that fit within tenants' average income, publicized the unit to applicants, and answered questions about furnishings, gardening, and organizing apartment space. After tenants moved into the units, the consultant aided them in arranging their space, establishing a wash schedule for sharing the clotheslines, and seeing that the SFHA met their requests for towel bars, hooks, and other items. Reisner also educated each family on how to use the gas stove, heater, and electric washing machine in their unit. Along with explaining household technologies, Reisner presumably instructed low-income women on "the best way"—defined by white, middle-class "standards"—to look after their children and clean their apartments. Caring about tenants' domestic concerns and eliminating resident dissatisfaction, Reisner reasoned, facilitated cooperation and created a strong project community, made up of selected tenants living according to committee and SFHA standards.⁶

Through the Tenant Aid Committee's "home-making" efforts and the lease the SFHA attempted to regulate and control the lives of tenants in Holly Courts. The agency regulated tenant behavior through the dwelling lease. Tenants signing a lease to live in Holly Courts agreed to pay the rent on time, not to sublet or house boarders, to "keep the

⁶ Else Reisner, "Homemaking and Family Adjustment Services in Public Housing: The Experiences at Holly Courts, First Western Housing Project," (San Francisco: San Francisco Housing Authority, 1942), 18.

premises in a clean and sanitary condition, [and] to maintain the yard...in a neat and orderly manner.” Residents also pledged “not to use the premises for any illegal or immoral purposes, not to make repairs or alterations without the written consent of the Management...to follow all rules and regulations prescribed by the Management concerning the use and care of the premises, to permit the Management to enter the premises during all reasonable hours to examine the same or make repairs,” and to submit family income in writing annually.⁷ Failure to comply “with any provisions of [the] lease” resulted in automatic termination of the contract and eviction.⁸

In assessing her role as homemaking consultant for Holly Courts, Reisner urged the Housing Authority to expand their initial program of tenant services, charging the agency to create new programs to encourage individual and community satisfaction with project living. Reisner asked the SFHA to establish a central housing information center that would aid not only project tenants but the larger community with tips on improving housing and living conditions. These housekeeping lessons, drawn from the white, middle-class vision of a “proper home,” promised to aid residents across the city in “bettering” their living environment. This gendered standard promoted fathers working

⁷ Dwelling lease for Holly Courts from the Minutes of San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 18 April 1940, San Francisco Housing Authority. The lease also barred tenants from using tacks, nails or screws or other fasteners in any part of the premises “except in a manner prescribed by the Management.” The monthly maximum income for families living at Holly Courts was \$72.00 for a family of 2, \$82.00 for a family of 3, \$85.00 for a family of 4, \$88.00 for a family of 5, and \$90.00 for a family of 6. Monthly rent for a 3 ½ room apartment, including utilities, was \$17.95, \$19.70 for a 4 ½ room apartment, and \$21.20 for a 5 ½ bedroom apartment. San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 20. The Tenant Selection Committee used a scoring system to determine eligibility. According to the *Second Annual Report* “items weighed most heavily include living accommodations in condemned buildings, in buildings unfit for use or in need of major repairs, no running water, no electricity, no private toilet or bath, no proper kitchen facilities, unsafe heating arrangements, doubled up or over-crowded conditions.” Other eligibility factors included credit checks, employment verification, citizenship—required for the one member of the family “preferably the head,” and income level were accessed by the SFHA staff. San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 20.

⁸ Ibid.

outside the home and mothers staying in to create an “attractive haven” in which to raise children.

Reisner both supported and challenged this notion as she advocated for the establishment of a homemaking service staffed with women trained in home economics, and “pedagogical and psychological training” so as to fully cooperate with tenants “without paternalism.” Women, she argued, would make the best employees because it was easier for them “to gain the necessary good relation with housewives and mothers.”⁹ Invoking gendered assumptions about women’s abilities to nurture and bond, Reisner pushed the authority to expand its work force to include more women. Reinforcing the powerful cultural ideology that women ruled the domestic sphere, she advocated the hiring of white, middle-class female consultants to teach lower-class women how to make their apartments into “homes.”¹⁰ Although the SFHA did not implement Reisner’s suggestions, her work contributed to the acceptance of public housing in the city.

The model unit Reisner created and promoted to tenants and the larger San Francisco citizenry underscored the Housing Authority’s early agenda to shape the new public housing program to “provide the framework for a way of life for its tenants... set within the greater framework of the community and the city.”¹¹ This “way of life” hinged on the SFHA’s entrenched belief in the superiority of middle-class citizens over lower-class ones and the power of place to influence behavior. By emphasizing and

⁹ Reisner, “Homemaking and Family Adjustment Services,” 20.

¹⁰ Ibid. In her report Reisner stressed the importance of knowing the tenants’ backgrounds, which she learned about during her time with the Tenant Selection Division. Knowledge of tenants’ finances prompted her to urge some families to wait to buy unnecessary furniture and to avoid using credit to make purchases for their apartments. While Reisner tried to use tenants’ personal information to aid them in making financially sound choices, her access to and use of tenants’ files raises questions about privacy and to some extent smacks of the “paternalism” she tried to avoid inflicting on Holly Court residents.

¹¹ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 15.

inculcating middle-class “values,” the SFHA rationale followed, public housing could “teach” lower-income families how to become “better” citizens. The SFHA opened the model apartment for tours bringing in high school and college classes in the Bay Area, among other groups, to view the project. Showcasing “the other half” living in modestly furnished, safe, clean apartments— modeling middle-class tastes— the Housing Authority hoped to convert skeptics into supporters.¹² Promoting the model apartment to tenants and the public, the SFHA publicized its stated mission to “provide simple, safe, and sanitary housing for families of low income and to give a better chance in life to their children—the men and women of tomorrow.”¹³

The SFHA, along with other actors introduced in this chapter including the FHA, public housing tenants, the larger San Francisco population, and smaller, localized racial and ethnic groups, both constructed and contested meanings of “community” in public housing between 1938 and 2000. The agency implemented federal housing policies and made decisions about local projects on the basis of particular notions of community in public housing that changed over time. Through site location, design, tenant selection, and placement the agency attempted to create and regulate public housing communities that reflected white, middle-class norms during its first two decades. The agency, following federal policy, did not allow the poorest San Franciscans into public housing in its early years. Carefully screening applicants for two-parent “meritorious” families with working fathers and stay-at-home mothers who “deserved” assistance in their quest for

¹² Ibid., 24.

¹³ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Third Annual Report*, 1941, 3.

homeownership, the SFHA promoted public housing tenants as “good citizens” who would contribute to the neighborhoods where they lived.

The agency’s narrow, exclusionary view of community as one grounded in middle-class superiority and racial segregation clashed with San Francisco’s reputation as an accepting city with “both a diverse population and tradition of liberalism and tolerance.”¹⁴ The SFHA’s policies and actions further demonstrate what historians Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, Josh Sides, and Deirdre Sullivan have shown in their work on the West: that the multi-racial, multi-ethnic region was a “diverse place of complexity and contestation.”¹⁵ Westerners did not always coexist peacefully and respectfully and despite its image San Francisco was no exception.¹⁶ According to the SFHA, strong ties between public housing tenants and the surrounding neighborhoods depended on racial and ethnic homogeneity. As a result, the Housing Commissioners passed Resolution 287 in 1942, implementing the “neighborhood pattern policy” whereby “in the selection of tenants for projects of this Authority, this Authority shall act with

¹⁴ Deirdre L. Sullivan, "Letting Down the Bars": Race, Space, and Democracy in San Francisco, 1936-1964" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2003). Sullivan challenges the city's reputation of tolerance and liberalism by examining housing discrimination between 1936 and 1964. Richard Edward DeLeon in *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* describes San Francisco as an "agitated city, a city of fissions and fusions, a breeder of change and new urban meanings. It is the spawning ground of social movements, policy innovations, and closely watched experiments in urban populism and local economic democracy" (2). DeLeon also notes the San Francisco's activists are proud of their city's "nonconformist reputation" (3).

¹⁵ Ibid. Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard White have complicated western history in their work by demonstrating that whites did not simply take over the West nor did diverse populations coexist peacefully over time. See Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (NY: Norton, 1987) and *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (NY: Norton, 2000); Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Deirdre L. Sullivan, "Letting Down the Bars" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2003); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

¹⁶ See Deirdre L. Sullivan "Letting Down the Bars"; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001); Douglas Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1990).

reference to the established usages, customs, and traditions of the community with a view of the preservation of public space and good order and shall insofar as possible maintain and preserve the same racial composition.”¹⁷ Put into place as San Francisco’s African American population began to dramatically increase due to wartime in-migration, the policy served as a conservative response to the city’s shifting demographics. The “neighborhood pattern policy” produced another level of restriction in San Francisco public housing as the SFHA used the regulation to segregate projects across the city.

During World War II, the SFHA, under federal orders, changed its focus to housing the onslaught of war workers and military families migrating to the area. The agency provided an unprecedented amount of services for new tenants whose commitment to the war effort illustrated to some extent the SFHA’s ideal “community.” Tenants in the projects were mostly upwardly mobile families who demonstrated their “worth” as citizens by directly supporting the war effort. After the war, the SFHA resumed its pre-war policy of housing low-income families in segregated projects, but the city, the nation, and the role of public housing had changed. Facing a postwar housing crisis due to wartime migration, the SFHA responded by resuming building of public housing projects deferred by the war. Continuing to segregate its tenants in black, white, and Chinese projects, the SFHA faced criticism from many San Franciscans and the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Banks vs. Housing Authority of San Francisco* mandated that the SFHA integrate public housing. The agency’s practice of segregating the majority of African American tenants in certain projects and

¹⁷ Minutes from the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 4 May 1942, San Francisco Housing Authority. The first part of the resolution stated that “in the development of its program and the selection of its tenants this Authority shall provide housing accommodations for all races in proportion with the numbers of low income families otherwise unable to obtain decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings in each racial group, bears to one another.”

the increase in the number of poorer families moving into public housing began to unravel the SFHA's "vision" for its developments.

By the early 1960s, the SFHA's goal to impose a middle-class framework on residents changed in response to federal policy shifts that resulted in the placement of poorer families into public housing projects. Tenants once excluded because of their very low income or family status (i.e. single parents) began moving into the projects. With the influx of poor families the SFHA abandoned its goal of helping residents become "better citizens" on their way toward homeownership and middle-class "respectability." Poor families headed by an unemployed parent or parents and often in need of welfare assistance could not become "respectable" citizens, in the SFHA's view. A combination of federal cutbacks resulting in fewer funds for maintenance work on the projects, reliance on patronage to select Housing Commission officials, and agency employee scandals eroded the SFHA's reputation with residents and the city and set a three-decade course of decline for the agency and its projects.

At the end of the decade, San Francisco's public housing projects, once praised for their design, began to deteriorate physically and socially. Tenants battled crime, poor upkeep, and waves of corrupt management in the SFHA. The Housing Authority that vowed to create "more than shelter" failed to properly manage its projects. Two decades later, San Francisco residents living in a city with some of the highest rental and homelessness rates in the country had to contend with a Housing Authority rife with internal problems and at times immobilized by decreasing federal funding. A quasi-local, state, and federal agency, the Housing Authority's increasing troubles, insensitivity to racial problems, and clashes with the Department of Housing and Urban Development

humiliated city leaders, angered housing activists and residents, and contributed to the decline in the housing environment for public housing tenants.

During the 1990s, the SFHA attempted to recapture its early focus on and view of “community” and to earn citizen and city support by applying for and winning federal HOPE VI grants to redevelop five public housing projects. Touted as “public housing for tomorrow,” the HOPE VI program called for combining public and private funds to create garden style apartments integrated with neighborhoods and populated by mixed-income tenants. By excluding tenants with police records or missed rents and placing low-income residents alongside middle-class families, the program sought to reestablish public housing as a laboratory for modeling middle-class “standards” to low-income residents. Employing the language of community used by the first Housing Commissioners, the SFHA has tried to improve its public image and its public housing by demolishing and rebuilding five projects. The effects of these new mixed-income projects on residents, neighborhoods, and the SFHA’s reputation remain to be seen.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE SFHA “WAY OF LIFE”

In 1938 the California legislature paved the way for the creation of the SFHA, a public corporation, through the passage of the Housing Authorities Law allowing cities to form local housing agencies.¹⁸ The Housing Cooperation Law sanctioned public bodies to aid housing authorities by providing parks, playgrounds, and other improvements, and the Eminent Domain and Tax Exemption Law excused housing authorities’ properties and bonds from taxation.¹⁹ San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors, a legislative body of 11

¹⁸ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

elected members that shared power with the mayor, passed a resolution on March 29, 1938 declaring the need for a Housing Authority and asking the mayor to appoint five housing commissioners to serve four-year terms without compensation and to govern the San Francisco Housing Authority.²⁰ The SFHA planned to hire an Executive Director to oversee the agency and to meet with the commissioners. Mayor Angelo Rossi filled the posts with a range of prominent city leaders: chairman Marshall Dill, an importer and former president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce; vice-chairman Alexander Watchman, president of the San Francisco Building Trades Council and the American Federation of Labor; Alice Griffith, co-founder of the Telegraph Neighborhood House and participant in the San Francisco Housing Association; E.N. Ayer, an apartment house operator and director of the San Francisco Apartment House Association; and Carlton Wall, vice-president and manager of The Grant Company. Over the years, a range of predominantly white, male, middle-class business and community leaders served as

²⁰ Richard DeLeon in *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* states that the "executive authority in San Francisco's city hall is divided, dispersed, and decentralized." The San Francisco City Charter of 1932 placed legislative authority in the 11 member Board of Supervisors who serve staggered four-year terms. The Board of Supervisors has a wide range of power including the abilities to initiate legislation, to share the authority over the budget with the mayor, to propose charter amendments on the ballot, and to confirm some mayoral appointees. DeLeon also points out that the Board of Supervisors' meetings provide a "forum for public debate during regular sessions and committee hearings" (22). In 1977, San Franciscans passed a measure to elect the Board of Supervisors by districts rather than at-large. The five new supervisors elected included Harvey Milk, an openly gay candidate and Dan White, a native San Franciscan, Vietnam vet, and former police officer and fireman. On November 27, 1978, after quitting and then hearing that the mayor refused to let him rejoin the Board of Supervisors when he realized he still wanted his seat, the troubled Dan White shot and killed Mayor Moscone and Harvey Milk. By 1980, the district election system was replaced with the at-large system. In 1990 voters passed a citizen-driven ballot proposition that restricted incumbent board members to a maximum of two terms. The information on the formation of the San Francisco Housing Authority is from the San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 4-5.

commissioners.²¹ Once appointed, the Housing Authority Commissioners, along with the Executive Director, had full control over the city's public housing program.

During its first decade of operation, the SFHA planned and built projects while simultaneously embarking on a public relations campaign to convince San Franciscans of the importance of public housing and to allay fears about the new program. The authority promoted public housing as a stepping stone to the middle class at the 1939-40 World's Fair, on the radio, and in newspapers. Commissioners also delivered talks around the city and officials showed the USHA's film "Housing in Our Time."²² In particular, the SFHA had to contend with San Franciscans "who held fantastical ideas concerning the type of persons to be housed and the effect on private property."²³ A number of neighbors living near project sites—equating class status with morality—feared that lower-class tenants would lessen "the character" of the neighborhood and devalue the real estate nearby. Battling these perceptions, the SFHA, like other housing agencies across the country, stressed the "morality" of public housing. As Lawrence Vale has described, through the

²¹ E.N. Ayer replaced Charles Page in 1939 after Page left the commission to enter private business. I do not have other information on Page. Carlton Wall replaced M.L. Giannini after he resigned in 1940. I have not been able to locate a copy of the SFHA's *First Annual Report* that would list information on Page and Giannini. Alice Griffith is listed as "Miss Alice Griffith" in the report which describes her as "well known for her devoted and unselfish work in the community." San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 24. In 1960, the SFHA described the 24 commissioners who had served as "representing a broad cross-section of the leaders of this community. Among them have been bankers, lawyers, realtors, doctors and representatives of organized labor and minority groups." As of 1960, Katherine Gray and Alice Griffith were the only two female appointees. Charles Jung, an Asian American, and Jefferson A. Beaver, an African American, were appointed and served in 1960 and represented the first minority commissioners. San Francisco Housing Authority, *The Road to the Golden Age*, 1960, 10.

²² The SFHA displayed an exhibit at the 1939-1940 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay. The ambitious exhibit showed photographs of housing conditions in the city as well as drawings and models of projects the Housing Authority had scheduled to build. A Housing Authority representative was on-site to answer questions. Several times a day, the agency screened two sound films; "Our City" and the United States Housing Authority (USHA) film "Housing in Our Time" described as "the story of what our dynamic democracy is doing to house its citizens." San Francisco Housing Authority, *Third Annual Report*, 1941, 8. "Movie on Housing is Available to Clubs," *Low Rent Housing News*, 7 April 1941, 1.

²³ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Third Annual Report*, 1941, 3.

mid-1950s housing authorities “turned away a broad array of would-be public neighbors who were seen as presenting an unwelcome, moral or financial risk.”²⁴

The SFHA used different media to stress that “upright citizens” down on their luck would live in the new projects. The agency claimed, the new housing projects would replace blighted buildings, thereby improving safety and sanitation in a neighborhood and increasing property values. Using donated radio time, the Authority presented “The Housing Reporter,” “a weekly dramatization of the Housing program in San Francisco.” The program, using actors from the Works Progress Administration, ran for 17 consecutive weeks and “received favorable comment” from listeners.²⁵ The SFHA also appealed to citizens with William Abbenseth’s 1941 sound film “More than Shelter.” Sponsored by the SFHA, the film depicted “in dramatic style the methods used by San Francisco in solving the age-old problem of providing more than four walls and a roof as a center of family life.”²⁶ The SFHA offered free screenings at its Market Street office and distributed it to churches, unions, and other organizations.²⁷

Despite growing criticism over its neighborhood pattern policy and state legislation aimed at curtailing the construction of new public housing projects, the SFHA continued to promote its agenda after the war. In 1949, the state legislature passed

²⁴ Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 3. These families eventually departed as they earned more money and Public Housing Authorities (PHA) were forced to begin housing the neediest applicants in cities. After World War II, Vale argues that the reward system reemerged for veterans and their families who had high priority to live in public housing. By the mid-1950s, changes in federal housing policies undermined the merit system. By the 1970s, the poorest of the poor populated public housing (3, 8).

²⁵ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 24.

²⁶ “More than Shelter” Ready for Showing,” *Low Rent Housing News*, San Francisco, 16 June 1941, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.* On August 30, 1941, *Low Rent Housing News* ran another feature on “More than Shelter.” The article explained that the film was “being shown in civic clubs and in all parts of the city” and was “in great demand among those who want to know the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of the low-rent housing program” (1).

California State Article XXXIV requiring voters to approve any construction of new public housing projects. With six projects put on hold because of the war, the SFHA heavily promoted public housing as a public good in hopes of receiving voter consent to begin construction. The agency displayed its seal and motto in publications and at meetings, alerting San Franciscans of the agency's importance to the city as an agent for "transforming" neighborhoods and tenants' lives. For its seal, the authority emphasized its commitment to both the city's past and future by selecting the "legendary Phoenix, fabulous eagle of antiquity and patron bird of San Francisco" (the bird also adorned the city's seal). The 1946 minutes of the Housing Authority Commission explained the meaning of the SFHA emblem:

Arising from the flames it commemorated the indomitable and virile city that arose again time after time from the ashes of disastrous early fires with new strength and spirit. In this seal the Phoenix symbolizes as well the building of good homes and a better city from the ashes of destroyed slums. The five stars represent the five low-rent developments constructed during the Authority's first decade after its founding in 1938. The scroll beneath carries the moving message 'In love of home the love of country has its rise,' by Charles Dickens, the motto of the SFHA.²⁸

Through its seal and motto the Housing Authority aligned itself with San Francisco's history of renewal after the fire and earthquake of 1906 while advocating a particular view of home and citizenship based on white, middle-class ideals. By creating modern projects housing "selected" tenants subject to numerous regulations, the SFHA pledged to improve both tenants and neighborhoods. Through the selection of Dickens' phrase for the SFHA motto, the Housing Commissioners also demonstrated their belief in environmental determinism's premise that good homes produce good citizens. Public

²⁸ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 7 October 1947, San Francisco Housing Authority.

housing, seen by the SFHA as the training ground for middle-class living, would in officials' eyes inculcate tenants on how to behave as they worked and waited to move up and out of the projects.

As the United States and the Soviet Union became increasingly embroiled in the Cold War following World War II, the Housing Authority's motto projected a powerful nationalistic, anti-communist message in a city that housed immigrants from China and later from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin and Central America. Public housing, as it gradually shifted from temporary housing for low-income working families and veterans to housing for the poorest of the poor in the 1960s, was spun by the SFHA as a local and national benefit and a moral good. From the international coverage of the opening of the all-Chinese project Ping Yuen in 1952, to the Housing Commission chairman's interview with the "Voice of America" radio program broadcast across Asia, the SFHA situated San Francisco public housing within a larger national and international context emphasizing the connection between public housing and democracy. In 1953 alone the Housing Authority welcomed visitors from 23 countries, providing tours of the agency and its projects.²⁹ To educate San Franciscans, the agency distributed booklets containing "a sound article on this authority's operations" to high school civic classes and colleges in the area as well as to people who called the central office for information on operations.³⁰

²⁹ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 19 November 1953, San Francisco Housing Authority. The minutes also reported a visit by a Burmese group traveling in the United States for the first time.

³⁰ The booklet apparently was sanctioned by the Board of Education, according to the Housing Authority Commission Minutes. I have not found a copy of this booklet to examine its contents. Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 18 February 1954, San Francisco Housing Authority. Public

In 1960, the SFHA assessed its “first twenty years of operation” in a glossy black and white booklet titled “The Road to the Golden Age,” a widely distributed publication dedicated to “those citizens of the world who have the proud honor of being known as San Franciscans.”³¹ With a photo of children smiling on the front, the SFHA claimed in the caption that “Good housing for low-income families is a part of the pattern of San Francisco’s community life.” In the following pages, the agency highlighted its history and progress in glowing terms using photographs with captions and short blurbs such as “who lives in public housing,” “children are welcome,” “a basic investment,” “the prewar story,” and “then came peace,” along with write-ups and photos of 16 permanent projects and plans for 2 others. The report opened with a “before” photograph of an older walk-up apartment with an African American mother leaning out a second-story window seemingly to communicate with her child standing on the porch below. Demonstrating both the subjective and ideological framing of the word “slum,” the caption reads, “[t]he illustration on this page...tell their own story—out of squalor of the slums into the wholesomeness of modern housing.”³² An architectural “after” shot appears in a photo of

Housing Administration Commissioner Charles E. Slusser praised the SFHA's building and promotional efforts claiming "that the San Francisco Housing Authority was one of the two outstanding authorities in the nation, the other being New York City's authority." SFHA Chairman Ayers reported Commissioner Slusser's statement at a Housing Commission meeting. Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 17 September 1953, San Francisco Housing Authority.

³¹ San Francisco Housing Authority, "The Road to the Golden Age: A Report on the First Twenty Years of Operations, 1940-1960" (San Francisco: San Francisco Housing Authority, 1960.)

³² Ibid. For a provocative exploration of the ideological force of the "slums" see Alan Mayne's *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities, 1870-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993.) Mayne demonstrates how "slums" since the late nineteenth century have become "constructions of the imagination." While recognizing that slums "are a universal feature of big cities," he argues that to discuss slums "is to deal with words, with discourse, with signs, and with the concepts they communicated, rather than with the social geography of inner cities. The term *slum*, encoded with the meanings of a dominant bourgeois culture, in fact obscured and distorted the varied spatial forms and social conditions to which it was applied." Reminding the reader of the universality of the term, Mayne explains that the labeling of areas as slums has subsumed "the diversity of occupations, incomes, ethnic backgrounds, and household arrangements, and the variations in age, size, and labour and housing markets

the modern Valencia Gardens housing project on the next page. A few pages later, in an image undoubtedly meant to correspond with the opening picture, the SFHA emphasized its belief in the power of public housing to make tenants into “good” citizens— defined by white, middle-class cultural norms and increasingly symbolized by the suburbs. In the photograph, an African American woman wearing an apron serves her four children food as they sit at a table in the kitchen. The shelves in the background appear orderly with plates neatly displayed. A lace doily placed on an end table with a plant on it decorates the foreground. The caption under the image reflects the SFHA’s goal of shaping tenants into “model” future members of the middle class: “Pleasing environment contributes to happy home life and builds better citizenship.”³³

Claiming that the “root of the evil has been poverty,” the SFHA praised its public housing program for stamping out “the existence of the slum way of life” which “has been synonymous with misery and economic privation.”³⁴ As the city’s largest and “busiest landlord,” the authority provided 7,098 apartments for over 30,000 people, with the aim of molding tenants into communities that reflected white, middle-class notions of home and family life. The SFHA defined the “basic asset” of community as “its citizens—their moral, spiritual, intellectual and physical nature.”³⁵ Highlighting its police force, community centers, day-care centers and other amenities, the SFHA assured San Franciscans that public housing would positively contribute to their community.

amongst cities. As a result these areas have been collapsed into "one all-embracing concept of an outcast society" (1-2).

³³ San Francisco Housing Authority, "Road to the Golden Age, 1960, 5.

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

Once again conflating housing conditions with upward class mobility and citizenship, the agency reminded readers that “A city is as virile as its home life is good.”³⁶

RACE, ETHNICITY, AND SPATIAL POLITICS

The SFHA promoted itself in part to secure additional support for public housing as it set out to build projects across the city. The agency opened Holly Courts (118 units) in 1940, Potrero Terrace (469 units) and Sunnydale (767 units) in 1941, Valencia Gardens (246 units) in 1942, and Westside Courts (136 units) in 1943. The agency’s plans to build six other projects were delayed by World War II, as the country shifted its policies, resources, and efforts to the war. As thousands of war workers and military personnel flooded the Bay Area, the San Francisco Housing Authority, responding to the federal Lanham Act and local needs, changed its mission in 1942 from housing low-income families to prioritizing the “selection of tenants to families of the Armed Forces and of Defense Workers.”³⁷ With the population of San Francisco increasing by 90,000 between 1940 and 1942 and “with thousands more arriving each month,” the SFHA

³⁶ Ibid., 19.

³⁷ Minutes from the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 14 May 1942, San Francisco Housing Authority. As the United States mobilized for war in 1940, workers living in rural areas migrated to urban areas in search of employment in the defense industries. This migration caused drastic housing shortages in centers of defense activity such as San Francisco. The federal government responded to the housing crisis first by authorizing the USHA to build 20 public housing developments for civilian employers of the armed forces and defense contractors with money originally slated for public housing. When the government’s other efforts to stimulate private industry in home building in centers of defense activity fell through, the government focused solely on federal public housing as a solution to the housing problem. In October 1940, President Roosevelt signed The National Defense Housing Act, also called the Lanham Act, authorizing the Federal Works Agency (FWA) to construct housing for workers “engaged in the national defense of their families in cities and towns [and] inadequately served by the private home-building industry.” Representative Fritz Lanham (Democrat, Texas) blocked the potential increase of public housing units after the war by securing an amendment “prohibiting the conversion of defense public housing into low-income public housing without specific Congressional authorization.” For more information on the federal housing program during World War II see Kristin M. Szylian’s “The Federal Housing Program During World War II,” in *From the Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth Century America*, edited by John F. Bauman, Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylian, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000) 121-122.

changed the status of the newly-built Valencia Gardens and Westside Courts from “Low-Rent” to “War Housing” and began a large-scale building program of units under federal ownership.³⁸

The SFHA vision of “community” shifted during World War II in response to the war and the different tenant population of war workers and military families living in public housing. The agency provided unprecedented communal features for war housing and lifted its segregation policy, a key component of the agency’s formula for creating “successful” projects. Building and operating wartime housing as an “agent for the Federal Government,” the SFHA rushed through a huge construction program erecting thousands of temporary housing units. On 500 acres in the Hunter’s Point area near the Navy’s dry docks, the Housing Authority constructed the bulk of its buildings, providing approximately 5500 units for naval yard workers and their families.

In a show of home front support for citizens serving the nation, the SFHA provided a wide range of amenities to tenants, many of which were unavailable for low-income residents living in the agency’s other projects. At Hunter’s Point, for example, the agency’s efforts to “serve a nation at war” resulted in community service facilities including recreation buildings, day care centers, public schools, a health center, a large gymnasium and a centrally located commercial center with a food market, drug store, department store, beauty shop, laundry, coffee shop, game rooms, and a movie theater. With the cooperation of the San Francisco Recreation Commission, the San Francisco Department of Education, and the San Francisco Department of Public Health as well as the services of the American Women’s Voluntary Services and the American Red Cross

³⁸ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Fifth Annual Report*, 1943, 5, 7.

and Community Chest, the Housing Authority offered wartime tenants a convenient, complete living experience with both essential services such as food and health care nearby as well as nonessentials like recreation and entertainment.³⁹ The extent of interagency cooperation in constructing community resources for tenants waned in the post-war period when the SFHA returned to its original mandate to house low-income tenants.

The Housing Authority's wartime housing program constructed at Hunter's Point also differed from the permanent projects in its racial composition. In its temporary war-time projects mandated by the federal government, the SFHA broke with its neighborhood policy plan and racially integrated the developments. The agency's support of racial unity, however, was merely a war-time display of national "harmony." With 27,000 African American migrants moving to San Francisco between 1941 and 1945 and a citywide housing crisis for all in-migrants, the SFHA opened Hunter's Point to all civilian employees for the duration of the war. By 1945, the Hunter's Point community had grown to 20,000 residents, one-third of them black. As historian Albert Broussard has described, Hunter's Point emerged as "one of the most thoroughly integrated communities in San Francisco."⁴⁰

³⁹ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Seventh Annual Report*, 1945, 4-5.

⁴⁰ Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 175. African American tenants in SFHA housing had a markedly different living environment than other black in-migrants housed in the city. Prior to World War II, the city had not enacted racial covenants against the small population of 5000 African Americans living in San Francisco. The dramatic increase in the black population during World War II, however, sparked wide-spread discrimination in housing. As a result, a number of tenants lived in overcrowded, rat-infested buildings in the Fillmore district where a 1944 survey found some residents living with 9 to 15 others in a single room. Many of the dwellings did not have hot water, bathroom facilities, or enough windows to provide access to natural light. Along with suffering distressing living conditions, African American migrants also paid higher rents for substandard dwellings than black non-migrants and non-migrant Chinese Americans (172-175). Broussard points out that blacks also occupied a "disproportionate share of

In a departure from a rigid adherence to racially segregated projects before and after the war, the Housing Authority endorsed and publicized integration in its wartime literature. The agency's *Seventh Annual Report* displayed photos that positively represented racial integration. Several photographs within the report depicted an interracial community. From a large picture of an integrated crowd watching a boxing match the opening night of the new gymnasium at Hunter's Point, to images of black and white men and women attending an Easter sunrise service and black and white children participating in the school Junior Traffic parade, the SFHA's report constructed an iconography of racial unity. *The Hunter's Point Beacon*, the "home town newspaper," published by the SFHA for resident war workers in and around Hunter's Point, held a photo contest.⁴¹ The photo that won the prize was taken at the Navy Point Infirmary. It captured the racial accord the SFHA sought to promote in its publications. In the photograph, Quentin Anderson, a smiling white little boy and a patient at the infirmary, sat on a bed feeding a black baby girl, Joy Knightson, with a bottle. The *San Francisco Housing News* reported that the five-month old baby had refused to eat until Quentin fed her.⁴² According to the SFHA, the photo was "produced in more than 30 publications

the Western Addition's substandard housing relative to the city's population" (173). For more information on housing discrimination in San Francisco see also Deirdre Sullivan's dissertation "Letting Down the Bars: Race, Space, and Democracy in San Francisco, 1936-1964."

⁴¹ "Hunter's Point Beach Interprets City Life," *San Francisco Housing News*, July 1944. According to the article, the Beacon "devotes a goodly amount of space in each issue to informing readers about what to do and see in San Francisco."

⁴² Caption of photograph, *San Francisco Housing News*, August 1944. The caption describes the children as "two patients....who have achieved national fame."

throughout the United States” and prompted people “from all parts of the world” to write letters responding favorably to it.⁴³

When tens of thousands of the families who had migrated to the city for war work decided to stay, San Francisco became “one of the Nation’s most critical cities in the lack of housing.”⁴⁴ In the immediate postwar period the Housing Authority turned its attention to constructing public housing projects delayed by the war. Rising land and building costs and the exhaustion of federal funds for public housing, however, delayed this construction. It was only after Congress passed the Housing Act of 1949 that the SFHA finally had the funds to move ahead with its building program.⁴⁵ After winning voter approval in 1950 for construction of the new projects, the agency again began building segregated projects across San Francisco.

⁴³ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Seventh Annual Report*, 1945, 15. The Housing Authority's wartime activities extended beyond overseeing a massive building program for the federal government, as the agency worked to house other groups in need. Along with the construction, the SFHA set up emergency accommodations for hundreds of sea bound servicemen on the *Saratoga* when the ship secretly underwent repairs in San Francisco. Additionally, at the close of the war, the agency provided housing for more than 1000 former Allied prisoners from 29 nations pending return to their homes. San Francisco Housing Authority, *Golden Anniversary Report*, 1987, 4. In a final act of wartime service, the SFHA housed 1200 Nisei, second generation Japanese Americans, many of whom lost their homes and land during their internment. San Francisco Housing Authority, *Twenty-fifth Annual Report*, 1965, 3.

⁴⁴ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Road to the Golden Age*, 12.

⁴⁵ The Housing Act of 1949 marked the entrée of the federal government into local city building projects. The act, supported by a unique coalition of trade unions, real estate interests, lenders, farmers, and housing advocates, set forth 5 titles to reach its goal, 3 of which drastically altered American cities. Title I financed slum clearance under urban "redevelopment" stating that a municipality could redevelop any "substandard" neighborhood and the federal government would cover 2/3 of the costs. Title II increased authorization of FHA mortgages and Title III promised 810,000 units of public housing by 1955. Collectively this legislation, as implemented by cities across the U.S., reshaped urban centers and the suburbs. As the FHA provided mortgage insurance to middle-class Americans moving to the suburbs, cities demolished large tracts of affordable housing with federal redevelopment funds. The act stipulated that local governments awarded funds clear "substandard dwellings" and replace them with "predominantly residential" structures. Consequently, low-income neighborhoods gave way to office buildings, shops, parking lots, and luxury apartments that city leaders hoped would reinvigorate the tax base. See Robert E. Lang and Rebecca R. Sohmer, eds. "Legacy of the Housing Act of 1949: The Past, Present, and Future of Federal Housing and Urban Policy" *Housing Policy Debate* 11 (2000), http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd_1102_edintro.pdf and Roger Biles, "Public Housing and Postwar Renaissance, 1949-1973" in Bauman, et al. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in the Twentieth Century*.

Ignoring the recommendations made in the 1946 *Citizens Survey* on public housing that called for the SFHA to “revise its racial policy to permit minority groups in all public housing” the agency continued its prewar policy of segregating its projects by race and ethnicity.⁴⁶ In untangling the racial and ethnic make-up of the agency’s projects it is important to note that the SFHA classified Latino/as as “white.”⁴⁷ With whites in four projects and African Americans in one, the SFHA dedicated one new housing project to the Chinese. In 1952 the SFHA opened two deferred projects, Ping Yuen in Chinatown, designated as an all-Chinese project, and North Beach Place in North Beach, built for white tenants. At Ping Yuen, celebrated by Chinatown and the city, the Housing Authority’s commitment to providing the Chinese with modern housing, and segregating them in Chinatown, drew praise. City-dwellers lauded the SFHA for tearing down crowded “tenements” in the district that had San Francisco’s “highest tuberculosis and death rates” and replacing them with projects that attracted tourists with their faux-Chinese architectural style.⁴⁸ Containing the Chinese in Chinatown, which Ping Yuen residents themselves readily accepted, did not incite controversy, as when North Beach Place opened a few months later. African American applicants protested their exclusion from North Beach Place, but not from Ping Yuen, possibly because they did not want to live in Chinatown and would not have been welcomed there.

⁴⁶ Mary Shepardson, “Minority Groups,” *San Francisco Public Housing: A Citizen's Survey* (San Francisco: San Francisco Planning and Housing Association, 1946), 21. The survey covered the SFHA's five permanent projects, Holly Courts, Potrero Terrace, Sunnysdale, Valencia Gardens, and Westside Courts.

⁴⁷ The SFHA classified Latino/as as white in their records. I do not have information on when Latino/as moved into “white” projects. The Chinese were classified as “non-white.” A fire at the SFHA in the 1960s destroyed a number of documents, including perhaps some demographic information. To date, the SFHA has not responded to my multiple requests for demographic information on projects in the city.

⁴⁸ “Worst in U.S.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 July 1949.

Although San Francisco took pride in its “history as a multiracial, multiethnic city” that “proved a mixed population could coexist without deadly violence,” African Americans in the post-war World II era faced systemic discrimination in housing.⁴⁹ A long history of diversity did not result in peaceable integration. It was the exclusion of African Americans from a white housing project, rather than the segregation of Chinese in Chinatown, that spurred criticism about segregation in public housing. The racial system characterized by the black/white binary in the American South and challenged by the growing Civil Rights Movement emerged as a contentious issue at North Beach Place. Besieged by criticism from the NAACP and other civic groups, the SFHA upheld its neighborhood pattern policy, refusing to allow African Americans access to projects other than Westside Courts despite the 600% increase in the African American population during the war. The NAACP sued the SFHA on behalf of two African American applicants denied admittance to North Beach Place in 1952. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court justices refused to hear the *Banks v. Housing Authority of San Francisco* case, thus upholding the California Supreme Court ruling against segregation in San Francisco public housing. Despite the court ruling, the SFHA’s consistent practice of segregating African Americans and Chinese Americans aroused controversy and created problems for the agency and some tenants over the next four decades.

In responding to San Franciscans’ need for affordable housing, the SFHA continued to segregate many of its projects. The Supreme Court’s 1954 decision dismantling the neighborhood pattern policy and the 1962 Executive Order issued by President John F. Kennedy outlawing segregation in all federally built subsidized housing

⁴⁹ Sullivan, "Letting Down the Bars," viii.

had little effect on the SFHA's operations. As the African American population of San Francisco increased after the war, the Housing Authority looked for ways to discourage black in-migration. In a May 16, 1962 letter to John C. Houlihan, the Mayor of Oakland, the San Francisco Housing Commissioners commended the mayor for his statement on the "Freedom Train" migration and joined him in asking the "Southern States" to discontinue their push for African American migration to the west. The mayor criticized white southerners for "capitalizing on the misfortune of the Negroes for which the whites themselves are much to be blamed."⁵⁰ Houlihan also reminded them that the West did not welcome the exodus of African American migrants. "The City of Oakland and the enlightened people of the West face our own problems, **and these people may become one of them** (my emphasis). We do not send our problems off to other states."⁵¹ Limiting the population of African Americans, the Housing Authority seemed to conclude, would perhaps lessen the problem surrounding public housing integration. At the same time that the SFHA voiced concern about the growth of the African American population in the city, it provided more public housing in Chinatown, opening the Ping Yuen Annex in 1962. While the agency claimed to have accepted applicants who were not Chinese, over 97% of the tenants were of Chinese descent. The SFHA continued to defend Ping Yuen's demographics on the grounds that tenants were happy living in a segregated project.⁵²

⁵⁰ C.R. Greenstone, Chairman, San Francisco Housing Authority to John C. Houlihan, Mayor of Oakland, California, 16 May 1962, copy in 1962 San Francisco Housing Authority Commission Minutes, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, February 1962-March 1963, San Francisco Housing Authority.

Although the SFHA had integrated Valencia Gardens, North Beach Place, and a number of other projects, the NAACP and the United Freedom Movement, a San Francisco off-shot of the NAACP, criticized the agency for not breaking up segregation in all public housing across the city. Civil rights organizations focused their attention on integrating projects that had a majority of white or black residents rather than attacking the homogeneity at Ping Yuen. They also condemned the Housing Authority for discriminatory hiring practices. The NAACP and the United Freedom Movement pointed to the lack of black and white integration in public housing and attacked the “racial imbalance” among authority maintenance workers, blaming the inequity on the SFHA’s practice of “hiring workers from union hiring halls which are operated in such a manner as to foreclose or discourage Negro applicants.”⁵³ Picketing at Hunter’s Point and Potrero Terrace and repeatedly marching at the Housing Authority office on Turk Street with signs reading “Discrimination Must Go” and “Hire Apprentices,” the NAACP vocally and publicly pressured the agency to change its housing and hiring practices.⁵⁴

The combination of the protests and a 1965 ruling by the California Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) that found the SFHA “was using various devices to perpetuate the Negroes’ housing and job-getting plight” forced the agency to act. Two months after the FEPC ruling, the commissioners voted to “begin negotiations with a management firm which would look into the Authority’s hiring and rental

⁵³ "Housing Authority Job Bias Charged," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 May 1964.

⁵⁴ "Picketing at Turk St. Housing Authority," *San Francisco Chronicle* 19 March 1965. See also "Housing Chairman Swings at Critics," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 February 1965 and "An Orderly Protest on S.F. Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 February 1965. NAACP leaders met with Mayor John Shelley to express their concerns over the SFHA's discriminatory hiring practices and placement of tenants in housing projects.

policies.”⁵⁵ The Housing Commission followed the recommendations of the FEPC and took steps “to improve the agency’s public image” by approving a new set of hiring rules “that would give minority groups greater employment opportunities in the agency” and eliminate “references to race in rental applications.”⁵⁶ The agency also created a new position, Director of Human Relations and Tenant Services, “to insure that neither housing assignment nor job discrimination is practiced by Housing Authority personnel.”⁵⁷

These changes failed to quell the increasing criticism levied against the agency as a whole, and long-time Executive Director John Beard in particular. As Executive Director of the Housing Authority between 1943 and 1965, Beard had presided over the agency’s initial efforts to build decent shelter and segregated project communities. Despite the 1954 ruling, he continued to promote segregation in public housing.⁵⁸ Criticized by the NAACP, State Assemblyman John Burton, and the Catholic Interracial Council for failing to integrate public housing, Beard became the scapegoat for allegations of discrimination lodged against the SFHA since the 1950s.⁵⁹ During an executive session of the Housing Commission in 1965, the commissioners voted to oust

⁵⁵ Peter Kuehl, "Getting the Picture," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 April 1965.

⁵⁶ Jack Lind, "Housing Board's New Rights Rules," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 July 1965.

⁵⁷ The Housing Authority created the position in 1964 in an early attempt to quail criticism. Nonetheless, the United Freedom Movement lambasted the agency for failing to consult their group when writing the job description. The United Freedom Movement, an African-American rights organization, had lobbied the SFHA to create the post in 1963.

⁵⁸ "John Burton Blasts S.F. Housing Boss," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 October 1965.

⁵⁹ A survey by an outside management firm described Beard as a leader who bypassed the housing commissioners and set his own policy. "John Burton Blasts S.F. Housing Boss," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 October 1965.

Beard. His departure from office, however, did not signal the end of the SFHA's problems.

For the next two decades, the SFHA continued housing minority groups in separate projects and these practices continued to ignite controversy. While the SFHA agreed to integrate public housing after the *Banks v. Housing Authority* verdict in 1954, the agency did not implement a policy to bolster integration nor to ease social interactions between different racial and ethnic groups in the city's housing projects. Patterns of segregation surfaced at a few projects over the years including a concentration of African Americans at Hunter's Point and later Alice Griffin. These patterns eventually drew criticism over time. In contrast, Ping Yuen in Chinatown continued to house a majority of Asian and Asian Americans, many of Chinese descent, without challenges or controversy. For years, the Commissioners, the city, Ping Yuen residents, and the Chinatown community praised Ping Yuen as a successful project that had the support of the district.

SFHA policies coupled with some applicants' preferences for living near friends and family resulted in a 98% Asian population at Ping Yuen in the 1980s and an 80% African American tenancy at Hunter's Point.⁶⁰ In 1983, the SFHA in what Corrie Anders of the *San Francisco Chronicle* described as "an administrative move to cut costs rather than implement integration," passed a new occupancy policy whereby applicants had to accept the first available apartment offered to them or "they shall be removed from the

⁶⁰ Corrie M. Anders and Charles C. Hardy, "S.F. Takes a New Look to Desegregate Schools: Officials Consider Integration of Families in Housing Projects as a First Step," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 September 1983. A 1983 court settlement of an NAACP desegregation suit against the San Francisco Unified School District called for a "concerted effort by housing agencies to promote rather than impede school desegregation and integration." The city aimed to desegregate schools by first desegregating subsidized housing.

waiting list and be prevented from applying for housing for one year's period of time."⁶¹

The SFHA previously allowed applicants to select where they wanted to live and "many turned down housing unless they could be near friends or relatives." Housing officials claimed the new policy would promote integration. They were wrong. Many applicants refused housing offered to them and went to the bottom of the waiting list in hopes that an apartment would open up in the neighborhood where they wanted to live.⁶²

Integration, pushed by lawmakers and policies, was not embraced by many prospective public housing tenants.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s the demographics at the mostly segregated projects had not changed. HUD, in a move signaling that the SFHA had not fully enforced its 1983 policy, ordered the agency to better integrate its projects by changing its policy "whereby applicants could pick where they wanted to live." A HUD audit found that African Americans were heavily concentrated in certain projects and Asian Americans in others. It was not until 1992, according to the *San Jose Mercury News*, that

⁶¹ Ibid. The second quote is from the following San Francisco Housing Authority Commission minutes. On January 13, 1983, Housing Commissioners passed Resolution 2503 stating that the SFHA had a waiting list of approximately 4600 and "whereas, applicants who reject available units by their actions indicate they are not in dire need of low income housing...be it resolved that 1. Every attempt will be made to refer applicants to the development which is their preference or to the geographical management area which is their preference. 2. That at the time the applicant is eligible for referral to a unit and neither the geographical nor the housing development preference is available, they shall be referred to the first available unit. 3. After an applicant for housing has been referred for leasing to the geographical management area, they shall be offered a choice of up to three units of housing in that area. 4. That applicants should turn down those three offers of housing in the geographical area, that they shall be removed from the waiting list and be prevented from applying for housing for one year's period of time. 5. That applicants who lease a unit from the Housing Authority and vacate that unit within 60 days without 'good cause,' they shall not be allowed to apply for housing for a twelve month period of time from the date of their vacate." The resolution was passed unanimously. Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 13 January 1983, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁶² Anders, "S.F. Takes a New Look to Desegregate Schools," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 September 1983.

“applicants generally had to take whatever apartments opened up.”⁶³ The SFHA began forcing applicants to take the first available apartments and at times steered African Americans and Asian Americans away from projects housing their own racial and ethnic groups. According to the article, if an apartment opened up in a predominantly African American project, the SFHA steered African Americans away from that project to another location with fewer black tenants; the same policy followed for Asian and Asian Americans waiting to move into Ping Yuen. Following orders from HUD to increase integration, the SFHA began “steering families—many of them (Southeast Asian) immigrants—into various developments (other than Ping Yuen) based on their ethnicity and leaving whatever cultural adjustments ensued almost entirely up to them.”⁶⁴ The SFHA’s implementation of a “Voluntary Compliance Agreement” to appease HUD “was done without any explanation to the established residents, who saw Southeast Asians as ‘intruders’ and interpreted their sudden arrival as simply a displacement of needy African Americans.”⁶⁵ Without interrelations officers to help ease in families or community social services in place either for new immigrant or long-term residents, the authority’s haphazard integration process prompted residents’ fears and frustrations.

By March 1993, a pattern of difficulties for Southeast Asian residents in African American projects had emerged. Over 100 Vietnamese and Cambodian residents at Potrero Terrace, Sunnydale, Westbrook, Hunter’s Point, Hunter’s View, and Alice Griffith, enlisting the Asian Law Caucus, filed a class action against the Housing

⁶³ Steve Johnson, "Projects Life is Violent for Asian Americans," *San Francisco Mercury News*, 11 April 1994.

⁶⁴ Johnny Brannon, "Public Housing's Struggle with Race," *Independent*, 1 July 1993.

⁶⁵ Timothy Fong, "Anti-Asian Violence: Breaking the Silence," *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 166.

Authority for “wanton disregard” of their safety. Southeast Asian tenants complained of being “the targets of steady harassment, including rock throwing, tire slashings, to more serious crimes, including beatings, home robberies, and even murder.”⁶⁶ The Nguyen family blamed the Housing Authority for the death of their 18 year-old son who was fatally shot in front of the family’s Potrero Terrace unit in September 1992. Mrs. Nguyen explained to the press, “I think we were attacked because we Vietnamese.”⁶⁷ Gen Fujioka, the Asian Law Caucus representative for the tenants, criticized the Housing Authority’s careless integration policy. “The Housing Authority has placed these families in dangerous, racially hostile situations with no regard for their safety.... You can’t have integration by just dropping people into the projects without an effort to bring together communities.”⁶⁸ The lack of social services, community programs, and staff to bridge cultural and language differences between new families and other tenants undermined the integration process and imperiled residents as the Housing Authority only relocated “families who suffered extreme injury.”⁶⁹ The Housing Authority settled the suit in 1994 and agreed to a modified policy allowing applicants to refuse a housing assignment for safety reasons without losing their place on the waiting list and facilitating quick transfers for residents threatened with violence.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Steven A. Chin, “Asians Sue City Over Violence in Public Housing,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 30 March 1993.

⁶⁷ Fong, “Anti-Asian Violence,” 166.

⁶⁸ Chin, “Asians Sue City Over Violence in Public Housing,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 30 March 1993.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* The families also accused the Housing Authority of negligence because the agency refused to relocate residents who were attacked.

⁷⁰ Steven A. Chin, “Housing Authority Settles Lawsuit by Asian Tenants,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 20 July 1993.

The SFHA's altered policies did not solve the difficulties of integration that also plagued other housing authorities in the Bay Area and across the nation. In the Bay Area, Asian immigrant public housing tenants in Oakland, Richmond, and Fresno reported racial harassment in the early 1990s. Discrimination affected other groups across the United States as well. Federal marshals in Vidor, Texas escorted four black families into public housing in early 1994 amid Ku Klux Klan protests that "blacks were being forced on the community."⁷¹ With targets of racial animosity varying from place to place, including Latino/as in Los Angeles, Russian-Americans "experiencing resentment" in Sacramento, and recent immigrants from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, "having the roughest time" in several cities in the U.S., the policy of integrating public housing proved increasingly complex.⁷²

The authority faced the challenge of housing a diverse tenant population and dealing with ingrained patterns of racial and ethnic segregation at some of its projects. The SFHA's tenant demographics in the early 1990s revealed that public housing had 49% African American, 27% Asian American, and 17% Latino/a and white residents.⁷³ In 1994, ten projects housed predominantly African Americans while Ping Yuen and Ping Yuen North had a majority of Asian American tenants.⁷⁴ African American tenants

⁷¹ Johnson, "Projects Life is Violent for Asian Americans," *San Francisco Mercury News*, 11 April 1994.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Brannon, "Public Housing's Struggle with Race," *Independent*, 1 July 1993.

⁷⁴ According to San Francisco Housing Authority figures printed in the *San Jose Mercury News* in 1994, the "segregated" projects had changed between 1988 and 1994. The predominantly black projects had seen the following changes: Alice Griffith went from having a 84% black population to 73%; Hayes Valley maintained an 88% African American tenancy; Hunters Point's black population grew from 74% to 83% while Hunter's View decreased from 78% to 75%; Potrero Annex increased its black population from 69% to 79% and Potrero Terrace increased from 72% to 83%; Sunnydale saw a small increase from 75% to 76% in black tenants; Westbrook went from 67% to 77%; Westside Courts decreased from 92% to 86% and

railed over the attention given to Asian-American victims when “the vast majority of the victims of violent crime in the city’s public housing developments [were] black.” Many black tenants suffering from violence in their own neighborhoods coveted the transfers and Section 8 vouchers provided to some harassed Asian American families. They resented the fact that “their complaints have not been taken as seriously—and that their requests for Section 8 vouchers have not been handled as expeditiously.”⁷⁵ While black families in black projects felt that SFHA officials ignored their complaints, black families pushed into Asian-American public housing developments experienced isolation. A black tenant who the SFHA “ordered” to live at Ping Yuen in 1993 described her hardships communicating and making friends with the stark statement: “It was a very bad situation.”⁷⁶

For the Asian American families who endured racial slurs and violence throughout the 1990s in a few African American projects, the Housing Authority “had not lived up to its commitment” made in the 1994 settlement.⁷⁷ News reports of racial violence in San Francisco’s housing projects further decreased the SFHA’s credibility with the city, HUD, and tenants. During the late 1990s, the Alice Griffith project in Hunter’s Point received extensive press coverage of allegedly racially-motivated attacks against Asian immigrants by African Americans. The articles did not report whether or

Yerba Buena went from 92% to 91%. The total percentage of African Americans living at these 10 projects increased from 78% to 80% between 1988 and 1994. The Asian-American population living at Ping Yuen and Ping Yuen North, meanwhile, decreased from 94% to 91%. At Ping Yuen the Asian-American population decreased from 97% to 93% while at Ping Yuen North the percentage went from 92% to 88%. Steve Johnson, “Projects Life is Violent for Asian Americans,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 11 April 1994.

⁷⁵ Brannon, “Public Housing’s Struggle with Race,” *The Independent*, 1 July 1993.

⁷⁶ Johnson, “Projects Life is Violent for Asian Americans,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 11 April 1994.

⁷⁷ Brannon, “Public Housing Struggles With Race,” *The Independent*, 1 July 1993.

not the perpetrators lived in public housing. Complaining of “official indifference,” six Vietnamese families shared harrowing stories with the *San Francisco Examiner*. Journalist Leslie Goldberg reported how a 78 year-old man, Ngu Vo, “got down on his knees, hands clasped as in prayer, as two young thugs tried to rob him at gunpoint in front of his home;” the story of a young Vietnamese woman who had a rock with glass in it thrown at her face; and of an assailant putting a gun to the head of a three-year old as he demanded money from the child’s father, among other accounts.⁷⁸ These negative stories implicated the Housing Authority for making little progress in improving the integration process five years after HUD criticized the agency. City Supervisor Leland Yee captured San Franciscans dismay over the problems in the projects. “It’s very sad to see (this racial hatred) in a city such as San Francisco, which prides itself on diversity and tolerance for others.”⁷⁹ The SFHA’s failure to find solutions to the persistent problem of integrating some of its projects further damaged its own compromised public image and undermined the city’s as well.

A “TROUBLED AGENCY,” ACTIVIST TENANTS, AND THE “HOPE” FOR REDEMPTION

From the outset the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission system raised questions and criticisms. The mayor’s sole power to appoint housing commissioners politicized the positions. Because commissioners and “top managers turned over with every new mayor,” the SFHA suffered from instability and over time gained a reputation

⁷⁸ Leslie Goldberg, “Vietnamese Describe Racial Violence in Housing Project,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 June 1997.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

“as a political dumping ground.”⁸⁰ While previous mayors had made politically motivated appointments to the Housing Commission and two of the first appointed commissioners, Alice Griffith and Marshall Dill, resigned in protest over the “mayor’s power of appointment, wrongfully used” in 1943, the patronage system became increasingly visible and volatile during the 1960s.⁸¹ In 1965 Mayor Jack Shelly replaced ousted Executive Director John Beard with his executive secretary Eneas Kane who allegedly asked for the post. Kane had no previous experience in the housing field. Two years after Kane took office, the agency’s problems were characterized by the SFHA in its annual report and in the press as “massive and long-term.”⁸²

The combination of the agency’s unstable leadership and the SFHA’s intractable stance on segregation coalesced in tenants challenging the agency beginning in 1966. With few decent affordable options available for poor families moving into public housing, the stakes were higher. Consequently, tenants fought to stay in and improve the projects. African American tenants at Hunter’s Point in 1966 organized to protest the

⁸⁰ Catherine Bowman and Aurleia Rojas, "When Home's Not Sweet," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1995.

⁸¹ Alice Griffith, "A Review of the Housing Authority of San Francisco," Marshall Dill Papers, folder 35, North Baker Library, California Historical Society, San Francisco, California. Alice Griffith resigned on August 17, 1943 in protest against Mayor Angelo Rossi's appointment of "men absolutely opposed to public housing" (1). Three commissioners united and asked Executive Director Mr. Albert Evers to resign his post when he challenged the need for creating a Central Maintenance Department which Mr. John Beard (then the chief of the Department of Management) wanted to manage. In an unprecedented move, Commissioners Cordes, Ayer, and Reardon made no charges against Mr. Evers and then proceeded to vote for his resignation. Mr. Evers refused to resign so the three commissioners voted to fire him—again without citing charges against him. The opposing commissioners Alice Griffith and Marshall Dill resigned in protest.

⁸² Jack Viets, "Praise for S.F. Housing Report," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 February 1967. The *San Francisco Examiner* reported in August 1965 that Eneas Kane was actively seeking the Executive Director position which he and the mayor both denied. In October, Kane announced he was actively seeking the post and according to the *San Francisco Examiner* he began soliciting the support of "several politically influential organizations and individuals in his bid for the job now held by John W. Beard." "Kane Seeking Beard Job as Housing Boss," *San Francisco Examiner*, 17 October 1965.

scheduled eviction of an unemployed resident unable to pay his rent. In response to the tenants' protest, the SFHA changed its rent delinquency policy, dropping the late fee and sending managers to talk with tenants about a payment plan rather than starting legal proceedings. Director Kane, hoping to further appease residents, next issued a moratorium on evictions.⁸³ The new policy decreased the agency's rent rolls significantly. Within eighteen months the SFHA changed its policy again, reinstating evictions to get rid of "freeloaders" and promising to work out a payment plan for tenants who fell behind on rent payments because of financial hardships or illness.⁸⁴ Echoing the late nineteenth century rhetoric of "deserving" and "undeserving" (or "freeloading") to characterize poor families in public housing, the SFHA evicted a number of tenants, replacing them with others who would make their monthly payments and boost revenues. With the rent owed by residents at the end of the moratorium totaling \$175,000 and a growing deficit predicted to top \$500,000 by 1967, the Housing Authority contradicted earlier policies and promises by raising rents up to \$4.00 a month, increasing the number of tenants who could not pay their rent on time.⁸⁵ Defending the measure Kane contended, "We must increase our income, in order to stay solvent."⁸⁶

⁸³ On March 9, 1966, a group of angry tenants from Hunter's Point put on a "wild" demonstration at a Housing Commission meeting. Together with members of the anti-poverty board (part of the Economic Opportunity Council), the protestors encircled the board's table and closed the doors when the commissioners tried to adjourn. The tenants listed demands and sang "We Shall Overcome" and protested against the SFHA's eviction policy. The Housing Commissioners blamed the "anti-poverty people" for fomenting the demonstration. The commissioners seemingly did not want to believe that the tenants themselves could rise up in protest against policies and procedures affecting their lives. J. Campbell Bruce, "Angry Uproar by Crowd at Housing Session," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 March 1966.

⁸⁴ Donald Carter, "Eviction Moratorium Ends," *San Francisco Examiner*, 2 February 1967.

⁸⁵ Donald Carter, "Eviction Moratorium Ends," *San Francisco Examiner*, 2 February 1967.

⁸⁶ "S.F. Poor Faces Rent Increases," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 October 1967.

The agency, like many others across the country, operated with a deficit and faced more financial difficulties due to federal policy shifts and spending cuts beginning in the late 1960s. In 1969 the federal government passed the Brooke Amendment capping rents in public housing at no more than 25 percent of tenant income “thereby keeping public housing affordable to those of lowest incomes, but exacerbating the shortfall of rent receipts.”⁸⁷ President Richard Nixon, in 1973, cut-off the already marginal funds to housing authorities by declaring a moratorium on public housing expansion. The direct effect on the SFHA was highlighted during a Housing Commission meeting in February 1973. The Secretary gloomily predicted that with “no funds available and no potential for funding...It is estimated that this Authority will ‘go into the red’ in the amount of \$775,000 this year.” Housing Commissioner Walter summed up the situation, “It does not bode well for the future unless there is a change in Federal policies.”⁸⁸ The combination of the rental shortages stemming from the Brooke Amendment, Congressional delays in delivering subsidies to make up for lower rents and Nixon’s moratorium forced the SFHA to draw on and deplete its reserves. As a result, these events and policies deprived residents of a sound maintenance program.⁸⁹

As the Housing Authority struggled to make ends meet, public housing tenants in San Francisco, like others across the country, began organizing tenants’ associations to

⁸⁷ Vale, *From Puritans to the Projects*, 337. Vale notes that a 1968 HUD survey revealed that half of the nation’s 80 major housing authorities were operating with a deficit and out of the 10 largest authorities 7 were near bankruptcy. Congress recognized that the amendment would cause a shortfall in revenue and voted for an increase in annual federal contributions to help offset the loss. Nonetheless, the measure did not adequately cover maintenance and upkeep in many cities.

⁸⁸ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 23 February 1973, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁸⁹ Donald Canter, “Some Tenants Get Paid to Live in Public Housing,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 May 1972. In early 1972, the SFHA finally received a \$2.3 million federal subsidy which it was entitled to for the fiscal year ending September 30, 1971.

lobby for their needs. The Public Housing Tenants Association (PHTA), an organization representing tenants, and tenant associations at the city's projects set out to bring "power to the people." In April 1971, the newly formed organization pressed for more self-governance and won the SFHA's designation of the San Francisco PHTA "as the organizational representative of 26 public housing projects." The PHTA also won a significant gain with the implementation of a new Grievance Panel Procedure.

Previously the Housing Authority's Human Relations Department dealt with tenant disputes over building maintenance, repairs, or overdue rents. Under the terms of the new Grievance Procedure, the PHTA would form a panel of tenants to conduct grievance and arbitration procedures "between the Housing Authority and residents of the 7000 housing units it administers." The Housing Authority made an important but limited move toward ceding some control to tenants. Nonetheless, the agency maintained veto power by asserting that Commissioners could review hearing decisions and intervene if they "believe[d] that the tenants have acted capriciously or beyond their authority."⁹⁰

By the end of the year, the PHTA challenged the Housing Authority for more power. Spurred on by the National Tenants Organization meeting held in San Francisco, the PHTA demonstrated at City Hall demanding a tenant appointment to the Housing Authority Commission. When Mayor Joseph Alioto appointed non-tenant Dr. Amaancia Ergina to a vacancy rather than following through on his promise to consider nominations submitted by the PHTA before filling the position, the PHTA threatened a rent strike. The Board of Supervisors responded by passing a formal resolution asking the mayor to

⁹⁰ Ralph Craib, "Housing Tenants Get New Power," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 April 1971. The Grievance Procedure also stated that in the case of disputes over rent, tenants were required to put the disputed amount of money into escrow until the issue was heard by the Grievance Panel.

“name a tenant to fill the next Housing Authority vacancy.”⁹¹ The mayor agreed. The strike threat quickly dissipated with the city’s vocal support for tenant representation. By 1976 there were two permanent tenant positions on the Housing Authority Commission.

Even as tenants and the SFHA clashed over tenant representation, maintenance, and safety, they found common ground around the need for more federal funding to keep up and expand the public housing program. Responding to the Nixon administration’s opposition to public housing, the SFHA and public housing tenants wrote Congress with pleas to pass the 1974 Housing and Community Development Act that would provide more federally subsidized units for low-income families and the elderly. Along with other tenants across the country, San Francisco public housing residents “bombarded Congress with wires and letters in opposition to the demise of public housing.” After the bill passed in the fall of 1974, San Francisco Housing Commissioner Wallace acknowledged the critical role tenants in the city had played. “This correspondence certainly let [Congress] know in Conference as well the Committees that the tenants of public housing were very much aware of the apparent attitude of the Administration to allow and foster the death of public housing.” He went on to acknowledge that “the San Francisco Housing Authority and its tenants have worked more diligently than any other group across the country in terms of that Bill.”⁹²

The final bill provided \$150 million for new developments and an additional \$150 million for a new program later called Section 8. This program, as scholar Lawrence Vale points out, “dramatically expanded the ability of local housing authorities to

⁹¹ Ralph Craib, “S.F. Rent Strike--Public Housing,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 November 1971.

⁹² Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 8 August 8 1974 and 12 September 1974, San Francisco Housing Authority.

administer a system of housing allowances, and also enabled tenants to go out and identify the units they wished to rent instead of being assigned to particular properties.”⁹³ Using Section 8 vouchers, public housing tenants could apply to live in private apartments with the rent offset by government subsidies. Residents and the SFHA cheered the federal government’s continuation of public housing but soon found that the demand for Section 8 vouchers in San Francisco far outweighed the supply of apartments in the tight private market. When the Housing Authority publicized vouchers in 1981, over 5000 people described by the press as “an unruly mob” went to the Housing Authority to sign up.⁹⁴ The SFHA, coming under scrutiny by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the city, increasingly failed to meet the needs of residents living in public housing and the demand for Section 8 vouchers.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, the Housing Authority’s inconsistent leadership, management, and financial problems became chronic taking a heavy toll on the agency, and in turn, tenants. Mayors’ selection of Housing Commissioners drew public criticism and accusations of patronage. Even seemingly politic appointments caused trouble for the SFHA. For instance, Mayor George Moscone’s selection of Reverend Jim Jones for an appointment to the Housing Commission in 1976 seemed in line with his efforts to reach out to different constituencies in the city. He appointed Reverend Jones, leader of the People’s Temple congregation “of 8000 black and white members,” and Reverend A.C. Ubalde, Jr., a Filipino known for his leadership in social

⁹³ Vale, *From Puritans to the Projects*, 336.

⁹⁴ Pearl Stewart, "Mob at Housing Office," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 February 1981.

welfare and educational organizations.⁹⁵ Within a year of his appointment, Reverend Jones left his post and the city and moved to Jonestown, an alternative society in Guyana, South America that he started developing in 1974. Jones called the Housing Authority from South America and resigned. On November 18, 1978, following the murder by Jones' followers of Congressman Leo Ryan and four other people investigating Jonestown, the reverend led 912 Jonestown residents in a mass suicide.⁹⁶ Moscone's appointment of Jim Jones ultimately embarrassed the Housing Authority. Though no selection would end as tragically as Jones', public criticism of Housing Authority posts would continue in succeeding years.

Between 1978 and 2000 the SFHA also came under fire for its poor management and financial troubles. In 1985, HUD put the agency on its "troubled list." The agency had a monthly deficit of \$170,000 and nearly \$6 million in unpaid bills. Not long after HUD recognized the agency's problems, Executive Director Carl Williams, hired to replace Walter Scott, resigned. Williams left office allegedly for mishandling finances, prompting author Chester Hartman to describe him "as the fourth consecutive director to leave the agency under a cloud of controversy."⁹⁷ As media headlines described

⁹⁵ Marshall Kilduff, "2 Nominated to Housing Authority," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 October 1976. Reverend Jones' full term was set to last until April 27, 1980. Reverend Ulbalde, filling an unexpired term, was slated to serve on the Housing Commission through May 3, 1977.

⁹⁶ Congressman Ryan visited Jonestown to investigate allegations of abuse. He left the site with 16 people who wanted to flee Jonestown. They were ambushed by People's Temple loyalists at the airfield.

⁹⁷ Hartman, *City for Sale*, 371. Walter Scott replaced Eneas Kane as Executive Director. A private audit of the SFHA revealed \$150,000 of unrecorded funds drawn from the agency along with excessive salaries, a lack of documentation for SFHA executive business trips totaling over \$43,000, and a failure to collect thousands of dollars in unpaid rent. The mismanagement resulted in a loss of millions in HUD funds to build low-rent housing in the Western Addition. Ralph Craib, "Housing Agency's Curious Traveling," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 August 1978. Mayor Moscone, responding to the audit, ordered the agency "to clean house." Scott was demoted to a deputy post and Carl Williams became Executive Director in 1978. The agency continued to have problems. In 1985, citing the agency's deep debt, Housing Commissioner Preston Cook recommended that the SFHA sell a few of its smaller properties to reduce the deficit. While

“Housing Projects in San Francisco Reported Out of Control,” the SFHA scrambled to hire David Gilmore as Executive Director.⁹⁸ Known as a specialist in saving troubled public housing authorities, Gilmore faced the challenge of running an authority HUD claimed had “virtually lost control of entire developments.” In half of the agency’s buildings, drug dealers paralyzed repair and maintenance efforts and vandalism was rampant.⁹⁹ During his time in office, Gilmore managed to reduce the authority’s vacancy rate, speed up repairs and the re-rental process, improve record keeping, and pay off most of the authority’s long term debt. As a result, the SFHA moved off of HUD’s troubled agency list but still received an “F” for the condition of its units and housing repairs.¹⁰⁰ Even as he facilitated improvements at the SFHA, Gilmore made some questionable financial decisions including large expenditures at “trendy restaurants.”¹⁰¹

one commissioner agreed to sell the projects "only as a last resort" Executive Director Carl Williams opposed the proposal. The SFHA ultimately decided to reduce its workforce, cut management salaries by 10%, and decrease the workload of 385 employees from 40 to 36 hours a week resulting in benefit cuts for these workers who were reclassified as part-time employees. Tenants feared they would pay the price for the agency's debt when the commissioners voted to lay off 72 employees including maintenance workers, a decision that threatened to compromise project services. Reginald Smith, "Housing Authority Paying Some Bills," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 April 1985. "Keep Public Housing Livable," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 February 1985.

⁹⁸ April Lynch, "Housing Authority Spared from HUD 'Troubled List'," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 12 April 1993.

⁹⁹ Hartman, *City for Sale*, 371.

¹⁰⁰ April Lynch, "Housing Authority Spared from HUD 'Troubled List'," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 12 April 1993. As with many issues surrounding the Housing Authority, the agency's move off of HUD's troubled list was controversial. HUD claimed that Executive Director Gilmore had skewed the agency's score in his self-assessment of the city's public housing projects, giving the SFHA the number of points necessary to move its classification from "troubled" to "standard." HUD designated the SFHA as a "standard" authority which qualified the agency to apply for more funding. At the same time, the federal agency initiated a criminal investigation of the SFHA based on claims that "the Housing Authority provided federal inspectors with unsupported and unreliable data during a recent audit." Steven A. Chin, "City Housing Agency Faces Criminal Probe," *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 September 1992.

¹⁰¹ According to a HUD audit, Gilmore spent thousands of dollars on meals at restaurants and on other entertainment, including a \$2200 party celebrating the SFHA's removal from the federal roster of troubled housing authorities. Mayor Jordan had friction with Gilmore and removed him from office.

Consequently, Mayor Frank Jordan ousted Gilmore in 1993, a move many tenants who viewed Gilmore “as unresponsive to their needs” applauded.¹⁰²

Over the objections of many tenants Mayor Jordan and the Housing Commission approved the hire of Felipe Floresca to replace Gilmore as Executive Director in 1994. Tenants claimed that Mayor Jordan had promised an African American would fill the vacant post. Instead Floresca, a Filipino American who grew up in a New York City project, took the \$120,000 position with the goal of turning San Francisco’s public housing complexes “into active parts of their neighborhoods rather than segregated enclaves or no zones.”¹⁰³ Eleven months later, the mayor’s initial endorsement had changed to criticism and Floresca, in danger of being fired, resigned.

The process of political appointments in the Housing Authority came to an abrupt halt in 1996 when Mayor Willie Brown and the Housing Commission recognized that the agency’s “bureaucratic incompetence” needed an overhaul and ceded control of the city’s housing projects to HUD.¹⁰⁴ According to HUD, the Housing Authority’s incompetent management had “forced tenants to live in housing that was not ‘decent, safe, or

¹⁰² Chin, "City Housing Agency Faces Criminal Probe," *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 September 1992.

¹⁰³ John King, "New Housing Chief Says S.F. Projects Will Improve," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 March 1994, 5. Floresca, a Filipino American, worked on anti-crime programs in housing projects in Providence and Boston and directed New York City's housing inspection program under Mayor Ed Koch. Before taking the position in San Francisco he worked in the White House and for HUD where he served as senior housing management officer. Tenants attending the Housing Commission meeting about the position vocally supported Paul Fletcher, an African American and former aide to HUD Secretary Jack Kemp. The Commissioners voted 5-2 for Floresca. Frustrated tenant Ed Williams summed up the position of a number of tenants in attendance. "Only blacks know the needs of other blacks. We need to consider my people, the 65 percent that are in public housing." "Housing Panel Names Director," *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 February 1994.

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Bowman and Aurelio Rojas, "When Home is Not Sweet," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1995.

sanitary.’”¹⁰⁵ The SFHA’s management errors also threatened to jeopardize tens of millions of dollars in federal grants. HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros vowed that his agency would operate the housing authority and manage the city’s projects housing 30,000 people until he determined the SFHA could do the job itself. The extent of the Housing Authority’s problems emerged a few months later when a HUD report landed the SFHA on HUD’s troubled list again jeopardizing “its eligibility for key funds.”¹⁰⁶ Federal funds were critical for tenants living in neglected units with conditions that received another grade of ‘F’. The federal official in charge of the report, Kevin Marchman, chastised the Housing Authority for not improving the city’s projects with the \$90 million in federal funds allocated to the agency between 1991 and 1996.¹⁰⁷ HUD finally seemed to realize the depth of the SFHA’s mismanagement that “tenants had been complaining about for years.” A year into the federal takeover, however, tenants reported little improvement in their living environments. HUD officials blamed their lack of progress on the fact that the SFHA “was broke.”¹⁰⁸

At the end of 1997, the San Francisco Housing Authority aimed to make a new start. The agency resumed control of its operations with seven new commissioners appointed by Mayor Willie Brown, and Ronnie Davis, the acting Executive Director brought in from the Cleveland Housing Authority by HUD, still at the helm. Davis quickly won the approval of tenants by promising to prioritize their needs. In 1997,

¹⁰⁵ Gregory Lewis, "HUD Takes Control of S.F. Housing," *San Francisco Examiner*, 9 March 1996.

¹⁰⁶ Catherine Bowman, "S.F. Public Housing Rated Among Worst in Nation," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 May 1996.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Catherine Bowman, "Housing Continues to Decay Under HUD/Tenants See Little Improvement at Projects Despite Federal Takeover," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 November 1996.

Davis described his management philosophy, "I'm not here to play politics. I'm here to empower the tenants, the residents of public housing."¹⁰⁹ The Housing Authority, thrilled at his popularity with tenants and employees, asked Davis to stay on when the SFHA regained management over the city's projects later that year. Within three years, the Housing Authority praised Ronnie Davis for cleaning up San Francisco's worst projects and redeeming "the agency's tarnished image."¹¹⁰ During his tenure, the SFHA moved off of HUD's troubled list, jump started renovations and construction, and earned a score of 95 out of 100 on HUD's review. The SFHA rewarded Davis with a new contract classifying him as a city employee (rather than as a consultant) and offering him a \$188,000 annual salary plus a \$12,000 signing bonus, a car, six weeks paid vacation, and other benefits making him one of the highest paid officials in city government.¹¹¹

Even as Davis raised review scores and won the approval of some tenants by visiting projects and listening to their complaints, he was not able to stop the spreading corruption at the Housing Authority or the investigation into his own crimes. In 1999, a federal grand jury indicted the SFHA's relocation manager, Patricia Williams, and her assistant Yolanda Jones, along with twenty other employees on bribery charges. Capitalizing on the perpetual shortage of affordable housing in San Francisco, a city with one of the highest rental rates in the county, Williams and other employees solicited bribes as high as \$25,000 from public housing residents displaced by redevelopment of

¹⁰⁹ Gregory Lewis, "Acting Director Restores Faith in Public Housing," *San Francisco Examiner*, 18 February 1997. Ronnie Davis grew up in a housing project in New Orleans, attended Harvard, and worked for the Cleveland Housing Authority as director of planning operations. He was Mayor Brown's choice to run the agency.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ilene Lelechuk, "Housing Chief's Big New Contract City Rewards Ronnie Davis," *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 March 2000.

their rundown projects between 1996 and 1998. In exchange, the staff placed tenants in other housing projects in the city or gave out coveted Section 8 vouchers.¹¹² Williams was found guilty of thirty counts of bribery and conspiracy in 2000.

According to a 2000 HUD audit, corruption in the agency was not limited to second-tier employees. Federal authorities lambasted Ronnie Davis's financial practices decrying the director's "\$11 million in questionable spending at his former job in Cleveland." The report warned that Davis' role as Executive Director of the SFHA "continues HUD's exposure to additional loss of funds." A separate audit of the SFHA released a few days later supported HUD's concern. The audit charged the agency with squandering hundreds of thousands of dollars by "handing out contracts without proper bidding and paying excessive salaries to managers."¹¹³ The Housing Authority's punishment came in December 2000, when HUD withheld \$20 million in special grants for renovating projects. An Ohio grand jury indicted Ronnie Davis in March 2001 and charged him "with stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in public money during his tenure at the Cleveland Housing Authority."¹¹⁴

Attempting to improve public housing and its own reputation as a landlord, the Housing Authority applied for federal funds in the 1990s to redevelop projects made

¹¹²Hartman, *City for Sale*, 373. See also Chuck Finnie and Lance Williams, "Two More Arrests in S.F. Bribery Probe," *San Francisco Examiner*, 16 November 1999. Bob Egelko and Lance Williams, "Housing Exec Guilty of Bribes," *San Francisco Examiner*, 27 September 2000. Yolanda Jones' indictment heaped more embarrassment on city hall. Jones is the daughter of Charlie Walker, a trucker and "political heavy" often described as "the mayor of Hunter's Point." She also was the self-described "goddaughter" of Mayor Willie Brown (Hartman, *City for Sale*, 373).

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Patrick Hoge, "S.F. Housing Chief Charged with Funds Theft in Ohio," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 March 2001, cited in Hartman, *City for Sale*, 373. The charges against Davis were dismissed in return for a guilty plea to a "single misdemeanor." Davis' plea meant he had to repay the Cuyahoga Housing Authority in Cleveland \$4500 and "could face a short federal prison sentence." For more information see Patrick Hoge's "Housing Chief Felony Charges Dropped in Ohio," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 October 2001.

available through the new HUD Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) grant program. In applying for and administering HOPE VI funds, the SFHA returned to its early definition of and focus on “community.” The HOPE VI program, according to Lawrence Vale, is HUD’s “most ambitious comprehensive redevelopment program yet undertaken.”¹¹⁵ HUD created the program in 1992— in response to a report issued by the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing— to improve some of the worst public housing projects in the country by redeveloping public housing into mixed-income units.¹¹⁶ HOPE VI is a competitive grant program, under which Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) can apply to HUD for up to \$50 million in “funding to redevelop or demolish [up to 500] public housing sites.” As stipulated by HUD, HOPE VI grantees leverage additional public and private funds to redevelop public housing into garden style apartments or townhouses that “blend in” with the surrounding community and house residents with mixed incomes. Local housing authorities awarded HOPE VI money must also use up to 15% of the grant for community and supportive services “to increase opportunities for resident employment and self-sufficiency.”¹¹⁷

Besides these requirements, HUD has not created a set of formal guidelines for the HOPE VI program. As a result the initiative “has been characterized by a lack of

¹¹⁵ Vale, *From Puritans to the Projects*, 369.

¹¹⁶ National Housing Law Project, et al., “False HOPE: A Critical Assessment of the HOPE VI Public Housing Redevelopment Program” (Oakland: National Housing Law Project, June 2002), 2. Congress in 1989 created an independent National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing as part of the Department of Housing and Urban Development Reform Act. The Commission was charged “with assessing and formulating the solutions to the problem [of] severe distress in the public housing.” The Commission’s final report noted that there were serious problems in public housing sites labeled as “severely distressed,” but these projects only made up 6% (86,000 units) of the total stock that “fit into the category.” Nonetheless, HUD responded by initiating the HOPE VI program (i). Vale, *From Puritans to the Projects*, 370.

¹¹⁷ “False HOPE,” 14.

clear standards [and] a lack of hard data on program results.”¹¹⁸ Due to the program’s loose structure, local housing authorities have had extensive flexibility in determining which housing projects merit HOPE VI funding, in relocating tenants, and in deciding the criteria for tenant eligibility in redeveloped HOPE VI projects. By failing to require a one-for-one replacement of low-income units the HOPE VI program has reduced the nation’s supply of public housing at the same time as low-income families are already facing a dramatic shortage of affordable housing in the U.S.¹¹⁹ While the HOPE VI program has received much attention and praise from cities and PHAs, and some returning residents, its ultimate effect on public housing and tenants remains inconclusive.

During the 1990s, San Francisco won five HOPE VI grants totaling \$118.5 million to revitalize 5 public housing projects.¹²⁰ Leveraging an additional \$166.8 million in public and private funds, the SFHA once again set out to rehabilitate public housing and its own reputation by redeveloping Hayes Valley and Plaza East in the Western Addition, Bernal Dwellings and Valencia Gardens in the Mission District, and North Beach Place in North Beach. Although the SFHA applied for funds to refurbish Valencia Gardens and North Beach Place, the agency ultimately decided to demolish and rebuild all 5 projects, forcing thousands of tenants to relocate. Eligible tenants wanting to return

¹¹⁸ Ibid., i.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., ii. According to HUD figures, listed in "False HOPE," in 1999 for every 100 very low income renter households, there were only 70 affordable units available to them. The situation was worse for extremely low income renter households with only 40 affordable units for every 100 households. Under federal definitions, "very low income" refers to households making 50% or below the median income of households in their geographic region. Extremely low income families are defined as making at or below 30% of the area median income.

¹²⁰ Between 1992 and 2001, HUD awarded over \$4.5 billion in competitive grants to PHAs to redevelop 165 projects in 98 cities, including San Francisco.

to the three completed HOPE VI projects, Bernal Dwellings, Plaza East, and Hayes Valley had to wait over three years.

Returning residents found transformed buildings and an altered community. Hayes Valley, fully occupied by 1999, provided Victorian townhouses and flats with private open space, electronic security systems in each unit, and windows facing the street. In 2001 residents moved into Bernal Dwellings reconstructed as Victorian townhouses and flats with two new private streets, a child-care center, and a 3000 square foot business incubator facility. A few months later Plaza East opened, demonstrating similar design features as the other two projects, with windows facing the street, individual front doors with sidewalks, washers and dryers in each unit, and a community room. The SFHA has promised North Beach Place and Valencia Gardens' residents defensible space features such as individual entrances and windows facing the street and community services as well when the projects reopen. With much fanfare, Mayor Willie Brown and the press attended the opening ceremonies at the projects praising the SFHA for revitalizing the developments and stylistically connecting the buildings with the surrounding areas. Speaking at Bernal Dwellings, Mayor Brown assured the crowd "No one's going to be able to tag them for living in public housing."¹²¹ Returning resident Kimberly Coleman-Curry expressed her gratitude. "I feel really blessed. This is like when you win the sweepstakes, you know, when they come to your door?"¹²² Lyria Decuire moving back to Plaza East rejoiced as well, "There's no comparison to the way it was." At the Plaza East opening, SFHA employee Juan Monsanto confirmed the agency's

¹²¹ David R. Baker, "Joyful Return for First Bernal Dwellers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 March 2001.

¹²² Ibid.

return to its early ideal of “community” and emphasis on the environment’s ability to foster “good citizens”: “We are making better homes and building up the community.”¹²³

For all the program’s rhetoric about improving public housing by creating “communities,” the HOPE VI initiative has displaced existing communities and decreased the number of affordable housing units in the U.S. The SFHA, like many other HOPE VI grantees, reduced the “total number of housing units, and by stressing mixed-income redevelopment, even further reduc[ed] the number of low-income units.” With over 14,000 families on the SFHA waiting list in the late 1990s, the reduction of the low-rent housing supply in San Francisco, as historian Chester Hartman phrased it, was “more than a little disturbing.”¹²⁴ When the last of the five projects opens in 2005, San Francisco will have a net loss of around 230 units (only North Beach Place will have a one-to-one replacement), not including the loss of low-income units to house residents with higher incomes in the mixed-income developments.¹²⁵ As San Francisco’s vacancy rates hovered around 1 percent in 1998 with “rents skyrocketing, where even the wealthy must overbid for housing,” the HOPE VI program threatened to increase the exodus of low-income families out of the city.¹²⁶

Residents pushed out of projects undergoing redevelopment were particularly vulnerable. The SFHA offered public housing tenants living in designated HOPE VI projects relocation options. Tenants could take a Section 8 voucher and find housing in

¹²³ Elizabeth Fernandez, “S.F. Families Return to Public Housing That’s New From Ground Up,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 February 2002.

¹²⁴ Hartman, *City for Sale*, 374.

¹²⁵ This figure is based on information listed on the San Francisco Housing Authority’s website, <http://www.sfha.org>.

¹²⁶ “Bay Boom in Housing, No End in Sight,” *San Francisco Examiner*, quoted in Letters to the Editor, *San Francisco Examiner*, 3 May 1998.

the private market; they could move into another public housing project; or they could make their own arrangements. Prior to making relocation plans, the SFHA alerted residents that those taking Section 8 vouchers or moving into a renovated HOPE VI project would not be allowed to return to their project. San Francisco's constricted rental market forced many residents opting for Section 8 vouchers out of the city. Private landlords turned away low-income tenants with vouchers as middle-class renters competed for apartments.¹²⁷ Critics, including a number of African American project tenants, accused the SFHA of swelling the black out-migration trend. According to Chester Hartman, a substantial number of former public housing families displaced by HOPE VI left the city because they could not find relocation housing locally.

Thirty percent of the families displaced from Bernal Dwellings left the city, as did over a third of those displaced from the Hayes Valley project. And since about half of all families in San Francisco public housing are African American, such displacement has been a major factor in reducing the city's black population—San Francisco is one of the very few major U.S. cities with a declining black population—and an increasing neighborhood racial concentration as well.¹²⁸

Hunter's View residents, protesting black out-migration, gathered more than 190 signatures, three-quarters of the families in the development, opposing the SFHA's application for HOPE VI funds to redevelop their project. Nonetheless the SFHA submitted its fourth application for a HOPE VI grant to redevelop Hunter's View in 2001. HUD turned down the agency's bid for the competitive funds.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ According to some tenants at Valencia Gardens, more landlords began taking Section 8 vouchers after September 11, 2001. The increase in vacancy rates in the wake of the economic downturn following September 11 allowed some tenants to stay in San Francisco. Valencia Gardens' residents, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 30 May 2003.

¹²⁸ Hartman, *City for Sale*, 374.

¹²⁹ "Residents Blast Housing Proposal," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 July 2001. Johnny Brannon, "Feds Reject Plan to Fix Troubled Housing Complex," *The Independent*, 15 August 2000.

Relocation disrupted the lives of all residents and particularly affected tenants who were eligible and eager to return to their project homes. Tenants with good rent histories and without criminal records had “first dibs” on the new units.¹³⁰ Delays stretched out the redevelopment process for several years at Hayes Valley, Bernal Dwellings, and Plaza East. Kimberly Coleman-Curry’s enthusiasm about her new townhouse at Bernal, no doubt partly came from knowing she was finally settled. For four years, Coleman-Curry and her daughter “drifted from one apartment to the next, waiting for the city’s housing authority to replace the torn-down tower and let her move back.”¹³¹

The HOPE VI program, with its focus on providing housing for “upstanding tenants” has returned public housing to its original emphasis on “morality.” Under the current model, PHAs allow “deserving” tenants who have a good rent history to return to a redeveloped project where they can “learn” from higher-income neighbors who “serve as positive role models for low-income residents.” Supporters of mixed-income communities argue that “proximity to higher income households is supposed to ‘reduce the social pathology caused by the concentration’ of poverty suffered by public housing residents.”¹³² In promoting the program, HUD has adopted and the SFHA has re-established an emphasis on building public housing communities designed to model and “train” low-income tenants in the “appropriate” middle-class way of living. By redesigning public housing projects to fit the look of the surrounding area, and bringing mixed-income tenants into spaces once occupied by low-income tenants, HUD and the

¹³⁰ Baker, “Joyful Return for First Bernal Dwellers,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 March 2001.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² “False HOPE,” 10-11.

SFHA claim they can increase community ties between residents and improve relationships between tenants and the neighbors living near the projects.

HUD and the SFHA's assumptions in promoting HOPE VI as the path to creating communities ignore the critical fact that low-income residents living in public housing projects have already formed important bonds over time. The following chapters examine community formation at three public housing projects in San Francisco: Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens. Located in bustling urban districts with easy access to public transportation, shopping, hospitals, and parks these projects offered residents easily accessible amenities, a critical factor in resident satisfaction. The convenient locations, widely praised architectural designs, and diverse tenant populations differentiate Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens from popular stereotypes and scholarly generalizations about public housing as high-rise failures located in run-down center cities or in isolated outlying areas. While these elements merit and receive attention here, both for their historical importance and as markers of the SFHA's early ideals in planning communities, tenants' interactions with each other, with the surrounding neighborhood, with social service organizations, and with the state ultimately reveal the complexities of community dynamics in public housing.

Examining these relationships demonstrates the ways tenants at Valencia Gardens, Ping Yuen, and North Beach Place have negotiated racial and ethnic differences, crime, maintenance problems, and the failings of the SFHA to support community formations within projects. Through the formal networks of tenants' associations, and informal ties, residents at these projects have navigated both similar problems related to living in public housing and specific difficulties associated with their

individual projects and neighborhoods. Many of these tenants are also actively engaged in their communities attending Housing Commission meetings, writing petitions, and protesting. In their efforts to improve policies affecting their projects these tenants redefined the meaning of “home” and undermined the SFHA’s and many Americans’ assumptions that poor people are not “good citizens” and renters of government housing have little investment in their environment.

CHAPTER II

“PEACE AND PROSPERITY PREVAIL AMONG VIRTUOUS NEIGHBORS”:
CHINATOWN’S AMERICAN PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

At 2:00 pm on October 21, 1951, over 5000 San Franciscans gathered on Pacific Avenue between Grant and Columbus for a jubilant celebration. The large crowd witnessed elements of a traditional Chinese ceremony complete with 100,000 firecrackers stretched on two strings set off to scare devils away. A group performed a lion dance to bring good luck as streams of dollar bills floated down near the firecrackers to strengthen the “lion” before going to charity. Melodies of “Over There” and “Chinatown, My Chinatown” played by the St. Mary’s Chinese Girls Drum Corps and the San Francisco Municipal Band entertained onlookers who at one point joined together in singing the national anthem.¹ The unlikely cause for celebration was the opening of Ping Yuen, Chinatown’s first subsidized housing project for low-income families. In the keynote address, Mayor Elmer Robinson praised Chinese Americans’ contributions to the city: “[I]t is fitting that this most distinctive of Projects should be dedicated here in San Francisco. The Chinese are among the earliest settlers to our City. They have

¹ "5000 See Dedication of Ping Yuen Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 October 1951. In accordance with Chinese tradition, before the dedication Mayor Robinson and his wife were offered "house warming tea" and watermelon seeds, candied ginger and coconut strips with the Wongs in a model apartment. Afterward they left a fifty-cent piece in a red colored paper talisman, a Chinese custom for new homes. "Ping Yuen Means 'Tranquil Gardens,'" *California Housing Reporter*, November 1951. The dedication took place at the east building, which opened first in November.

contributed to our City's life, culture, commerce and spiritual life for over 100 years."²

After dedicating the three buildings, Tung Ping Yuen (the eastern building), Sai Ping Yuen (the western building) and Chung Ping Yuen (the central building) to "the little boys and girls who will be born here, who will grow up here in an atmosphere of health and happiness and the good will of all the citizens of San Francisco," Mayor Robinson presented a golden key to Henry K. Wong, a World War II veteran, his wife Alice, and their two children, the first residents of Ping Yuen.³ The celebration and dedication marked a significant day in Chinatown's complex history in San Francisco.

The festivities surrounding the opening of Ping Yuen highlight the uniqueness of the development. Unlike many housing projects in the city, such as Valencia Gardens, which came under scrutiny by neighborhood and city groups, Ping Yuen had wide support of the residents in the Chinatown district; most commentators praised it for its form and function as well as for its role in reparations and renewal in the district. The national and international press covered the project opening, hailing the buildings' original design and important purpose.⁴ In its 1951 *Annual Report*, the San Francisco

² "Ping Yuen Means 'Tranquil Gardens,'" *California Housing Reporter*, November 1951. Other participants in the ceremony included Charles J. Jung, a member of the Housing Authority Commission, Father Donald F. Forrester, director of St. Mary's Chinese Mission, E.N. Ayer, chairman of the San Francisco Housing Authority, Dr. Theodore C. Lee, chairman of the Chinatown Housing Committee, the Reverend C.S. Chiu, president of the Chinese Christian Union, and members of the Chinese Six Companies. The singing of the national anthem at the ceremony was reported in "Ping Yuen is Dedicated," *The Journal of Housing* (November 1951): 391.

³ Henry K. Wong was a Navy Sea-Bee in the Pacific during the war and worked as a waiter in Chinatown when Ping Yuen opened. As the "first family" of Ping Yuen, the Wongs were given the opportunity to pick which two-bedroom apartment they wanted to rent in the six-story East Ping Yuen building. They selected an apartment on the top floor with a view. "The Henry Wongs—Ping Yuen's First Family," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 October 1951.

⁴ The San Francisco Housing Authority Annual Report from 1951 boasted about the wide press coverage Ping Yuen received, stating that "newsreel cameras, television and radio programs recorded the event and newspapers and periodicals as far away as China and Europe devoted space to the dedication. The Voice of

Housing Authority touted the “outstanding feature in the past year in low rent housing” as the dedication of Ping Yuen. Omitting statistics on the historically deplorable housing conditions in Chinatown, the report, like many articles on the project, focused on the style which was different than any other public housing project in the country with its “Chinese...architectural motif and color scheme.”⁵ The *California Housing Reporter* also marveled over the unique project in a 1951 article. “The three unit Project...will feature automatic elevators and enclosed playgrounds. However, these features will in no way detract from the picturesque yellow tile roofs and multi-colored dragon decorations.”⁶

The decision to house families in Chinatown overturned a century of discriminatory laws passed to limit the Chinese population in the U.S. by keeping families apart.⁷ With the rise of the nuclear family as a symbol of American national identity and supremacy over communist countries during the Cold War, San Francisco turned its attention to improving the long ignored housing problems in Chinatown. The deplorable housing stock in Chinatown, designed to house single male workers, underscored the harsh conditions the Chinese had endured.⁸ Segregated from other parts

America beamed the story to far points of the World." San Francisco Housing Authority, *Eleventh Annual Report*, 1951, 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Ping Yuen Means 'Tranquil Gardens,'" *California Housing Reporter*, November 1951.

⁷ The Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 kept wives of Chinese laborers from immigrating to the U.S. At the turn of the century the limited number of women living in Chinatown included imported prostitutes, native-born wives, and wives of merchants who were exempted from the Exclusion Act. In 1906, California attempted to further reduce the number of Chinese families in the United States by amending the 1872 miscegenation statute to include "Mongolians." The law was invalidated in 1948.

⁸ The majority of Chinese laborers came to California during the nineteenth century by means of the credit-ticket system by which passage was advanced to an emigrant who was expected to repay this debt from future earnings. Realizing they could pay Chinese workers lower wages, American businessmen hired Chinese workers to do labor often shunned by other laborers, such as the dangerous, backbreaking work of

of the city, the Chinese were forced to live in a crowded ethnic ghetto. When discussions about the housing project began in 1941, 15,000 Chinese lived in a five-by-four block area in which 3,000 out of 3,860 dwelling units had no heat. The overcrowded conditions in Chinatown resulted in a tuberculosis rate three times higher than the rest of the city.⁹ Conditions worsened over the next decade as more families crowded into the district. Beginning in the 1920s, Chinatown had shifted from a bachelor society to a family-centered one as merchants brought their wives over, and the population of native-born Chinese-American women increased.¹⁰ The number of families continued to rise over the next two decades with relatives living in small rooms built for single occupancy.

By 1950, city, state, and national attitudes as well as official doctrines towards the Chinese had softened as a result of China's alliance with the U.S. during World War II

building the continental railroad. Once the railroad was complete and Chinese workers flooded the labor market competing with white workers for jobs during the recession of the late 1870s, discrimination against the Chinese mounted. The result was the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882 and amended in 1884 to ensure that wives of Chinese laborers would also be forbidden entrance into the U.S. The Exclusion Act suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers in the U.S. and prohibited the naturalization of Chinese.

⁹ Letter to Carey McWilliams from the San Francisco Housing Authority sent in 1941 and quoted in Connie Young Yu's "A History of San Francisco Chinatown Housing," *Amerasia* 8 (1981): 104.

¹⁰ In the 1920s, there was a gradual proliferation of families in Chinatown as a result of three trends. First, merchants who were exempt from the exclusion acts brought their wives over or married women on their trips back to China. Second, some laundry and restaurant owners and even some hired laborers bribed merchants to add their names as partners in business so they could bring their wives over. Finally, there was a slow increase in the population of native-born Chinese women in the 1920s. It is important to note that despite this increase in the female population, between 1924 and 1930 no Chinese women were admitted to the U.S. because of the 1924 Exclusion Act. In 1930 the harsh act was revised to allow for the admission of Chinese wives of American citizens who were married prior to May 26, 1924. Between 1906 and 1924, an average of 150 Chinese women per year entered the U.S. From 1931 to 1940, an average of 60 Chinese women entered each year. The 1945 War Brides Act eased the entry of wives of men in the U.S. armed forces and resulted in approximately 6,000 Chinese women entering the United States. Victor G. and Brett de Bary Nee, *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 149; Judy Yung's *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

and the participation of Chinese Americans in the war.¹¹ After World War II, as the nuclear family living the “American Dream” of homeownership and exercising unprecedented purchasing power emerged as a bulwark against the communist threat, decent housing for American families became imperative.¹² While white, male-headed middle-class households in their suburban homes emerged as the symbol of American national identity, San Francisco broadened the ideal to include Chinese Americans living in subsidized apartments. Reconfiguring the model of the Cold War American family, the SFHA presented public housing in Chinatown as another way to promote Americanism. With the “fall” of China to communism in 1949, endorsing nationalism through housing took on new importance. Even happily housed Chinese-American families could buttress the nation against communist “evils.” *The San Francisco News* captured the excitement of the possibilities offered by the projects, “[f]or the first time in the history of Chinatown there will be real homes. Families that have endured the shocking housing of Chinatown never planned for family living will have “a real living room” where they can gather and visit, where the children can invite their friends. Each home will have its own kitchen and bath, and enough bedroom space for all the family.” In contrast to the small, dark, dank spaces inhabited by many residents in the district, the author of the article noted and

¹¹ Over 15,000 Chinese Americans served in all branches of the military. For a brief history of Asians in America, see Timothy P. Fong's "The History of Asians in America," *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 23.

¹² For information on the ideology of containment and the American family see Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families and the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Stephanie Coontz examines the myths and realities of the American family in the twentieth century in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). For information on the rise of consumer culture in the post-war suburbs see Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

prospective tenants rejoiced that each apartment was designed “to receive plenty of fresh air and its windows will invite the sunshine.”¹³

While tenants welcomed improved living conditions, others in the Chinatown community viewed the project buildings as a symbol of reparation. By 1951, the Chinese had been in San Francisco for over a century. During that time, Chinese immigrants and their American-born children had endured legal and extra-legal discrimination. From state legislation in the 1860s that prevented Chinese children from attending public schools to the federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the 1924 Immigration Act, the Chinese in San Francisco had encountered a variety of specific and anti-Asian legislation and social policy.¹⁴ The Exclusion Act, which suspended Chinese immigration and prevented states from granting citizenship to a Chinese person, and the Immigration Act, which set the immigrant quota for China and Japan at zero, drastically lowered the population of Chinese in the United States and sent a clear message— Chinese were not welcome. Ping Yuen, for many in Chinatown, symbolized a city, state, and federal governmental apology—however limited. The *Chinese Press* exulted that “Ping Yuen is a strong, handsome, living memorial to a dream and its happy realization after more than

¹³ *San Francisco News*, 20 March 1950 quoted in Connie Young Yu's "From Tents to Federal Projects: Chinatown's Housing History" in *The Chinese American Experience. Papers from the Second National Conference on Chinese American Studies*, ed. Ginny Lin (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1980), 136.

¹⁴ The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers in the U.S. and prohibited the naturalization of Chinese: no state could grant a Chinese person citizenship. The act was amended and renewed in 1888 as the more restrictive Scott Act went into effect shutting out any Chinese laborer who had left the U.S. from returning and prohibiting reentry certificates. The Scott Act broke the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, insulted Chinese government officials, and invalidated the return certificates issued to 20,000 laborers. The 1892 Geary Act extended the Exclusion Act for 10 more years and required all Chinese laborers to register with the government and to purchase certificates of residence. After one year those without certificates were liable for deportation. These acts dramatically reduced the number of Chinese in the U.S. and San Francisco. Between 1890 and 1920, the Chinese population in San Francisco dropped from 25,833 to 11,000. The 1924 Immigration Act stopped immigration altogether. The act excluded all Chinese and Japanese from immigrating into the U.S. and set the quota for immigrants at zero.

fifteen years of ‘blood, sweat, and tears’—Ping Yuen is **America’s pledge that a century-old wrong is being righted**” (my emphasis).¹⁵ By providing 224 housing units designated for Chinese Americans in Chinatown, the city demonstrated an understanding of the myriad problems spawned by the housing shortage in the area, and the lack of affordable and accessible housing options for those of Chinese descent outside the district.¹⁶

The demand for apartments in Ping Yuen demonstrated Chinatown’s need for public housing. When the rental offices for the project opened in the Chinese Citizens Alliance building on August 1, 1951, applicants lined up around the block. For days people queued outside the office in hopes of living in Ping Yuen; veterans, U.S. citizens, and people displaced by “slum clearance” had priority on the list of over 600 applicants and selected tenants quickly moved into the public housing project.¹⁷ Veteran Watson Low summed up the transformation in his living environment. “The difference from where I lived before and here is like heaven and hell...The place where I was living had a public kitchen and a public toilet and still cost too much.”¹⁸ The major players who shaped Ping Yuen over time came together at the project dedication. Representatives from the Housing Authority, tenants, and members of Chinatown service organizations

¹⁵ Yu, "A History of San Francisco Chinatown Housing," 105.

¹⁶ The term Chinese American, according to scholar Yong Chen, gained prevalence after World War II. It is arguable that many residents moving into Ping Yuen in 1952 did not use this term to describe or define themselves. I am using the term in my text to refer to Chinese immigrants as well as second and third generations of Americans of Chinese ancestry. Unlike Chen, I am using the term to refer both to citizens and non-citizens: immigrants living in the United States participated to some extent in American life and culture whether they were citizens or not. For a comprehensive history of the Chinese in San Francisco before World War II see Yong Chen's *Chinese San Francisco 1850-1943: A Trans-Pacific Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Yu, "A History of San Francisco Chinatown Housing," 105.

¹⁸ Watson Low, interview by author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 15 May 2003.

celebrated the realization of public housing in the overcrowded district. During the next five decades the complex web of cooperation and contestation between these groups resulted in Ping Yuen's success as a public housing project that has been a relatively safe and decent place for residents to live.

Examining Ping Yuen's history underscores the critical importance of regionalism defined both as the way federal housing policy plays out in relation to San Francisco's political, social, and cultural structures *and* as an architectural style attendant to local characteristics. The declension model of public housing emphasized in studies of the Midwest and East falls apart when applied to Ping Yuen, revealing that regional and local conditions matter greatly. The Housing Authority's collaboration with district leaders in the 1940s and 1950s demonstrates the significance of what scholar Gwendolyn Wright identified as a key component to successful public housing— an attention to “regionalism” that goes beyond design by showing “a concern for local traditions—social and architectural—with a determination to push the federal standards and fiscal limits” and “to insist upon trying new ideas.”¹⁹ While the Housing Authority's sensitivity to and cooperation with the Chinese community in the design-phase demonstrated the agency's early goal of strengthening communities and broke with the city's pattern of ignoring Chinatown, the authority failed as a landlord over time. Ping Yuen tenants in the late 1960s stepped in to fill the gaps left by the Housing Authority's erratic care. Working together over the past four decades, Chinatown social service organizations and Ping

¹⁹ Gwendolyn Wright, "The Evolution of Public Housing Policy and Design in the San Francisco-Bay Area," part of Ph.D. Qualifying Exam, College of Environmental Design, Department of Architecture, University of California, Berkeley, 22 November 1976, 57.

Yuen tenants have fashioned public housing to fit community needs, demonstrating the possibilities of local input and resident control over public housing.

Moving outside the traditional reliance on Chinese associations that governed the “ethnic ghetto” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinatown organizations both embraced and challenged tenets of the welfare state’s public housing provisions. In 1938, through the activities of Chinatown social service organizations and again in 1966, with the start of the Ping Yuen Residents Improvement Association (PYRIA), Chinatown leaders used the federal housing program to improve the Ping Yuen and Chinatown communities. The historic segregation of the Chinese in San Francisco that prompted the need for public housing in Chinatown fostered alliances between the tenants’ association, non-profit organizations, and businesses in the district that proved mutually beneficial. A century of separation had encouraged bonds of community between many Chinatown residents.²⁰ Because of their location in Chinatown the language and culture of their homeland continues to dominate residents’ lives in Ping Yuen and the area around the project. Leaders of the tenants’ association, many of whom do not speak fluent English, have served the project for over three decades. The tenants’ association members have been a force for change, addressing residents’ grievances with the state and exercising their democratic rights to receive state funds through subsidized rents and to challenge

²⁰ See for example, Lizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Cohen argues that European immigrants in Chicago between 1919 and 1939 bonded together to "make a new deal" for themselves because of their shared work experiences and enjoyment of American mass culture. While Cohen effectively demonstrates how working-class immigrants used the emerging welfare state to improve their situation, she does not explore how their whiteness afforded them opportunities unavailable to Asian immigrants and African Americans. Many European immigrants in the late nineteenth century quickly realized the value of being white in the U.S. The Chinese, burdened under the label of the "yellow peril" in the nineteenth century, could not assume the privileges of whiteness. The American black-white racial framework left no space for Asians (or Latina/os.) See David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991).

the Housing Authority to better serve their needs.²¹ As a result, Ping Yuen is, by the estimate of its residents, a successful public housing project; through an active tenants' association and the cooperation of social service organizations, residents have fought for and won improvements for their project while striving for economic development and an unprecedented amount of control over their state-run living environment. A high-rise, high-density public housing success story, in an era when critics, scholars, and tenants deemed similar designs unworkable, Ping Yuen— Chinatown's American project— stands as a vibrant counterpoint to the failure of public housing nationally while challenging the current trend of standardized designs in redeveloped projects.

ETHNICITY, RACE, CULTURE AND PUBLIC HOUSING

The opening of Ping Yuen was years in the making and involved a careful negotiation between Chinatown-based housing activists, the Housing Authority, and the federal government. Yet it was the efforts of Chinatown organizations that initiated the call for federal public housing in their district. When the Housing Authority opened in 1938, the housing problem in Chinatown was already quite severe. Discrimination, legalized in the Alien Land Law of 1913 that prevented people ineligible for citizenship from also buying property, and practiced by landlords outside Chinatown locked

²¹ In his book on the Chinese in San Francisco, Yong Chen demonstrates how acculturation became more visible in many aspects of Chinatown social life between 1915 and 1943. During these years, many Chinese in Chinatown embraced American movies and other non-Chinese activities such as hosting the Miss Chinatown Pageant and eating at taverns that served American food. Furthermore, he notes that Chinese Americans also increased their participation in American politics during the wars, demonstrating "keen awareness of their political rights." Yet, even as some Chinese became more Americanized, the community continued to support Chinese social and cultural values through Chinese schools and celebrations that reinforced cultural identity for immigrants and their American-born children. Chen, *Chinese San Francisco 1850-1943*, 40.

approximately 20,000 Chinese into 20 square blocks.²² An editorial in the *Chinese Digest* criticized the policies that forced a number of families to crowd together in tenements designed for single men. The editorial went on to contend that beyond Grant Avenue and Powell Street “a barbed wire barrier in the form of a concerted front with a ‘we do not rent to Orientals’ sign is presented. Occasionally the answer is it was just rented this morning. Until such a time when prejudiced landowners see the light, housing conditions will remain an inevitable problem in Chinatown.”²³

When the family, district, and regional associations in Chinatown designated to protect the welfare of members and to settle local problems were unable to resolve the area’s housing crisis, Chinatown housing activists turned to state and federal assistance as a possible solution.²⁴ In June 1937, just prior to the passage of the Housing Act, housing advocate Lim P. Lee noted the importance of the legislation for the district, explaining that after the bill passed “San Francisco Chinatown can request the proper housing

²² Mark Daniels, Jr., "Oriental Architecture for Chinatown Housing Unit," *Architect and Engineer*, December 1939, 37. According to Daniels most of the residents in Chinatown lived primarily in the 9 blocks of the district's core area.

²³ Yu, "A History of Chinatown Housing," 101. Yu explains that the *Chinese Digest* was a magazine published by Chinese-American intellectuals who were part of a visible college-educated, American-born generation in Chinatown that began criticizing the community's housing, health care, and lack of employment opportunities in the 1930s.

²⁴ For Chinese communities at home and abroad the basic unit of social control was the family unit. Thomas Chinn explains that when "broader social needs were required, the family associations came into being...As the name implies, each association includes members with the same surname." Family associations exercised a large amount of influence over members, punishing unruly members and protecting and helping those in need. District associations provided another level of support to businesses. District associations included members originating from certain districts in Kwangtung and performed administrative duties for businesses and groups. In San Francisco's Chinatown, the district associations formed the Chinese Six Companies that was incorporated in 1901 under its legal name, Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and was empowered to speak and act for all California Chinese in "problems and affairs which affected the majority of them." The Chinese Six Companies settled disputes, and initiated programs for the general welfare of the Chinese in California. After World War II, the influence of family and district associations and of the Chinese Six Companies was diminished by the increasing numbers of Chinese Americans assimilating into American culture. Thomas Chinn, "A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus" (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1969), 65-66.

authorities to set up housing in this community for the families of low income. In view of our congested conditions, this is one of the urgent needs.”²⁵ Shortly after the San Francisco Housing Authority formed, the Housing Commissioners received a number of letters from Chinatown housing advocates. During the Housing Authority Commission meeting on July 21, 1938, the Secretary read a letter from The Chinese Young Women’s Christian Association urging the Housing Authority to “make every effort to remedy the social situation of overcrowded homes in the Chinese section of the city.” Commissioner Alice Griffith, supporting the sentiment of the letter, concurred that “the Chinese are very anxious to have us do something for them the same as we are doing for other sections of the city.”²⁶ Responding to the activists’ pleas and the 1939 Real Property Survey that confirmed the deplorable housing conditions in the district, the Housing Authority moved forward with CAL 1-5, the Chinatown housing project. Their plans to “relieve conditions in Chinatown, which is notorious for its poor housing,” however, were cut short when the land prices in the district exceeded federal limits for purchase.²⁷

Despite this setback, the leaders of the Chinese community refused to abandon their goal of bringing public housing to the area. Working together, housing activists in Chinatown formed the Chinatown Housing Project Committee in 1939 to “take up the

²⁵ Lim P. Lee, "Chinatown's Housing Problem Due for Airing," *Chinese Digest*, June 1937.

²⁶ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 21 July 1938, San Francisco Housing Authority.

²⁷ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 17. The Housing Authority's willingness to aid the Chinatown community broke with the city's history of discriminating against the Chinese and ignoring Chinatown's problems. The Housing Authority's decision to act arguably demonstrates the new agency's goal of bringing better housing to the most distressed areas in the city, and/or its fear of tuberculosis spreading throughout San Francisco. Similarly, it reveals, to some extent, the increasingly "Sinophile sentiments" of American society in the late 1930s and early 1940s that created an environment in which the Chinese exclusion acts could be abolished following China's alliance with the U.S. during World War II. Chen, *Chinese San Francisco 1850-1943*, 255.

fight to have money appropriated from the Housing Authority funds for the erection of a housing unit in Chinatown."²⁸ Headed by Dr. Theodore Lee, the committee's organizational members included the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association, the Chinese Catholic Center, Cathay Post American Legion, and members of the Chinese Six Companies. Lee, working with the Junior Chamber of Commerce, tried to convince the city that improved housing conditions in Chinatown would benefit all of San Francisco.²⁹ Undeterred by federal limits on land prices, the Chinatown Housing Committee appealed to Eleanor Roosevelt.

The evidence regarding Eleanor Roosevelt's connection to the development of public housing in Chinatown reveals competing narratives. Decades after her reported intervention, Johnny Ng noted in a 1989 *AsianWeek* article that Mrs. Roosevelt learned about the housing crisis in the district when she received a copy of the report "Living Conditions in Chinatown."³⁰ Ng does not mention who sent her the report. Theodore

²⁸ Mark Daniels, Jr. "Oriental Architecture for Chinatown Housing Unit," *Architect and Engineer*, 37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 102. Connie Young Yu argues that the Chinatown Housing Project Committee was a grassroots committee formed in the late 1930s by housing activists in Chinatown who led the fight for better housing in the district. Similarly, architect Mark Daniels, Jr., in a December 1939 issue of *Architect and Engineer*, described the Committee as forming in 1939 to urge the Housing Authority to appropriate funds for public housing in Chinatown. In contrast, the Housing Authority Commission Minutes dated September 20, 1951, lists Resolution 821 honoring the Chinatown Housing Committee that "was named at the request of the Housing Commission of the City and County of San Francisco, to bring about the full cooperation of all groups in Chinatown in furthering the construction and dedication of Ping Yuen." It seems as though the Housing Authority wanted to take credit for the work done by Chinatown activists. The end result, nonetheless, demonstrated that the Housing Authority and the Chinatown housing groups worked together to have Ping Yuen built.

³⁰ In his 1989 article, Ng reports that plans to bring public housing to Chinatown began in 1939 when city newspapers published a study called "Living Conditions in Chinatown," which detailed the horrible living conditions in the district and the health problems arising out of them. Ng claims that a copy of the report was sent to Eleanor Roosevelt who "helped generate more public attention to the problem and called for the improvement of housing in Chinatown in her weekly newspaper column." Johnny Ng, "Ping Yuen's

Lee, however, remembers chaperoning Eleanor Roosevelt through Chinatown and talking to her about the area's housing shortage. Lee's recollection falls in line with the activism of the committee and the impact members had in bringing public housing to Chinatown. According to Lee, he and members of the Chamber of Commerce took the First Lady on a tour of Chinatown in April 1939, after which she talked to her husband about increasing the level of federal funding for public housing in the district. Lee recalls,

I told her Chinatown is very unique, it is self-contained and has its own culture, but there is an ugly side that we don't like to talk about. There is the highest infant mortality rate in the city. There is inadequate housing from the days of the single men society with everyone sleeping in one big room. As a result, we have the highest tuberculosis rate in the country. The only way to help the community is to change the law. 'I'll talk to my husband,' she said.³¹

On October 30, 1939 President Roosevelt signed the Chinatown Housing Bill, delegating \$1,365,000 in funds to go toward a housing project in the district.

After approving additional funds for the project the USHA stipulated that the remaining one-third of the money come from local sources.³² Working together, the Chinatown Housing Project Committee, the Chinese Advisory Committee, the Junior Chamber of Commerce and representatives from other organizations lobbied for the

Construction Was a Long-Fought Battle," *AsianWeek*, 15 December 1989. I have not found other accounts of Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to Chinatown.

³¹ Yu, "From Tents to Federal Projects," 135. In an interview with Connie Young Yu, Lee claims he and members of the Chamber of Commerce took the First Lady on a tour of Chinatown in 1939 after which she talked to her husband about increasing the federal limit for purchasing land for public housing. In a 1970 interview with Victor Nee and Brett de Bary, Lee explained how he managed to meet Eleanor Roosevelt and to show her around. At the time, Lee was in the restaurant business and often hosted famous visitors free of charge as part of their tour of Chinatown. When he learned that Eleanor Roosevelt might be coming to his restaurant, he alerted the Chinese Junior Chamber of Commerce. According to Lee, they took the First Lady on a tour of tenements showing her the horrible conditions where "whole families were living in one room, sleeping on the floor. We told her about the high infant mortality rate in Chinatown, and that we had a high rate of T.B., too." The first lady told the group about public housing and they explained to her that the land prices in Chinatown exceeded federal limits. She supported the cause of housing in Chinatown after her return to Washington. Victor Nee and Brett de Bary Nee, interview with Dr. Theodore Lee, tape recording, San Francisco, California, summer 1970.

³² San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1940, 17.

funds, working against San Franciscans' concerns about public housing projects effecting land prices. Fearful of decreased property values in and around Chinatown, members of the Nob Hill Association, fought against Ping Yuen. Theodore Lee argued,

They knew that Chinatown was in a very high tax area, that the property was valuable. Also, to them, Chinatown was a stigma lying right there between the high-class Nob Hill residential section and Montgomery Street, the financial district. They never liked Chinatown because it was in the way. And they could never get used to Chinese New Years.' All that noise during the whole week of celebration was a nuisance. So every time I would go out to speak, they would send their lawyer out to speak for the opposing side.³³

Battling resistance from some members of the San Francisco community, Chairman Lee made hundreds of speeches to civic and community groups across San Francisco about the overcrowded housing conditions in Chinatown. The alliance of organizations for public housing in Chinatown spent months publicizing their cause, with a platform focused primarily on improving health conditions in the district and secondarily on assisting the city's economy through tourism. In an effort to demonstrate the possibilities for public housing in Chinatown, the Junior Chamber of Commerce asked architect Mark Daniels to prepare architectural studies for buildings that he based on western and northern Chinese architecture. *Architect and Engineer* published the sketches along with Daniels' plea for the project: "It will form not only a beautiful background but a monument to San Francisco's romantic and historic Chinatown, the largest Chinese settlement outside of Asia. It will bring business to both the Chinese and white merchants of San Francisco. There are benefits in addition to those of health and living standards."³⁴ On March 4, 1940, the committee's efforts paid off when the San

³³ Lee, interview.

³⁴ Mark Daniels Jr., "Oriental Architecture for Chinatown Housing Unit," *Architect and Engineer*, 38.

Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously passed resolution No. 852 pledging \$75,000 for the development of public housing in Chinatown.³⁵ By 1941, the Housing Authority was soliciting bids for the demolition of existing buildings and asking architects to begin submitting proposals. A year later the SFHA purchased the land, totaling 2.6 acres, and commissioned architects Mark Daniels and Henry Howard with their six-story modern “American-Oriental designs.” The much needed construction of public housing in San Francisco’s Chinatown was posed to start.³⁶

World War II would delay the project again, but after the war the Housing Authority reactivated the project and furthered their collaboration with Chinatown leaders in an effort to finally bring public housing to the district. Their collective efforts were threatened by increased post-war costs for land and building supplies and by the growing strength of the anti-public housing lobby in the state capitol.³⁷ Hamstrung by soaring land and construction costs, the Housing Authority could only move ahead on the project after the passage of the federal Housing Act of 1949 increased funding for loans and subsidies.

With the funds in place, the Housing Authority and Chinatown housing activists still faced another obstacle: voter approval. Following on the heels of the Housing Act of 1949, the California Legislature passed State Article XXXIV requiring local referenda on any proposed public housing projects. A major victory for the anti-public housing lobby

³⁵ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 17.

³⁶ "Chinatown Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 July 1949. The article lists the land purchase price at \$380,673 and the estimated total cost of the buildings at \$1,360,000 in 1942.

³⁷ Once again, the high cost of building in Chinatown delayed the project from moving forward as the Housing Authority had to reject bids that exceeded federal limits: funds appropriated in 1939 and 1941 had been spent on the war. It was not until the federal Housing Act of 1949 was passed that the Housing Authority could finally move ahead with the project.

in California, the law did little to slow down San Francisco's building program. Housing activists' strategy of campaigning for a Chinatown project by emphasizing the tuberculosis (T.B.) problem in the district paid off when San Francisco voters approved Ping Yuen.³⁸ The project held out the promise of decreasing the high T.B. rate in Chinatown, a public health danger that threatened to spread to nearby areas. By voting yes on the referenda to build public housing in the district, San Franciscans could continue to contain the Chinese in Chinatown and curtail the possible spread of T.B. in the city. Recognized as the "only public housing project in the country with discernable Oriental architectural design" and as "one of the few projects to receive the unanimous endorsement of all city groups, however divergent their politics," Chinatown's \$3,500,000 housing project finally opened with the city and neighborhood's backing in 1951.³⁹

The extensive collaboration between the Housing Authority and the Chinatown community made the improbable project possible and created a firm foundation for the future of Ping Yuen. This successful cooperation was made possible in part by city officials' changing attitudes towards Chinatown. Initially city officials ignored Chinatown but Chinese support of the war effort and the district's consistent draw as a tourist attraction resulted in the city's move to support the area. The Housing Authority's willingness to work with the Chinatown community and to take into account the community's cultural values and social needs during the planning phases gave the project

³⁸ Carey and Co, Inc., "Historic Resource Evaluation: Ping Yuen Housing Development," Prepared for the San Francisco Housing Authority, 26 July 2001, 9.

³⁹ "Worst in U.S.," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 July 1949.

a positive start by making it a product of rather than an imposition on the surrounding community. For example, in contrast to their practice of selecting names for all the city's housing projects, the Housing Authority Commissioners ceded control over naming the Chinatown project to the Chinese Advisory Committee and offered to postpone the name selection process for the Chinese Festival.⁴⁰ After several months the committee presented their choice of Ping Yuen, meaning "Tranquil Gardens," to the Commissioners. The group also suggested differentiating the three project buildings with the Chinese words for east (tung), middle (chung) and west (sai.). Taking into consideration the primary language of the Chinatown area, Cantonese, the Commission voted unanimously to use the names and insisted "that the Chinese characters for these names be used in decorating the project."⁴¹

The Housing Authority's interest in creating continuity between the housing project and the surrounding area expanded to encompass the social needs of the neighborhood. Again, in collaboration with Chinatown community members who pushed the city's bureaucracy for improvements in the area, the Housing Authority responded positively to a request for a health care center. A month after the Housing Authority applied for federal funds to build Ping Yuen, Doctor Geiger of the City Health Department sent a letter to the Housing Commissioners asking for space in Ping Yuen for the Chinatown Health Center. In a clear understanding of the important role the health center played for residents in an area with high rates of T.B., the Housing Commissioners

⁴⁰ Minutes of San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 18 April 1941, San Francisco Housing Authority. Commissioner Alice Griffith worked with the Chinese Advisory Committee on the name selection process. Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 8 May 1941, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁴¹ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 15 January 1942, San Francisco Housing Authority.

approved the request.⁴² The initial deferral of the project did not deter the Health Department. In 1949, Doctor Geiger again requested space in Ping Yuen. Acknowledging that the Chinatown Health Center's location was "not adequate," the Commissioners unanimously voted to provide space in Ping Yuen for the health center.⁴³ By agreeing to locate the San Francisco Health Department's Chinatown Health Center in Ping Yuen, the commissioners extended the connection between project residents and the larger community. Open to the entire community, the Health Center drew people living outside of Ping Yuen into the project space, fostering feelings of familiarity and ease with public housing and the residents there. Although Ping Yuen was widely supported by Chinatown, the location of the Health Center reinforced the ties between public housing residents and the larger community.

Inside the Health Center, patients and workers witnessed a visual symbol of the cooperation between the Housing Authority and Chinatown on the wall. There in the waiting room they saw a mural commissioned and paid for by the Housing Authority in 1952 celebrating the contributions of Chinese in the United States. The mural, entitled "One Hundred Years of Progress of the Chinese in the U.S." and created by James Leong, a local Chinese-American artist, contained eight sequences "from Chinese (rice fields) to the departure for America and the gold rush and railroad building period ending with the role of the Chinese in World War II and Ping Yuen, a better life for the

⁴² Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 26 September 1940, San Francisco Housing Authority. The issue of the health care center did not come up again until 1949.

⁴³ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 18 August 1949, San Francisco Housing Authority. According to the Housing Commission Minutes from October 2, 1952, the Health Department paid \$80.00 a month to rent space in Ping Yuen. In 1956 the Housing Authority leased additional space to the Health Department and raised the rent to \$300.00 a month. Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 16 September 1956, San Francisco Housing Authority.

Chinese.”⁴⁴ The Housing Authority carefully excluded depictions of the discrimination the Chinese had endured in San Francisco, eliminating a section depicting “the Dennis Kearny episode” proposed in the original sketches. (Kearny organized the Workingman’s Party in 1877 with the slogan “The Chinese Must Go” and incited many whites to burn Chinese businesses.) Paying for the \$1000 mural out of its own funds, the Housing Authority reinforced a misrepresentation of the Chinese in the U.S. through the “positive” artistic representation selected to adorn the Health Center in Ping Yuen. The agency refused to depict the difficulties the Chinese had endured in San Francisco. By sponsoring a “whitewashed” depiction of the “happy Chinese” in San Francisco, the SFHA revealed the limits of its cooperation with Chinatown and the agency’s own promotional agenda.

The SFHA’s other community-based decisions shored up backing for Ping Yuen while demonstrating bureaucratic sensitivity to the neighborhood’s cultural and spatial politics representative of the agency’s initial goal of fostering “community.” For example, the SFHA approved changes to the project buildings in order to add commercial space and oblige business owners located on one side of the site.⁴⁵ Likewise, when contracting for model apartment decorators, the Housing Authority patronized a local business, hiring a San Francisco-based Chinese furniture distributor—the Ti Sun Company based on Grant Avenue—to do the work. The model apartment had

⁴⁴ Martin Snipper, *A Survey of Art Work in the City and County of San Francisco*, (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Commission, 1975), 325. The mural was made of egg tempera painted on a prepared panel that was 17 ½' x 4 ½' high. Artist James Leong was born in 1928 and studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts. He also painted murals for the Chung Mei Home for Boys in El Cerrito. According to the Housing Authority Commission minutes from July 19, 1952, the commissioners agreed with Commissioner Jung's recommendation that the Dennis Kearney section be eliminated and replaced with "something of a more constructive nature with regard to the Chinese people."

⁴⁵ Carey and Co., "Historic Resource Evaluation," 10.

watercolors in the bedroom and oil paintings for each room, including a traditional-style Chinese print by James Leong in “the dinette section” of the apartment.⁴⁶ A mixture of “Chinese decorations and accessories fit in with Modern (Western)...pieces” such as a record cabinet and cocktail table, the model apartment represented the fusion of Chinese and American elements that shaped the housing project.⁴⁷

In a further show of understanding of Chinatown’s cultural and economic interests, the Housing Authority commissioned plans that incorporated what Gwendolyn Wright has termed “Chinese regionalism,” resulting in a project that fit in with the district and bolstered tourism. Designed by Mark Daniels and Henry Howard, who turned the project over to J. Francis Ward and John Bolles after the war, the housing complex consists of three concrete six-story buildings with courtyards in the rear and 46 one-bedroom units, 92 two-bedroom units, 75 three-bedroom units, and 21 four-bedroom units. A modern high-density structure with elevators, the project showcased Chinese design, including “a side-gabled terra cotta tile roof and exterior hallways accented with inset panels and colored, diamond-shaped ceramic tiles” and vertical supports with “rectangular posts with incised Chinese characters indicating ‘Ping Yuen.’”⁴⁸ With bright

⁴⁶ “The Ping Yuen Model Inventory,” an unmarked article seemingly published by the Heywood-Wakefield furniture company whose pieces the Ti Sun Company used in the model apartment, December 1951. Chinese Historical Society’s Ping Yuen scrapbook, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley. The model apartments were open to the public during the dedication of Ping Yuen. The Mayor and his wife toured the apartments and had traditional Chinese tea in one of the models before the ceremony began. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the two model apartments were scheduled to remain open to the public between 1 and 5 p.m. for five days after the Ping Yuen dedication. “Chinatown’s Ping Yuen Dedication Today,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 October 1951.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Gwendolyn Wright, “The Evolution of Public Housing Policy and Design in San-Francisco Bay Area,” 32, 34. The completion of the 6-story, high-density apartments aligned with current trends in public housing construction that partly resulted from provisions of the 1949 Housing Act stressing urban redevelopment to revive blighted areas in central cities.

yellow and red paint that blended seamlessly into the neighborhood, the project fit in with the faux Chinese architectural style that entrepreneurs had hoped would lure tourists to the area after Chinatown was rebuilt following the 1906 earthquake and fire.⁴⁹ (Figures 3-6)

A 1946 bulletin released by the Downtown Association and sent to the Housing Authority stressed the importance “from a trade standpoint of maintaining the Chinese character of Chinatown.”⁵⁰ Responding to the need to boost tourism, the Housing Commissioners approved an additional structure that did more than merely echo the aesthetic of the district. Ping Yuen boasted its own tourist attraction: a reproduction of the Paliou Gate copied from the Marble Pagoda in Beijing with an inscription over it by China’s famed philosopher, Lao Tse, reading “Peace and Prosperity Prevail Among

⁴⁹ With its prominent location on 2.6 acres near the center of the district, the design of Ping Yuen played a pivotal role in maintaining the "oriental" style that emerged after the earthquake and fire of 1906. As entrepreneurs in Chinatown began to rebuild, they incorporated Chinese architectural details to beckon tourists and to ward off "the constant threat of removal and annihilation of Chinatown by the Board of Supervisors and other anti-Chinese forces." Philip Choy and Christopher Yip, *A Historical and Architectural Guide to San Francisco's Chinatown* (San Francisco: Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement and Resource Center, 1981), 25. Led by Look Tin Eli, who saw the potential of appealing to the Anglo market, many business owners in the area rebuilt structures with "oriental flavor" including pagoda-like roofs, dragons for ornamentation, and other details ironically not found in the rural areas of southern China where most of Chinatown's immigrants came from. For more information on Look Tin Eli and his efforts to rebuild Chinatown as a tourist attraction see Christopher L. Yip's "The Impact of the Social-Historical Context on Chinese American Settlement," from *The Chinese American Experience: Papers from the Second National Conference on Chinese American Studies*, ed. Ginny Lim (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1980), 140+. Between 1920 and 1940, Chinatown emerged as a major tourist destination within the city. A year before Ping Yuen opened, George K. Jue, former president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, summed up the importance of tourism to the district: "Chinatown is the number one tourist attraction in San Francisco. This trade brings to the city a total of over fifty millions of dollars every year.... The future, as in the past and present, depends primarily on continued tourist trade; and conversely, the tourist trade depends upon Chinatown, its number one attraction in San Francisco." George K. Jue, "Chinatown—Its History, Its People, Its Importance," lecture in the series "Know Your San Francisco," offered by Marina Adult School in cooperation with the San Francisco Junior Chamber of Commerce, Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley.

⁵⁰ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 20 June 1946, San Francisco Housing Authority.



FIGURE 3

Ping Yuen, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author



FIGURE 4

Ping Yuen, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author



FIGURE 5

People pausing to look at Ping Yuen

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library



FIGURE 6

Pailou Gate, Ping Yuen, San Francisco

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

Virtuous Neighbors”—an adage the Housing Authority surely supported. The gate, as well as the project’s design, pleased both the city and the district that depended on tourist revenue. The city even went so far as to promote the project as a tourist site, listing Ping Yuen on the Chamber of Commerce’s tourist map of Chinatown.⁵¹ The project’s location in a tourist district influenced its design and future policy decisions that had an impact on residents. The location also demonstrated the collaboration between the neighborhood and the Housing Authority that pushed the federal boundaries for public housing.

The Housing Authority’s attention to Chinatown’s housing and economic needs continued throughout the 1950s as the agency and federal government responded to the marked shifts in Chinese Americans’ status in the United States following World War II. The Chinese gained acceptance, legalized discrimination declined, and the establishment of a communist government in China in 1949 prompted many Chinese Americans to disassociate themselves from China in response to the political climate of the McCarthy era. Shortly after Ping Yuen opened, Chinatown residents asked for more public housing units to offset the population shifts resulting from federal legislation that both enabled families to move out of Chinatown by banning restrictive covenants and increased the population by raising immigration quotas.⁵² With over 500 families on the waiting list for

⁵¹ *San Francisco Chinatown* (San Francisco: San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1963). Ping Yuen is listed under "Chinatown Points of Interest," number 28, Ping Yuen Housing Projects. Gates like the replica placed in front of the Central Ping Yuen building were traditionally used in China to commemorate heroic events. According to the Housing Authority, the replica they commissioned was the first one built in the United States. "Chinatown's Ping Yuen Dedication Today," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 October 1951.

⁵² China's alliance with the United States during World War II resulted in the easement of racial hostilities and the end of discriminatory laws. These changes, along with the U.S. Supreme Court's 1947 decision declaring restrictive covenants non-enforceable, afforded some Chinatown residents the chance to leave the ethnic enclave. Chalsa M. Loo explains that these shifts altered the meaning of Chinese ethnic identity as homogeneity along class lines emerged. Chinese Americans with better incomes moved into adjoining or outlying areas such as the Richmond District. Loo argues that "[I]iving outside the ghetto connoted higher

Ping Yuen in January 1954, the Housing Authority began discussing ways to overcome the high land costs and additional fees for Chinese design elements for another housing project in Chinatown.⁵³ As the Cold War escalated and the white, middle-class, heterosexual nuclear family emerged as a symbol of the American ideal, housing immigrants in Chinatown took on a new significance. In appealing to the PHA for extra funds the Housing Authority stressed Ping Yuen's significance as a political tool, a way station for immigrants from communist China who sought a better life in the United States.⁵⁴ The Commissioners, implicitly lauding the Housing Authority's role as manager of the project, reminded the PHA that Ping Yuen was "'a must see' on the itinerary of all groups referred to the Authority by the State department and **has been one of the best arguments against Communism in the Far East**" (my emphasis)."⁵⁵ Building another project with "Oriental motifs," the Housing Commissioners argued, would appease Chinatown residents and strengthen the fight against communism by housing Chinese

socioeconomic status." Thus even as Chinatown remained the "homebase for the majority of San Francisco Chinese," it was no longer the exclusive location of Chinese residency" (60). Yet, as Chinatown residents began moving out, a new influx of immigrants came in responding to the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act that admitted 27,502 Chinese immigrants between 1951 and 1960. Ensuing legislation had a further impact on Chinatown. A decade after the McCarran Act, John F. Kennedy used presidential directive to permit Hong Kong refugees to enter the U.S. swelling the number of immigrants to 15,000 by 1966. The 1959 repeal of the Alien Land Law and the 1965 Immigration Act (which abolished the 1943 quota that allowed in 105 Chinese per year and changed the quota to 20,000 people per year) further altered the social and economic landscape of Chinatown. As Chinese Americans began to own property in Chinatown, more Chinese Americans moved out of the district, and an influx of 20,000 immigrants from countries across Asia began immigrating to the U.S., with many landing in San Francisco. As a result, the population of Chinatown increased to 31,000 in 1960. The movement of Chinese Americans out of Chinatown, with some living in adjacent areas, spurred the growth of the district from 30 city blocks in 1940 to 224 city blocks in 1970 leading the Department of City Planning to designate core, residential, and expanded areas of Chinatown in 1970. Chalsa M. Loo, *Chinatown: Most Time, Hard Time* (New York: Prager, 1991), 51.

⁵³ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 7 January 1954, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁵⁴ The United States Housing Authority started in 1937 was later changed to the Public Housing Administration (PHA). In 1965, Congress passed a Housing Act establishing the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) which replaced the PHA.

⁵⁵ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 21 August 1958, San Francisco Housing Authority.

families. The Housing Authority, promoting itself through Ping Yuen, went so far as to present visiting governmental officials both from the U.S. and abroad miniature replicas of the Paliou Gate symbolizing the success of Ping Yuen.⁵⁶ The PHA, unconvinced of the necessity for another "Chinese project," rejected the Housing Authority's initial request for additional monies to render Chinese designs at the Ping Yuen annex. Ironically, as the PHA turned the SFHA away, the federal Immigration Department looked to the authority for help, asking for photographs of Ping Yuen. Immigrant officials wanted to show Chinese immigrants the high quality facilities available to them in the U.S.⁵⁷

Eventually the Housing Authority, with continuous backing of the Chinatown community, secured federal approval for additional costs of land purchases and it raised money to include Chinese motifs for the new project. Finally on October 29, 1961, Ping Yuen North was dedicated. At a cost of \$3 million, the twelve-story building on the block bounded by Stockton and Powell Streets, and Broadway and Pacific Avenues, provided apartments for 150 families and 44 singles (used to house elderly tenants) with total unit space for approximately 560 people.⁵⁸ Housing both families with children and elderly people, the "Z" building made of reinforced concrete echoed the Chinese

⁵⁶ The minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission list several instances where replicas were given out to high-level visitors. For example, the September 17, 1953 minutes record the receipt of a thank you note from the Housing and Home Finance Agency Administrator Albert M. Cole for the "miniature Ping Yuen Gate" sent to him after he visited the city.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "Chinatown Apartment Dedication," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 October 1961. The promotion of the project started in 1960 with the ground breaking for the project. The Queen of Chinatown, USA and "her court of beautiful girls" along with Mayor Christopher and the "representatives of every organization in Chinatown," attended the formal ground breaking for the Ping Yuen Annex. Firecrackers were set off to scare away evil spirits. San Francisco Housing Authority, *A Road to the Golden Age: A Report of the First Twenty Years of Operations, 1940-1960*, 1960, 13. The dedication for North Ping Yuen drew a crowd of 500 for the celebration that included the traditional Chinese firecracker dance. "A Dedication at Ping Yuen North," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 October 1961.

decorative motifs of the first three Ping Yuen projects, including “an interesting Chinese design” on the lower balcony and “a monumental pillar” in the garden.⁵⁹ Pitched to the federal government as a demonstration of superior American values over communism, and marketed to the city as an important addition to the local economy and an “Oriental” attraction promising “to out-rival its companion project as a tourism attraction,” Ping Yuen North opened “in the tradition of Chinatown” with a celebration similar to the festivities in 1952.⁶⁰ The completion of Ping Yuen North signaled the SFHA’s last sustained attempt to foster communities through public housing development in the city until the 1990s. Built for Chinese American and Chinese residents, like the original Ping Yuen project, but technically open to anyone on the public housing waiting list, Ping Yuen North showcased the continuing cooperation between the Housing Authority and the Chinatown district.⁶¹

While the Housing Authority’s support for and collaboration with the Chinatown district strengthened ties between tenants and the larger neighborhood, it also provoked criticism from some African American leaders. When Ping Yuen opened in 1952, the Housing Authority allocated tenant occupancy through its 1942 neighborhood pattern plan that established an occupancy ratio for racial and ethnic groups in proportion to their

⁵⁹ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Nineteenth Annual Report*, 1959, 1. Further underscoring the importance of tourism to the city and Chinatown’s economy, the report predicted that Ping Yuen North would “out rival its companion project as a tourist attraction.”

⁶⁰ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Nineteenth Annual Report* and *A Road to the Golden Age*, 1959 and 1960.

⁶¹ According the San Francisco Housing Authority Annual Report from 1961-62, “many non-Chinese applied for accommodations there (Ping Yuen Annex) and a considerable number are now residing there” (2). Most likely, the residents were Asians as evidenced by the number of Asian immigrants moving to Chinatown in the 1960s. Because Chinatown resembled some elements of their homelands, many immigrants settled there. By reporting this information in their annual report, the Housing Authority clearly wanted to demonstrate its compliance with the California Supreme Court’s ruling to integrate public housing in San Francisco.

population in a given neighborhood. Two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court, a week before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, issued a clear mandate to the SFHA to integrate public housing in the city.⁶² Nonetheless, Ping Yuen continued to reflect the demographics of Chinatown and to underscore the diversity of San Francisco where the black-white construction of race fell apart. The black/white racial binary under scrutiny in the *Brown* case did not address the diverse population of San Francisco and the West. However, this racial framework infused the discussion of the city's public housing residents, who the SFHA described as white or non-white in the 1950s. According to a 1954 demographic report made by the Secretary of the Housing Commission, Ping Yuen was the only permanent project that did not have "nonwhites living in it." Read as the only project without African Americans, this terminology did not align with the 1854 California state classification of Chinese people as "nonwhites."⁶³ According to the Secretary's report, with a long waiting list for Ping Yuen made up of eligible Chinese, the SFHA moved "nonwhites" into other projects where they made up 63% of the families living in public housing in 1954.⁶⁴

The Housing Authority's consistent placement of Chinese and Chinese Americans on the waiting list for Ping Yuen years after the high court ruling on segregation ignited criticism from one of its own members. In 1963, Solomon Johnson, an African American

⁶² The U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case. This action upheld the California Supreme Court's decision overturning the neighborhood pattern policy.

⁶³ Nee and Nee, *Longtime Californ'*, 32. According to the Nees, almost as soon as the Chinese in California were subjects of legislation they were defined as a "nonwhite people." In an 1854 decision, the court ruled that "Chinese, and all people not white, are included in the prohibition from being witnesses against whites." *People vs. George W. Hall* quoted in Nee and Nee *Longtime Californ'*, 32.

⁶⁴ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 16 September 1954, San Francisco Housing Authority. The Secretary went on to report that this was the last demographic report he would make to the Commission.

attorney and vice chairman of the SFHA challenged the “racial solidarity” of all Chinese families living in Ping Yuen.⁶⁵ Backed by the NAACP and drawing on the national struggle for racial integration, Johnson urged the Housing Authority to take some Chinese residents out of Ping Yuen and move blacks into the project. Integration was not only necessary, Johnson argued, it was the law. Undeterred by the other Housing Commissioners’ claims that the “Chinese people are happy at Ping Yuen,” Johnson argued that placement patterns isolating African Americans in projects resulted in resident frustration that could lead to violence. Attacking what he saw as special treatment and segregation, Johnson claimed, “Those people have no right to be in an all-Chinese project. They’re discriminating against whites and Negroes. We should start moving Chinese out of there.”⁶⁶ Situating his argument within the context of the racial tensions exploding in the South, Johnson pressed his point at a Housing Commission meeting: “We’re sitting here talking just like the people in Birmingham—I can’t believe we’re really here in San Francisco.” His chief opponent on the issue of moving Chinese residents out of Ping Yuen, Commissioner Mazzola, fired back, “Now you just keep Birmingham out of this room.”⁶⁷

Johnson’s press for the integration of Ping Yuen rapidly declined as he came under fire for his comments. The complicated issue of Ping Yuen’s relatively homogeneous tenant population, however, continued. Criticized by Mayor George Christopher for putting forth a proposal that “sets a group of Chinese against a group of Negroes” Johnson responded that he had been misunderstood; his intent was to suggest

⁶⁵ Warren Hinckle, “A Negro Takes on Chinese Housing,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 June 1963.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

that an “inner group relations officer be appointed to encourage qualified applicants for public housing to move into areas where there are existing vacancies.”⁶⁸ An editorial and cartoon in the *San Francisco Chronicle* underscored the complexity of integration at Ping Yuen. Built for the Chinese in Chinatown as demonstrated by its name, location, and architectural design, the project while technically “open to all races” continued to house primarily Chinese who “have regularly dominated the application list.” Ping Yuen, the editorial argued, “like Chinatown, is a special case and may well remain so with offense to no one.”⁶⁹

A cartoon adjacent to the editorial illuminated the precarious racial, ethnic, cultural, and spatial politics intertwined in the proposal to integrate Ping Yuen. In the foreground an African American man in a suit stands across the street from Ping Yuen, looking on with an expression of surprise. In front of Ping Yuen stands a Chinese (or Chinese American) man wearing traditional Chinese clothes and leaning with his right arm on a concrete block labeled Ping Yuen and holding a leash in his left hand. At the end of the leash stands a dragon—mouth open, teeth showing—akin to the statues that decorate the project.⁷⁰ Chinese characters on the building further highlight the cultural gulf between the two men.⁷¹ The Chinese man frowns at the African American. His expression, along with the dragon’s menacing look, alert the “intruder” that African Americans are not welcome at the project. Chinatown and Ping Yuen residents, as well

⁶⁸ “‘Open Housing’ Proposal for Chinatown Explained,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 June 1963.

⁶⁹ “A Specious Show of Integration,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 June 1963.

⁷⁰ Dragons symbolize Chinese nationalism. According to Yong Chen, the dragon was a divine symbol of the Chinese nation in Chinese mythology and folklore, and the paramount image of the emperor’s power centuries before it appeared on the first Chinese national flag. It remained a powerful cultural symbol among Chinese Americans, he explains, who believed it protected the dead. Chen, 129.

⁷¹ Cartoon, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 June 1963.

as the SFHA seemed to uphold the messages of the editorial and cartoon by continually promoting segregation in the district. While Ping Yuen's demographics shifted over time starting with non-Chinese Asian residents moving into Ping Yuen North when it opened in 1962, the project maintained its reputation as a good home for Chinese families.

PRIDE AND PROTEST: PING YUEN RESIDENTS IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION & TENANT ACTIVISM

The bonds between the Housing Authority, residents, and community organizations shifted over time as tenants and social service agencies in Chinatown mobilized in the wake of the African American Civil Rights Movement and the Housing Authority struggled to maintain its projects as the federal government cut funding. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Housing Authority continued to recognize, celebrate, and promote Ping Yuen for its design, dedicated managers, and perfect rent record. The project stood in stark contrast to the Housing Authority's "big four" public housing developments that were becoming riddled with safety and maintenance problems.⁷² As the Housing Authority increasingly focused attention and resources on its problem projects, Ping Yuen residents organized to help themselves, forming the Ping Yuen Residents Improvement Association (PYRIA) in 1966 with guidance from the Equal Opportunity Council (EOC).

The tenants' organization at Ping Yuen grew out of the efforts of the EOC and later garnered the support of other social services agencies in Chinatown. Modeling the community-based activism that helped bring public housing to Chinatown, the formation of PYRIA emerged from a locally based, federally funded initiative to organize "the

⁷² The big four projects were Sunnydale, Hunter's Point, Alice Griffith, and Potrero Terrace. The Housing Authority passed resolutions in the 1960s celebrating Ping Yuen's perfect rent record and paying tribute to Anna Lee, a beloved project manager, for her contributions to the project.

poor.” Created and funded by the 1964 Equal Opportunity Act, and specifically by Title II, “Urban and Rural Community Action Programs,” the Chinatown-North Beach EOC of San Francisco set out to organize community programs with a federal mandate to involve the poor in the development and operation of local programs. In an effort to mobilize low-income residents in Chinatown to collectively organize and work to improve the community’s living conditions, the Chinatown-North Beach EOC targeted the Ping Yuen projects in 1965. With over 1,830 tenants, the EOC viewed Ping Yuen project residents as representative of Chinatown’s basic problems in the areas of employment, health, education, and housing. After overcoming initial resistance from residents, EOC workers gained ground in January 1966 when they held a meeting for residents to discuss their problems and complaints. The tenants’ list was long and detailed their frustrations at the rise in rental rates, loitering, and unsanitary elevators and stairways. This first meeting led to others generating enough interest that residents formed PYRIA, elected officers, and wrote and approved a constitution.⁷³

While the support of the EOC, and later other community organizations aided PYRIA, it was tenant leaders—many Chinese immigrants—who learned about and embraced their rights to participate in and challenge the political process that influenced their lives as residents of state-run housing. Encouraged by the EOC to seek self-help and to participate in city-level meetings, PYRIA leaders turned advice into action. Shortly after forming, PYRIA requested and received additional police patrols, and in an attempt

⁷³ James Lee, "The Grassroot (sic) Program in San Francisco's Chinatown Public Housing Projects: 'The Ping Yuen Residents Improvement Association,'" Paper for Mr. Lewin, Political Science 140, February 1967, University of California, Berkeley.

to promote cleanliness, wrote signs for the garbage disposal area in Chinese as well as in English.

Tackling the two main complaints of tenants—safety and sanitation— the organization then took on to another problem-- space for the new organization. PYRIA officers and two EOC workers attended a Housing Commission meeting in September 1966 to request the use of the laundry room on the ninth floor of Ping Yuen North for PYRIA's meeting space and for other community services such as daycare, English and citizenship classes, social and educational activities, and vocational training.⁷⁴ The Housing Commissioners, enforcing their mandate that no visitor could speak without permission granted prior to the start of the meeting, denied the group's request to address the Commission. In a show of protest, the PYRIA representatives and EOC staff walked out.⁷⁵

During the ensuing two weeks before the next Commission meeting, PYRIA members planned their strategy of using the Commissioners' own "principled" language and housing ideals to support their proposal. At the next meeting PYRIA representatives, Harry Chan and Mrs. Wong (through Chan's translation), on behalf of the 250 PYRIA members, argued that the Housing Authority should grant the organization space because "an association without a meeting room is like a man without a home." Contending that a meeting room would "foster better relationships among residents" and that the PHA

⁷⁴ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 1 September 1966, San Francisco Housing Authority. The minutes state that Larry Jack Wong and Father Joseph Wong, officers of the Chinatown-North Beach Area EOC office, had written letters on behalf of the Ping Yuen Residents Improvement Association. Over time the minutes clearly demonstrate that PYRIA officers relied less on EOC workers for assistance. Even with the guidance of the EOC, PYRIA members stood up for themselves, attending Housing Commission meetings and asking to speak on behalf of the tenants.

⁷⁵ Lee, "The Grassroot (sic) Program in San Francisco's Chinatown Public Housing Projects," 7.

guidelines stated tenants' associations should have a meeting place, they urged the Commissioners to remodel the laundry room into a meeting space. In a clear expression of Ping Yuen's importance, both as a model public housing project that the city showed off to visitors and as the project with "virtuous neighbors" who paid their rent on time each month, Mrs. Wong and Mr. Chan drew on the success of the project as leverage for a meeting space:

Historically speaking, Ping Yuen has had the best record in rent paying. In the past fifteen years, Ping Yuen residents have paid more than one and a half million dollars in rent. We have never been delinquent in paying rent, as you can see from the tribute given to Ping Yuen by the Housing Commission in 1961. The Ping Yuen residents have never asked for anything. This is the first time.⁷⁶

While the Housing Commissioners unanimously agreed to "make every endeavor to provide...space" for the residents, the request stalled for over three years.⁷⁷ PYRIA members continued their efforts during these three years, submitting a petition for the space and trying to raise money for the overhaul of the laundry through donations.⁷⁸ In

⁷⁶ This speech in its entirety appears in the appendix of James Lee's paper. He cites it as Henry Chan's speech. Mrs. Wong's first name is not cited.

⁷⁷ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 3 November 1966, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁷⁸ At the November 3, 1966 meeting, Henry Chan presented a petition in an effort to expedite the Housing Commissioners' decision to seek funds for renovation of the laundry into a meeting space. The Housing Authority submitted a request for funds for the renovation to the Housing Assistance Administration (HAA) in November 1966. In response, the HAA in January 1967 refused the authorization of additional expenditures for a meeting room on the grounds that "this type of facility ...should have been included in the original Development program." Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 3 November 1966 and January 5, 1967, San Francisco Housing Authority. Working on behalf of the tenants, the Housing Authority dispatched a letter back to the HAA pointing out that "social services has changed considerably" since Ping Yuen was built and that tenants groups did not exist in 1952 in Chinatown, or elsewhere. The Executive Director reiterated the Housing Authority's \$10,623 request for "a tenant activities space at Ping Yuen North." Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 5 January 1967, San Francisco Housing Authority. The HAA denied the request for funds a second time basing their decision on the "current local inventory of off-site meeting space in the neighborhood which is still considered adequate, and the current usage and continuing need for the laundry space by tenants." The Housing Authority continued trying to find funds without success. After failing to win support or funds from the Housing Assistance Administration, the Housing Authority alerted the PYRIA leadership that they did not have the funds to provide a meeting space. Refusing to give up, and demonstrating the importance

1969, after three long years of pushing for a meeting room PYRIA requested another location; the space occupied by the Public Health Department on 711 Pacific Avenue until 1970 when the health clinic moved to a new location. With unanimous approval, the Housing Commissioners finally granted PYRIA a meeting space, commending the organization's leaders "for their persistence and spirit of pursuit."⁷⁹ The determination of PYRIA praised by the Housing Commission in 1969 became a thorn in the Housing Authority's side a decade later.

In the 1970s, PYRIA members challenged the historically cooperative bond with the Housing Authority on issues of safety and sanitation by escalating their actions from letter writing and attending Housing Commission meetings to rent strikes. Alongside public housing residents across the city, Ping Yuen tenants expressed frustration over the increase in crime around their project and joined their Chinatown neighbors in worrying about the decline in low-income housing units in the district. PYRIA's actions reflected the rising tensions over the housing crisis in and around Chinatown that began in the 1960s and erupted in the 1970s, the activism of tenants' groups such as the Public Housing Tenants Association (PHTA), and the larger pattern of rent strikes occurring across the United States.⁸⁰

of an organizational headquarters and meeting space to the continued growth and strength of their nascent tenants' association, PYRIA and the EOC informed the Housing Authority that "the local community would like to embark on a program of raising monies needed" for the space. Although there was undoubtedly no lack of support for a meeting space for PYRIA, the funds were not raised." Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 2 March 1967, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁷⁹ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 30 January 1969, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁸⁰ Rent strikes began to occur with frequency in American cities in the 1960s and 1970s as tenants and organizers became galvanized by the Civil Rights Movement and frustrated by the problems of urban decay, rising rents, and the decline in living spaces for low-income tenants. Tenant unions formed in cities across the nation as housing became perceived not as "just another problem," but rather as "a right denied to some and abused by others." Stephen Burghardt, *Tenants and the Urban Housing Crisis* (Dexter,

Urban renewal in the Financial District abutting Chinatown and the rise in the Asian immigrant population settling in and around Chinatown came into conflict at the International Hotel or I-Hotel site. Located in Manilatown between Chinatown and the financial district on Kearny and Jackson Streets, the I-Hotel was home to 196 Chinese and Filipino tenants, many poor and elderly, who rented rooms for \$45.00 a month. In 1968, the expansion of the Financial District spread to Manilatown when Milton Meyer and Company, headed by San Francisco business magnate Walter Shorenstein, bought the I-Hotel and made plans to construct a multi-level parking lot on the site. Shorenstein secured a demolition permit and ordered the eviction of all tenants. His action drew an immediate protest from I-Hotel tenants, Chinatown neighbors, politicized Asian American college students from the University of California Berkeley and San Francisco colleges and universities, and housing activists in the city. The demonstrations around the I-Hotel became the rallying cry of young activists and organizers who drew publicity to the tenants' plight.

The battle over the I-Hotel raged on for nine years as the city, investors, tenants, and tenant supporters struggled for a resolution. During that time the hotel was sold to the Four Seas Investment Corporation headed by Thai businessman Supasit Mahaguna, protestors picketed city hall, and Mayor George Moscone attempted to broker a deal where the city would purchase the hotel and sell it back to the tenants for \$1.3 million

Michigan: The New Press, 1972), 16. In 1969, tenant organizers formed the N.T.O, the National Tenant's Organization, that had 40 local affiliates which played a large role in public housing projects. From the widely publicized public housing rent strike in St. Louis in 1969-1970 put on with the aid of the N.T.O. to the lesser known rent strikes held by public housing tenants at the East Park Manor project in Muskegon Heights, Michigan in 1967 and 1968 led solely by tenants, public housing residents, like other low-income tenants in run-down housing in the private market, agitated for improvements in their living environment. For more information on the rise of tenant activism in public housing and in the private market see Stephen Burghardt's *Tenants and the Urban Housing Crisis* (Dexter, Michigan: The New Press, 1972). For specific information on the East Manor tenants' rent strike see George V. Neagu's "Tenant Power in Public Housing—The East Park Manor Rent Strike" in Burghardt's *Tenants and the Urban Housing Crisis*, 35-46.

dollars.⁸¹ The tenants could not raise the money and in January 1977 the Four Seas Corporation, with the backing of the court system, posted eviction notices. Five thousand protestors, including members from PYRIA, picketed the notices, linking arms to form a human barricade around the hotel to prevent evictions.⁸² Their efforts postponed the evictions until August 4 when riot police moved past 3000 people to evict the remaining fifty tenants. While supporters and activists lost the battle to maintain low-rent housing at the I-Hotel, their actions motivated tenants in Chinatown to resist developers' attempts to buy up residential land.⁸³ Echoing the struggle for the I-Hotel, tenants across Chinatown held rent strikes in 1977 and 1978 to protest rent increases and poor maintenance.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Larry Solomon, *Roots of Justice*, excerpted as "The Struggle to Save the I-Hotel," <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/107/organize.html>. The San Francisco Housing Authority tried to buy the property from the Four Seas Corporation. The SFHA sent their proposal to the Board of Supervisors who rejected it. Mayor Moscone vetoed the board and submitted a proposal for the city to purchase the property for \$1.3 million dollars which the tenants would have to pay back within a short period of time. In 2002 the lot at Kearny and Jackson streets remained empty. Ironically, developers and city planners could not agree on a suitable project for the site. To many San Franciscans, who call the site "the Hole," the land is a "monument and protest to organized community struggle."

⁸² "Mrs. Chang Jok Lee, A Long Time Chinatown Housing Advocate," n.d., from Chinatown CDC miscellaneous file.

⁸³ The activists who formed the I-Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee in 1977 continued to fight the move to develop the land for business interests. In 1981 the committee worked to have the parcel rezoned so that housing was a requirement for development. In 1999 the Chinatown Community Development Center, St. Mary's Catholic Center, and HUD started negotiations to build on the still empty lot. In June 2003, ground was broken on the new \$40 million I-Hotel which will have 104 affordable studios and one-bedroom apartments, a new campus for St. Mary's Chinese School, and an underground garage and tea house. J.K. Dineen, "I Hotel Begins New Life," *San Francisco Examiner*, 30 June 2003. Elderly residents at a run-down hotel owned by the Chinese Six Companies and located at 857 Clay Street held a rent strike for over seven months to protest rent increases and "unlivable conditions."

⁸⁴ In June 1977, tenants at 666 Sacramento Street picketed outside their apartment building to protest a proposed 55% rent increase. With the support of the Workers Committee to Fight for the International Hotel, tenants formed an association and made demands. "Chinatown Tenants Launch Rent Strikes, Pickets," *San Francisco Journal*, 8 June 1977. Other landlords in Chinatown raised rents forcing many elderly residents living on fixed incomes out of their hotel rooms and apartments. Headlines noted the "Eviction Crisis in Chinatown" and the "Chinatown Squeeze." Tenants were aided by a citywide rent freeze.

Having participated in the fight to save the I-Hotel, and aware of the rent hikes and decline of the housing stock in the district, PYRIA endeavored to maintain Ping Yuen as a source of good, affordable housing for residents. Setting a course for self-sufficiency and community outreach, PYRIA residents wrestled for control over their project environment. Through petitions, rent strikes, and involvement with community agencies, PYRIA worked to better the project and to care for residents' social needs—tasks the beleaguered Housing Authority could not fulfill. Beginning in 1976, PYRIA challenged the Housing Authority to improve maintenance after tenants complained about the lack of steady hot water and heat. Disavowing responsibility and assailing the tenants for being *too clean*, the Housing Authority claimed that the “women in Ping Yuen wash their clothes too often, and it drains the water.”⁸⁵ The actual cause of the problem was four defective boilers which had pumped lukewarm water to residents for over two years. Frustrated by the Housing Authority's failure to respond to tenants' complaints and the “intolerable living conditions” at Ping Yuen, PYRIA submitted a petition with over one hundred signatures and threatened to start a rent strike if their needs were not met.⁸⁶ Their actions netted results. By January 1977, the Housing Authority had repaired the boilers and more residents, impressed by PYRIA's success, joined the association.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Dennis Hayashi, "Ping Yuen Tenants Protest Conditions," *San Francisco Journal*, 8 September 1976.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Mrs. Lee Chan (first name not given), a Ping Yuen resident for over thirty-five years, recalls the impact PYRIA's activism had on her stating that "after a month I still did not have hot water...I went to the office and complained and they said they had put the order in and they can not do anything much more about it. So I talked to Mrs. Wong and she said why don't you go to the Association and Mr. Lee and they can get the Housing Authority to fix it." Impressed by PYRIA's attention to her concerns and success with the Housing Authority, Mrs. Chan joined the tenants' association and has been a member since then. Lee Chan, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 25 May 2003.

The success of PYRIA in challenging the Housing Authority was a critically important experience for the association leadership and the tenants as it set a precedent for aggressively dealing with project problems. Within two years, PYRIA turned brinkmanship into an onslaught against the Housing Authority, fully exercising their democratic rights to protest. The catalyst for PYRIA's actions was tragedy. On August 23, 1978, nineteen-year old Julia Wong, returning home from work at 10:00 p.m., was raped and murdered in Ping Yuen North on her way up the stairs to her 10th floor apartment. Outraged tenants claimed that Ms. Wong's death might have been prevented if the elevator had worked. PYRIA immediately requested more security from the Housing Authority, including guards, fencing, and lighting. The Housing Authority responded by rushing through a contract for elevator repairs and posting one guard for the project buildings.⁸⁸ Noting that Ping Yuen has the "lowest rate of reported crime of any of our projects," the Housing Authority refused to "give them special treatment" by hiring multiple security guards, fearing the response of public housing tenants across San Francisco, many of whom lived in higher crime neighborhoods.⁸⁹ Residents, insulted by the Housing Authority's limited actions, chained a "motorcycle to the door leading to the stairwell where Wong was attacked to prevent others from using it," and threatened to

⁸⁸ The Housing Commissioners passed Resolution number 2197 on September 14, 1978, waiving competitive bidding for elevator repairs due to the "serious urgency of this security problem." During the same meeting the Director of Housing Operations stated that the security controls for the elevators had been ordered, but because they were coming from the east coast delivery would take 10 to 12 weeks. Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 14 September 1978, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁸⁹ Ibid. According to Carl Williams, the new Executive Director of the Housing Authority, the SFHA could not "afford to give them round the clock security. It will pose problems with the other 42 public housing sites in the city." Marshall Kilduff, "Ping Yuen Rent Strike to Begin," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 September 1978.

start a rent strike on October 1 if their demands for security were not met.⁹⁰ By the end of September, after multiple meetings, the two sides seemed close to reaching a compromise over security measures that called for the city to build fences around the projects and for tenants to organize their own “watchdog force.” The compromise plan was not implemented, however, because tenants would not withdraw their demand for night-time security guards.⁹¹

The tenants’ refusal to forego their demand for security guards and their continued willingness to threaten extreme actions against the Housing Authority resulted from Wong’s death *and* the escalating crime rate in Chinatown caused by gang conflict. Beginning in 1965 with the upsurge in young Hong Kong immigrants moving into the area, the numbers of gangs battling for control of Chinatown increased. The result was violence. During the 1970s, the rivaling Joe Boys and Wah Ching (and their allies the Hop Sing Boys) battled over the illegal firecracker trade and extorted business owners.⁹² According to Bill Lee, a Joe Boy member in the 1960s and early 1970s, youth in the Ping Yuen projects sold firecrackers and beginning in the 1970s were forced to pay part of their earnings to gangs. Some refused to pay, sparking conflict between dealers and increasing fighting around the projects.⁹³ Gang violence reached its apex in 1977. During

⁹⁰ "Ping Yuen Talks of Rent Strike," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 September 1978.

⁹¹ Kilduff, "Ping Yuen Rent Strike to Begin," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 September 1978.

⁹² I do not have information on the ethnic or racial background of the members. I do know that the increase in immigration sparked a rise in the number of gangs vying for control and increased gang membership.

⁹³ Bill Lee, "Notes Underground," *AsianWeek*, 1 January 1999. According to Lee, kids from east and middle Ping Yuen made up most of the fireworks dealers. It is likely that some of these dealers were also gang members. Lee explains that the gangs forced dealers to pay them a cut of their earnings. Some dealers refused to pay. Lee writes, "Those who held out placed the burden on others to come up with the money. Arguments and fistfights broke out among dealers who were friends. The only alternative was to drop out and let the Hock Sair Woey (Chinese Underworld) monopolize the business, but dealers from the projects

a confrontation between gangs Felix Huey was murdered in Ping Yuen (it is not known whether or not he resided in the projects.) Two months later, five people were killed and eleven wounded at the Golden Dragon restaurant in what police called a retaliatory attack. No known gang members sustained injuries. The incident, called the Golden Dragon Massacre, provoked fear among Chinatown residents and negatively affected Chinatown's economy. Wong's murder, it seems, was the breaking point for tenants concerned about the district's rise in crime and its penetration into their housing project.

Drawing on their earlier success against the SFHA, their experiences protesting during the I-Hotel incident and in rent strikes across the district, and their anger over the murder of a community member, PYRIA acted on its threat and began a rent strike on October 1, 1978. The leaders demanded 24-hour security guards and better lighting and fencing. In their quest for safety, the association ignored Chinatown merchants' opposition to the placement of fences at Ping Yuen. Business owners viewed the fences as a deterrent to an already damaged economy.⁹⁴ Intercommunity conflict ensued. Housing Commissioner A.C. Ulbade Jr., who had negotiated with the tenant leadership, revealed the complex spatial politics of Ping Yuen's location in the prime San Francisco tourist spot: "Many, many tourists come through Chinatown, and these non-project

had to sell off their inventory one way or another to recoup their initial investments," Lee contends that his gang, Joe Boys, with a membership around 150 to 175, negotiated to protect the project dealers during the Fourth of July period for firework sales. "One evening, the Hock Sair Woey enforcers came to collect their final payoff. Around 8:30 p.m., the Joe Boys faced-off against the Wah Ching and their allies, the Hop Sing Boys, on Pacific Avenue in front of the projects." In a fight that must have scared project residents, "[w]eapons were drawn and gunfire erupted, with gangsters running up and down the street, ducking behind cars and into doorways, blasting at one another." Lee, "Notes Underground," 5.

⁹⁴ Rose Pak, director of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, in a 1995 *San Francisco Examiner* article recalled the devastating effect the Golden Dragon Massacre had on the Chinatown economy. She stated "It was three years before people drifted back to Chinatown after the Golden Dragon shooting. Nightlife has never recovered from it." Steven A. Chin, "Police on Alert in Fireworks Turf War, Fear Business Will Drop Like After '77 Chinatown Massacre," *San Francisco Examiner*, 2 July 1995.

dwellers do not want it to look like a concentration camp.”⁹⁵ A number of Chinatown business owners concurred with the commissioner. In the wake of the Golden Dragon Massacre, smoke-shop owner Yee Tom complained, “Business is terrible. Before the shooting the streets were crowded very late. Now at 7 o’clock everyone goes.”⁹⁶

Chinatown businesses trying to regroup a year later may have considered the gate another impediment to reviving the district’s tourist economy. Breaking off from the larger Chinatown community, Ping Yuen residents drew on project bonds to secure their living environment.

Confident in their demands and in the support of many Ping Yuen residents, PYRIA leaders disregarded the business interests of the city and Chinatown merchants. They first wrote a letter to the Housing Commissioners announcing that the October rents of 200 residents would go into an escrow account. They then submitted the letter as a group at the September 28, 1978 Housing Commission meeting. Speaking on behalf of members, George Lee, chairman of PYRIA, declared, “It is unfortunate that we tenants must resort to such extreme measures to obtain what we regard as our right to decent and safe housing. Our choice of housing is obviously very limited. However, we find the bureaucratic mentality of the Housing Authority virtually impervious.”⁹⁷ The letter, demonstrating tenants’ understanding of and irritation with the Housing Authority’s bureaucracy, stated that the rent strike would continue until project residents were given

⁹⁵ “Ping Yuen Tenants Starting Rent Strike”, *San Francisco Examiner*, 28 September 1978.

⁹⁶ “Civil War in Chinatown,” *Newsweek*, 26 September 1977, 39.

⁹⁷ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 28 September 1978, San Francisco Housing Authority. George Lee was elected chairman of PYRIA after his involvement with the 1976 protest.

“adequate assurance that security guards will be provided and **until they see the actual completion of the fences and the lighting**” (my emphasis).⁹⁸

The rent strike spurred Ping Yuen residents to action and strengthened the project community. PYRIA members draped a large banner across one of the projects that read in Chinese and in English, “Ping Yuen Tenants on a Rent Strike.” By announcing the strike to both project tenants and other residents in Chinatown, the association worked to increase participation and support for their cause.⁹⁹ Some PYRIA members tried to bolster resident participation through canvassing tenants. Chang Jok Lee, treasurer of the association and wife of George Lee, recalls “passing out leaflets door to door, talking to the tenants, attending lots of meetings and collecting rent at 838 Pacific for 15 days each month.”¹⁰⁰ Even residents who could not help organize supported the strike effort by withholding their rent—an action that risked serious consequences as the Housing Authority began issuing 14-day eviction notices in October. Watson Low, a resident since 1952, was not active in encouraging others to join the strike because he “was

⁹⁸ "Ping Yuen Tenants Starting Rent Strike," *San Francisco Examiner*, 28 September 1978. The Housing Commissioners were surprised by the tenants' decision to move ahead with the rent strike and berated the tenant leadership for their failure to continue negotiations. Commissioner Ubalde had reported to the Housing Commission that after meeting with tenants he felt progress was being made in satisfying their demands for security. He expressed frustration because he and Commissioner Fong along with staff "had exceeded themselves in the time and efforts they had put into these meetings (with PYRIA) in view of other meetings cancelled and other matters not intended to." He also noted that Ping Yuen tenants had been told that the Housing Authority had ordered "elevator safety features" and that similar crimes happened throughout the city's projects. He called the letter from PYRIA "a total breach of faith with the Commission, and staff, and with the tenants' agreement." Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 28 September 1978, San Francisco Housing Authority. Before PYRIA representatives left the Housing Commission meeting on September 28, Commissioner Booker lectured them on their failure to understand the Housing Authority's position. He explained that the Housing Authority "has 8000 units and 25,000 people to administer to and that the Chinese low income dwellers should meet the authority and its staff halfway." "Ping Yuen Tenants Starting Rent Strike," *San Francisco Examiner*, 28 September 1978.

⁹⁹ "Ping Yuen Tenants on Strike," *San Francisco Journal*, 4 October 1978, 1. The association's efforts most likely drew support from other area residents who had picketed against their landlords.

¹⁰⁰ "Mrs. Chang Jok Lee, A Long Time Chinatown Housing Advocate." The rents collected during the rent strike, which averaged about \$100 per household, were put in escrow at the Chinatown Federal Savings and Loan. "Tenants at Ping Yuen Withhold \$10,000 in Rent," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 October 1978.

working a lot at the time” but he “was part of the people who withheld their rent” because there “were reasons for us to strike...safety was the main concern.”¹⁰¹ Although striking tenants had to endure eviction notices and harassment by “people who pound[ed] on their doors at night and threaten[ed] to evict them if rents aren’t collected,” most of them continued in the strike.¹⁰²

The Housing Authority’s eviction notices did little to dampen dissent as participants gained momentum by securing the backing of the larger public housing community in San Francisco. As the strike wore on into November, PYRIA won a victory against the Housing Authority when they exercised their right to a grievance hearing on November 6 to explain their reasons for withholding their rent. The Grievance Panel, a body made up of residents from public housing projects across the city under the PHTA, voted in favor of Ping Yuen residents withholding their rent “until the Housing Authority provides security.”¹⁰³ In a show of public housing tenant solidarity that confirmed the critical need for a clean and safe living environment universal to all residents, the Grievance Panel supported PYRIA’s strike on the grounds of **maintenance** and **security** needs (my emphasis). Prior to the hearing, PYRIA had focused its demands solely on increased security measures. Once in front of their public housing peers, however, they laid out evidence of the Housing Authority’s failure to meet maintenance requests “for the past eight years” as well as tenant frustration that there were no bi-lingual Housing Authority operators for residents (primarily elderly Chinese) to contact

¹⁰¹ Watson Low, interview.

¹⁰² Lester W. Chang, “New Ground Rules Set in Ping Yuen Rent Strike,” *EastWest*, 22 November 1978.

¹⁰³ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 16 November 1978, San Francisco Housing Authority.

in case of problems or an emergency. The Grievance Panel voted in favor of the Ping Yuen tenants and in doing so charged the Housing Authority to exceed PYRIA's original demands for lighting, gates, and guards by providing better maintenance. The Housing Commissioners balked at the Grievance Panel's decision and demonstrated their ultimate control over Grievance Panel procedures. Invoking Section 7 of the Grievance Procedure negotiated with the PHTA and approved by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Commission exercised its power to overrule the Grievance Panel's ruling, passing resolution number 2215 rejecting the panel's decision on December 7, 1978.¹⁰⁴

Despite the Housing Authority's veto, both sides continued to negotiate. In late November, city Supervisor John Molinari mediated a session between the Housing Authority and PYRIA (along with their legal representative from the Asian Law Caucus.)¹⁰⁵ During the meeting, participants established "new ground rules" that required the SFHA to stop issuing eviction notices and to drop the notices previously issued; to observe the ruling by the Grievance Panel to meet the security needs and maintenance demands of Ping Yuen tenants; and to send bilingual notices informing

¹⁰⁴ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 21 December 1978, San Francisco Housing Authority. The resolution stated: "1. The Commission overruled the decision of the Grievance Panel under Section VII (A)1 of the approved Grievance Procedure. 2. The present escrow account be dissolved and immediately returned to the Controller of the Housing Authority. 3. The Housing Authority staff is instructed to continue to intensify their efforts to resolve the problems of security in Ping Yuen as well as all developments. 4. The Commission and staff are willing to do whatever is financially feasible regarding security problems at Ping Yuen to try and resolve this present disagreement. 5. This resolution become [sic] effective immediately.

¹⁰⁵ The Housing Authority issued eviction notices because the residents' reasons for striking did not comply with a state law that provided residents could hold their rent in escrow if a project was "physically uninhabitable" or the "physical conditions render the units unsafe." According to the legal counsel for the Housing Authority, "none of the communications from the residents cite physical conditions; the complaint is lack of security guards and maintenance." Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 26 October 1978, San Francisco Housing Authority.

tenants of developments.¹⁰⁶ These efforts laid the groundwork for the rent strike agreement signed in January 1979 that brought the three and half month protest to an end. The 187 tenants who had participated in the rent strike won improvements for all residents at Ping Yuen. Chang Jok Lee explained that those “who stayed on the strike got results for people living here: they get the linoleum floor replaced, they get the fencing...they have a few months of twilight security.”¹⁰⁷ In the agreement the Housing Authority set approximate dates for completing elevator maintenance and physical security improvements, including fences, gates, and window bars in all project buildings. The agreement also called for the Housing Authority to immediately answer tenants’ chief demand: four security guards, one for each building, would go on duty seven days a week from 7:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. until September 30, 1979, after which time the Housing Authority could not guarantee funding for the positions.

For their part, PYRIA agreed to end the rent strike and submit the money in escrow to the Housing Authority. Signed by Executive Director Carl Williams, Cleo Wallace, the Chair of the Housing Authority, and Willie Fong, Louise Yee, George Lee, and Chang Jok Lee of PYRIA on January 11, 1979, the agreement ended the strike and provided Ping Yuen residents with a major victory.¹⁰⁸ The effects of the rent strike resonated in the Ping Yuen community for years to come in tenant activism and leadership, in the growth and strength of PYRIA, and in the association’s relationship with the Housing Authority and Chinatown. Although the strike resulted in

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Chang Jok Lee, interview by author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 29 May 2003.

¹⁰⁸ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 11 January 1979, San Francisco Housing Authority.

improvements for residents, the tragedy of Julia Wong's death remained. A few long-time residents claim that even today "when it is stormy weather you can hear the girl (Wong) still crying."¹⁰⁹

PYRIA's victory and the leaders' experience executing the strike encouraged the association to challenge the Housing Authority not only for their own demands but others as well.¹¹⁰ At the end of 1979, residents went on strike again. In November 1979, reelected PYRIA chairman George Lee and eighty residents supported Housing Authority groundskeepers' and office workers' protest for higher wages. After the employees went back to work, PYRIA changed their reasons for striking, demanding that the Housing Authority follow through on promises made in the first rent strike agreement and that the agency fund repairs for apartment interiors. Protesting, residents had learned, could yield significant results. Building on their experience from the previous rent strike, the PYRIA leadership, made up of many reelected officers, called on residents to join their cause.

PYRIA officer Mrs. Lee recalls:

We started with 80 households, but some tenants discontinued their strike support for fear of eviction. We held many meetings and visited people door to door. We also had membership drives and sponsored activities to keep the striking tenants together. Since I was treasurer, I collected the rent, put it in escrow and kept the books... we finally got our demands met.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Chan, interview.

¹¹⁰ As chairman of PYRIA during the rent strike, George Lee shored up favor and support of residents and gained valuable experience. Together, George and Chang Jok Lee served the Ping Yuen community for over three decades. Their experience during the rent strike proved invaluable for strengthening their leadership positions and popularity within Ping Yuen. Other participants such as Watson Low became increasingly more involved after the strike and later took on leadership roles.

¹¹¹ "Mrs. Chang Jok Lee, A Long Time Chinatown Housing Advocate."

Although some of the residents quit the strike early, the tenants who remained on strike for a year earned important benefits for the whole Ping Yuen community that had a lasting effect. On September 18, 1981, the Housing Authority agreed to several demands—including ones that were supposed to have been met under the 1979 agreement. The SFHA, by the terms of the agreement, had to provide general maintenance for all elevators at Ping Yuen, hire bilingual personnel “capable of fielding Cantonese calls for maintenance and security during regular office hours,” hire and compensate “bilingual residents during non-office hours on a twenty-four basis, including weekends and holidays,” complete outstanding work/repair requests for individual units at Ping Yuen, and follow through with security measures *promised* in the first rent strike agreement, including window bars, and the installation of 100-watt bulbs in all exterior lights for all buildings.¹¹²

PYRIA leaders drew on their experience with the SFHA during the first rent strike—notably, the agency’s failure to follow through on agreements made to end the protest—in laying out their terms during the second standoff. The tenants’ association agreed to end the strike and return the monies in escrow in parts, dependant on the Housing Authority’s completion of repairs and improvements. Both sides agreed that the accrued interest would go back to strike participants with PYRIA taking responsibility for the distribution. After battling busted boilers, broken elevators, and worn-down interiors

¹¹² "Compromise and Settlement Agreement," approved by Carol Williams, Executive Director, San Francisco Housing Authority and Connie M. Perry, Legal Counsel, Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 18 September 1981, San Francisco Housing Authority. The agreement stated that bilingual residents who were on call for maintenance and security when the office was closed were entitled to free rent and reimbursement of monthly basic phone charges. The Housing Authority was also charged with maintaining all the units of Ping Yuen "in good working order" and providing inspections once every three months of areas "not contained in individual dwelling units for plumbing, heat, and hot and cold water" to discover patent and latent defects.

for years, residents succeeded in getting action on their complaints. And once again, the activism of some tenants benefited the entire Ping Yuen community. Mrs. Lee recounts the generosity of strike participants who at “the end of the strike were asked to donate a portion of the interest or keep it if they so desired. Most of the people donated 50 percent of the interest, which amounted to \$10,000.” These funds enabled the association to buy a television for the community room, to support more classes and events, and to further extend their outreach to the Chinatown district through donations to community service organizations. Residents, in another show of solidarity, also used some of the funds to express their appreciation to George and Chang Jok Lee for their leadership and perseverance during the two rent strikes by giving the couple a trip to Japan to visit Chang Jok’s family.¹¹³ Chang Jok and George Lee and Watson Low continued to manage PYRIA after the rent strikes with the full-backing of Ping Yuen tenants. These leaders and other PYRIA officers, like the tenant officers at Valencia Gardens and North Beach Place, enjoyed their work and the sense of contributing to the betterment of their community.

Through her leadership positions within Ping Yuen, Chang Jok Lee challenged traditional gender roles “for an immigrant woman whose Chinese tradition frowns upon public activism by women.”¹¹⁴ Despite her initial reservations about becoming active in the community because she “didn’t speak English well and was not used to speaking in front of people,” Chang Jok emerged as a prominent activist. Through her experience picketing at the I-Hotel and her work as the PYRIA treasurer, president (taking over

¹¹³ "Mrs. Chang Jok Lee, A Long Time Chinatown Housing Advocate."

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

George died), and the resident “go-to” person in Ping Yuen, she broke with the cultural gender norms she had grown up with in her Chinese family to work for social justice. Overcoming her own doubts and Chinese cultural norms that denied women the opportunity to pursue public leadership roles, Lee became a life-long activist. “As long as I am fighting for a just cause, then I am not scared.” Mrs. Lee seemed to downplay her leadership, however, by placing her work within the context of traditional kin networks, stating that activism “was a family affair.”¹¹⁵ Her leadership and activism for over three decades has shaped the Ping Yuen community, earned her the respect of tenants and the wider Chinatown district, and modeled female leadership to Chinese immigrants who have lived in the project over the past thirty years. Receiving an award for her dedication to and hard work for PYRIA from the Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Center in 1985, Mrs. Lee humbly accepted the honor in front of 550 people. “I don’t really deserve this, but I know if we all work together, anything can be done.”¹¹⁶

The continual leadership of the Lees and Watson Low provided tenants with experienced officers who were knowledgeable about the SFHA, procedures for getting things done, and the project’s history and current needs. While these PYRIA officers shared the goal of creating an improved project environment, they did not always agree on how to accomplish the organization’s aims. In 1983, George Lee stepped down as president after the SFHA hired him as a resident manager. After leaving office Lee supported Watson Low’s presidential candidacy. Low served as PYRIA president until 1987 when tenants reelected Lee who no longer worked for the SFHA. During his tenure

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

in office Low had to contend with George Lee advising him on how to run the project. Friction resulted on both sides as Low worked to govern PYRIA in his own way. Despite tensions between these leaders, Lee eventually backed off and all three residents stayed friends.¹¹⁷

REACHING OUT, REACHING IN: PING YUEN AND THE CHINATOWN COMMUNITY

With an increased budget due to interest from the rent strikes, more members, and continuity in leadership under George Lee, Chang Jok Lee, and Watson Low, PYRIA played a larger part in the Chinatown community and stepped up efforts for self-help, complicating the management role of the Housing Authority and pushing the boundaries of state-run housing. Ping Yuen's community outreach and economic development goals were aided by PYRIA's position in the Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center. The result of a group of community activists working to improve the social and physical conditions of Chinatown in the 1970s, the Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center formed in 1977. Activists from the Chinatown Coalition for Better Housing, the Chinatown Transportation Research and Improvement Project,

¹¹⁷ George Lee was reelected in 1981 after a record election turn out of 300 people. "Mrs. Chang Jok Lee, A Long Time Chinatown Housing Advocate." In 1985 there was some friction between Lee and Low as Lee wanted Low to run PYRIA as he had—while there was frustration on both sides, both Lee and Low remained friends and both worked hard for the project community. "ND's Comment on Conflict Resolution at the PYRIA Board Meeting on July 1, 1985," from miscellaneous file at the Chinatown CDC, San Francisco, California. Earlier in the year Low went to bat for Lee when he was laid off by the Housing Authority because of budget cuts. Testifying before the Board of Supervisors in support of rehiring Lee, Low stated that in Ping Yuen "George Lee has been the most effective resident manager because he knows the tenants well and they respect him. Whenever there is a problem you can rely on Mr. Lee to take care of it for you. ...Laying people off in these direct service positions will seriously reduce the quality and type of services provided for tenants." Using leverage gained from PYRIA's previous success against the Housing Authority, Low reminded the Supervisors that the "...Ping Yuen Tenants Association is very well known for its successful rent strikes. We would like members of the Health Committee and Board of Supervisors to get the Housing Authority to reinstate those people laid off. (Executive Director Carl Williams proposed laying off groundskeepers and resident managers to offset the loss of \$5.9 million dollars.) We want Mr. Lee's layoff rescinded otherwise we will **use every means at our disposal and every possible channel to get him reinstated** (my emphasis.) "Watson Low's Testimony at the Board of Supervisor's on February 21, 1985" printed in the "Ping Yuen Newsletter," March 1985.

the Committee for Better Parks and Recreation in Chinatown, the Chinatown Coalition for Neighborhood Facilities, and PYRIA came together with the mutual need for staffing and technical assistance. These five organizations sponsored the creation of the non-profit Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center (the name was changed to the Chinatown Resource Center in 1986 and it is now called Chinatown Development Center or CDC). In 1978, the Chinese Community Housing Corporation (CCHC) was formed as the development arm of the CDC to create and improve affordable housing for low-income people. Striving to improve the lives of Chinatown “residents, workers, shopkeepers, and property owners” the CDC launched initiatives with emphases “on alleyways, and open space improvements, housing education, litter control and clean-up campaigns, land use issues, transit and transportation, and housing development for low income residents.”¹¹⁸

The partnership between PYRIA and the CDC both reflects and restructures the long history of aid associations in Chinatown assisting residents in the area. Blurring the often stark line between residents and non-residents in public housing, the CDC and PYRIA have worked together to improve not only public housing but also the larger Chinatown district. A non-profit established solely to better the lives of people in Chinatown, the CDC has worked to fill gaps in city, state, and federal funding for what remains an economically depressed district. Over the past twenty-six years the CDC has had a major impact on Ping Yuen by helping PYRIA win grants for physical improvements such as graffiti removal and garden and playground renovations and by

¹¹⁸ "A Refresher History: The Chinatown Resource Center," *Neighborhood Improvement Update*, 10 (Spring 1988): 1. The CDC is a non-profit organization concerned with social justice and formed to bring together a range of groups already working to improve Chinatown. My evidence shows no links between the organization and business interests.

supporting Ping Yuen's economic development.¹¹⁹ With a PYRIA member serving on the CDC board and a CDC representative attending PYRIA meetings, the organizations have established a mutually beneficial relationship. As the CDC has aided PYRIA through workshops and training, PYRIA has reciprocated by providing space for the CDC to hold workshops, meetings, and training courses for residents and non-residents. PYRIA, like the CDC, has made efforts to support other community organizations as well, offering meeting space and giving donations to other area groups over the years. By engaging with the CDC and other non-profit organizations in the Chinatown community, PYRIA broke new ground by creating an active tenants' association that helped not only residents but also agencies in the district thus expanding the boundaries of Ping Yuen to include the surrounding community.¹²⁰

In 1984, PYRIA, with the help of the CDC, set a course for economic development. Growing out of tenants' frustrations over problems with the laundry rooms in Ping Yuen, the residents lobbied to manage the laundries themselves, establishing the first tenant-run laundromat in San Francisco public housing. Tenants began expressing their dissatisfaction with the laundry rooms at the project in 1983. Because of

¹¹⁹ The CDC has assisted PYRIA in the areas of physical improvement, resource development, and residents' services for over two decades. The CDC supported the laundromat program in 1984, assisted in securing funding for a Ping Yuen mural, sponsored a graffiti removal day, worked on garden and playground renovations in 1995, and painted ten units for senior residents and sponsored more playground renovations in 1996, among other things. "Ping Yuen Residents Improvement Association and Chinatown Resource Center" (San Francisco: Chinatown Resource Center, n.d.).

¹²⁰ Over the years, PYRIA has helped alleviate the ongoing space problem for non-profit groups by allowing many organizations and agencies to use their facilities. For example, PYRIA sublets space to the Chinatown Coalition for Better Housing, the Economic Opportunity Council, the Veteran's Administration and other groups. Pleased with its achievements and commitment to the larger Chinatown community, PYRIA claimed that its "generosity serves as a model for how encouraging leadership capacity in one organization can benefit an entire community." "Public Housing Tenants" paper describing PYRIA, n.d., found in a box of Reverend Norman Fong's miscellaneous files at the Chinatown CDC, San Francisco, California.

“vandalism, the frequent breakdowns of twenty-four washers and twelve dryers serving the complex, and the dilapidated condition of the room themselves,” many residents took their laundry to “increasingly expensive laundromats offsite” or washed their clothes by hand rather than using the existing facilities. Fully aware of the slow bureaucracy of the Housing Authority that delayed repairs and maintenance, PYRIA and the CDC decided to try for economic development by taking control of the laundries. As a CDC employee explained “by renovating the laundry rooms and operating the facility themselves, the tenants’ association and the Resource Center saw a chance to earn some money to fund service programs for tenants, and improve laundry service.”¹²¹

Together PYRIA leaders and the CDC embarked on the most ambitious course for the tenants’ association to date. With the technical assistance of the CDC, the PYRIA board submitted an application for the 1983 Jobs Bill Funding Program under the Mayor’s Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD) to renovate the laundry rooms and acquire new machines. As an economic development project, the PYRIA laundry proposal was granted \$100,000 with stipulations that required a new level of management and responsibility from the PYRIA leadership. The Jobs Bills funding mandated that PYRIA hire and manage a tenant maintenance worker, handle the money, negotiate a lease agreement with the service distributors and supplier, and oversee the major renovations of the laundry facilities.¹²²

¹²¹ "Ping Yuen Laundromat", write up from the Chinatown CDC, 1984, miscellaneous file, Chinatown CDC, San Francisco, California. The Housing Authority Commissioners passed Resolution Number 2554 on November 10, 1983 approving the lease of the laundry facilities at Ping Yuen to the Ping Yuen Resident Improvement Association. Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 10 November 1983, San Francisco Housing Authority.

¹²² Ibid. The renovations of the laundry facilities included new plumbing, doors and security bars, electrical fixtures, ceiling tiles, tables and benches, a utility sink, ceiling tiles and an alarm system.

The combination of seasoned tenant leaders such as George and Chang Jok Lee and Watson Low steering the laundry project and the support of the CDC turned the laundromat program into a viable economic development program for the Ping Yuen. While the program experienced problems and ran a deficit at the beginning, it eventually proved a profitable venture. At a general tenants meeting in 1984, residents voted to abandon the original plan of buying the washers and dryers and to rent them instead. With an understanding of the responsibilities of ownership and the privileges of renting, tenants looked at the change as a positive one because “machine rental eliminates the problem of repairs.” PYRIA put the additional funds freed up by the reduced cost of renting equipment into more renovations.¹²³ Residents shifted between laundry rooms during the renovations and experienced some difficulties during the laundry’s first year of operation.

Although the PYRIA leadership appealed to residents to use the new laundry facility— a “clean place” with “convenient hours” (three more hours per day than under the Housing Authority), “reasonable prices,” and “a pleasant environment” with bright lighting and “comfortable seating”— tenants did not use the machines as much as projected which suggests not all tenants supported the program.¹²⁴ PYRIA reported a usage increase of 30-35% in March 1985 and the association continued to struggle with problems, including delays in opening some of the rooms, tenants abusing the system by

Because three of the five laundry room sites also doubled as tenant meeting rooms, the renovations included more than just installing new machines. In February 1984, the Ping Yuen Residents Improvement Association and the Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center signed a contract providing that the CDC would assist PYRIA in the renovation and fiscal management of the five laundromats at Ping Yuen.

¹²³ *Ping Yuen Newsletter*, November 1984, 15.

¹²⁴ The hours for the laundry rooms were seven days a week, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. The prices for laundry were the same as when the Housing Authority ran the facilities; washing was \$.50 a load and drying was \$.25 a load. *Ibid.*

doing laundry after hours, frequent machine breakdowns, and a deficit due to an "over estimation of projected usage increase."¹²⁵ Reassessing the program after ten months, PYRIA worked to remedy the problems by reducing the numbers of machines in Ping Yuen North. Despite these problems in the first year of operation, the laundry program ran a net profit of \$1768.10 in March 1988, and by 1990 the laundromat account had grown to \$20,042.15.¹²⁶ Pulling in funds that were put back into services for Ping Yuen residents as well as the larger community, the laundry program in the end strengthened both PYRIA and the Ping Yuen project.

The unique partnership between the CDC and PYRIA has resulted in improvements for Ping Yuen residents and the Chinatown community, but has not been without tensions. The complexities and limits of extended community bonds in the face of self-interest emerged in 1987 when Ping Yuen North residents protested actions by the CDC's subsidiary, the Chinese Community Housing Corporation (CCHC). The cause of the disagreement was the CCHC's proposal to construct a five-story building for low-

¹²⁵ "Laundromat Project Update," *Ping Yuen Newsletter*, March 1985, 9. The newsletter reported the level of commitment made by some residents to the community as well as the individualistic impulses that at times impeded the laundry system. Touting the generosity of Mr. Wong, the PYRIA Chinese secretary, who "took the janitor job [for the laundries] in spite of low wages" because of his "commitment to public service," the newsletter reprimanded tenants who used the laundry after hours frustrating Mr. Wong and taking advantage of his leniency. The tenants who "insist on doing laundry past the closing time" ultimately caused Mr. Wong to leave his position as janitor.

¹²⁶ Minutes of the PYRIA Board, 14 March 1988, and November 8 1990, San Francisco, California. While the laundry program continued to net a profit after 1987, the PYRIA board and other tenants experienced frustration at the number of times machines broke. At the November 8 PYRIA meeting, a tenant reported another broken dryer. The machines had been replaced in 1989 with used models and residents had complained, "The machines were always out of order." The board agreed to act by asking the Macke Company for a deduction of costs because of the broken dryer and to make an appointment with the Sales Manager at Macke. PYRIA's success at managing the laundry may have prompted North Beach tenants to ask the Housing Authority for the opportunity to take over management of the laundry at North Beach Place. In October 1993, the Housing Authority signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the North Beach Resident Council "to afford the residents at North Beach the opportunity to manage the laundry facility at the development." Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission Meeting, 14 October 1993, San Francisco Housing Authority.

income senior citizens on the parking lot next to Ping Yuen North. With a commitment from HUD for a \$2.4 million loan, contingent on the Housing Authority agreement to lease the land, the CCHC unveiled the architectural plans to tenants at a February 24 meeting, riling Ping Yuen North residents.¹²⁷ Tenants at the project held a news conference two weeks later contesting the project because they felt bullied into accepting it, and feared the new building would “block their sunlight and further crowd their neighborhood.”¹²⁸ In a case of tenant solidarity and concerns overriding larger Chinatown community needs, tenants from 170 of Ping Yuen North’s 190 apartments signed a petition opposing the new complex. Demonstrating a strong sense of ownership and control of their subsidized apartments, tenants criticized the CCHC for making plans to alter their living environment without consulting them. On March 19, 1987, the Ping Yuen North tenants sent a letter addressed to “friends in the Chinatown Community” asking for support and explaining that they were not opposed to senior housing but rather to the CCHC’s tactics. Chastising CDC Director Gordon Chin, residents stated:

As tenants, we are very disappointed by the Resource Center and the CCHC, who have always defended the rights of the tenants against all developers in Chinatown. They have always used ‘quality of life’ to oppose buildings that will block the sun, increase traffic, displace people and parking, etc...For his (Chin) own project, he now chooses to disregard our rights as tenants, and our quality of life at North Ping Yuen. The open space he wants to build on is **OUR front yard, OUR property, OUR home** (my emphasis in bold). Is it just because we’re

¹²⁷ In a *San Francisco Chronicle* article, Gordon Chin explained that the CCHC had met with the full “Ping Yuen tenants association” in November and January. Realizing the intricacies of community ties, Chin stated that “In retrospect, we should have concentrated on the North Ping Yuen tenants.” L.A. Chung, “Protest Stalls Chinatown Housing Project,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 March 1987. In a March 19, 1987 *EastWest* article, Max Millard reported that PYRIA fully supported the North Ping Yuen residents’ protest. Lee was quoted as saying that the association’s officers were elected by over 400 tenants and “If the tenants don’t want the project, we will oppose it... We would like to see more senior housing in Chinatown, but we don’t want it built in our front yard. Max Millard, “Senior Housing Plan Sparks Angry Debate,” *EastWest*, 19 March 1987.

¹²⁸ Elaine Herscher, “Chinatown Project/Housing Proposal Angers Neighbors,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 March 1987.

poor and live in public housing that we should not enjoy any rights and any decent portion of quality of life?...The issue, then, dear friends, is not senior housing. The issue is open and fair process, and an understanding of the tenants who live there everyday.¹²⁹

The tenants' disapproval stalled the project and forced the CCHC to reconsider their site selection for the forty-unit senior housing development. After five months of wrangling and negotiations, Ping Yuen North residents (with the full support of PYRIA) dropped their opposition to the project in July, winning concessions from the developer that included lowering the height of the building from five stories to four, providing a security gate at the senior housing parking lot, and creating temporary parking for Ping Yuen North tenants during construction.¹³⁰ The Bayside Senior Housing Project opened in 1990 with thirty units and a large multi-purpose community room used for social events and citizenship and naturalization classes.¹³¹ Now considered a positive addition to Ping Yuen by tenants, the Bayside project challenged the CDC/PYRIA relationship without irreparably damaging it.

By assisting with grant writing and serving as a resident resource, the CDC joined PYRIA as a care-taker of Ping Yuen, supplementing the Housing Authority's role as landlord and helping residents improve their living situation. Together, members of PYRIA and the CDC have shaped federal public housing to fit the needs of the Chinatown community and in doing so have made a strong case for the importance of

¹²⁹ Letter to the Chinatown Community from Tenants of Ping Yuen North, March 19, 1987, Chinatown CDC miscellaneous files, San Francisco, California.

¹³⁰ L.A. Chung, "Chinatown Groups OKS Disputed Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 July 1987. The CCHC agreed to lower the building from 5 to 4 stories in response to the tenants' concerns about sunlight reduction. This change reduced the number of units from 40 to 31.

¹³¹ "Program Profile: Chinatown Community Development Center, San Francisco, California," from *On the Ground with Comprehensive Community Initiatives* (Columbia, MD: The Enterprise Foundation, 2000).

regionalism and local autonomy. Nonetheless, the Housing Authority's position as landlord should not be overlooked. While the agency has been unable to sustain their initial concern for the Chinatown community's cultural and social needs and has failed to consistently provide high-quality maintenance for residents, the Housing Authority as owner of the high-priced project land has guaranteed low-income housing for 1500 plus residents for over fifty years. With run-down Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Hotels being bought up by developers, the number of affordable housing units in Chinatown has continually declined over the past three decades. The Housing Authority's commitment to retaining control over the Ping Yuen properties protects the project from potential sale that could happen under private ownership, including financial hardships suffered by a non-profit such as the CDC. Furthermore, the SFHA, for all its failures, has supported PYRIA's efforts at economic development by turning over control of the laundries, and encouraging PYRIA to continue writing grants. The Housing Authority has not, however, acknowledged the important partnership between the CDC and PYRIA nor given credit to the CDC for its efforts in improving the Ping Yuen environment, a failure that has frustrated CDC workers who claim the Housing Authority "is happy to take credit for these positive changes."¹³² In recognizing the efforts of both PYRIA and the CDC, the Housing Authority could demonstrate to HUD the need for local input and cooperation between the federal government, local housing authorities, tenants, and community organizations in improving public housing in the United States.

The complex web of cooperation, contestation, and community alliances between the Housing Authority, Ping Yuen tenants, and Chinatown social service agencies has

¹³² Reverend Norman Fong and Angela Chu, interview by author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 8 August 2002.

made Ping Yuen a decent place to live and a project “many people want to get in to.”¹³³ As families have moved in and out of the project over the years, the core leadership of PYRIA has stayed constant (along with many long-time residents) with Chang Jok Lee currently serving as president, taking office after George’s death in 1998. She serves on the board with other octogenarians, including Watson Low. Their efforts, along with the support of a shifting resident population, have helped make Ping Yuen San Francisco’s “most popular housing project.”¹³⁴ Over the years residents have struggled with problems including vagrancy, theft, gang violence, maintenance problems, and disagreements with neighbors in the project. Yet these issues have not dampened residents’ enthusiasm about their project and the emergence of Ping Yuen as some of the best housing in the district. Considered one of the better places to live in Chinatown and described by residents as “a big family,” Ping Yuen defies the stereotype of public housing in the United States as high-rise failures.

As long-time residents adjust to the shifting demographics of the project which now houses African American, Caucasian, Asian, and Latino/a families— many displaced by HOPE VI redevelopment— they continue to cultivate bonds in the project community. After living in the project for over fifty years, Watson Low argues that the demographic changes actually improve the project even as they pose problems for residents and PYRIA leaders since many Chinese residents do not speak English. Low claims that “all people no matter what race, they should treat others like brothers and sisters...Even though we have different people from different backgrounds and

¹³³ Low, interview.

¹³⁴ Johnny Ng, “Ping Yuen’s Construction Was a Long-Fought Battle,” *AsianWeek*, 15 December 1989. 14.

nationalities we are very good to each other.” PYRIA board members readily agreed with Low’s assessment.¹³⁵ As a “convenient place to live” for Chinese residents, “a good place to raise a family” and “a safe place,” Ping Yuen has been “home” to many residents for years and in some ways has contributed to many immigrants’ American Dream.¹³⁶ A long-time resident and immigrant from Hong Kong, Mrs. Lee Chan claimed that “My American Dream is that my kids have their Masters and Ph.D...um...I still didn’t get my house but I have my kids’ success.”¹³⁷ Turning the American Dream’s obsession with homeownership on its head, Watson Low attributed his children’s success to public housing: “We are low-income person and I raise my kids because I was able to save the money from paying the rent to get them into college so public housing actually contributed a lot to my kids’ education, my kids’ future—so public housing is good and it is not necessary that people have to own their housing.”¹³⁸ Echoing modern housing reformers’ vision of public housing as a viable alternative to the private housing market, Low and other tenants at Ping Yuen challenged the SFHA’s narrow definition of community and public housing. By turning their apartments and their project space into “home” and building relationships with one another these tenants claimed the benefits of “community” and “ownership,” and acted as “good, engaged citizens” as low-income renters. Proud of their project and the lives they have made for themselves and others,

¹³⁵ Watson Low (and other PYRIA board members), interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco California, 25 May 2003.

¹³⁶ Ping Yuen residents, interview by author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 25 May 2003.

¹³⁷ Chan, interview.

¹³⁸ Low, interview.

long-time Ping Yuen residents have created their own version of “the little gray home in the West.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ "Little Grey Home in the West," words by D. Eardley-Wilmot, Music by Hermann Lohr (London: Chappel Ltd.), 1911.

CHAPTER III

“THE BEST PROJECT IN TOWN”: NORTH BEACH PLACE

INTRODUCTION

North Beach is like America, in a sense, where different ethnic groups come together to give it a strength and vitality all its own.¹

A short walk from Ping Yuen leads to North Beach. Nestled in the northeast section of the city in the valley of Telegraph and Russian Hills near the bay, North Beach is one of San Francisco's most popular districts. Often referred to as “one of the greatest neighborhoods in America,” North Beach has captured the hearts of San Franciscans and tourists alike over the past sixty-five years.² During the twentieth century, the eclectic district known for its “openness” offered residents and visitors a chance to experience the smells and tastes of “Little Italy,” the sounds and sensations of Beat poetry readings and bohemian culture, the scandalous sights of topless dancers, and the increasing coexistence of Asian and Italian businesses in the neighborhood. As one of the top tourist destinations in San Francisco, North Beach attracts over 6 million visitors a year who come to see Fisherman's Wharf, Pier 39, Coit Tower, the City Lights Bookstore, and Washington Square Park and to eat in the famed restaurants and cafes.³ Many tourists

¹ Ken Wong, "Broadway is Yet a Street But, Ah, North Beach," *San Francisco Examiner*, 27 December 1978.

² Nancy Dooley, "A Second Look: Italian Renaissance in North Beach," *San Francisco Examiner*, 6 July 1984.

³ Gary Kamiya, "North Beach at Twilight," *Image*, 27 June 1993, 12. Estimates on the number of tourists who visit North Beach vary between sources. In the 1996 HOPE VI application, the San Francisco Housing

that visit the district take the historic Powell-Mason Street cable car that ends three blocks away from Fisherman's Wharf in the middle of North Beach Place— a public housing project. While visitors might expect to see Italianate architecture, cafes, shops, galleries or perhaps upscale condominiums at the end of their ride, they exit instead between two public housing project buildings constructed in 1952.

Examining the history of North Beach Place reveals the complexities of community both within public housing developments and between public housing residents and the surrounding area. It also underscores the critical role that the fluid politics of inclusion and exclusion play in community formation. When the project opened, the SFHA attempting to “uphold” the cultural and social values of the district then known as “Little Italy” mandated that only “whites” could live in the subsidized apartments.⁴ Implementing the neighborhood pattern policy established in 1942, the Housing Authority narrowly limited who the “public” living in each public housing project was to be, shutting out Asian Americans, African Americans, and other non-white groups from North Beach Place.

Perhaps because of the project's location, the timing of its opening, and/or the image of North Beach as an accepting neighborhood, African Americans sued the Housing Authority in 1952. The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, opening the door for North Beach Place to become a multi-ethnic, racially diverse

Authority stated that "North Beach is seen by approximately 13 million tourists annually." SFHA, "HOPE VI: San Francisco Housing Authority North Beach Revitalization Plan," 1996, 2.

⁴ As noted in Chapter 1, the SFHA classified Latino/as as "whites" in their records. I have been unable to determine if any Latino/as lived in North Beach prior to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the *Banks* case. Because the SFHA staunchly followed the neighborhood pattern policy and North Beach was primarily populated by Italian-Americans in the early 1950s, I assume that the project housed only white families.

project.⁵ Minority public housing applicants' successful challenge of the Housing Authority created a project environment that both fit the multicultural history of the neighborhood and expanded the diversity of the district. Integration in the project over the past six decades, however, has not always resulted in cohesion. Community formations have shifted over time to different configurations including a move from inter-racial and ethnic ties to stronger intra-group dynamics as the demographics (with attendant shifts in language differences) and problems of the project have changed. In recent years the specter of redevelopment has united tenants in their work to control their housing options and to protect their "home." Banding together in the 1990s, tenants pushed the Housing Authority to consider their needs as plans for rebuilding the project moved forward.

North Beach Place complicates the national image of public housing built in urban "ghettos" and underscores the significance of location in public housing both in terms of amenities available to residents *and* the spatial politics of who should live where and why. Pulled between the powerful forces of business development and a historically liberal voting constituency, San Francisco's relationship to North Beach Place poses questions about the politics of development, redevelopment, and gentrification. More precisely, if, when, and how do poor families— subsidized by the state— fit with the discourse and plans for the North Beach district? How has the evolution of North Beach into one of the top tourist destinations in the city affected the policies, people, and permanency of North Beach Place? How has the city dealt with the presence of "the projects" on prime property near the bay and next to a cable car that brings tourists from

⁵ *Banks, et al. v. San Francisco Housing Authority, et al.* 1 Civil No, 15, 963.

all over the world face to face with public housing? How has the neighborhood responded to the project over time as the tourist industry has grown? Have the tenants benefited from the growth of tourism in the district? What impact have spatial politics and the concept of “home” had in uniting tenants across racial and ethnic lines? As the Housing Authority sets out to redevelop North Beach Place with a federal HOPE VI grant, what impact will the push for tourism and business have on tenants and policies dictating who can return when the project reopens? Finally, what design decisions has the Housing Authority put forth to make redeveloped public housing “amenable” to the surrounding neighborhood and at what cost, if any, to tenants?

The project’s history demonstrates low-income families’ efforts to live in a nice neighborhood, in “the best project in town,” and their willingness to form new ties with each other and to take on the state to do so.⁶ From African Americans’ fight against the Housing Authority’s racial discrimination policy, to residents’ attempts to stay on-site during the redevelopment of their project, the diverse tenants at North Beach Place have collectively shown the value and significance of location and community bonds in public housing. Built in what has become a top tourist area, North Beach Place both upsets and mirrors historical trends of urban renewal and gentrification that have displaced low-income people from up and coming neighborhoods across the United States. North Beach Place tenants, the Housing Authority, and the surrounding neighborhood have shaped the history of a housing project located in an unexpected place, inhabited by an unlikely group of tenants, and undergoing redevelopment that will create a space more likely to please tourists and district residents than tenants.

⁶ North Beach Place residents, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, August 2002.

The North Beach neighborhood took on a layered identity throughout the twentieth century. Located next to Chinatown, and stretching out to Fisherman's Wharf and the bay, the multi-cultural district originated out of the mid-nineteenth century enclaves of Italian, French, Basque, Spanish, Irish, Mexican, and South American immigrants living. By the turn-of-the century, Telegraph Hill and the wharf had acquired the name "the Latin Quarter" because of the proliferation of Romance languages in the area. Between 1850 and 1920, Italian immigrants transformed North Beach into a *colonia* or Little Italy, a spatial and cultural designation that marked the district into the twentieth century.⁷ The hub of Italian American life in the Bay Area, North Beach drew immigrants and tourists alike with its markets, cafes, bakeries, restaurants and delis, its notable hospitality, and its sights, particularly Washington Square Park, the SS Peter and Paul Church, and Coit Tower. Writing in 1939, columnist Bill Simmons described North Beach as "world famed." The label still applies today.⁸

While Fisherman's Wharf, the world-renowned Italian cuisine in North Beach, and the lively evening entertainment scene drew tourists to the area after World War II, it was the confluence of the "poet hipsters"—the beats— in San Francisco in the mid-1950s and the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) that lodged North Beach in the

⁷ David Arnason, "'Little Italy' or 'New Chinatown'? The Shifting Boundary Between the Italian and Chinese Business Communities of San Francisco's North Beach Neighborhood" (master's thesis, California State University, Hayward, 1989), 3. The settlement of North Beach by Italians occurred in two phases. Between 1850 and 1880, primarily Northern Italians lived in North Beach. After 1880, both Northern and Southern Italian immigrants settled in the area. As a result, regionalism and localism played an important role in North Beach, creating factions and even enclaves in different places. Factionalism ended, however, in 1906 when the earthquake and fire destroyed the district. Many Italians came together to rebuild the area and as a result provincialism was reduced to some extent (Arnason, 39). The influx of Italian immigrants in North Beach stopped in 1924 due to the passage of the National Origins Act. Around this time, second and third generation Italians slowly began moving out of North Beach to the suburbs. This trend accelerated after World War II.

⁸ Bill Simons, "Like San Francisco, North Beach Grew Again from the 1906 Flames," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 12 October 1939.

American imagination. At the City Lights Bookstore in North Beach founded in 1953 as a literary meeting place, the disaffected east coast beat generation writers such as Allen Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac experimented with a new writing style based on “uncensored self-expression and altered states of consciousness induced by trance and drugs” and met up with more politically and ecologically oriented poets later known as the Bay Area branch of the beats—Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Bob Kaufmann, and others in a short-lived energetic literary community.⁹ This group produced writings, including Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” (which he wrote in his North Beach apartment), held readings, and put together multimedia events in collaboration with assemblage artists. The work of these writers and their challenge to the status quo, the literary establishment, and postwar mass society and consumption, coupled with their “bohemian” lifestyles sparked national intrigue and for some outrage as Kerouac’s definition of beat—“poor, down and out, dead-beat, on the bum, sad, and sleeping in subways”—was appropriated as a label for a disaffected, rebellious generation, a counter to American culture.¹⁰

Generating a wide range of press coverage, the presence of the beats in North Beach

⁹ Nancy J. Peters, “The Beat Generation and San Francisco’s Culture of Dissent”, in *Reclaiming San Francisco, History, Politics, and Culture*, ed. James Brook, Chris Carlson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights Bookstore, 1998), 205-206. Lawrence Ferlinghetti came from Paris to San Francisco in 1950 where he met Peter D. Martin. Together they founded City Lights Bookstore in 1953. Allen Ginsburg arrived in North Beach in 1954 where he wrote “Howl” which City Lights had printed in England due to the content. The poem describes the destruction of the human spirit by America’s military-industrial machine “and calls for redemption through the reconciliation of mind and body, affirming human wholeness and holiness” (Peters, 206). *Howl and Other Poems* garnered public attention when a copy was seized by U.S Customs in March 1957, setting off a court battle involving the ACLU. For more details see Nancy J. Peter’s “The Beat Generation,” 205-208.

¹⁰ Jack Kerouac, “The Origins of the Beat Generation,” in *Marginal Manners: The Variants of Bohemia*, ed. by Fredrick J. Hoffman, 1962 reprinted in James E. Miller Junior’s *Heritage of American Literature: Civil War to the Present* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 2054. In a 1958 interview, Kerouac explained that “the beat generation was just a phrase I used in the 1951 manuscript of *On the Road*...It was thereafter picked up by West Coast leftist groups and turned into a meaning like “beat mutiny” and “beat insurrection” and all that nonsense; they just wanted some youth movement to grab onto for their own political and social purposes. I had nothing to do with any of that.” Kerouac, quoted in Miller’s *Heritage of American Literature*, 2049.

brought young people from across the nation to the district where “they dressed as hipsters and tried to be beats.” Tourists followed these youth to North Beach in search of the “beatniks” only to find that the writers had left the area in 1956. Nonetheless, a bohemian community established itself in North Beach and tourists could find the legacy of the beats at coffee houses, in galleries, at the City Lights Bookstore, and in the district’s claims of openness.¹¹

As North Beach began marketing itself to tourists as “Little Italy and Home of the Beats,” a new wave of changes in the 1960s and 1970s altered the character of the neighborhood. Between 1964 and 1968, North Beach witnessed the rise and relative decline of the topless industry in the area, drawing “male tourists throughout the world” to see shows like Carol Doda’s topless act at the Condor Club and other “adult” night clubs in the district.¹² Along with Italian restaurants and cafes, and bohemian hangouts, the short-lived topless entertainment phenomenon added to the popular nightlife in North Beach that already boasted female impersonators at the Finnochio Club, Greek dancing at the Greek Taverna, and operatic singing at the Bocce Ball.¹³

By the mid-1970s, the district also witnessed an influx of Asian-American residents and businesses (the majority were Chinese Americans followed by some immigrants from Southeast Asia) as immigrants crossed the once rigidly defined border of Columbus Avenue between Chinatown and North Beach. This border was marked

¹¹ Peters, "The Beat Generation and San Francisco's Culture of Dissent," 210-211.

¹² Bonnie Parker and Gary Smart, "Whatever Happened to Topless," *San Francisco Business*, July 1968, 42. Parker and Smart argue that the "death of topless" was due to market overexposure and customers' demand for something new. They also reported that some clubs tried to revive the business by offering customers "Bottomless," and "All Nude Scene" shows.

¹³ Brochure, "San Francisco's North Beach," (San Francisco: San Francisco Convention and Visitor's Bureau, 1968), 2.

first by anti-Chinese discrimination and later by traffic light poles displaying the colors of the Italian flag. The U.S Supreme Court's 1947 decision rendering restrictive covenants non-enforceable, along with the California Supreme Court's 1952 declaration that the Alien Land Law preventing non-citizens from owning property in the state was unconstitutional, afforded Asian Americans, especially Chinese, an opportunity to move outside of Chinatown.¹⁴

North Beach became a popular destination for the new wave of Chinese immigrants arriving after 1965 in response to the softening of federal immigration restrictions. Buying up spaces previously owned by Italian Americans who moved to the suburbs, Chinese Americans settled in, enjoying the beauty of the neighborhood and its proximity to Chinatown.¹⁵ Cultural differences, fear of the loss of Italian culture, and rising rents sparked tensions in the area that still continue today. Similarly, business interests and gentrification have reshaped the district and may make more changes. Nonetheless, the image of North Beach as a unique, quaint, and open and accepting neighborhood persists. In a 1984 report, Nancy Dooley summed up a sentiment that many North Beach residents—who take pride in their multi-faceted neighborhood—still echo: San Francisco's most famous neighborhood “remains one of San Francisco's

¹⁴ The Alien Land Law was signed into law in 1913. It was followed by another Alien Land Law in 1920 designed to close loopholes in the 1913 law. The California Supreme Court found the law unconstitutional in 1952 in *Fuji Sei v. State of California*. In 1956 all Alien Land Laws in California were repealed by popular vote.

¹⁵ Italian Americans began leaving North Beach to live in the suburbs in the 1940s. The neighborhood continued to house working-class Italians in the 1960s. By 1970, the border between North Beach and Chinatown had begun to slowly blur in part because of the 1965 legislation allowing more Chinese immigrants into the country.

diverse corners, where different cultures, the old and the new, live cheek and jowl. They may not love one another, but they are tolerant.”¹⁶

The North Beach district welcomed the 1941 selection of the housing project site to replace run-down warehouses and “to house the fisherman, clerks, etc. that work in the vicinity.”¹⁷ Reflecting the needs of the neighborhood that housed many working-class Italian Americans in the early 1940s, the project offered the prospect of decent, low-rent housing. Like Ping Yuen tenants, district residents worked to shape the project to fit their needs, petitioning the Housing Authority for “a nursery school, WPA art project, and minimum amount of space for parking and maximum amount of space for a playground to be included in the Project development.”¹⁸ Over 400 area residents advocated for these amenities aimed at creating a safe, attractive environment for working-class families to raise children. The project design answered the requests for play space and parking and emphasized the culture of the primarily Italian-American district with regional features including European-style architecture and a bocce ball court, a game brought to the U.S. by Italian immigrants.

¹⁶ Nancy Dooley, "A Second Look: Italian Renaissance in North Beach," *San Francisco Examiner*, 16 July 1984.

¹⁷ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 22 September 1938, San Francisco Housing Authority. "North Beach Place to Be Built in 1952," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 October 1949. Describing the site, the article notes that "razing of the present buildings—warehouses for the most part," will get under way shortly. Three photographs taken in 1950 of the site between Columbus, Bay, and Mason prior to demolition depict several run-down warehouses. (Site of North Beach Place Housing Project Prior to Construction, April 10, 1950, and ca. 1950; photo identification numbers, AAD-6089, AAD-6090, AAD6091, S.F. Housing Projects -North Beach file in the San Francisco Public Library's San Francisco Historical Photograph Collection, <http://sflib1.sfp1.org>.)

¹⁸ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 19 June 1941, San Francisco Housing Authority. There is no mention in the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission Minutes or the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner* of opposition to the development of North Beach Place.

Like five other housing projects, North Beach Place was delayed by the war but opened next to the cable car line in 1952. The surrounding neighborhood underwent major shifts as Italian Americans migrated out of the district and an evolving tourist industry ballooned during the decade. The project, once seen as a positive addition to the neighborhood, began to lose favor over the years as North Beach's offerings drew visitors with varied interests to the district and North Beach Place's buildings aged and declined and its crime rate rose. As the neighborhood changed into an increasingly popular tourist destination and residential section with its prime location near the San Francisco Bay where hip and traditional elements mingled, North Beach Place became isolated from the surrounding community. With Pier 45 four blocks away and the development of Pier 39 (1978) six blocks from the project, the boom in hotel openings directly across from North Beach Place, and the city's push for redevelopment, the neighborhood —(with its mythic tolerance) that has housed European immigrants, Asian immigrants, beat poets and bohemian artists, and topless clubs— stopped short of a sustained acceptance of the low-income African American, Chinese-American, and Caucasian families living in public housing in the district.¹⁹

“EXCLUSIVE” PUBLIC HOUSING

The opening of North Beach Place in September 1952 was hailed by the Housing Authority, the *Journal of Housing*, and tenants as an “outstanding example in low-rent housing.”²⁰ Like Ping Yuen, the SFHA selected the site in 1941 in response to surveys

¹⁹ While there were other Asian families living in North Beach Place, the majority of Asian residents according to tenants were Chinese Americans.

²⁰ San Francisco Housing Authority, *Eleventh Annual Report*, 1951, 2. In May 1950, the *Journal of Housing* lauded the strong design of North Beach Place: “The much-recommended balcony seems to be due for a real work-out.” *Journal of Housing*, May 1950, 171, quoted in Gwendolyn Wright, “The

that depicted the “Latin Quarter” as overcrowded and overrun with substandard buildings. Deferred because of the war, the modern project designed by prominent architects Henry Gutterson and Ernest Born provided 229 low-rent apartments for the North Beach neighborhood.²¹ Located on 4.6 acres on Bay, Mason, and Francisco Streets and Columbus Avenue, the thirteen, three-story buildings integrated U-shaped garden court playgrounds and parking areas. Blending a modernist design that echoed European avant-garde buildings with regional accents such as Italian gardens, a bocce ball court, and exterior paint selected to achieve a “Mediterranean feeling,” Gutterson and Born, along with famed landscape architect Thomas Church, created a project with an international look and local flavor that was particularly suited to North Beach.²² (Figures

Evolution of Public Housing Policy and Design in the San Francisco-Bay Area (part of author's Ph.D. exam, College of Environmental Design, Department of Architecture, University of California, Berkeley, November 22, 1976), 34..

²¹ Henry Gutterson, noted for his extensive residential designs throughout the Bay Area, was part of the design team for the Panama Pacific Exposition, and served as staff architect for the City of Oakland early in his career. In 1916, he opened his own architectural firm in San Francisco. He designed several Christian Science churches, the Salem Lutheran Home in Oakland, the Vedanta Society Meeting Hall in Berkeley, and the Benevolent Society Building in San Francisco. He also served on many urban planning and development organizations including the Berkeley Planning Commission, the design committee for the San Francisco Civic Center, and others. Ernest Born worked under Bay Area architect John Galen Howard and for the firm Gehron and Ross in New York City before settling in the Bay Area in the 1930s. Born's notable commissions include several buildings for the 1930 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island, the renovation of the Greek Theatre at the University of California Berkeley, two Stanford University campus buildings, and the design standards for 33 Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) stations. He became a full-time professor at the U.C. Berkeley's School of Architecture in 1952. He also served on the San Francisco Art Commission in the 1940s and 1960s and was the director of the San Francisco Art Association between 1947 and 1951. San Francisco Planning Department, "Final Environmental Impact Report, North Beach HOPE VI Housing Development," 17 May 2001, 36.

²² Wright, "The Evolution of Public Housing Policy and Design in the San Francisco-Bay Area," 34. Wright argues that the modernist aesthetic of North Beach Place dominated over "more regionalistic designs." While she accurately describes the ways in which the strong geometric designs of Gutterson and Born's structure demonstrates "an almost literal application of the low-cost working-class housing built by enlightened city governments in England, Austria, and Holland in the late 1920s," she does not take into account the design details that reflected the district's history as Little Italy. From the design calling for bocce ball courts—a European game brought to the U.S. by Italian immigrants—to the selection of Italian shrubs, the architects made an effort to create a space that would appeal to the surrounding community. These choices, however, reflected a view of the district that quickly proved static as Italian Americans moved to the suburbs in droves following World War II. Likewise, these regional additions reflected the Housing Authority's "neighborhood pattern policy" in the expectation that project residents would be

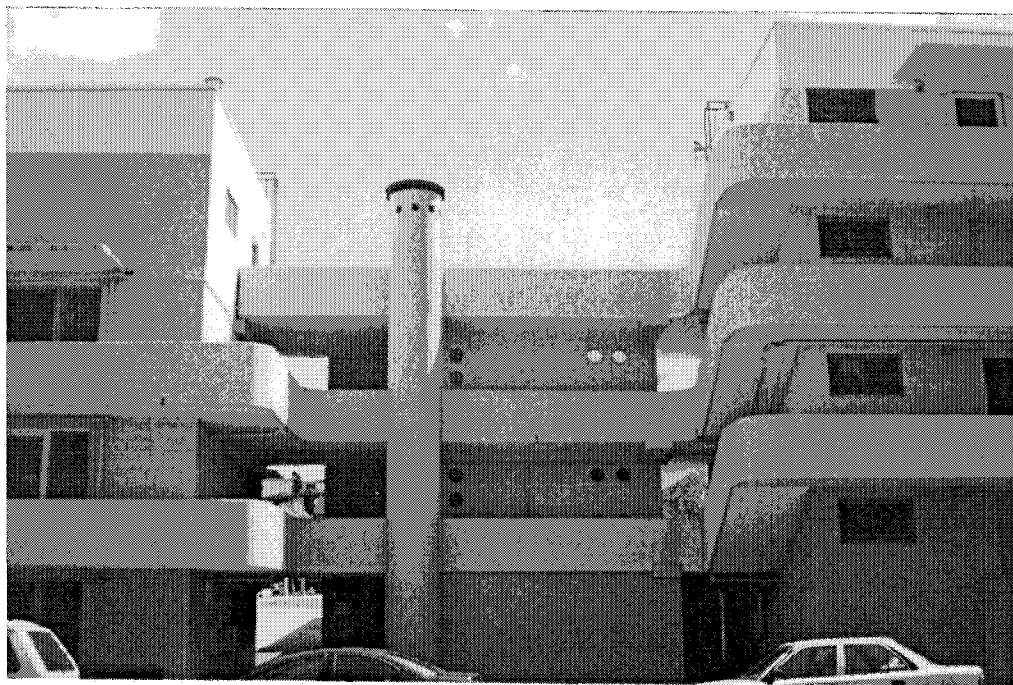
7-10) Albert Conlon, one of the first tenants in North Beach Place, praised the design. "I've lived in 16 States, and I haven't seen anything to compare with these apartments here. They are wonderful."²³ The new modern apartments located near public transportation, shops, and the picturesque bay provided the tenants selected to live in North Beach Place with a high quality, low-rent living environment.

The lawsuit against the Housing Authority eclipsed the press coverage of the project opening and brought the policy and politics of segregation in public housing to center stage at the city, state, and federal level. Locally, the neighborhood pattern policy came under attack again in 1949 when African American Housing Commissioner William McKinley Thomas challenged the formula, calling it "a very practical form of segregation and discrimination." Undeterred by his arguments, the Housing Commissioners voted three to one to uphold the policy.²⁴ A month later the city's Board of Supervisors tried to undermine the policy by making new public housing units free of racial discrimination. Eight supervisors out of eleven passed through a non-discrimination clause into the cooperation agreement authorizing the Authority to seek

Italian Americans, or Italian or European immigrant families. The Housing Authority proudly described the Mediterranean and "Old World" feeling of North Beach Place in its 1951 annual report. According to a 1945 article in *Architect and Engineer* by John S. Bolles, "the architects have adapted the project to the North Beach area by including a Bocci court." I have not been able to establish whether or not the courts were put in when the project was constructed. Nonetheless, the architects' choice to include a bocce ball court, a European game frequently played by and associated with Italian immigrants, demonstrates an attention to the neighborhood's culture. John S. Bolles, "North Beach Place Housing Project—San Francisco," *Architect and Engineer*, July 1945, 16.

²³ Conlon, a 40-year hotel employee, moved in with his family in September 1952. His family of five had previously lived in a two-room "hotel apartment." "New Housing Project Opens," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 September 1952. The maximum amount of income for tenants ranged from \$180 to \$249 depending on the number of people in a family. "North Beach Place to be Built in 1952," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 October 1949.

²⁴ "S.F. Housing Board Keeps Racial Policy," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 October 1949.



FIGURES 7 & 8

North Beach Place, San Francisco, photos by Michael Cole



FIGURES 9 & 10

North Beach Place, San Francisco, photos by Michael Cole

federal funds for the construction of 3000 new public housing units.²⁵ Federal law required both the city (in San Francisco represented by the Board of Supervisors) and the Housing Authority to sign and submit a “Co-operation Agreement” in order to receive funds for new public housing units.²⁶ The Housing Authority Commissioners defied the Board of Supervisors. Instead of signing the application for federal funds with the non-discrimination amendment, the Authority polled civic and community organizations for “an expression of opinion on the nonsegregation policy.”²⁷ Ignoring criticism by national housing expert Charles Abrams who called the Authority’s move “an act of secession” and produced reports on the decrease in racial tensions in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Pittsburgh public housing where segregation had been abolished, the Housing Authority contended that the “final action...will be determined by the poll.”²⁸ Claiming to bow to democratic principles, the Housing Authority vowed to let the people decide by polling approximately ninety community groups listed by the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce.

Shoring up its defense against critics’ allegations of discrimination, the Housing Commissioners, complicating the meanings of localism and community in public housing design and management, argued that the Housing Authority was trying to create

²⁵ "Segregation Ban in New S.F. Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 November 1949. The amendment was suggested by Edward Howden, the executive director of the Council for Civic Unity and was drafted by Supervisor Christopher George. For more details see "Building Blocked on 3000 Units: Segregation and S.F. Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 January 1950.

²⁶ "Building Blocked on 3000 Units: Segregation and S.F. Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 January 1950.

²⁷ "Housing Policy Attack," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 January 1950.

²⁸ Ibid. Information on Abrams' critique from "Housing Policy Attack," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 January 1950.

developments that would mesh with surrounding neighborhoods by enforcing its policy.

Executive Director John Beard explained the rationale:

It is desired that a housing project be an integral part of the neighborhood so that people intermingle in the social, economic and political life of the community. Public housing is intended to serve not only the tenants but the community as a whole. We don't want any cultural islands scattered about the city. An effort to change the character of a neighborhood would be accompanied by social disturbances of considerable degree.²⁹

Ultimately the Housing Commissioners' poll (twenty-two organizations responded with eleven opposing the neighborhood policy plan, nine supporting it, and two unable to answer) had little, if any, impact on the compromise reached between the Housing Authority and the Board of Supervisors.³⁰ With \$30,000,000 in federal funds hanging in the balance, the Housing Commissioners and Board of Supervisors reached an agreement whereby the authority's neighborhood pattern plan would remain in the 1741 existing units and apply to 1200 deferred units ready for construction, including Ping Yuen and North Beach Place, while being abolished in new projects.³¹

NAACP attorneys Terry Francois and Nathaniel Colley challenged the de jure segregation of the Housing Authority's neighborhood pattern policy. Their battleground was the newly built North Beach Place and their case underscores one piece of the "story of the Western Civil Rights Movement" which according to legal scholar Carolyn Luedtke, "has gone largely unnoticed in our national history."³² During an August 1952

²⁹ "Segregation and S.F. Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 January 1950. Beard, in further defense of the Housing Authority's policy, stated that the SFHA borrowed the plan from Philadelphia.

³⁰ "Housing Segregation," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 February 1950.

³¹ "Housing Officials Agree to Nonsegregation in Projects," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 February 1950.

³² Luedtke, "On the Frontier of Change," 1.

meeting, Housing Commission Chairman E.N. Ayer revealed the murky racial politics of the policy at North Beach Place when he announced, "Negroes... would not be admitted, and although a few Chinese families may be selected, the tenants will be predominantly white."³³ According to SFHA's policy, the agency could admit a few Chinese tenants if there were Chinese families living in the North Beach District. Ayers' statement reveals the SFHA's and city's struggle with the demographic shifts that occurred during World War II. In collaborating with the Chinatown community to build Ping Yuen, the SFHA acknowledged the long history of the Chinese in overcrowded Chinatown and the desire for many low-income Chinese-American residents to remain in the district. This cooperation also demonstrated the city's changing attitude toward Chinese Americans following World War II. Segregation at Ping Yuen placated district leaders, project residents, and San Franciscans who wanted the Chinese to stay in Chinatown.

The neighborhood pattern formula did not, however, please African Americans in need of housing. The African American population had grown from less than 5000 before the war to over 43,000 in 1950. Most of the migrants to the city settled in Hunter's Point, the Western Addition, and the Fillmore, once home to Japanese Americans forced out of the area and into internment during the war.³⁴ While many San Franciscans tolerated the small black population before the war, their attitude changed when African American

³³ "NAACP to Fight Ban on Negroes in S.F. Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 September 1952.

³⁴ Luedtke, "On the Frontier of Change," 3. According to Charles Johnson's report "The Negro War Worker in San Francisco," African Americans became one of the two largest "unassimilated racial minorities" in San Francisco in the early 1940s. As over 5000 Japanese Americans, many living in the Fillmore District, "were lifted from the city's midst" in 1941, the area was taken over by black migrants. African Americans moved into the available space "for housing and living" and extended the area of settlement another six blocks toward downtown. Even as thousands of African Americans poured into the district, Johnson notes that "the enlarged Fillmore area remained mixed in its ethnic composition." A June 1943 survey by the San Francisco Department of Health and Sanitation of the Fillmore District showed that there were 27,379 whites, 9,319 African Americans, and 342 "persons of other racial extraction" in the area. Johnson, "The Negro War Worker in San Francisco," 3.

migrants moved to the city, looking for housing and jobs. Across the city, San Franciscans objected to African Americans moving into their neighborhood fearing that “Negroes depreciate property values.”³⁵ Beginning in 1941, white property owners began forming restrictive covenants “to restrict the sale or rental of property only to members of the Caucasian group.”³⁶ While a 1947 Supreme Court ruling banned these restrictive covenants, “the pattern of residential segregation” with African Americans residing in Hunter’s Point, the Western Addition, and the Fillmore had become firmly rooted and continues, to some extent, today.³⁷ Building on the efforts in the South to dismantle racial segregation, African Americans in San Francisco challenged the Housing Authority, particularly the black and white racial divide in housing policies. With a number of migrants coming from southern states where they had witnessed and lived the injustices of the black/white binary in the Jim Crow South, African Americans in San Francisco applied and fought for the right to live in North Beach Place.

Filing a petition on behalf of three eligible African Americans denied admission to North Beach Place, Francois and Colley won an early but empty victory when Judge Albert C. Wollenberg ordered the Housing Authority to “give the three persons named—and all other eligible Negroes—the same consideration as other applicants, ‘without regard to race or color.’”³⁸ After several delays on the part of the Housing Authority,

³⁵ Ibid., 29.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Luedtke, "On the Frontier of Change," 3.

³⁸ "Court Acts on Housing Race Issue," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 September 1952. The three applicants listed in the petition were Mattie Banks, Tobbie Cain, and James Charley. The NAACP attorneys argued that these applicants had higher qualifications for North Beach Place than "many persons or ethnic groups whom the Housing Authority has certified for occupancy." They claimed that Mrs. Banks was the second

Superior Court Judge Melvyn I. Cronin presided over a stopgap agreement forcing the Authority to hold fifteen units for African Americans at North Beach Place for possible occupancy depending on the outcome of the NAACP's legal challenge to the SFHA's admission policy.³⁹ In the ensuing court battles between 1952 and 1954, the Housing Authority justified segregation in public housing under the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) doctrine of "separate but equal." The plaintiffs countered that the "separate but equal" framework was invalid in evaluating housing. Rather than arguing that the housing facilities in San Francisco were unequal, the NAACP attorneys asked the court to "enforce the 14th Amendment. The Housing Authority has the discretionary power to determine the economic qualification of applicants for housing, but not the racial qualifications."⁴⁰

During a series of heated hearings, the extremity of the Housing Authority's policies emerged. The SFHA defied the federal government by ignoring the Federal Housing Act to sustain its neighborhood pattern plan. Executive Director John Beard testified that the agency had violated the Federal Housing Act that called for prioritizing veteran applicants when he stated that the SFHA had assigned white non-veteran applicants to apartments at North Beach Place over African American veterans. Subsequent testimony further revealed how the Housing Authority manipulated the Federal Housing Act in order to keep the project all white. The NAACP attorneys elicited

person in line on the first day applications were taken. Her husband was in the Navy. Cain was a World War II Army vet which should have ranked him near the top of the list for moving into public housing.

³⁹ "Segregation Issue," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 12 September, 1952.

⁴⁰ Carolyn Hoecker Luedtke explains how the plaintiffs, in their arguments, noted the trend away from the "separate but equal framework" and contended that the Supreme Court "consistently refused to apply the 'separate but equal' doctrine in the field of housing." Banks Plaintiffs' Answer Brief, supra n. 74, at 10, cited in Luedtke, "On the Frontier of Change," 7. The quote about plaintiffs' plea for the enforcement of the 14 Amendment (equal protection under the law to all citizens in a state) is from "Hearings Open on Negroes in North Beach Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 September 1952.

statements from tenants demonstrating that the Housing Authority had moved white families with veteran status all the way from the East Bay, rather than housing those in need in the North Beach area and in San Francisco, in an attempt to fill North Beach Place with white veterans after the NAACP mounted its legal challenge. In the event the NAACP won its case, the Housing Authority could reject African American applicants due to the federal mandate to house veterans first.⁴¹ Judge Cronin's 1952 decision to side with the plaintiffs charging the Housing Authority to end segregation in public housing under the 14th Amendment was appealed by the SFHA later that year. African Americans still could not move into North Beach Place.

The Housing Authority's intractability drew scathing criticism from several organizations across San Francisco that viewed the agency's policies as discriminatory and counter to the city's long held reputation "as a liberal, cosmopolitan city full of diverse populations living in harmony."⁴² James E. Stratten, a member of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, called for the resignation of E.N. Ayer and John W. Beard, the Chairman and Executive Director, respectively, of the Housing Authority. Justifying his position, Stratten summed up the frustration of San Franciscans opposed to the SFHA's admittance policy: "I take this attitude because I think the majority of San Franciscans want San Francisco to remain the leading city in the world in its attitude

⁴¹ "Hearing on Jim Crow Housing Issue," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 October 1952. The order of priority for tenants according to the *Banks, et al. v. San Francisco Housing Authority* report was first preference to families displaced by the project. Next, families of disabled veterans would be housed followed by veterans and servicemen. Low-income families not displaced by the project were considered next. The record states that when "other factors are equal, families of the lowest income and in greatest need of better housing are preferred." All tenants accepted to live in public housing had to be residents of San Francisco. *Banks, et al v. San Francisco Housing Authority, Pacific Reporter*, 2d series, 120 Cal. App., 2dI, p.671.

⁴² Luedtke, "On the Frontier of Change," 2.

toward human beings.”⁴³ Other civic groups joined together in June 1953 at a one-day conference on the problem of segregation in public housing sponsored by the NAACP, the San Francisco Urban League, the Council for Civic Unity, and the Japanese-American Citizens League. Together these groups urged the Housing Authority to abolish the neighborhood pattern policy claiming, “It marks our city as a center of race bigotry, which it is not in fact.”⁴⁴

Defying “the official policy of the city, the State and the Superior Court” and ignoring the vocal local opposition, the Housing Authority continued enforcing the neighborhood pattern policy and fought to uphold it. In the private housing and rental markets, San Francisco residents of all races had received the legal go-ahead from the U.S. and California Supreme Court rulings in 1947 and 1952 to rent and/or buy housing in any neighborhood in the city. Yet in public housing, the SFHA continued to distribute tenant populations based on race and ethnicity. The agency appealed Judge Cronin’s ruling in the state courts. The California Superior Court and the California Appellate Court both ruled against the Housing Authority arguing “the rights of individual Negroes were being abridged when they were denied admission to specific projects.”⁴⁵

The Housing Authority would not be deterred, even by a State court ruling. In the ultimate appeal by the SFHA, *Banks v. Housing Authority of San Francisco* (1952) reached the United States Supreme Court in 1954, one week before the justices invalidated the “separate but equal” justification for segregation in *Brown v. Board of*

⁴³ "Bias Charged to S.F. Housing Chiefs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 November 1952.

⁴⁴ Bernard Taper, "Housing Agency Urged to Give Up Segregation," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 June 1953.

⁴⁵ "Court Voids S.F. Policy on Housing," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 August 1953.

Education. The court denied certiorari (refused to hear the case), allowing the California ruling deeming the neighborhood pattern policy in San Francisco unconstitutional to stand. African Americans could now move into North Beach Place and other projects. Writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Richard Reinhardt summed up the breadth of the Housing Authority's resistance and the impact of the court's decision. "After fighting for its segregation policy in four courts, employing five attorneys, and spending \$7500 in public money, the Housing Authority bowed to the final rule of law." The Authority's promise to "comply 100% with the court's ruling" opened the city's eleven low-rent public housing projects to all eligible tenants marking a monumental shift in policy and placement.⁴⁶ Yet even as the victory in the *Banks* case promised to blaze "trails in the national fight against public housing discrimination" by overturning segregation in San Francisco public housing, the U.S. government did not formally outlaw discrimination in federal housing projects nationwide until the 1968 passage of the Fair Housing Act.⁴⁷

PROJECT LIVING, TOURIST TRADE

A 1952 photo of North Beach Place captures the Housing Authority's initial vision for selective occupancy at the housing project. The modern lines of the new project carry the viewer's eye toward Russian Hill in the background while in the foreground a Caucasian family looks into the camera. The husband, Theodore, stands to the left, his wife Mary is on the right and in the center is their son Teddy holding his

⁴⁶ Richard Reinhardt, "S.F. Segregation in Housing to End," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 May 1954. On May 27, 1954, the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission passed resolution number 978 repealing the neighborhood pattern policy plan established under resolution 287.

⁴⁷ Luedtke, 7.

parents' hands (Figure 11).⁴⁸ The family's whiteness gave them priority over "non-whites." Despite the SFHA's segregated vision for public housing in the North Beach district, the tenacity of the plaintiffs in the *Banks* case, the NAACP and their legal team, and other African Americans who wanted to live in North Beach Place paved the way for African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/as and other groups to live in the newly built, conveniently located project. Long-time resident Alma Lark captured the appeal of living in North Beach and the increasing diversity of the project.

Three years after it (North Beach Place) opened, I moved in. I was a parent with three kids. I had checked around the other developments and I discovered this was the best for living...Everybody seemed to be friendly with each other and for moving from place to place you had adequate transportation, a theater down the street, a drug store down the street, everything was convenient. And with the atmosphere up here you see I wanted my children raised here. ...I filled out the necessary forms but I had to sue Housing to come in...And after I moved in all other nationals came like the Asians, Filipinos, Koreans, you name it, after the 1950s.⁴⁹

The diversity of North Beach Place, made possible by the efforts of the NAACP and African American plaintiffs, grew in tandem with the changes in the North Beach district. By the late 1950s, the project began housing a range of racial and ethnic groups, a shift that presaged the demographic changes that increased in the 1960s and 1970s. As "Little Italy" became the hang-out for beat poets and their followers in the 1950s, North Beach gained national attention. The combination of quaint Italian cafes, scenic bay views, and the unfettered lifestyle of the beats with their readings at City Lights

⁴⁸ Photo from the San Francisco Public Library's San Francisco Historical Photo Collection, in the folder S.F. Public Housing-- North Beach Place, Photo ID: AAD-6092, <http://webbie.sfpd.org/multimedia/sfphotos/AAD-6092.jpg>. The caption reads "Theodore and Mary Martin with their son, Teddy, at the North Beach Place Housing Project," September 12, 1952.

⁴⁹ Alma Lark, interview with the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 10 August 2002. Alma Lark was not listed in the suit against the Housing Authority. Nonetheless she did retain Terry Francois, one of the NAACP lead attorneys in the suit, as her lawyer. Whether she was directly involved in the case against the Housing Authority or not, it is clear that she wanted to live at North Beach Place and was able to do so because of the NAACP's victory over the Housing Authority.



FIGURE 11

The Martin Family at North Beach Place, San Francisco
San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

Bookstore drew more visitors to North Beach. The increased tourist interest affected the neighborhood's economy, property values, and the push for redevelopment. Over time it also influenced the lives of North Beach Place tenants whose project location at the end of the cable car line served as many visitors entrée into the district.

Tenants of all races moving into North Beach Place in the 1950s, like residents at Ping Yuen, experienced a clean, safe, congenial living environment in the heart of a burgeoning tourist district. As a child growing up in North Beach Place, Janette Huffman recalled, "no one would have called them 'projects' back then the neighborhood was so safe and comfortable that everyone left their doors unlocked—even at night."⁵⁰ While integration did not foster an instant community, some tenants formed relationships across racial and ethnic lines. When asked about racial tensions in the early years of the project, Alma Lark responded "we didn't have any here. It was just like a big family....Everyone has respected each other over the years."⁵¹ Even if other tenants did not share Lark's interpretation of the project community, it is probable that residents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds commingled in the project and in the North Beach district. A 1956 photograph of the North Beach Playground taken by Cliff Nelson and donated to the San Francisco Historical Photograph Collection shows a group of children—most likely from the neighborhood and perhaps including kids from North Beach Place located two blocks away— playing together. In the sandbox, on the swings, and in the spaces in between Asian American, African American, and Caucasian children play together while

⁵⁰ Nina Siegal, "Rebuilding Trust: As S.F. 'Revitalizes' the North Beach Public-Housing Project Tenants Prepare to Fight," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 27 November 1996.

⁵¹ Lark, interview.

a few mothers stand in a circle talking.⁵² Although the photograph does not represent North Beach Place it reminds the viewer that on the playgrounds, in the shops, at the bay, and in the courtyards and laundry rooms at the project, tenants lived in a racially and ethnically diverse district. Forty years later North Beach Place tenants described racial harmony among children when they reflected on the importance of the project's diversity for their kids even as they explained how language barriers increasingly divided the adult population.⁵³

The emergent tourist trade and the gradual increase of the Chinese population in North Beach and in the project in the 1960s altered community dynamics within North Beach Place.⁵⁴ The national and international fascination with the beats in the late 1950s and the rise of topless clubs in the 1960s drew a wide range of new visitors to the district, including "summer of love" participants in 1967. While peace and love were supposedly the watchwords for the hippies, they did not apply to the public housing tenants. Project residents were "ignored by the surrounding community" increasingly interested in earning tourist dollars and gradually ashamed of North Beach Place that began housing poorer families and receiving fewer repairs in response to federal legislation and budget

⁵² Photo captioned "North Beach Playground," 19 July 1956, from the San Francisco Public Library's San Francisco Historical Photo Collection, in the North Beach folder, <http://webbie1.sfpl.org/multimedia/sfphoto/sfphotos/aad-6415.jpg>. Play equipment was installed at North Beach Place in October 1955. Nevertheless, it is arguable that older North Beach Place children continued to play at the North Beach Playground located on Greenwich Street and Columbus Avenue three blocks away from the project.

⁵³ North Beach Place residents, interview.

⁵⁴ There were other Asians moving into North Beach in the 1960s but the majority of newcomers to North Beach were Chinese and Chinese Americans.

cuts in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁵ As the population of Chinese immigrants increased as a result of federal legislation in 1965, more Chinese families moved from crowded Chinatown to North Beach. These changes resulted in a larger population of Chinese families in North Beach Place, many of whom could not speak English. Language barriers and cultural differences undermined integration. Mini-communities began forming in the project offering support for participants and causing misunderstandings and tensions between groups as tenants navigated living in a neighborhood increasingly disdainful of public housing.

The ethnic and racial divide in the project manifested in the formation of two separate tenants' organization. The North Beach Place Neighborhood Improvement Association (later called the North Beach Place Tenants' Association, NBTAs) formed in 1964. The group's purpose was to "improve conditions in the immediate area by providing activities for young people of each age group from pre-school to young adulthood; improve general living conditions; improve relations among tenants; and to improve the community at large."⁵⁶ The last two aims became more and more difficult over time as Chinese-speaking residents moved into North Beach Place and the surrounding neighborhood underwent urban redevelopment in the 1970s to increase tourism, further alienating project residents. Within two years, Chinese residents created a separate organization, the North Beach Place Chinese Improvement Association

⁵⁵ North Beach Place residents, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 10 August 2002. The Brooke Amendment, enacted in 1969, required public housing residents to pay 25% of their income for rent (this was later raised to 30%). For the working class this policy resulted in a rent hike with each pay increase they received. This policy was followed by others in the 1970s and 1980s which mandated that local public housing authorities give admission preference to the poorest of the poor.

⁵⁶ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 3 December 1964, San Francisco Housing Authority.

(NBPCIA), to serve the needs of Chinese tenants, many who could not fully participate in the NBTA because they could not speak English. By 1969, the NBPCIA had over sixty members— over 95 percent of the Chinese residents at the project— and the SFHA deemed it “one of the most active and viable tenant organizations with in the Authority.”⁵⁷ The formation of the NBPCIA seemed to pose a challenge to the NBPTA and initially created friction between the groups, fueled in part by language barriers. Nonetheless by 1969 both groups had apparently resolved their differences and established a rapport, laying the foundation for a generally peaceful co-existence between the formal tenant networks.⁵⁸

While formal and informal networks formed along racial and ethnic lines, all tenants at North Beach Place shared the experience of living in public housing in an excellent location which included public transportation, a grocery store and CostPlus/World Market across the street, and playgrounds, the bay, and Fisherman’s Wharf nearby. The benefits of living in a safe, convenient, and attractive location outweighed cultural and language differences among tenants and promoted inter-group unity spurred by the prospect of dislocation in the 1990s.⁵⁹

The attractions of the area were apparent to real estate developers and business leaders as well. In the 1970s, the city began redeveloping the Financial District, located near North Beach and Chinatown. Using federal urban renewal funds, the city

⁵⁷ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 27 March 1969, San Francisco Housing Authority. The meeting minutes noted that the organization had a membership of 65 of the 68 Chinese families in residence “plus other non-Chinese resident families.”

⁵⁸ Ibid. I do not know if and when the NBPCIA disbanded. I have no evidence suggesting that the NBPCIA interacted with PYRIA. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that members of the NBPCIA supported PYRIA’s rent strike.

⁵⁹ The CostPlus/World Market Store opened in 1956 across from the project on Bay Street.

demolished apartments and houses in the South of Market area to construct Yerba Buena Plaza. Over 3000 working-class families were displaced from their apartments and homes.⁶⁰ The city promoted the Plaza as a new draw for tourists and locals. The North Beach district followed suit as business developers began “revitalizing” the area around North Beach Place to shore up tourist dollars.

Project residents were left out of the boom cycle. In 1975, Hilton opened a hotel on the corner of Bay and Jones Streets across from North Beach Place, later followed by the San Francisco Marriott Fisherman’s Wharf, the Hyatt, and the Travelodge. Resident Alma Lark remembers the empty promises made by community planners regarding redevelopment in the district. “Before these hotels were built you see we sat right in here with community groups and discussed plans where residents would have upward mobility to work in those hotels across the street.” According to Lark, the developers did not follow through on their promises to provide employment opportunities for project residents.⁶¹

The neighborhood surrounding the project not only transformed into a hotel district, it also attracted more visitors as the entry point to Fisherman’s Wharf and the newly developed Pier 39. Once a run-down pier “full of old refrigerators and junked cars,” Pier 39 was transformed into a forty-five acre entertainment complex with over one hundred shops, restaurants, and numerous attractions including a carousel, arcade, and cruises around the bay by businessman Warren Simmons. The pier launched with a grand

⁶⁰ For more information on San Francisco's urban redevelopment process and the controversy surrounding the construction of Yerba Buena Plaza see Chester Hartman's *City for Sale: The Transformation of San Francisco* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2002).

⁶¹ Alma Lark, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 10 August 2002. The Marriott opened in 1984 and the Hyatt opened in 1990.

opening on October 4, 1978.⁶² The site quickly became one of the major tourist destinations in the city, increasing visitors to the area—many of whom used the Powell-Mason line.

As the tourist traffic in North Beach grew in response to new attractions and places to stay in the area, North Beach Place, like other projects across the city and the nation declined as federal funding to the Housing Authority decreased. To North Beach Place residents, it seemed that the district and the city valued tourists over project tenants as North Beach Place became a run-down, unsafe island in the midst of a thriving tourist neighborhood. Maintenance problems and delays, as well as the rise in crime in and around the project, frustrated and worried tenants. In a district catering to tourists, neighbors blamed tenants for both the social and physical deterioration of North Beach Place and increasingly viewed the project as a “problem.” When asked about how the neighborhood perceived public housing tenants, North Beach Place residents responded that their neighbors “didn’t have anything to do with us,” “felt we were beneath them,” and “pointed the finger of blame at us if there is a robbery at the Safeway or at the cable car station. People from the outside always blame crime on North Beach residents.”⁶³ Thus North Beach Place tenants suffered not only the burden of the declining landscape of their project but also the contempt of the surrounding community. Once a safe community in a nice neighborhood, North Beach Place tenants in the late 1970s and early 1980s felt threatened by criminals, some of whom were residents, using the project grounds as a home base and hiding place.

⁶² For a brief summary on the history of Pier 39 see <http://www.chicseafood.com/history/html>. Information on Pier 39 can be found on the Fisherman's Wharf Merchants Association website, <http://www.fishermanswharf.org/Pier39.htm>.

⁶³ North Beach Place Tenants, interview.

By 1979 tenants fearing for their safety and encouraged by the success of the Ping Yuen rent strike, demanded additional lighting and security from the SFHA. North Beach Place tenants, like residents at Ping Yuen and Valencia Gardens, had to contend with teenage gangs who preyed on tenants and tourists alike in the late 1970s. According to Deputy Chief of Police, North Beach Place had become “a sanctuary for the crooks who hang out there or live there.” These gang members broke into project apartments, mugged people on the street, stole purses and cars, and kept North Beach Place tenants “in a state of terror.”⁶⁴

Tenants’ calls for aid to the police and to the SFHA were not prioritized by either group. The Housing Authority did take some notice of the problems at the project after someone burned Christmas trees in the courtyard in early January 1979, destroying equipment in the children’s play area. The Housing Commission sent two members to North Beach Place to report on conditions there. Their description revealed the severity of the project’s troubles as “tenants had fear of leaving their homes” and “people were being physically attacked.”⁶⁵ That same month, Laura Swartz of the S.F. Neighborhood Legal Assistance Foundation also reported on project conditions to the Housing Commission, noting that tenants were “concerned about physical safety in their homes,” and about having “no security bars and no outside lighting.” With PYRIA’s successful rent strike as a subtext, Swartz, implied that North Beach Place tenants could follow Ping Yuen’s lead when she stated that “conditions are far graver (at North Beach Place) than

⁶⁴ Birney Jarvis, "Crackdown on Teenage Crime in Housing Project," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 July 1978.

⁶⁵ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 11 January 1979, San Francisco Housing Authority.

Ping Yuen in terms of security.”⁶⁶ Despite the commissioners’ report and Swartz’s claims, the Executive Director explained the bleak facts. “[T]he Housing Authority does not have the resources to provide comprehensive security. Public housing residents are residents of the City and County of San Francisco and the S.F. Police Department has a clear responsibility to provide security for the entire city.”⁶⁷ Nonetheless, perhaps hoping to avoid another rent strike, the SFHA promised to provide North Beach Place tenants with brighter lighting and window gratings. North Beach tenants responded that they would “consider a rent strike” if “those promises aren’t kept.”⁶⁸ In a demonstration of their fear and lack of faith in the SFHA, some residents went ahead and paid to secure their apartments. After a project neighbor scared off burglars trying to break into her apartment, tenant Hope Halikias used her savings to start “investing in my own prison” by putting bars on her windows.⁶⁹ Other tenants took safety into their own hands, installing window bars, additional locks, and gratings on doors.

North Beach Place tenants, living with danger at their doorsteps, claimed that the police prioritized tourists over them in terms of protection and public safety. The president of the North Beach Tenants Association, Hope Halikias, argued that the police were more concerned about protecting tourists at Fisherman’s Wharf than “entire families living in fear inside the project’s apartments.” She went on to describe the hierarchy of police aid: “We know we are in a tourist area and the Central Station police—they do

⁶⁶ Ibid. In response to the Christmas tree burning incidence, Commissioner Ubalde toured North Beach Place and visited with some residents. He reported to the commission, “there was an attitude of fear and apprehension over lack of security and safety.”

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Frances D’Emilio, “Fed-up Tenants Fight City Hall,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 February 1979.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

take care of the tourists but it's inside the buildings where we need help... We are left stranded there, alone."⁷⁰ Even after the Housing Authority installed window bars, residents had little relief from criminal activity that they claimed was perpetuated mostly by "outsiders."⁷¹ During a November 1980 Housing Commission meeting, Hope Halikias commented on the continuing problems at the project explaining that "there has been a rash of crime and the bars installed for protection are now being used as ladders to climb to the second floor of the apartments, and tenants are being robbed."⁷²

As tenants dealt with the growing numbers of crimes around the project, the city and neighborhood looked for "solutions" to what they saw as the cause of such problems—having public housing located in North Beach. Whether or not the criminals were insiders, outsiders or both was not an issue to business leaders concerned with the image of North Beach and the safety and satisfaction of visitors to the area. This concern with the area's image, to some extent, resulted in a lack of media coverage of the crimes in and around North Beach Place, including shootings and drug deals that escalated in the 1980s as the sale of crack cocaine became more widespread. Residents argued that the "acts of violence are not reported because of fear that the tourist industry would be hurt."⁷³ North Beach Place, with or without media coverage of its problems, was still considered one of the best public housing developments in the city. The project's location and lower crime-rate—in comparison to other public housing-- made it one of

⁷⁰ Paul Ramirez, "Trouble Brewing at Other Project as Ping Yuen Tenant Rent Strike Ends," *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 January 1979.

⁷¹ North Beach Place tenants, interview.

⁷² Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 13 November 1980, San Francisco Housing Authority.

⁷³ Ramirez, "Trouble Brewing at Other Project as Ping Yuen Tenant Rent Strike Ends," *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 January 1979.

the better living options for public housing tenants. Yet to the city's business leaders and many residents in the North Beach district North Beach Place was an eyesore in need of drastic measures to remedy its troubles.⁷⁴

In the early 1980s, a local real estate developer approached the Housing Authority with a proposal to "solve" the problems at North Beach Place by moving public housing residents out of the district. The developer offered to buy land in another section of the city where he would build 229 units of housing that he would "trade" the Housing Authority for North Beach Place. After the trade was complete the developer planned to demolish the housing project, replacing it with a hotel and retail complex on site.⁷⁵

While merchants in the area and some leaders found the proposal appealing, North Beach Place tenants rejected the idea of relocation from their home. Gathering support from the Chinatown Community Development Center (CDC), the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Association (Tel-Hi), and the members of the Telegraph Hill Dwellers, an organization that represented community interests of residents and property owners in Telegraph Hill, North Beach Place tenants opposed the plan.⁷⁶ The collaborative effort stopped the development proposal and also resulted in a joint effort to improve the look of North Beach Place. Some merchants and neighbors (including the above mentioned community

⁷⁴ Patricia Guthrie and Janis Hutchinson, "The Impact of Perceptions on Interpersonal Interactions in an African American/Asian American Housing Project," *Journal of Black Studies*, 25 (January 1995): 382. San Francisco newspapers did run a few reports on the gang violence in and around North Beach Place in the late 1970s.

⁷⁵ Kaplan/McLaughlin/Diaz, "San Francisco Housing Authority, North Beach Tenants Association, Planning and Process Design Alternatives for North Beach Place," 6. Kaplan, McLaughlin and Diaz report that the proposal was rejected for two reasons. First, the cost of buying land in another section of the city was too costly and second, the tenants of North Beach Place "organized early on to oppose the proposal."

⁷⁶ The Telegraph Hill Dwellers formed in 1954 "to perpetuate the historic traditions of San Francisco's Telegraph Hill and to represent the community interests and its residents and property owners." Over the past forty years, the organization has addressed development in Telegraph Hill and North Beach. Telegraph Hill Dwellers, <http://www.thd.org>.

organizations) raised funds for and participated in repainting the project exterior. Although the residents were victorious in defeating the proposal and earning support from some people in the neighborhood, critics continued to focus on ways to “fix the problem of the project” in North Beach.

Residents at North Beach Place benefited from the services and support of the Chinatown CDC and the Tel-Hi over the years. Founded in 1890 by Alice Griffith and Elizabeth Ashe to help immigrant children in the neighborhood, Tel-Hi grew into a non-profit resource center focused on “self-help and empowerment for people who live and work in northeast San Francisco.” Prioritizing education, community organizing, and direct services such as day-care, Tel-Hi aimed to improve the quality of life for low-income residents in the area.⁷⁷ Over the years North Beach Place residents took advantage of Tel-Hi’s daycare center, classes, and other services. The long-standing support of Tel-Hi and the Chinatown CDC both strengthened North Beach Place and demonstrated the racial and ethnic divide that separated tenants. African American tenants drew on the resources at Tel-Hi and Chinese Americans went to the CDC for assistance.

Between 1974 and 1984, the numbers of Asian Americans, the majority of whom were of Chinese descent, and African Americans living in North Beach Place increased, shifting the composition and dynamics at the project. A 1989 study of North Beach Place by anthropologists Patricia Gutherie and Janis Hutchinson examined the interpersonal interactions between ethnic groups at North Beach Place during 1988 and 1989,

⁷⁷ In 1890, Alice Griffith, who later became one of the first Housing Authority Commissioners, and Elizabeth Ashe incorporated the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Center for “the improvement of social and hygienic conditions of Telegraph Hill and its neighborhoods.” Through Tel-Hi they offered a garden, nursery, library, a health clinic, and classes for parents and children in the area. Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Center, <http://www.tel-hi.org/abouthistoryandmission.html>.

particularly focusing on African Americans and Asian Americans, the two largest populations at the project who, according to the article, rarely interacted.⁷⁸ The article revealed the growing divide between these groups, which the scholars argued emerged out of African American tenants' perceptions that Asian Americans — whom they categorized as Chinese— were “pushy” immigrants who “are taking resources” as “they come here and have immediate access to jobs, housing, and money from the government.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, African American tenants expressed resentment over what they saw as Chinese Americans forming a “separately organized political unit” facilitated by “a woman from Chinatown [who] came to the housing project to organize the Chinese American residents.”⁸⁰ Guthrie and Hutchinson, however, found “no evidence that any Asian Americans are ‘organized’” at North Beach Place perhaps indicating that the North Beach Place Chinese Resident Improvement Association had disbanded or had reduced its visibility in the project.

African American tenants most likely resented what they perceived as Chinese Americans' easy access to and connection with Chinatown and the social service organizations there. These low-income African American tenants felt isolated in North Beach Place because they did not “believe that they have any geographic turf in the wider

⁷⁸ Guthrie and Hutchinson, "The Impact of Perceptions on Interpersonal Interactions in an African American/Asian American Housing Projects," 382-83. The demographics of the diverse project included the following occupancy of the 229 units: African Americans 35.2%, Asian Americans 37.8 %, European Americans 15.7%, Latin Americans 3.9%, Other 2.6 %, and Unoccupied 4.8%. According to the study, "units occupied by Asian Americans [were] composed of Chinese (70%), Vietnamese (21%), Koreans (4.5%), Filipinos (3.4%) and Cambodians (1.1%)." Guthrie and Hutchinson labeled Native Americans "and units where all residents do not fall into the same ethnic group" as "Other" (383). The Chinese American population in the project varied between immigrants and residents born in the U.S. or living in the country since 1965.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 387. The authors found no evidence that Chinese American tenants were organized by any group or individual.

North Beach/Chinatown community. European Americans have a portion of North Beach at large, Asian Americans have Chinatown, whereas African Americans only have the project.”⁸¹ As a result, African American tenants claimed the project grounds as their own and they made it “known that this [was] their space.”⁸² With little interaction between the groups, the majority of project notices printed only in English, and ethnic and racial perceptions and stereotypes coloring residents’ thoughts and actions, Guthrie and Hutchinson concluded that “African Americans and Asian Americans (at North Beach Place) formed a residential group but not a social one.”⁸³

While Guthrie and Hutchinson outlined the “paucity of interethnic interaction” in North Beach Place, they did not fully consider how the increase in crime around the project and the shared idea of the space as “home” cultivated common ground across racial and ethnic lines. With the increase in gang-related violence and the crack cocaine trade, tenants at North Beach Place, like residents at Valencia Gardens, blamed the rise in project crime on “outsiders.”⁸⁴ Tenants defined “outsiders” both as public housing residents from other projects who visited North Beach Place or were relocated there by the SFHA and as non-resident criminals preying on their community. The diverse tenants at the project collectively agreed that “outsiders”—many of whom they alleged were

⁸¹ Ibid., 391.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 377-395. During the tenure of the study, the distribution of ethnic groups in North Beach Place according to Guthrie and Hutchinson was as follows: 35.2 units of African American, 37.8 Asian American units, 15.7 European Americans units, 3.9 Latin American units, 2.6 ‘other’, and 4.8 unoccupied units (383). In the article Guthrie and Hutchinson do not name the project where they conducted the study. The information in the report indicated they had studied North Beach Place which Patricia Guthrie confirmed in a phone conversation with the author.

⁸⁴ Guthrie and Hutchinson describe how the sale and distribution of crack cocaine became increasingly public during 1988 and 1989 resulting in numerous shootings in the projects. The problems, according to tenants I interviewed, multiplied in the 1990s, “when gangbangers and drugdealers came in [from other projects.]” North Beach Place tenants, interview.

“problem tenants” moved to North Beach Place from other public housing developments— used their project as an “office,” dealt drugs, and inflicted violence. These “outsiders,” residents claimed, made “insiders” “quality of life go right down the river” and threatened their “home.”⁸⁵ As tenants turned inward to their own racial and ethnic groups as their fear and frustration mounted, they continued to hold a common view that the majority of North Beach Place residents were not responsible for the projects’ problems.

Despite the rise in crime and the slow deterioration of the project buildings, tenant “insiders” of all races continued to share the belief that they lived in one of the better, if not the best, housing project in the city. The location and relative safety of the project compared to others in San Francisco prompted residents to stay put and to strive for change. The desire to remain and the support of mini-communities ameliorated the tensions between the groups Gutherie and Hutchinson studied. In fact, according to some residents the ethnic and racial tensions these scholars analyzed in the late 1980s did not exist. When asked about the strain between racial and ethnic groups documented in 1988 and 1989, African American tenants in 2002 disputed that there were problems among residents, offering instead another interpretation of community dynamics at North Beach Place. “Asians kept to themselves. They did their thing and we didn’t bother them and they didn’t bother us.”⁸⁶ While the inconsistencies of memory and the veil of nostalgia may have shaded tenants’ responses, their explanation provides a way to understand how residents balanced their desire to live in North Beach Place with their lack of

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

understanding of their neighbors' cultures. The mini-communities formed along ethnic and racial lines in North Beach Place and blurred by children in the project playing together began to shift and meld a decade later as tenants' shared feelings of project pride and their desire to continue living at North Beach Place prompted them to unite in facing the threat of relocation.

The city's concern over its own image, which Carolyn Luedkte accurately describes as an "urban asset" for San Francisco, spurred another proposed solution to the project's problems.⁸⁷ The nation and the world characterized San Francisco as a diverse and tolerant city. City leaders wanted to uphold and promote this image in middle-class Victorian homes, and in tourist attractions such as Washington Square Park, Chinatown shops, and historic Mission Dolores, rather than through a multiethnic public housing project. Low-income tenants living in projects stereotyped as "ghettos" and considered the housing of last resort in the United States did not appeal to tourists—or San Francisco residents. Even as critics acknowledged that North Beach Place residents had to cope with "drug dealers and other criminals, most of whom do not live there" they worked to make improvements in the area for tourists not tenants.⁸⁸ With the Hyatt Hotel opening across Bay Street in 1990 and a Barnes and Noble bookstore opening next to CostPlus later in the decade, the area beckoned to tourists with an estimated 10,000 people a week using the cable car next to the project.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, North Beach Place residents suffered through maintenance delays and criminal activity in and around their homes. The city's proposed answer to the problem was simple. Move the tourists away from the

⁸⁷ Luedkte, "On the Frontier of Change," 2.

⁸⁸ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 October 1996.

⁸⁹ Malcolm Glover, "Off-duty Cop Hurt in Beating," *San Francisco Examiner*, 21 November 1996.

housing project. The solution, designed to protect tourists and their spending habits, was to extend the end of the cable car line so riders would exit at Fisherman's Wharf rather than next to North Beach Place. Mayor Willie Brown, who expressed his support for the initiative in 1996, argued that moving the end of the cable car line to Pier 45, four blocks away from the housing project, "would enable tourists to see Fisherman's Wharf without running the gauntlet of dangers associated with street walking."⁹⁰ Although the proposal did not move forward the solution it offered again demonstrated the value of tourists' dollars over the lives of public housing residents.

In 1996, the Housing Authority attempted to bridge the gap between residents' needs and business and city interests in its application for a federal HOPE VI grant to revitalize North Beach Place. The grant held out the possibility of solving the design problems that offered criminals a place to work and hide, extending in-apartment amenities and social services for tenants, and providing city dwellers and tourists retail space on the project site. The transformation of the housing project offered the "HOPE" of improving residents' living environment and blending the project's design and function as an apartment/retail complex into the neighborhood's look and purpose as a tourist destination.

DEMOLITION: THE POLITICS AND PROCESS OF REDEVELOPMENT

The city and many people in the North Beach District, especially business owners and investors concerned with tourist revenue and the image of the area, and frustrated over North Beach Place's problems celebrated the San Francisco Housing Authority's award of a \$20 million federal HOPE VI Grant in 1996 to redevelop the project. These

⁹⁰ Ibid.

funds, along with the additional tens of millions of dollars raised by the Housing Authority, created an opportunity to construct a housing project that melded with the surrounding community and welcomed visitors with retail shops on the ground floor. This new project also undertook to alter the tenant population by providing mixed-income housing and codifying regulations governing which low-income residents could return. For tenants, the grant generated talk of better social services, washers and dryers in their apartments, a safer design, and the opportunity to live in a new apartment as opposed to a run-down forty-four year old unit. The grant also caused alarm as tenants quickly realized the problems inherent in redevelopment—specifically relocation. With oftentimes varying agendas, the city, the neighborhood, the SFHA, and North Beach Place tenants struggled to redesign and redevelop the project into a safe, attractive place, palatable to tourists and neighbors—and home to residents.

The battle over the future of North Beach Place demonstrates the complexities of redevelopment politics of public housing generally as well as the particular problems attendant for a project located on valuable land in a popular tourist area. Undoubtedly some North Beach residents and business owners echoed the sentiments of the North Beach Chamber of Commerce, whose director Marsha Garland remarked that the Chamber would prefer to see the project disappear. “It’s the wrong place for public housing. No one wants to be around it.”⁹¹ Rather than replacing the North Beach Project that took up valuable commercial and residential space, Garland suggested that the

⁹¹ Paul Franson, "Pondering the Projects," *North Beach Now*, November 1996, 1.

project “could be replaced with smaller clusters of housing throughout the city.” Most likely she wanted these clusters located in districts other than North Beach.⁹²

A letter to the editor written by J.D. Sexton after the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on the HOPE VI grant for North Beach Place further illuminates the deep-seated frustration some people had about the location of the project, the high cost of redevelopment, and the idea of housing low-income families in an area like North Beach.

I was delighted when I saw the headline “Projects near the Wharf to be Razed.” (Oct. 8.) My delight was short-lived, however, since the first paragraph pointed out that, incredibly, the projects would be rebuilt in the same location. The cost is projected to be \$69 million for construction plus \$39 million for job training and other services for the tenants. As if that were not enough, the \$22 million extension of the cable car line so that it does not end in the “crime-packed” projects in still on the table... That means we are spending \$568,000 for each family currently living there.... A public housing project does not belong at Fisherman’s Wharf. **That land is far too valuable to be used for that purpose** (my emphasis).⁹³

For Sexton, and other opponents of public housing in North Beach, property values and land use formed the basis for inclusion or exclusion from the community. Low-income families living in the projects devalued North Beach. “The projects” belonged in San Francisco’s lesser neighborhoods, not in famed, economically viable North Beach. Despite opposition, redevelopment plans for North Beach Place moved forward, creating new critics, the tenants themselves.

The initiative to improve North Beach Place stemmed partly from tenants who in 1993 generated ideas for improving their deteriorating, crime-ridden living environment by cooperating in a study sponsored by the Housing Authority. Conducted by the design

⁹² Catherine Bowman, "Projects Near Wharf to be Raised," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 October 1996.

⁹³ J.D. Sexton, "New Public Housing Near Wharf to Cost \$568,000 per family," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 October 1996. Sexton lamented that North Beach Place had been built and urged the city to "[s]ell the land to a developer. Part of the payment for that valuable project could include providing replacement housing in a more appropriate, less valuable spot."

team Kaplan, McLaughlin, and Diaz, the report outlined “possible long-term approaches to improving the living environment at North Beach Place” with the stated intent of serving “as a tool for residents to use in making decisions about future improvements at North Beach Place.”⁹⁴ Through a series of design workshops attended by tenants, along with neighborhood and Housing Authority representatives, residents created and discussed long-term goals for their project, outlined the cause of their problems—deferred maintenance and design features which created safety hazards— and brainstormed about design alternatives. During the five workshops one issue emerged about which tenants were adamant—dislocation. The Kaplan report noted tenants’ concerns, “The requirement that no residents be displaced became one of the design principles for any renovation or new construction on the site.”⁹⁵ The Housing Authority drew on the information in the report for its HOPE VI application as a way of showing HUD its willingness to implement a federal requirement for HOPE VI grantees to involve tenants in the redesign process.

The cooperative relationship between the SFHA and North Beach tenants lessened over time as tenants called into question the ways the Housing Authority

⁹⁴ Kaplan/McLaughlin/Diaz, "San Francisco Housing Authority, North Beach Tenants Association: Planning Process and Design Alternatives for North Beach Place," 1. The report was funded by contributions from the LEF Foundation and Wharf Associates.

⁹⁵ Ibid. The other design principles drafted by participants and "intended to guide any renovation or new construction on site" and listed in the report were as follows: "1. No residents should be displaced. 2. To the extent possible, the project should be oriented outward with entrances on public streets. Units above the ground floor should have access from private stairways leading directly from the street, similar to other buildings in the neighborhood. 3. The building should not contain shared corridors or elevators. 4. Open space should be clearly designated, either for certain types of uses (e.g. play areas) or as "private" open space for dwelling units. Play areas for children should be an important element in any new design. 5. The project should provide for retail uses of Taylor Street to improve neighborhood safety and to encourage economic development. 6. The project design should be similar to residential buildings in the surrounding North Beach neighborhood. 7. The project should provide secured parking areas. 8. The projects should contain one large community room and smaller community facilities, such as mailrooms and smaller meeting rooms located at project entrances." Kaplan/McLaughlin/Diaz, "San Francisco Housing Authority, North Beach Tenants Association: Planning Process and Design Alternatives for North Beach Place," 11.

manipulated their participation— a key component to winning the grant. In its HOPE VI application, the SFHA proposed replacing the 229-unit complex with 355 mixed-income apartments costing an estimated \$69 million, 20,000 square feet of commercial space, resident services including business and computer training, free child care, computer wiring in all apartments, and secured parking. The revitalization plan also called for a private management firm to run North Beach Place rather than the Housing Authority.⁹⁶ The application to the federal government included the requisite evidence of residents' support of redevelopment in the form of a letter signed by 16 residents.

While residents wanted project improvements, as demonstrated by their participation and input in the design workshops in 1992-1993, many claimed they did not *knowingly* sign a letter of support for the HOPE VI grant. A week after the Housing Authority announced its HOPE VI award, long-time North Beach Place tenant leader Alma Lark accused the Housing Authority of tricking residents into signing a petition of support. Lark explained to *Independent* reporter Barbara Nanney that someone at the Housing Authority substituted a meeting sign-in sheet with a support letter for the project. The Housing Authority denied any impropriety and claimed that an SFHA employee had passed around an attendance sheet and a letter at the tenants' meeting. However, resident leaders Bethola Harper and Cynthia Wiltz, Vice-President of the North Beach Tenants Association, claimed that they thought they had signed an attendance sheet rather than a petition in favor of redevelopment. Ms. Harper explained, "When they were passing it around I was under the impression it was an attendance sheet. Later on I found out we had agreed with what they were doing...I don't think I would have

⁹⁶ *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 October 1996.

agreed to sign it (if she had known it was a letter of support.) They should have told us what we signed.”⁹⁷ Some tenants, including the President of the North Beach Tenants Association, Gregory Richardson, supported the Housing Authority’s version of events. Nevertheless, for the tenants who felt they had been manipulated the HOPE VI grant aroused distrust and concern for their future. Wiltz explained the tensions between tenants and the Housing Authority in regards to the impending redevelopment, “We’ve been used and we don’t know what is going on.”⁹⁸ The grant also sparked debate among tenant leaders, several of whom claimed that Gregory Richardson had signed a letter urging HUD to award funds that did not have the full backing of North Beach tenants.

When the initial startup capital from the HOPE VI grant arrived, North Beach Place tenants realized the Housing Authority would move ahead with redevelopment plans. Aware of the well-publicized problems at other HOPE VI sites in the city, tenants tried to protect themselves. The Housing Authority came under fire from tenants and community groups for its failures at other HOPE VI projects, including rushing tenants out of Hayes Valley and not aiding all tenants at Bernal Heights and Plaza East in finding places to live during reconstruction. In particular, many residents who opted to take Section 8 Certificates (subsidies to live in private market rental housing) for relocation had to leave San Francisco because they could not find housing in the city’s tight rental market. Redevelopment at HOPE VI sites had resulted in tenants’ dislocation from their

⁹⁷ Barbara Nanney, "Tenants Furious Over Agency's Letter," *The Independent*, 15 October 1996.

⁹⁸ Ibid. While the discrepancy between the President and the Vice-President of the North Beach Place Tenants Association may seem problematic, one possible explanation is that Gregory Richardson was working for the Housing Authority. In a group interview with North Beach Place residents conducted in August 2002, residents stated that the Housing Authority often hired tenant leaders for part-time positions (sometimes as liaisons between tenants and the Housing Authority). Tenants argued that these jobs put the employees in an awkward position and that oftentimes the employee sided with the Housing Authority because the agency provided their paycheck. North Beach Place tenants, interview.

community, friends, and resources. Eligible residents who wanted to return had to wait three to four years for the completion of the HOPE VI projects. Those tenants who did return found a reduction in the number of low-income units: Bernal Dwellings lost forty units, Hayes Valley had 177 fewer low-income units, and Plaza East's units were reduced from 276 to 193.⁹⁹ North Beach Place residents, in an effort to avoid these problems pressed for a two-phase relocation plan that would allow residents to stay on-site during reconstruction and a one-to-one replacement of low-income units.¹⁰⁰ With a clear understanding of the contracted, expensive rental market in San Francisco, tenants wanted to ensure that the Housing Authority would follow through with the proposal put forth in the HOPE VI application to construct 229 low-income units and to keep residents on-site during redevelopment.

Although the Housing Authority proposed the two-phase plan in their HOPE VI application and community organizations such as Tel-Hi had endorsed the proposal on the basis that the SFHA "follow through on [these] promises" tenants remained skeptical—with good reason.¹⁰¹ In an October 1996 press conference, HUD regional director Art Agnos said that there was not enough funding to reconstruct North Beach Place in phases because the HOPE VI grant was \$10 million less than the Housing Authority requested. Residents and community organizations supporting redevelopment subsequently balked. Meanwhile the Housing Authority engaged in damage control, meeting with tenants and reassuring them that "the agency would stick to its agreement to

⁹⁹ Angela Rowan, "Locked Out," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 3 November 1999.

¹⁰⁰ The two-phase plan called for half the residents to be relocated while their buildings were demolished and rebuilt. After the new buildings were constructed on half the site, the tenants in the old section would move into the new apartments while the remainder of the site was redeveloped.

¹⁰¹ Barbara Nanney, "Public Housing Relocation," *The Independent*, 12 November 1996.

reconstruct the development in phases, allowing most residents to remain on the site during demolition and reconstruction.”¹⁰² Many tenants who had endured the weight of the public’s negative perception of the project and witnessed the growing popularity of North Beach as a tourist spot remained dubious of the SFHA’s assurances about relocation and opportunities to return. Underpinning their worries were doubts of the city’s intentions to rebuild a public housing project on such prime real estate in North Beach.¹⁰³

Many tenants who distrusted the Housing Authority and described agency employees as “politicians playing games” and making empty promises, preemptively mobilized “to protect their homes.”¹⁰⁴ In November 1996, residents began holding weekly meetings to establish a tenant-based support network with ties to community organizations. Gaining support from tenants’ activist groups in the city including the San Francisco-based Eviction Defense Network, an organization devoted to helping low-income tenants with eviction issues, tenants worked to have a voice in relocation and redesign plans. North Beach Place tenants’ concerns grew as they watched in dismay as other HOPE VI project residents scattered throughout the city and the Bay Area and the SFHA evicted neighbors within their own project under the One Strike Policy. Implemented in 1997 by HUD, the policy allows local authorities to evict any public housing resident if the resident, a member of the household, or a guest violates any part of the lease. In a May 1997 report for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, Nina Seagal

¹⁰² Ibid., 1.

¹⁰³ Rachel Gordon and Sally Lehrman, “Projects Near the Wharf to be Razed: City to Replace Troubled North Beach Housing,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 October 1996.

¹⁰⁴ Nina Siegal, “Rebuilding Trust,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 27 November 1996. Quote about the Housing Authority by Thomas Toy, a 20-year resident of North Beach.

stated that six tenants from North Beach Place had received eviction notices “in recent months.”¹⁰⁵ Three of the six tenants claimed they had been “targeted” by the One Strike policy. James Tracy of the Eviction Defense Network linked the “unwarranted” evictions to the HOPE VI program claiming that “the housing authority is using One Strike as a way of substantially reducing the amount of relocation money they will have to pay out before demolitions come around.”¹⁰⁶ Responding to the displacement of public housing tenants within their project and throughout the city, North Beach Place residents escalated their meetings, activities, and demands in an attempt to gain a modicum of control over the future of their housing and their project community.¹⁰⁷

The tenant’s suspicions over relocation and the Housing Authority’s promises that those “in good standing” would “be given first crack at units when the development is rebuilt,” brought disparate groups within North Beach Place together and led to unprecedented tenant activism. In April 1998, a group of North Beach Place tenants formed the North Beach Resident Management Corporation (NBRMC). Resident Management Corporations (RMC), established by the federal government in the 1980s to facilitate tenant management of public housing, had little success nationwide. Nonetheless, the NBRMC mounted a significant challenge to the SFHA’s control over their project. Tenants established the corporation with the aim of purchasing and running their project, an opportunity the Housing Authority was legally required to give them

¹⁰⁵ Nina Siegal, "Strike Out: North Beach Public Housing Tenants Fight Evictions," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 28 May 1997.

¹⁰⁶ James Tracy, "Tenants Organizing Wins One-for-One Replacement," *Shelterforce* (January/February 2000), <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/109/organize.html>.

¹⁰⁷ HUD's "One Strike, You're Out" policy was announced in 1996 and implemented in April 1997. Nina Siegal, "Strike Out: North Beach Public Housing Tenants Fight Evictions," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 28 May 1997.

before redevelopment started. North Beach Place residents claimed that they did not receive the notification letter the Housing Authority claimed it sent informing tenants of their rights to try to manage the project. Because tenants “passed” on the opportunity (they said they did not know about) to purchase the property, the SFHA opened the project’s redevelopment to competitive bidding.

Tenants, unwilling to miss their final chance to manage their project, set up the NBRMC, put together a proposal, and submitted it along with other competitive bidders vying to redevelop North Beach Place. The NBRMC’s plan called for rejecting the HOPE VI grant in order to avoid federal restrictions and instead securing private loans to rebuild the property. The \$100 million proposal outlined a tenant cooperative to manage the project in partnership with Human Technology Partners, Inc. Alma Lark, president of the NBRMC, explained the impetus behind the group’s actions, underscoring tenants’ distrust of the SFHA. “It is only natural that we are not going to give control to the Housing Authority.” In June, a nine-member panel made up of tenants, SFHA representatives, an area merchant, community members, a local architect, a representative from the mayor’s office, and a zoning administrator selected the North Beach Development Partners’ (including Bridge Housing Corporation and the John Stewart Company) proposal to redevelop North Beach Place, rejecting the NBRMC’s plan and upending tenants’ hopes for running their project.¹⁰⁸

Refusing to go quietly, North Beach Place residents picketed, petitioned, and protested relocation and their lack of participation in the HOPE VI redevelopment

¹⁰⁸ Angela Rowan, "Hope vs. HOPE VI," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 5 August 1998. The so-called first right of refusal law in section 412 of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development Code, requires the local housing authority to give tenants a "reasonable opportunity" to bid on the property before putting out an RFP (request for proposal). The panel rated the NBRMC's proposal last.

process. Together with the Eviction Defense Network and Fire by Night Organizing Committee, a small national organization committed to organizing students and low-income people, “many concerned residents at North Beach” sponsored a tenant speakout and rally on August 13, 1998 at noon. In a clear understanding of the importance of their project’s location, the organizing committee held the rally at the cable car turnaround on Bay Street. A flyer for the event depicts a white businessman holding a dollar bill with his arm around “Da Mayor,” Willie Brown, who is kicking the backside of a person who has been pushed out of the edge of the picture. Behind the men looms a large house. The cartoon represents the mayor and big business as bedfellows in the effort to displace low-income residents for the sake of capital gain.

Historicizing their fight to “stop urban removal,” North Beach Place tenants aligned themselves not only with other public housing tenants but also with the wider community of dislocated residents in the city who had lost their homes over the years. Forging a community of the dispossessed, the tenants placed their struggle within the context of other groups displaced by the city over time for the purpose of redevelopment and its purported economic benefits. From downtown urban renewal to the problems at other HOPE VI sites, North Beach Place tenants tried to gain support for their cause by reminding San Franciscans of the city’s transgressions against low-income tenants. The flyer they created to explain their struggle read:

Tenants at North Beach Public Housing are currently waging a battle against another wave of urban removal; the HOPE VI demolition of their homes, administered by the San Francisco Housing Authority. HOPE VI promises much needed improvements to public housing, but has resulted in eviction and loss of homes of thousands of tenants. Bernal Dwellings remains a vacant lot reminiscent of the International Hotel (the residential hotel demolished in 1977) mere blocks away from North Beach public housing. This is the same pattern

which removed low-income renters from the SOMA neighborhood, and African-Americans from the Fillmore in the 1970s. This blatant effort to remove poor people and minorities from the city, is now being supported by Mayor Brown, the Board of Supervisors, and all levels of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Join in the support of public housing residents at a rally and speakout, as we demand housing, economic upliftment (sic) to opportunities, and self determination.¹⁰⁹

The NBTA and the NBRMC led the rally setting forth demands that included a legally binding “one for one relocation during the HOPE VI demolition, guaranteed reoccupancy for all current tenants” and full tenant control of the redevelopment process through the acceptance of the NBRMC plan for the project.¹¹⁰ Although the Housing Authority had selected another proposal, tenants still upheld the NBRMC’s plan. Carrying signs reading “We Will Not Be Removed,” “United the Community of Residents of North Beach will never be Defeated,” “Low Income Homes Shall-B-Saved,” “Eviction Defense Network and North Beach Tenants Fighting Forced Relocation and Urban Removal,” and “Don’t Take Our Homes,” about thirty people gathered to raise their voices against the potential pitfalls of redevelopment for residents; the prospect of relocation and the fear of not

¹⁰⁹ Flyer for Tenant Speakout and Rally, Chinatown CDC, miscellaneous box, San Francisco, California. SOMA stands for the South of Market area. Over 3000 people were displaced in the 1970s as the city redeveloped the downtown area. The flyer also announced that the rally had the endorsement of the NBTA and the NBRMC as well as “solidarity statements” by Myra Wallace (Coalition for Low Income Housing, former Bernal Dwellings tenant), Eric Mar (Northern California Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights), Ester Chavez (Coalition for Low Income Housing) and Connie Morgenstern (Eviction Defense Network).

¹¹⁰ Ibid. The president of the NBTA did not support the rally. In an interview with Johnny Brannon from *The Independent*, NBTA president Cynthia Wiltz said that she “did not support the rally and questioned whether residents who participated in it fully understood. Yet during the interview with Brannon, it became clear that Wiltz was not clear on the plan put forth by North Beach Development Partners and selected by the Housing Authority either. Some residents stated that they did not think that Wiltz had been told of the Housing Authority’s plans and “said they believed the agency has compromised her leadership of the tenants association by employing her for the past year as a paid ‘resident coordinator.’” Johnny Brannon, “Rally Protest Agency’s Plans,” *The Independent*, 15 August 1998.

being able to return.¹¹¹ While the number of participants in relation to residents at North Beach Place appears small, the turn out, according to housing activist James Tracy, was relatively strong for a tenant protest. Participants undoubtedly represented the concerns of residents who could not or would not— out of fear of reprisals— attend. City officials, exemplifying their view of public housing tenants as troublemakers and criminals dispatched police to the area where officers allegedly outnumbered demonstrators two to one.¹¹²

The presence of the police at the peaceful rally and the increase in One Strike evictions did not slow tenants' efforts to safeguard their homes. North Beach Place residents drafted a petition to the Housing Authority in August 1998 restating their demands. Concerned residents who signed the petition— in an effort to look after everyone in their project community— asked the Housing Authority to reconfirm its commitments to tenant protections.¹¹³ The petition also demanded that tenants have an opportunity to review and approve all plans for revitalization. Acknowledging the multiculturalism of their project and the need to work together, tenants requested that the SFHA submit their written guarantees in English, Chinese, and Spanish.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ For more information on the rally see the following sources: Jason B. Johnson, "Residents of Projects List Demands: Tenants Want S.F. to Let Them Run the Development," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 August 1998. Angela Rowan, "Hope vs. HOPE VI," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 15 August 1998.

¹¹² Tracy, "Tenants Organizing Wins One-for-One Replacement," 3.

¹¹³ The tenants reiterated the demands put forth at the rally for one-to-one replacement of low-income units, phased demolition allowing them to stay on-site longer, and the opportunity for all tenants to return.

¹¹⁴ "Petition to the San Francisco Housing Authority," August 1998. Unsigned draft copy, from Chinatown CDC, Rev. Norman Fong's miscellaneous files, San Francisco, California. Other tenant protections listed included "no unlawful evictions without due process and full disclosure of policies, so that North Beach Public Housing residents understood their rights."

The plans for redevelopment at North Beach Place caused disagreements and tensions between tenants and drew criticism from neighbors who wanted to see the project close, but they also brought tenants and community organizations together in an effort to protect tenants' rights and future housing options. The Chinatown CDC and Tel-Hi formed the backbone of an informal support network. As important community resource centers for tenants at North Beach Place, the CDC and the Tel-Hi cautiously supported HOPE VI while frequently writing to the Housing Authority demanding that the agency maintain the promises made in the HOPE VI application.¹¹⁵ Because the Housing Authority decided to apply for HOPE VI money for North Beach Place in July 1996 and had to submit the paperwork by September 10, tenants had little involvement in the initial planning process. The coalition, while recognizing the Housing Authority's limited time frame, pushed for resident involvement and services during the application phase and after HUD awarded the grant. Forming demands echoed in the tenants' petition, community organizations worked to ensure that the diverse population at North Beach Place could participate in the planning process by prompting the SFHA to print notices and information in multiple languages and insisting on translation for residents. In a September 5, 1996 letter to Kevin Marchman, Assistant Secretary of Public and Indian

¹¹⁵ Letter from the North Beach Coalition to Mr. Renell Davis, Acting Executive Director, San Francisco Housing Authority, 14 November 1996, regarding the HOPE VI Project at North Beach Place in San Francisco, Chinatown CDC, miscellaneous files, San Francisco, California. Other members of the North Beach Coalition who signed the letter were Reverend Norman Fong, Chinatown Resource Center; Norman Yee, Executive Director, Wu Yee Children's Services; Anna Yee, Coordinator, South of Market Problem Solving Council Enterprise Community Board; Darwin Ow-Wing, Executive Director Community Education Services S.F.; Neil Gendel, Project Director, Lead Poisoning Prevention Project; Gordon Chin, Executive Director, Chinatown Resource Center; Denise McCarthy, Executive Director, Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Center; Cynthia Wiltz, North Beach Place resident; Maricella Guerrero, North Beach Place resident; Greta Yin, Director, Kai Ming Head Start; Maurice Miller, Executive Director, Asian Neighborhood Design; Henry Luc, North Beach Place resident; Yan Hong Hu, North Beach Place resident; Gen Fujioka, Attorney, Asian Law Caucus; and Joanne Lee, Director of Housing, Chinese Community Housing Corporation.

Housing, CDC Program Director Reverend Norman Fong hinged his organization's continued support for HOPE VI at North Beach Place on inclusion and participation of residents.

Translation (both oral and written), particularly in Chinese and Spanish, must be budgeted by the SFHA and its consultants and subcontractors (rather than an afterthought), to enable *all* tenants to *fully* participate throughout the revitalization process, and a reasonable amount of lead time must be given to allow for translation and proper notice to tenants of all upcoming meetings and site visits.¹¹⁶

The support of the CDC and Tel-HI staff along with other organizations buttressed tenants' attempts to control the outcome of their relocation and the future of their project. Similarly activists' and tenants' drive to overcome the language barriers in the diverse project helped bring tenants from different races and ethnicities together in their joint fight to protect their rights and their "home." Tenants' commitment to North Beach Place demonstrated in their protests, paralleled the zeal of homeowners working to protect their private property. Through their efforts, North Beach Place tenants redefined "home" by claiming rights connected with ownership as renters of subsidized housing.

While ethnic and racially based mini-communities emerged in the diverse project over the years, the threat of relocation and the reality of redevelopment helped foster inter-group interactions.¹¹⁷ Cooperation became easier with the residents and community organizations' request for and access to multi-language translation: when tenants

¹¹⁶ Letter from Reverend Norman Fong, Program Director, Chinatown Resource Center to Mr. Kevin Marchman, Assistant Secretary, Public and Indian Housing, regarding the North Beach Place HOPE VI application, 5 September 1996, Rev. Norman Fong's miscellaneous files, Chinatown, CDC, San Francisco, California. Reverend Fong also stipulated that the SFHA must provide a written guarantee to residents that they could return to the project, that specific details of the relocation plan be translated into Chinese and Spanish and that supportive services for tenants include provisions "for limited and non-English speaking tenants as well as expanded senior services."

¹¹⁷ In 1996, the project demographics showed that the tenant population consisted of 50% Asian Pacific Islander, 32% African American, 14% White, and 4% Other. Statistics from October 16, 1996 agenda for "Internal Strategy Meeting Regarding Hope VI/North Beach Place," sponsored by the CRC/CCHC, miscellaneous files, Chinatown CDC, San Francisco, California.

understood the policies and procedures they could unite around a common cause—their home. In a 2002 interview, Alma Lark explained that the HOPE VI grant brought “all these nationalities together,” creating community bonds so close “you would think we were relatives.”¹¹⁸ Although the Housing Authority continued to delay putting out publications in Chinese that according to one tenant was deliberate because “they (the SFHA) don’t want everything translated,” Chinese tenants became more active in the North Beach community.¹¹⁹ According to Ms. Lark, the Chinese population “was staying to themselves but when they found out about HOPE VI they came out and embraced us. We are like a big family.”¹²⁰ Demonstrating the power of culturally-based assumptions and the simple ways that community connections can form, an African American resident explained, “We have social events that they (Chinese tenants) participate in too. Like we have a social gathering and we try to have Chinese food or something. They like our food (though) because they eat that food (Chinese food) everyday so they want spaghetti or chilidogs. When we barbeque or whatever they are here.”¹²¹ Through social events, children playing together, and second generation children serving as translators for their parents, the contours of the North Beach public housing community changed as tenants worked harder to understand and accommodate one another. Four decades after the U.S. Supreme Court banned segregation in San Francisco public housing, tenants joined to

¹¹⁸ Lark, interview.

¹¹⁹ Bea Harper, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 10 August 2002. When asked about SFHA publications in Chinese, tenants contended that “the only time we get it we have to request it.” Residents mused that the process was costly to the Housing Authority. Bea, however, argued that “there are a lot of people working at housing who can do it” but that the SFHA intended to keep information from residents so they did not have certain documents translated.

¹²⁰ Lark, interview.

¹²¹ Harper, interview.

“integrate” into a strong, viable community as they faced the uncertainties of redevelopment.

The efforts to build bridges in daily life encouraged tenants to band together to lobby for an exit contract from the Housing Authority. Starting in 1996, the Fire By Night Organizing Committee, the Eviction Defense Network, and tenants began the slow process of door-to-door organizing to mobilize residents to push for an exit contract.¹²² The contract called for legally binding guarantees for one-to-one unit replacement of all demolished low-income units, a two-phase demolition, and “a limited number of reasons that could disqualify one from reoccupancy.”¹²³ The campaign for the exit contract initially became marred in racial politics at the project with different racial and ethnic groups harboring similar suspicions about one another they had to work through. Although “nearly identical” rumors about Chinese and African American tenant leaders “on the take” for their own gain initially split Chinese and African American tenants, the participants’ willingness to sit down with each other, and translators, led to a peaceful and a stronger coalition. In a report for *Shelterforce*, James Tracy summed up the significance of tenant unification, “The final exit contract negotiating team had Black, Chinese, and White tenants working well together, thanks in part to the conscious effort

¹²² The proposed exit contract was a collaborative effort between residents, the Eviction Defense Network, and the National Housing Law Project. A November, 1998 *North Beach Newsletter* lists the tenets of the exit contract as follows: to ensure that all agreements between the Housing Authority, Bridge Housing and the tenants in writing; a fair screening criteria when residents return to the site; one-for-one replacement of the 229 public housing units; a two-phase demolition and new construction; the residents to have the option to remain on-site during the demolition and new construction or receive Section 8 vouchers; a guarantee that HOPE VI Section 8 relocatees will be provided a rent subsidy if the Section 8 program is un-funded by HUD; an independent relocation monitoring body and no reduction of the low income units.

¹²³ *North Beach Newsletter*, November 1998.

to confront rumors and innuendo.”¹²⁴ Tenant teamwork paid off as over 60% of the tenants signed a pledge during the next two years stating they would not move until they received an exit contract. Standing by their pledge, tenants refused to be relocated when the SFHA started the process to comply with HUD mandates. Fearful that a protracted battle might result in the loss of the \$23 million HOPE VI funds, the SFHA finally relented and agreed to sign the contract. On September 22, 1999, the Executive Director of the SFHA, Ronnie Davis, signed the exit contract in front of the City Board of Supervisors’ Finance and Labor Committee during a hearing on the Public Housing Tenant Protection Act, a direct outgrowth of North Beach Place tenants’ unity and activism.¹²⁵

Tenants’ cooperation to secure an exit contract along with the problems at HOPE VI sites across San Francisco resulted in a groundbreaking proposal for a city ordinance to ensure public housing tenant protections. In early 2000, Supervisor Tom Ammiano pushed forward a resolution, the Public Housing Tenant Protection Act, and used the North Beach Place exit contract as the model for the legislation. The act included tenants’ demands put forth in the exit contract and required the SFHA to secure all funds for construction before beginning demolition.¹²⁶ The proposal also explicitly criticized the Housing Authority’s inadequate financial planning at North Beach Place by including the clause on securing construction monies upfront.

¹²⁴ Tracy, "Tenant Organizing Wins One-for-One Replacement," 109.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ The Tenant Protection Act called for the SFHA to implement multi-phase construction keeping residents on-site longer, to secure all construction funds for projects before beginning demolition, to provide the same number of low-income units, and to guarantee that all tenants "except those with serious criminal records be allowed to return to their homes" at HOPE VI projects. Angela Rowan, "Amos Brown Tables Public Housing," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 1 March 2000.

The SFHA started relocating project residents before the agency had secured the necessary funding to rebuild the project. In 1998, the SFHA began moving tenants out from the east block of the project but when the Tenant Protection Act was put forward in 2000 the developers still had not secured funding for all the construction costs. The total project cost had ballooned from \$69 million to \$101 million. Tenant Alma Lark, highlighted the absurdity of this process, “As a matter of fact this is the first time in my life that I have been around a developer who is going to do a building and doesn’t have any money. They have investors from HUD from everybody and they still haven’t been able to close the gap.”¹²⁷

Unfortunately for public housing tenants and their supporters, the Public Housing Tenant Protection Act, poised to change HOPE VI redevelopment practices in San Francisco and to put HUD on alert to the program’s problems, did not make it to the Board of Supervisors meeting on February 14, 2000 for a vote. Supervisor Amos Brown sent the proposal back to committee. Brown “didn’t say why he sent the resolution back” but his move came after “SFHA executive director Ronnie Davis spoke against the proposed act” calling parts of the legislation “unnecessary,” “cumbersome,” and difficult to enforce because of federal regulations.¹²⁸ The act did not go before the board again.

The failure of the Tenant Protection Act was not initially a problem for North Beach Place tenants who felt victorious after Ronnie Davis signed the exit contract. Their excitement over the contract, however, was short-lived. The turn-over in the SFHA leadership undermined the guarantees tenants had worked hard to claim. The SFHA’s

¹²⁷ Lark, interview.

¹²⁸ Angela Rowen, "Amos Brown Tables Public Housing Protections," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 1 March 2000.

commitment to and reassurances about a two-phase development made repeatedly since 1996 ended in 2001. New Executive Director Gregg Fortner announced in August 2001 that the “project had to be done in one phase to guarantee funding—and everyone had to move.”¹²⁹ Voiding the exit contract and ignoring tenants’ rights, the Housing Authority, under its new directorship, moved ahead with demolition in one phase to cut costs on a project that still was not fully funded. Tenant leader Benita Grayson described her community’s feelings of desperation acknowledging that “we fought until the last day, to do it in two phases, to get everything we wanted.... We tried to make sure what they were saying is right. You know when they start tearing down the building we aren’t going to know what is what.”¹³⁰

Just as tenants became aware of this distressing news, they also discovered the extent of the Housing Authority’s broken promises—or lies. A controversial memo began circulating at the project. The letter, dated January 2000, from developer Bridge Housing Corp. to the Housing Authority, revealed that the agencies had been considering rebuilding the project all at once for over a year. The memo predated Executive Director Ronnie Davis signing the exit contract. Tenants angrily countered with cries of “I am not moving.” For residents, “who couldn’t imagine a better place to live,” the thought of relocation in the tight San Francisco market was daunting. The Housing Authority’s empty reassurances caused many residents to worry that they would not be allowed to come back to the redeveloped project hailed by city leaders “as the best location for

¹²⁹ Cassi Feldmen, “What Exit Contract?” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 10 October 2001.

¹³⁰ Benita Grayson, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 5 August 2002.

housing anywhere in America.”¹³¹ Residents threatened but did not pursue a lawsuit. With demolition for the eastern block eminent in late 2001, the remaining families seemed resigned to their fate and that of the project community. While residents took pride that their project, which unlike the other three HOPE VI projects in town, was to have a one-to-one replacement of low-income housing units, they wondered if they would be allowed to return and what changes there would be in the community. In 2002, the SFHA demolished North Beach Place described by tenants as a “small community...a tight-knit family that looks out for one another’s children.”¹³² Plans began thereafter on a design that will radically alter the community, the look, and the function of the project. A Housing Authority, Bridge Corporation billboard standing on the site of the demolished project assured the city that North Beach Place tenants participated in and looked forward to the new project, with the tagline “Residents Rebuilding Their Communities.”¹³³

The new North Beach Place, slated to open in late 2004, reflects North Beach Development Associates main objective “to build high-quality, well-designed and cost-efficient, affordable multi-family house, above ground-floor parking, and **retail and commercial space of benefit to the residents and the surrounding community** (my emphasis.)¹³⁴ The four-story project will mix ground-floor retail space with 229 public housing units and 112 affordable apartments available on the open market. In-unit

¹³¹ Irene Lelchuk, "North Beach Project Residents Ready to Fight Eviction: Housing Authority Abandons Plan for Two Stage Rebuild," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 August 2001.

¹³² North Beach Place tenants, interview.

¹³³ Photograph by Michael Cole, San Francisco, California, 19 June 2002.

¹³⁴ "North Beach HOPE VI Housing Redevelopment: Final Impact Report," May 17, 2001, 13.

amenities will include energy-efficient appliances, an oven, disposal, dishwasher, washer/dryer, patio/balcony and a refrigerator. The project will also house a Head-Start day care center and offer a variety of adult education classes.¹³⁵ The walk-up apartments, along with increased pedestrian activity on all sides of the project, higher levels of lighting, and “a pedestrian-oriented streetscape at the cable car terminus including outdoor seating for the new retail/commercial space” were designed to enhance safety at the project.¹³⁶ Tenants, neighbors, and visitors alike will benefit from a more open design based on principles of defensible space.

It is unknown, however, whether low-income tenants will profit from the new Trader Joes, a high-end grocery store that will occupy the 11,000 square foot commercial space on the corner of Mason and Bay streets. With only two other stores in the city, regional vice president Ken Sheppard sees the move to North Beach Place as a “slam dunk for us. Just look at the density. There’s a large part of this town we’re not serving.”¹³⁷ The customer base Sheppard and Trader Joes aims to attract is tourists staying in the nearby hotels and middle- and upper-class residents from North Beach, Russian Hill and the Financial District. While public housing tenants could choose to shop at Trader Joes, rather than the Safeway across the street, most would not, because as Benita Grayson noted, “It’s too expensive. Some things you could buy but not others.”¹³⁸

¹³⁵ “One of the Largest Ever Affordable Housing Developments Breaks Ground in San Francisco,” *Real Estate Financial Services*, (March 2003), <http://www.relatedcapital.com/March122203pr.cfm>.

¹³⁶ Ilene Lelchuk, “A First: San Francisco Public Housing at Wharf Gets a Trader Joes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 October 2002. “North Beach HOPE VI Redevelopment: Final Impact Report,” 14. The apartments on the open market would run a family of four earning \$56,000, or 55% of the area median income, about \$1,198 a month for a two bedroom apartment.

¹³⁷ Lelchuk, “A First,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 October 2002.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

Although the developers and the Housing Authority have promised to provide another 3000 square feet of retail space reserved for resident entrepreneurs who will be allowed to set up businesses rent-free, no tenants have yet signed on to occupy the space. In the meantime, the focus continues on the Housing Authority's and neighborhood's windfall: the opening of a popular, upscale market known for its "organic, vegetarian and global products."¹³⁹ A marker of middle-class living, the store will undoubtedly bring in customers from the neighborhood and surrounding areas and define the space around the cable car turnstile as a "nice area" for the 16 million visitors who currently travel to San Francisco each year.

Through the redevelopment of North Beach Place, the city and the neighborhood will remake the project into mixed-income housing that will blend with the aesthetic of the surrounding area and promote business in the area. The regional style of the project designed for the residents of "Little Italy" and home to a population that mirrored and expanded the diversity of North Beach will be replaced with walk-up apartments that could be found in any city in the United States. The buildings will fulfill the HOPE VI design goal of *not* standing out. The question of whether or not the twin aims of meeting tenants' needs and the city and neighborhood's economic agenda for the tourist district remains to be seen.

The HOPE VI program at North Beach Place represents a diluted form of urban renewal, a compromised contribution to gentrification. While North Beach Place tenants successfully won one-to-one replacement of low-income units, not all residents can come back. The poorest families will most likely face displacement and the tenants who return

¹³⁹ Ibid.

will find that their community base at the project no longer exists. By locating low-income families next to upwardly-mobile working families with moderate incomes, and living on the same property as a Trader Joe's, the Housing Authority holds "HOPE" of lessening crime in the project through an altered environment and tenant base.

Despite North Beach Place tenants' fight for exit contracts many cannot return to their "homes." Housing Authority employee Juan Monsanto, adamantly arguing that residents would be able to return, revealed the limitations inherent in a redevelopment effort based on the notion of "improving" the design and the people living in public housing. "One of the most important things the HOPE VI program has is that the residents have the first right to return. As long as the residents **are in good standing on paying [their] lease, not being convicted of a felony, and following lease guidelines**" (my emphasis).¹⁴⁰ With some residents relocated in other cities in California, some in other HOPE VI sites and thus unable to return, and others barred by new regulations, the community dynamics at the new project will change dramatically. The low-income families moving into the project will share their housing project with middle-income tenants and a Trader Joe's grocery store. Residents who intend to return to their home in North Beach Place and those who do not plan to come back agree that for better or worse, "It's not going to be like it used to be. It is going to be totally different."¹⁴¹

Designed to benefit and please tourists and neighbors, the new North Beach Place holds out the possibility of increasing the district's revenue and perhaps removing the stigma from the project in the area. However, the cost in human relationships and

¹⁴⁰ Ethen Lieser, "Public Housing Aims to Improve Lives," *AsianWeek*, 15 June 2001.

¹⁴¹ Grayson, interview.

community capital are staggering. Community ties tenants created by coming together to fight for their homes eroded under relocation. While placating district neighbors the redevelopment has dismantled a diverse, activist community representative of North Beach's history and very much a part of the district's marketed image. Dislocating low-income multi-racial and multi-ethnic tenants in favor of a mixed-income community with a Trader Joe's, the SFHA, the district, and the city have taken another step toward gentrifying historic areas in the city at the expense of San Francisco's history and low-income residents' needs.

CHAPTER IV

“THE PROJECT HAS A LONG, TROUBLED HISTORY”: VALENCIA GARDENS’
CONTESTED MISSION

“That is one of things I have always loved about being in here was that we care for each other. Sure you have those who don’t want to fall in with anyone else. That is the way it is anywhere. Otherwise we care about each other...”
Gabrielle Fuentes, Valencia Gardens’ resident¹

INTRODUCTION

On May 6, 1940 more than 500 residents and business owners from the Greater Mission District in San Francisco stormed the city’s Board of Supervisors meeting. Ignoring the board rule that prohibited applause or other demonstrations, the group “repeatedly vented itself in cheers and catcalls” forcing the chairman to call in five policemen to maintain order.² The participants rallied around I.S. McCulloch, spokesperson for the Mission Street Property Owners and Merchants Association, as he put forth his group’s demand to the supervisors: keep public housing out of the Mission District. Five days earlier, McCulloch and 150 supporters attended a Housing Authority Commission hearing where they attacked the commissioners for their alleged secrecy in site selection and for “putting the stigma of ‘slum area’ in the Greater Mission District.”³

¹ Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 27 May 2003. Several of the Valencia Gardens residents interviewed asked to have their names changed. For consistency I have changed all the names of interviewees in this chapter. The title quote is from Rachel Gordon and Ray Delgado, “Valencia Project Gets Clean Sweep,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 25 July 1996.

² “Supervisors’ Vote Opposes Mission Housing Project,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 May 1940.

³ “Housing Authority Flayed by Mission District at Hearing”, *San Francisco Examiner*, 3 May 1940.

Fearful that the Housing Authority would overlook their concerns, opponents of public housing development in the Mission called on the Board of Supervisors to stop the Housing Commissioners from moving forward with their plans to construct public housing projects on the Valencia Street and Cogswell School sites. Their message was clear. They did not want public housing in their district.

As residents and business owners in San Francisco's oldest neighborhood, opponents of the Valencia and Cogswell sites spoke proudly of the Mission community, evoking a rich history and predicting a successful future, while seemingly ignoring its growing problems. Perhaps recalling the Valencia site's history as an entertainment destination for San Franciscans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, detractors argued against putting public housing on 14th and Valencia Streets. First as the location of Woodward Gardens, San Francisco's most popular amusement park from 1866 to 1894, and later, from 1907 to 1931 as the site of the Pacific Coast League's San Francisco Seals stadium, the five-acre plot of land on Valencia Street between 14th and 15th streets sparked pleasant memories for residents across the city.⁴ Rather than housing low-income residents, opponents argued that business owners could convert the site into successful businesses—possibly with a renewed focus on entertainment that would

⁴ It is important to note that Mayor Rossi as well as two members of the Housing Authority Commission also argued against the placement of public housing on the Valencia site. Woodward Gardens, once the home and gardens of Robert Woodward, featured a zoo with exotic animals, Japanese acrobats, and other amusements that drew crowds for almost three decades. Charles Lockwood, *Suddenly San Francisco: The Early Years of an Instant City* (San Francisco: The *San Francisco Examiner* Division of the Hearst Company, 1978), 112. A major draw for the Pacific Coast League organized in 1903, the San Francisco Seals played to cheering crowds at Recreation Park on Eighth Street until the 1906 earthquake destroyed it. The following year fans made their way to the new Recreation Park, also called Valencia Street Grounds, at 14th and Valencia Streets in the Mission District. The 10,000-seat stadium hosted the Seals until the larger Seal Stadium opened in 1931. Bill O'Neal, *The Pacific Coast League 1903-1988* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1990), 274-282.

reignite interest in the Mission District. The SFHA's extensive promotion of public housing as a "public good" had failed to win over Mission residents.

For many Mission residents, the public housing plan posed a threat to the bonds of "community" and "a way of life" that had solidified during the interwar years. As foreign immigration slowed during World War I and again in the late 1920s, the Mission District became "chiefly an area of secondary ethnic settlement, a place to establish familial roots after immigrants had already arrived in the city."⁵ Primarily a blue-collar neighborhood for European ethnic groups from Ireland, Germany, Italy, and Scandinavia, the district proved stable during the interwar years and produced a close localized community with its own accent, called "Mish."⁶ Long-time resident Geraldine Fregoso recalled that the "neighborhood was our world.... Our church and school were only a few blocks away and nearby Mission Street offered complete shopping and entertainment... There was an overpowering sense of continuity."⁷ This sense of a strong local community both buttressed the opposition and fueled proponents as area residents took sides in the public housing debate.

By May 1940, the opposition seemed to have the upper hand. Taking the floor at the Board of Supervisors meeting, McCulloch outlined the chief arguments against the projects, working to soften the opponents' main concerns: decreased property values, with a secondary interest in child safety. McCulloch began by warning the board that the

⁵ Brian Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco's Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities* (Berkeley: University of California Publications in Geology, 1988), 142.

⁶ The Mission is the only district in San Francisco that developed its own urban accent, Mish, which was a blend of Irish and German resembling Brooklynese. Lynn Ludlow and Mireya Navarro, "Winds of Change Sweep Polyglot Neighborhood," *San Francisco Examiner*, 19 October 1981.

⁷ Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition*, 147.

construction of the two projects “would bring tremendous reduction in property values in the Mission District—a reduction which would be reflected in the city’s tax revenues.” (Under federal rules, public housing properties remain tax-free for sixty years).⁸ He tempered the group’s economic argument by claiming that the locations were unsafe for children and citing statistics that showed 44 percent of all accidents involving children under twelve years of age occurred in the Mission District. “Why, in the name of common sense, he continued, “ should we even think of exposing children to needless slaughter by placing them in a housing project between two of the most dangerous and fastest traveled vehicular arteries in the Mission District?”⁹ After laying out his evidence, McCulloch reminded the board that more than 3,000 merchants, property owners, and residents near the sites had signed petitions against the projects. The proponents of public housing, he charged, cheated on their petition, collecting some of the 2,000 signatures from minors and persons living outside the Mission District.¹⁰ These accusations reflected the level of contention over public housing development in the area. As the turbulent meeting drew to a close, the Board of Supervisors voted 7 to 4 to ask the Housing Authority to “respectfully desist in plans” for the two projects.¹¹

⁸ “Supervisors Oppose Mission Housing Site,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 May 1940. McCulloch went on to argue that “[t]he drop has already begun... One apartment house across the street from the Valencia site was built at a cost of \$160,000 and has been bringing its owner a return of 12 cents per year. Today—we couldn’t get a speculator to bid \$65,000.”

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* McCulloch first made his allegations against the proponents’ petition on May 5, 1940 to the press. His charges were not followed up on. For more information see “Mission Site Foes Charge Petition Fraud” *San Francisco Examiner*, 6 May 1940.

¹¹ *Ibid.* The Board of Supervisors could only suggest that the Housing Commissioners change their decision. The Board and the Mayor had no power over the Commissioners who were appointed to their posts by the Mayor and acted as an independent body.

While opponents celebrated their victory at the Board of Supervisors, proponents continued gathering support for the projects with their guarantee of “slum clearance” and affordable housing for working families. Groups as diverse as the Bay Area Agricultural Workers, the Negro Civic Council, the League of Women Shoppers, the CIO Council, the WCTU, Associated Jewish Charities and others appeared at the Housing Commission meetings to support the projects.¹² Individuals without organizational affiliation also offered encouragement. Ruth Kraucer, a resident in the Mission, challenged the economic interests of groups opposing the projects in a letter supporting Housing Commission Chairman Marshall Dill’s “courage”:

While I am among the more fortunate of the Mission’s residents, my frequent walks about the district bring to my attention habitations that are a fire menace and a disgrace to the so-called American standards of living... That anyone for venal profit, should wish to condemn his fellow human beings to such conditions is past my understanding. Their economic arguments, all facts considered, seem to me to be points ill taken.¹³

Chairman Dill, in response to the uproar over proposed public housing sites in the Mission, called a secret emergency Housing Commission meeting on May 21, 1940, preempting the regularly scheduled bi-monthly meeting that was open to the press and the public. In a three to two vote the Housing Commissioners rejected the Board of Supervisors’ request to reconsider the selection of the Valencia and Cogswell sites.¹⁴

¹² Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 16 May 1940, San Francisco Housing Authority. Other groups listed as “waiting to address the Commission in support of both projects,” included Charles Schermerhorn from the Juvenile Court; James H. Mitchell from the AIA; Mrs. Porter from the San Francisco Center; Mrs. Kara Fontaine, Homeowner in the Mission District; Mary Cady, Mission YWCA; Mrs. Snow from the Visiting Nurses Association; the S.F. Housing Council; and the Emergency Committee to Save Housing.

¹³ Ruth E. Kraucer to Marshall Dill, 29 May 1940, Marshall Dill Papers, North Baker Library, California Historical Society.

¹⁴ The Housing Authority Commissioners had postponed scheduled meetings for two weeks due to scheduling conflicts of its members. The Mission Property Owners and Merchants Association and its

Marshalling evidence from the 1939 Real Property Survey showing an increase in low-income, "dilapidated," and "substandard" residential areas in the Mission District during the 1930s, and fearing the loss of federal funds, the Housing Authority moved ahead with its plans.¹⁵ Opponents met the Commission's decision with cries of "secrecy" and "un-American activity," a protest rally, and a resolution voted on by 600 Mission business owners and residents demanding Dill's resignation.¹⁶ Dill kept his job and despite controversy over the sites, the SFHA rapidly moved forward with the Valencia Street project.¹⁷

The selection of the former Woodward Gardens and Valencia Street Grounds sites coalesced in name and location at the Valencia Gardens Housing Project. Although the Housing Authority seemingly triumphed through the construction of Valencia Gardens, the contestation and concern over low-income housing and its residents have continued to the present. Built in a neighborhood that fought against it, Valencia Gardens and its residents have at different times incurred scorn, fear, and indifference from the Mission District as well as neglect from the Housing Authority. Over the years, the district and the city blamed project tenants for the drug trafficking and crime in the Mission. City

leader lambasted the move by Dill. McCulloch had written Dill on May 21 asking for an open meeting with the Commissioners to lay out the opposition's arguments. See "New Hearing Demanded on Housing Sites," *San Francisco Examiner*, 21 May 1940.

¹⁵ The Real Property Survey conducted by the Works Progress Administration for the new Housing Authority of the City and County of San Francisco in 1939 to determine areas which needed public housing described the Mission as "a blighted district" and listed residential properties there as having the third lowest median value for home owners in San Francisco. *1939 Real Property Survey, San Francisco, California: A Report on Work Projects Administration* (San Francisco: City and County of San Francisco, 1940), 16 and 24. While the core of the Mission was below par, the northern section of the district was labeled "substandard" with owner occupancy at less than 20 percent and monthly rents well below the city average (Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition*, 147). Figures compiled from the *Real Property Survey*.

¹⁶ "Mission Housing Meeting Set," *San Francisco Examiner*, 27 May 1940, 16; "Meet Demands Ouster of Dill in Housing Row," *San Francisco Examiner*, 30 May 1940.

¹⁷ The Cogswell site, later Bernal Dwelling, was delayed first because of problems acquiring the land and then because of the war.

officials labeled Valencia Gardens a problem project, and according to tenants, stereotyped them as “lazy,” “drug-abusers,” and “slobs.”¹⁸ Yet many tenants, like their Mission District neighbors, were concerned about crime in the area and wanted to increase safety and improve the quality of life for their families and their “community.”

Valencia Gardens’ residents faced a lack of support for their project over time in the form of the SFHA’s dwindling commitment to build project “communities” and maintain properties. Despite living in a project environment that was at times hostile and filthy, and in buildings that deteriorated over time, tenants forged a “community” and made their project “home.” Struggling with sporadic crime waves, low incomes, unruly neighbors inside and outside the project, and neglect by the SFHA, many residents formed informal and formal networks that allowed them not only to cope, but in some cases, to thrive. These networks, buttressed by bonds uniquely created around public art, pride in the project’s racial and ethnic diversity, and use of the common space within the development, enabled many residents to create a community within the contested space of state-sponsored public housing. By participating in community building and seizing psychological ownership of their apartments, Valencia Gardens residents have redefined what the government has labeled as “temporary housing” and the city has deemed a “troubled project” as “home.” Claiming “ownership” of a project that district neighbors have continually resented, Valencia Gardens’ low-income tenants have forged a community that turns the SFHA’s early ideal of public housing on its head and challenges the equation linking higher class status to engaged, “good” citizenship.

¹⁸ Betty and Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 27 May 2003.

DECENT HOUSING, "DECENT" RESIDENTS

Perhaps in response to the public debate over the Mission site, Valencia Gardens' architects took great pains to create a comfortable, livable space for residents as well as a project the Mission District would gladly call its own. This challenge fell on the shoulders of Henry A. Thomsen and William W. Wurster—notable architects from two different firms who collaborated on the design for Valencia Gardens beginning in 1939. In selecting Wurster the Housing Authority perhaps quelled neighborhood criticism of the project. After opening his office in Berkeley in 1924, Wurster quickly gained a name for himself in residential design with his attention to the climate, the properties of the site, the technical constraints of building well, and the client's needs.¹⁹ By the mid-1930s, he had firmly established his career and as scholar Marc Treib notes "(h)is residential designs had been lauded, published and premiated [sic], and he was acknowledged as one of the leading architects on the West Coast."²⁰ As a notable architect whose office suffered little during the Depression, the question of why Wurster accepted a public housing project contract arises.²¹ It is unclear whether Wurster had a

¹⁹ Marc Treib, ed. *An Everyday Modernism: The Houses of William Wurster* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29. Wurster has been widely recognized as the foremost proponent of the Bay Area architectural style. His legacy, nonetheless, extends beyond the borders of California. Through his architectural practice at Wurster, Bernardi, and Emmons, and as head of the architecture schools at University of California Berkeley and MIT, he "helped shape an entire generation of architects and city planners. ... Greatly influenced by the social and economic conditions of the 1930s, Wurster set out to design small houses that offered the same livability as those of a greater scale. Later, in response to the post-World War II housing boom, he was involved in the creation of innovative—and affordable—mass-produced dwellings that were distinguished by simplicity and economy, yet incorporated diverse human needs." His work was characterized by the use of simple, unadorned materials and his use of flexible plans. Treib, *An Everyday Modernism*, cover sleeve.

²¹ According to the *Heritage Newsletter* the San Francisco Housing Authority did not select architects for its projects by soliciting proposals. Instead they took recommendations from staff members who had a working knowledge of the architects in the city. "San Francisco Marks 50 Years of Public Housing," *Heritage Newsletter* XVII (Summer 1989): 9.

direct interest in social housing in 1939 or as Gwendolyn Wright argues, he took the contract because he needed work— or both.²² Certainly, though, by the time he signed the “Articles of Joint Venture” with Harry Thomsen Jr. for the project in July 1940, his thinking on public housing had been influenced by Catherine Bauer, the leading proponent of social housing in the United States in the 1930s and author of *Modern Housing* (1934) the definitive work on the subject.²³ Bauer, a city planner and advisor on the 1937 U.S. Housing Act, and Wurster wed in August 1940 after a six-month courtship. Drawing from his own experiences designing understated, livable homes, and from Bauer’s encouragement to “publicly insist that housing reform go beyond functional plans and structural systems,” Wurster and Thomsen, with the SFHA’s support, pushed the limits of USHA guidelines for public housing in an effort to design a project that would “stress the dignity of the individual.”²⁴

Wurster and Thomsen’s design plans furthered the SFHA’s aim to facilitate ties between public housing residents and the surrounding neighborhood and to provide tenants with “more than shelter.” Commissioned in 1939, Valencia Gardens did not open until 1943 due to wartime delays.²⁵ Situated on five acres, the twenty-two linked three-story buildings laid out in a serpentine plan were built of fireproof reinforced concrete. The project provided eight different plan types including 114 one-bedroom units, 102

²² Gwendolyn Wright, “A Partnership: William Wurster and Catherine Bauer,” in Treib, *An Everyday Modernism*, 187.

²³ “Articles of Venture,” W.W. Wurster Collection (1976-2), Valencia Gardens Folder, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

²⁴ Wright, *An Everyday Modernism*, ed. Treib, 195; “Valencia Gardens,” *Pencil Points*, January 1944, 28.

²⁵ Holly Courts (1940), Sunnydale (1941), and Potrero (1941) were all essentially row houses. SF Planning and Housing Association, *San Francisco Public Housing: A Citizen’s Survey*, January 1946, referenced in Nick Griffin, “Valencia Gardens: An Unsettled Community with an Architectural Legacy” (Architecture 279, Final Paper, University of California, Berkeley, Professor Waverly Lowell, Spring 2000), 13.



FIGURE 12

Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author

two-bedroom units, and 30 three-bedroom units. (Figure 12) Wurster and Thomsen designed each unit with “windows on two facades to allow for cross-ventilation, light from both sides, and a view to both the formal garden and the service area.”²⁶ The architects made efforts to create the project space with individuals in mind. In an interview with a writer from *Pencil Points* “the essential humanity of the basic scheme kept entering the conversation.” Clearly impressed by the project’s features, the author continued, “Too many times it has seemed that the designers of low-cost housing—and good housing at that---have forgotten the individual in trying to produce for the mass, to meet governmental requirements. None of this straining at restrictions is evident in the completed Valencia Gardens.”²⁷

The architects’ design description echoes these claims while demonstrating the ways in which the project space replicated the SFHA’s early vision of housing “deserving,” two-parent families with employed fathers and stay-at-home mothers. Reflecting the white, middle-class gender prescriptions of the day and the SFHA’s view of public housing as the training ground for middle-class living the architects celebrated their creation.

Each apartment to be entered from a balcony has small wing walls which designate a portion of the balcony as belonging to that apartment. Each living room has a window with a low sill, and a railing for security, so that a mother may look down into the garden, or to see her children, rather than just look across at other apartments. For the same reason we painted portions of the buildings in different colors, so that the immensity might be reduced, and at the same time the whole might be lively and gay.... [We] pulled no punches; we always designed each idea or phase as if we, personally, were to live there; or as if it were for our most tony client. We were careful to fix the curtain rods... so the curtains could be pushed free of the window to make the best of light

²⁶ Carey and Company, Inc., "Valencia Gardens: Historic Building Assessment Report" (San Francisco, July 1997), 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

and air.²⁸

The architects' focus on individuality resulted in a plan that both facilitated and to some extent impeded tenant community formation. Their courtyard design provided enclosed spaces for adults to meet and talk, and for children to play safely away from the street. Yet, in their continued effort to avoid the precepts of "mass living" Wurster and Thomsen purposely avoided an emphasis "on the great axis which would only serve to show how small each family was in the sum total. There would be no emphasis on the office or community facilities as architectural motif; they would just be available when wanted."²⁹ As a result, the management offices and community room were located in a remote part of the project—inconspicuous to visitors and project residents. This design decision, in some ways, discouraged tenant exchange. Nonetheless, in the community room, the laundry, and even in the manager's office tenants found spaces—however decentralized—to interact with their neighbors.

The courtyards at Valencia Gardens reflected the SFHA's early goals of fostering bonds between residents and between the project and Mission community. In contrast to the current popular and scholarly view of public housing design as cheaply built warehouses thrown together for the poor the architects continued to prioritize tenants' comfort. With a keen consideration of San Francisco's cold northerly wind, they engineered the building blocks to enclose three southern-facing courtyards and two

²⁸ "Valencia Gardens" *Pencil Points*, January 1944, 29 and 32. The colors of the buildings were terra cotta, blue and bright yellow.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32. The cost of the land was \$230,000 and the general contract was for \$845,000 making the total cost per room around \$1000.

service courts.³⁰ Thomas Church, a regionally known landscape architect, designed the three courtyards and planned them as social and play areas with raised planting beds supported by brick walls that functioned as seating. Eucalyptus, box, and prostrate juniper along with grass were planted, creating a spacious landscaped area “intimate enough to give the feeling of a small neighborhood.”³¹ Foregoing fencing or a perimeter wall, the architects allowed the courtyards to open directly onto the busy sidewalk of Valencia Street, connecting residents with people and activities of the street and surrounding community.³²

In 1943, the first tenants moved into Valencia Gardens, a project MOMA claimed was “outstanding among urban housing schemes for its ‘easy livability’” and “the logic of its site plan.”³³ Rather than housing low-income families, however, the SFHA responded to amendments in the Housing Act and to the 1940 Lanham Act and leased the apartments to some of the 150,000 war workers in the city.³⁴ In Resolution 306 passed by the San Francisco Housing Commission on August 18, 1942, eligible applicants for the four permanent housing projects included “those families any member of which is

³⁰ Treib, 53.

³¹ Sally Carrighar, “Valencia Gardens: A Prelude to Mass Housing,” *Architect and Engineer*, March 1943, 22.

³² Wright, *An Everyday Modernism*, ed. Treib, 187.

³³ Elizabeth Mock, ed., *Built in America 1932-1944* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1944), 58.

³⁴ In June 1940, the federal government amended the 1937 Housing Act in response to the local housing crises arising from war mobilization. The amendment authorized loans and subsidies for housing defense workers and supported the continued construction of permanent buildings under Public Housing Authority standards, with occupant priority going to defense workers. Later that year the Lanham Act was passed which provided direct federal financing and construction for temporary housing and social services. Wright, “The Evolution of Public Housing Policy and Design in the San Francisco-Bay Area,” 23. Wurster grumbled that the residents living in Valencia Gardens were “probably only in-migrant workers at that.” He was referring to the large number of migrants from other areas in the U.S. who moved to the Bay Area for work during the war. Carey and Company, Inc., “Valencia Gardens: Historic Building Assessment Report,” 4. Quote from Carrighar, “Valencia Gardens: A Prelude to Mass Housing,” *Architect and Engineer*, March 1943, 22.

engaged in national defense activities” with preference given to those “most in need of housing from the standpoint of national defense: 1. Employees of Bethlehem Shipyard; 2. Civilian Employees of the Army and Navy establishments; 3. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard personnel. The project will be exclusively occupied by the families and persons engaged in national defense activities.”³⁵ Arguably the shift from low-income tenants to national defense workers and military families pleased Mission residents who had resisted the project as they found comfort in Valencia Gardens’ new purpose as a residence for “patriotic citizens.”

The Housing Authority housed its “higher- income,” non-controversial tenants for several years after the war ended, seemingly reversing its claim to house defense workers only “for the duration of the national emergency.”³⁶ These “preferred” tenants likely stayed in public housing after the war in hopes of saving money to buy homes or to rent apartments in the expensive, contracting Bay-area market. As early as 1946, the Housing Commissioners began discussing the return of permanent projects to low-income status with a start schedule set for May. By August, the Commission began anticipating the changeover. Two years later, however, the Housing Authority admitted to “still [being] in the process of evicting ‘high income families.’”³⁷ The slow process elicited a reprimand from the federal government. On May 19, 1949, the Secretary of the Housing Commission reported that the Public Housing Authority (PHA) had sent a

³⁵ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 18 August 1942, San Francisco Housing Authority. A January 3, 1943 article in the *San Francisco Examiner* stated that according to Housing Commissioner Timothy Reardon “some 800 persons will be accommodated at the new \$2,000,000 project and the apartments will not be rented to single persons unless their dependents live with them.”

³⁶ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 14 May 1942, San Francisco Housing Authority.

³⁷ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 3 May 1946 and August 15, 1946, San Francisco Housing Authority.

directive “requiring stepping up removal of high income families from permanent projects so that all ineligible families will have received their 6 months notice to vacate by the end of the year.”³⁸ A later extension by the PHA kept some higher -income tenants in projects until August 1950. By the end of that month low-income residents fully occupied Valencia Gardens and other permanent projects.³⁹

PUBLIC HOUSING, PUBLIC ART

Low-income residents entering Valencia Gardens in 1950 found evidence of the SFHA’s pride in the “deserving families” selected to live in public housing as well as the agency’s attempt to integrate public housing into the surrounding neighborhood in an unlikely place—the courtyards. Within each of the three courtyards stood sculptures of animals by Beniamino Bufano, an internationally acclaimed artist. Bufano, an Italian immigrant, adopted San Francisco as his home in 1924 and began a forty-six year love/hate relationship with the city. His grandiose plans for creating enormous statues for the city to display, along with his eccentric lifestyle and outspokenness provoked interest, ridicule, and even adoration from San Franciscans.⁴⁰ Bufano crafted the animal

³⁸ Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 19 May 1949, San Francisco Housing Authority. The Housing Commission Minutes report that during the period October 1948 to March 1949 43% of the 162 families vacated from permanent projects bought homes. Capitalizing on the figures for publicity, the Chairman directed the Secretary to release the information to the press.

³⁹ San Francisco Housing Authority Commission minutes from January 1, 1950 state that in regard to the eviction of high-income families who are now given approximately 6 months to vacate public housing “[t]he PHA has requested that this be discontinued and has suggested that those tenants having to move from our developments because of high income be allowed until July 1, 1950. After that date 30 days will be given.”

⁴⁰ Bufano was born in San-Fele, Italy on October 14, 1898. He immigrated with his family to New York in 1901. Between 1913 and 1915 he studied at the Arts Student League in New York after which he traveled to San Francisco to work on a sculpture for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. It was then at the young age of sixteen that Bufano began a long and tumultuous relationship with his adopted city of San Francisco. After traveling in France, Italy, India, and China, Bufano opened his studio in San Francisco in 1924 where he worked until his death in 1970. Praised by critics for the “freedom in his simplification of form and movement,” Bufano exhibited his work in New York, Paris, and San Francisco. (Quote by

sculptures placed at Valencia Gardens, along with approximately twelve other pieces, during his tenure on the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project between 1935 and 1942.⁴¹ These figures, which were perhaps the most "consistently successful of his career," raised the standard for Federal Art Project (FAP) sculptures by showcasing Bufano's "extraordinary ability to marry traditional subjects to modern forms without seriously violating public taste," and by introducing stainless steel, which became a Bufano trademark, to California sculpture.⁴² Originally intended for placement at an aquatic theme park, the sculptures were transferred from the FAP when it ended in 1942 to the City of San Francisco. Unsure where to place them the city kept them in storage until 1944. Under pressure from Bufano, the Board of Supervisors voted to display the statues at the Civic Center with the intention of attracting city department heads who would want to showcase the pieces in their jurisdiction.⁴³

English art critic Robert Fry referenced in H. Wilkening and Sonia Brown, *Bufano: An Intimate Biography* (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1972), 103. An ardent pacifist and non-conformist, Bufano became the darling of the San Francisco newspapers because he was a consistent source of story materials. The papers called him "Benny" and printed hundreds of articles about his antics, including his radical break from the San Francisco Institute of Art faculty and his controversial tenure on the city's Art Commission.

⁴¹ While on the Federal Art Project, Bufano produced a granite head of St. Francis, fourteen animal statues, including a mouse, a cat, a cat and a mouse, a bear with two cubs, a horse and a bear, a seal, a frog, a rabbit, a penguin, double seals, a crab, two fish sculptures, a bear with a human head, and stainless steel and granite representations of Sun Yat-Sen and Louis Pasteur. Steven M. Gelber, "The New Deal and Public Art in California" in *New Deal Art: California* (Santa Clara: de Saisset Art Gallery and Museum, University of Santa Clara, 1976), 88.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 74. Bufano liked shiny, smooth surfaces and recognized that steel would make a good complement to polished granite or glazed ceramic. When he contacted the steel companies they informed him that the material could only be worked by heating it which discolored the finish. Bufano refused to listen and he and the artists in his studio worked the metal cold into shapes they desired. For more information see Gelber, "The New Deal and Public Art in California", 74.

⁴³ The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to display the stored statues at the Civic Center. The display provided the city its first "open air show in history, the first art exhibit ever held in the Civic Center and the first one-man exhibition ever prompted by City Hall legislation." Sherman Miller, "Board Order Exhibit of Bufano Sculptures," *San Francisco Examiner*, 10 October 1944. The sculptures had been in storage since 1930. In 1941, Bufano was fired from the FAP but the city supported his reinstatement in hopes that he would finish the pieces. The exhibit at the Civic Center drew crowds and enabled city department heads to view the sculptures and select any they might want for location in their jurisdiction.

The SFHA, looking to adorn its projects and to bring tenants and project neighbors together, requested thirteen statues for display in their public housing projects. SFHA Executive Director John Beard characterized Valencia Gardens as a worthy site for Bufano's pieces. "Now that the city is apparently seeking a suitable location for the exhibit of the sculpture[s] **in order that the public may enjoy [them]**, I wish to offer Valencia Gardens for this purpose"(my emphasis).⁴⁴ According to Beard, the statues' placement in the project would allow both the public and tenants an opportunity to enjoy the artwork. The Art Commission, demonstrating their confidence in the Housing Authority's project and ignoring Bufano's request to place the statues in a more prominent public place, agreed to lend the agency the statues. On March 9, 1945, the Art Commission delivered a cat, a mouse, a cat and mouse, a pair of seals, penguins, a bear with two cubs, a rabbit, and a frog to Valencia Gardens for permanent location (Figures 13-21)⁴⁵

The city zoo and Parks Department expressed initial interest in displaying some of the pieces but eventually backed out. The continual controversy that Bufano generated made the acquisition of his pieces potentially troublesome and led both agencies to create excuses for changing their plans. The Park Commission claimed that works of a living artist belonged in museums and galleries rather than in parks. "Bufano's 16 Statues Won't Stand in Park," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 December 1944. The Art Commission, presenting a hastily crafted excuse, refused to loan statues to the zoo, because it would be an "artistic anachronism" to place animal sculptures next to live animals at the zoo. "Storage Again for Bufano's Animals: Art Board Rules that Zoo Out of Bounds," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 January 1945. After the exhibit at the Civic Center ended in early 1945 the sculptures were slated to go back into storage, seemingly unwanted by city agencies.

⁴⁴ "Display of City Owned Bufano Sculpture Urged," *San Francisco Examiner*, 4 October 1944. The quote is from a letter to the Art Commission from John Beard, San Francisco Art Commission.

⁴⁵ "Bufano Art to Housing Site," *San Francisco Examiner*, 9 March 1945. I have not been able to learn anything about the frog listed above. There is a butterfly sculpture at Valencia Gardens that, according to residents, was there early on before it was removed. The butterfly was returned with the other pieces in 1989 after the Art Commission took them away for cleaning and repair following an earthquake.

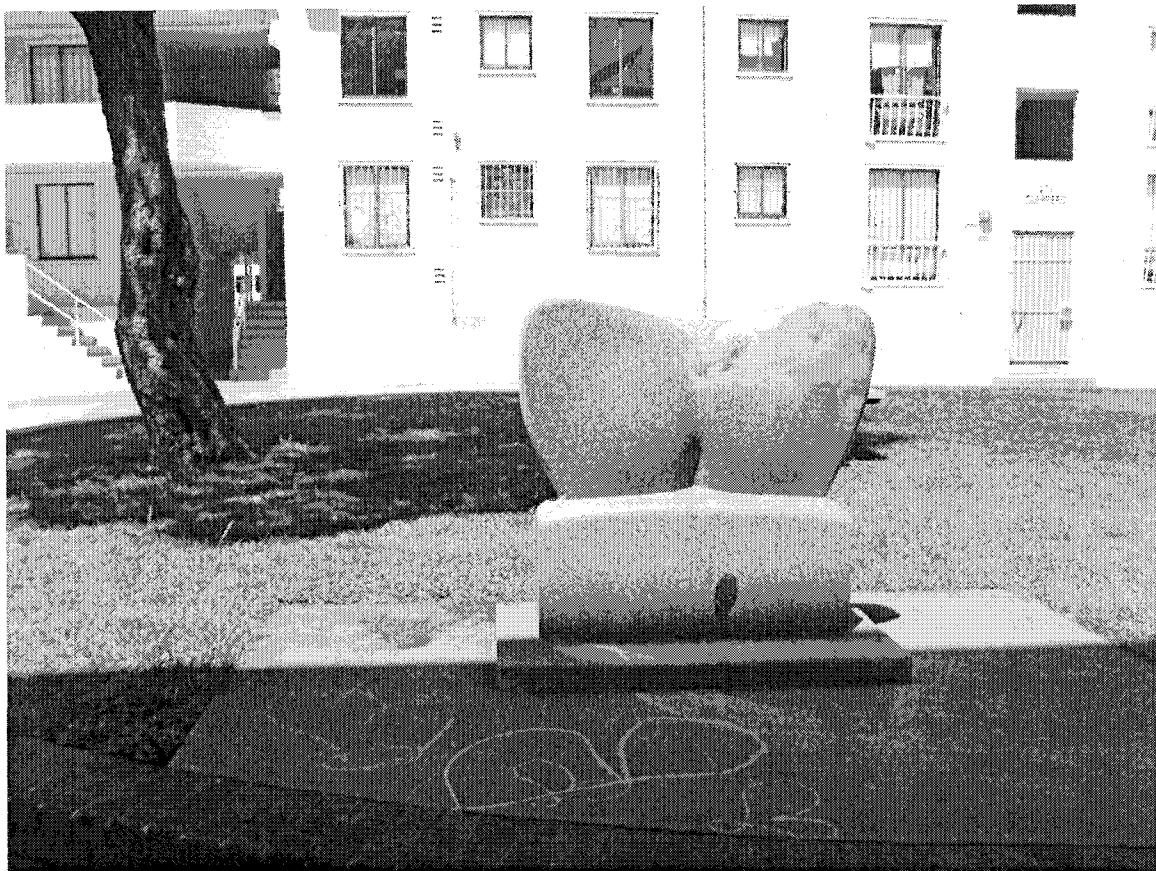


FIGURE 13

Butterflies, sculpted by Beniamino Bufano, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author



FIGURE 14

Cat with mouse, sculpted by Beniamino Bufano, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author

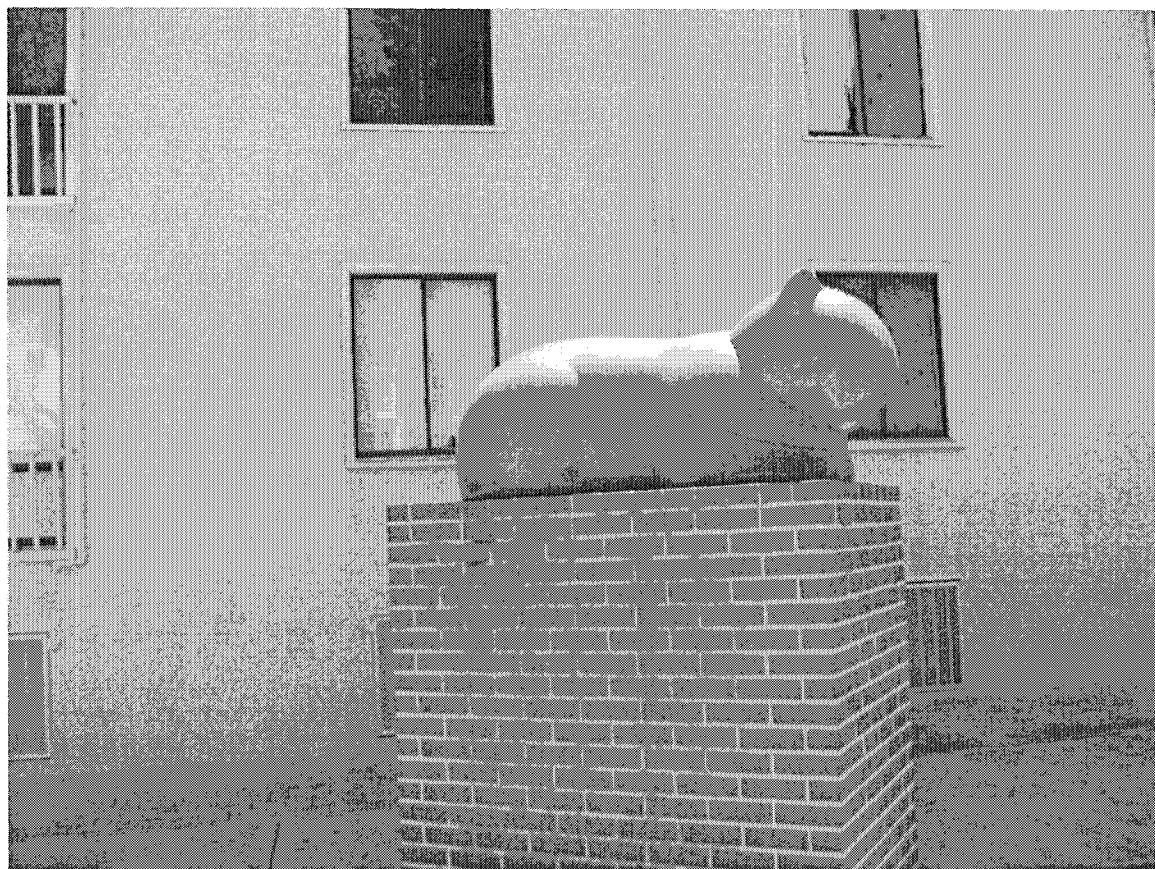


FIGURE 15

Cat, sculpted by Beniamino Bufano, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author



FIGURE 16

Mouse, sculpted by Beniamino Bufano, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author

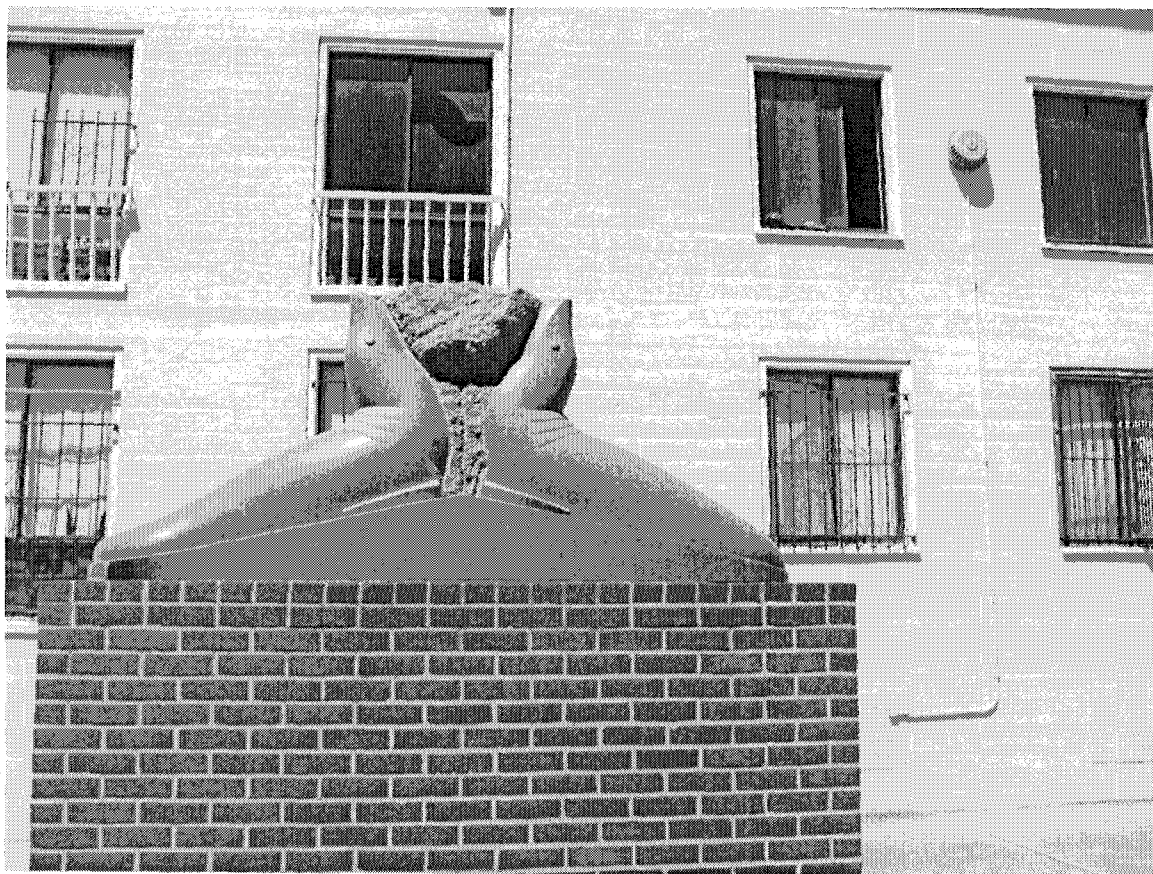


FIGURE 17

Seals, sculpted by Beniamino Bufano, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author

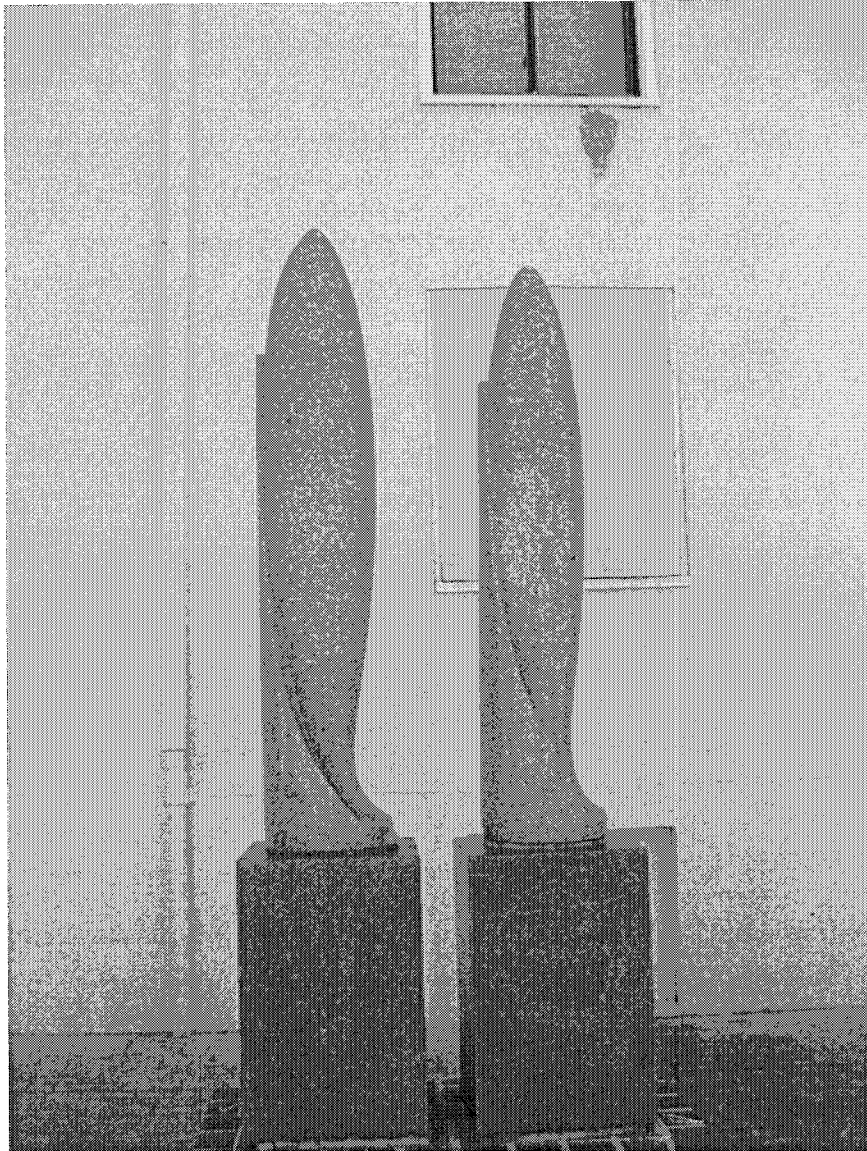


FIGURE 18

Penguins, sculpted by Beniamino Bufano, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author

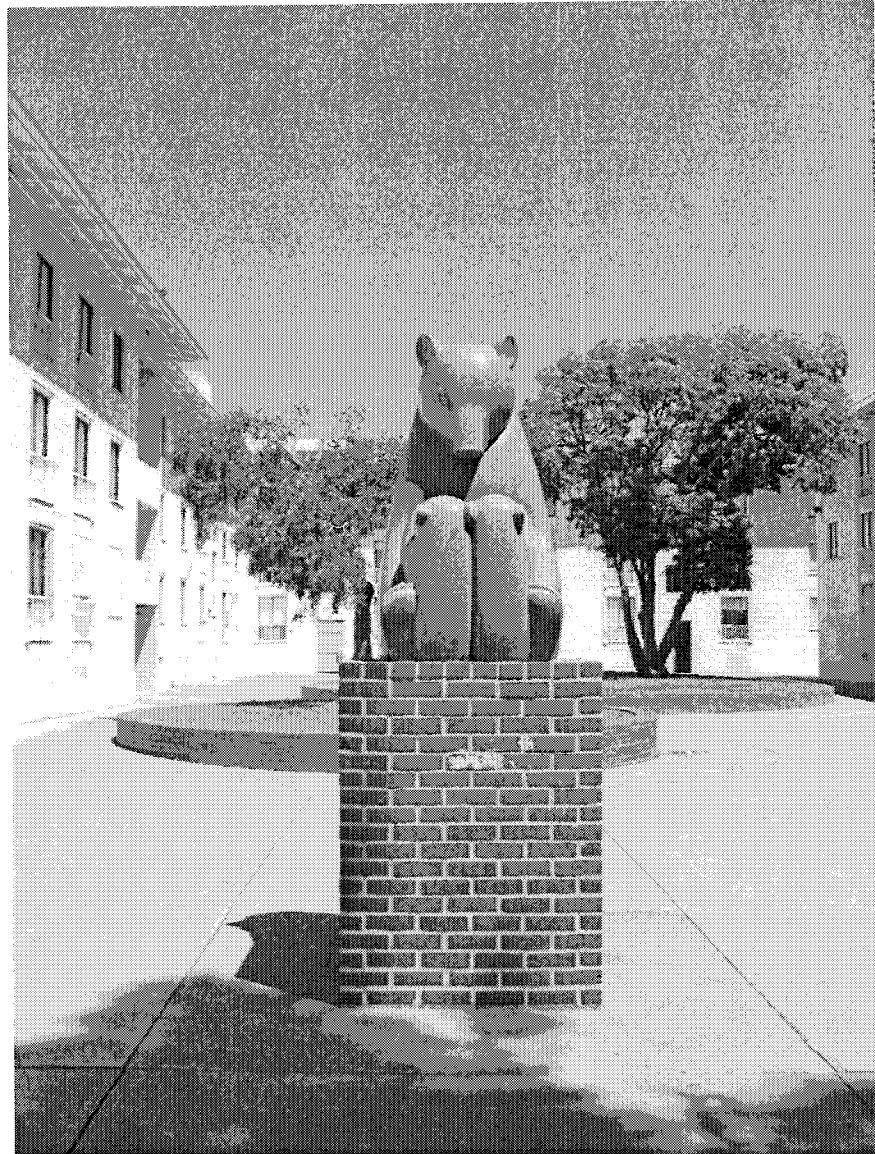


FIGURE 19

Bear with cubs, sculpted by Beniamino Bufano, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author



FIGURE 20

Rabbit, sculpted by Beniamino Bufano, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author



FIGURE 21

Courtyard, Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author

Bufano protested the loan to the SFHA and threatened to sue the city.⁴⁶ The Board of Supervisors countered Bufano's protests by claiming that Valencia Gardens offered a favorable spot for his pieces. Thomas A. Brooks, Chief Administrative Officer, echoing Wurster and Thomsen's design goal of connecting tenants with the Greater Mission District assured Bufano that "the works will be on public display where they may be viewed by both residents and visitors."⁴⁷ Finally, in a show of support for the project and in defense of the decision to place the sculptures there, Brooks stated, "Valencia Gardens appears to be the most appropriate place for some of Mr. Bufano's creations. The project has attracted the attention of artists and architects throughout the Nation and received special acclaim from the Museum of Modern Art in New York City."⁴⁸ Ultimately, Bufano resigned himself to the city's decision and worked with the Housing Authority "to determine the most artistic locations" for the sculptures.⁴⁹

While the SFHA intended the sculptures to promote bonds between project residents and the Mission District, tenants increasingly claimed the Bufano sculptures as their own. The Bufanos became an important source of communal pride and cohesion for tenants over the years. Situated in the courtyards—the spaces between the buildings—the sculptures drew residents—and particularly children—out—giving them a place to meet, talk, and play. A life-long resident, Mary Estes, echoing Bufano's expressed hope that children would enjoy his animal sculptures, recalled:

⁴⁶ "Bufano May Sue City Over WPA Statues," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 February 1945. At one point Bufano claimed he would rather see the statues back in storage than at Valencia Gardens.

⁴⁷ "Bufano May Sue City Over WPA Statues," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 February 1945. The Art Commission loaned the Housing Authority 13 statues slated for display at Valencia Gardens. The Housing Authority placed two statues at Westside Courts and one at in the Sunnydale administrative office.

⁴⁸ "Display of City Owned Bufano Sculpture Urged," *San Francisco Examiner*, 4 October 1944.

⁴⁹ *San Francisco Housing News*, 2 March 1945.

Children throughout the years have grown pretty fond of this one [the mouse] because as children growing up in the housing development, you're a real kid when you can climb on this thing, that's what separates the little kids from the older ones, when you are old enough or get enough agility to climb up on this thing, once you have made it when you are a kid—you go—Yeah, I made it! I'm not a baby anymore.⁵⁰

Though project rules prohibited playing on the statues, many children over the years made a symbolic climb to adolescence on the Bufanos. Gabrielle Fuentes envied her brother “who seemed to have suction feet” and could climb on the bear—a challenge with its sharp vertical design. “I was always on the kitty cats or the seals...the low things...we would pretend things... We never thought of tearing them up or anything...It was ours but it didn't belong to us. It belonged to everybody, so why should we mess it up?”⁵¹ A teenager when she moved to Valencia Gardens in 1958, Betty Fuentes, like her daughter who grew up there, recalled that over the decades “all the kids climb on them.”⁵² Bufano, who claimed to like children playing on his pieces, was seemingly pleased by the sculptures' use and importance to residents as demonstrated by his later appearance in a photograph with children in front of the seals at Valencia Gardens.⁵³

CHANGING MISSION

Tenants living in Valencia Gardens enjoyed the Bufanos, the Mission District's sunny weather, and the benefits of living in an urban location with public transportation, shopping, entertainment, and hospitals nearby. During the 1950s residents—mainly

⁵⁰ Mary Estes, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 15 July 1997. Bufano claimed that “nothing pleases me more than to see the children of God...humans and animals...play together.” Wilkening, *Bufano*, 129.

⁵¹ Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁵² Betty Fuentes, interview.

⁵³ Randolph Falk, *Bufano* (Millbrae, CA: Celestial Arts, 1975), 25. The photo has no caption or citation.

made up of selected two-parent families screened by the SFHA— lived in a safe, clean project that had the full support of the agency. A clear symbol of the Housing Authority's pride in the development as a space to further “educate” low-income families on “good citizenship” was the raising of the American flag each morning. One life-long resident explained the experience her mother had as a child in the early 1950s:

... [E] veryday when the office would open up they put the flag up because they were proud because back then this was a nice family-oriented housing project. They were proud. They had joy to be there. Kids back then were not ashamed to say ‘Oh I live in Valencia Gardens’ because you would come by on 15th Street and you would see the pride. You would see the American flag every morning they would put it up.... For a little while my mom said they had not only the American flag but also the Housing Authority flag. It didn't last long for some reason....It was like an all-American, or what we like to think of as an all-American neighborhood, watching the flag go up each morning.⁵⁴

Residents remembered how in the late 1950s and into the 1960s the “lawns were impeccably kept” and at night “huge globes” of light would illuminate the project securing tenants' space.⁵⁵ “Cleanliness,” “safety,” and “neighborliness,” for many residents, defined their living experience at Valencia Gardens. Rita Smith recounted how in the 1960s “we used to sit outside when it was hot and drink wine and watch the kids.... The people who lived here were good people.... We used to sit down with [our] neighbors, talking, watching our kids like family.”⁵⁶

Tenants' situations began to change slowly as the project and the Mission District underwent demographic and economic changes and the Housing Authority's funding and management declined. At Valencia Gardens, the numbers of racially and ethnically diverse tenants increased over time in response to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to

⁵⁴ Mary Estes, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁵⁵ Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by Roberta Swan.

⁵⁶ Rita Smith, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

outlaw segregation in the city's projects in the 1954 *Banks v. The Housing Authority of San Francisco* ruling. Within a decade and a half, lower-income tenants including single-parent families gradually began moving into the project as federal laws shifted making public housing the domain of poorer families. The project, as feared by detractors in the 1940s, was viewed by some district residents as leading to a "decline" in the Mission by bringing in poorer minority families. The remnants of the "old neighborhood" faded as Latino/a immigrants moved to the area. Between 1930 and 1970 the Latino/a population in the Mission District increased markedly rising 45 percent by 1970 even as the U.S. census showed a 17 percent decline in the city's total Latino/a population. Documented residents of Latino/a origin in 1980 reached an average of 60 percent and continued climbing.⁵⁷ Long-time Mission residents complained about the changes in their neighborhood in a 1961 report expressing "fear of industrial encroachment, fear of crowded conditions, and fear that the historic neighborhood was losing its character."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition*, 152-53. Godfrey notes that the 60% figure given for 1980 is most likely a conservative estimate due to the number of undocumented residents. The steady growth of the Latino/a population started during the 1930s and 1940s, and continued as European immigrant groups moved to the suburbs after World War II. Godfrey claims that the Mission District, which was already a solidly working-class area, appeared to be "going further down hill in social terms" due to the influx of Latino/a immigrants and the exodus of white residents of European ancestry. He argues that the 1930s and 1940s constituted the beginning stages of "Hispanic *penetration*" and that the 1950s were the "real stage of ethnic invasion, as the Spanish-surnamed population rose from 11% in 1950 to 23% in 1960 (150).

⁵⁸ "Mission District to Get a Going-Over at Meeting," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 January 1961. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Mission District experienced an increase in crime, economic downturns, and other problems. These changes affected both district residents and project tenants. In the early 1960s, city officials labeled the Greater Mission District as having a juvenile delinquency problem—a mark of the neighborhood's decline. A two-year, two-volume survey of the Mission District released in 1961 reported the growth of juvenile delinquency in the Mission as the highest in the city with an 85% increase between 1950 and 1958. The report also documented an increase in the dropout rate in Mission schools. Mission residents were growing fearful of the changes taking place in their area. Valencia Gardens' residents shared some of these concerns and had others. The rise of vandalism at the project attracted the SFHA's attention and the agency labeled Valencia Gardens as a "trouble spot" in 1960. The Commissioners, in response, "inaugurated a special police coverage...with a squad car for two policemen on the 4:00 p.m. to midnight watch...making themselves visible," "checking the roof and laundry areas, stairways and spot checking the floors, [and] knocking on doors and discussing with tenants problems as tenants see it." Minutes of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission, 18 February 1960, San Francisco Housing Authority. The

By 1969, Mission and Valencia Gardens residents shared a common concern about their district— gang violence. Operating along Mission Street, gangs harassed business owners and threatened customers causing a marked decline in revenue. One prominent gang, estimated at twenty to thirty members between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two years of age, allegedly stole from stores, hassled salespeople, and threw bottles at school children walking home. Witnesses generally kept silent, fearing retribution. Many business owners and residents agreed that Mission Street—the main artery of the district— had “gone to hell.”⁵⁹

Gang violence continued as the Mission District’s troubles increased in the 1970s. Residents of the beleaguered district stressed by internal problems and outside criticism, looked for a scapegoat to blame. Some white critics pointed the finger of blame first to the influx of Latino/as in the area and then to Valencia Gardens’ residents. Onlookers began to equate the economic difficulties of the district with demographic shifts as Latino/as came to constitute almost half of the area’s 51,000 residents by 1970. Andres Malcolm writing for the *New York Times* chronicled the decline of the neighborhood. He described the area’s problems noting that “a higher unemployment rate developed among these unskilled workers. Street crime grew. Many buildings were aging. Fashionable stores gave way to thrift shops. The crowded streets were torn up for construction of a new transit system. Vandalism mounted. Sears blacked over its street level display

SFHA also designated Yerba Buena Plaza "as one of the most troublesome projects." A squad car patrolled Yerba Buena Plaza and the SFHA requested that the officers perform the same duties there as at Valencia Gardens along with doing additional spot checks and "going up into the elevators." Ibid.

⁵⁹ Jarvis, Birney, A Gang's Terror in the Mission", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 April 1969.

windows. And many marginal businesses closed.”⁶⁰ One long-time Mission business owner Tom Mason recalled that in the Mission District circa 1976 “there were a lot of arson fires in run-down buildings, a lot of anxiety about housing issues and displacement...[and] the problem was alcohol and certain kinds of drugs.... a feeling that is was a very run down, very cheap, very bohemian place.”⁶¹

The status of Valencia Gardens as a public housing project, and emergence in the 1970s as an *anti-public* space—a place Americans of all classes fear as dangerous and avoid if possible—its location abutting a thoroughfare, Valencia Street that saw a large percentage of crime, gang violence, and drug dealing, and its design, made it a repository of the surrounding community’s blame for the district’s problems. Mission business owner Tom Mason explained that the “relationship with Valencia Gardens was uneasy because there was a perception that people dealing drugs or creating problems in the neighborhood.... were pulling things and disappearing into Valencia Gardens” which caused the neighborhood’s attitude to sour in the 1970s as neighbors “would feel no recourse or hope for it [Valencia Gardens] except to raze it or rehabilitate it.”⁶² With an unknown number of drug dealers inside the project and many working out of houses around the project and on the streets nearby, Valencia Gardens was marked as a negative space both by Mission District residents and city officials. Ironically, the design of the project worked against the Housing Authority and architects’ intent of promoting good

⁶⁰ Malcolm, Andres H. "Death of a Store Jolts Historic San Francisco District," *New York Times*, 1 February 1975, quoted in Cary Cordova's "San Francisco's Borderlands: Aztlan Mythologies and Urban Realities in Constructing the Mission District," (paper presented at the Western Social Science Association Annual Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 2002), 3.

⁶¹ Tom Mason, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁶² *Ibid.*

ties between residents and the surrounding neighborhood, instead aiding criminals who used the project's open courtyard construction as a cut-through, its hallways and stairwells as hiding places and dealing locations, and service courts as escape routes from the police. For undercover officers the project's construction made their job more difficult, as one remarked, "It's like chasing rats into Swiss cheese."⁶³

By the 1980s, the police, city officials, and Mission District residents labeled Valencia Gardens as a dangerous project overrun by drug dealers. The popularity and increase in sales of crack cocaine expanded the drug trade in San Francisco and other cities. Journalist Susan Ward described drug trafficking in housing projects across the city as "occurring so openly and freely that police and the Housing Authority officials admit they do not have a handle on it."⁶⁴ Valencia Gardens along with Bernal Heights, Hayes Valley, and Sunnydale had the most severe problems. With drug dealers visible at Valencia Gardens "in the autumn sunshine—offering Angel Dust for sale" and threatening to kill tenants who refused to let dealers work out of their apartments, many families "cower[ed] in fear in their apartments, fearing for their safety."⁶⁵ Other residents fed up with the dealing and related shootings, vandalism, and burglaries, complained to the Housing Authority and police—yet did so anonymously fearing reprisals. At a meeting with housing officials in October 1985, over thirty tenants from Valencia Gardens, refusing to give their names, told stories of "junkies shooting up in

⁶³ Susan Sward, "Wide-Open Drug Dealing in S.F. Housing Projects," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 October 1985.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

the hallways and basements, around the clock drug dealing and too few police to stop it.”⁶⁶

The police and the Authority— ignoring tenants’ concern about retaliation— responded by asking them to become the cops’ “eyes and ears” at Valencia Gardens. Even as residents sought help from the city they expressed skepticism that the meeting would make “any difference in their lives in the crime-ridden project.”⁶⁷ Over the next four years the police arrested a drug ring operating out of Bernal Heights that had caused trouble at several projects in the city including Valencia Gardens. While drug trafficking began to decrease slightly in the projects and in the city, Valencia Gardens residents continued to experience gang violence that included shootings near the project and to confront gang members—some of whom lived in the city’s projects.⁶⁸ Reports of drug-dealing, gang fighting, and robberies in and around Valencia Gardens contributed to city and district officials’ negative perceptions of the project.

Valencia Gardens’ reputation as an *anti-public* space along with the national image of public housing as federal failures led San Franciscans—including some public housing applicants—to stereotype project residents and their apartments as unsavory and unsafe. Building on this growing national stigma of public housing spurred by press coverage of the problems at the Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini Green in Chicago,

⁶⁶ Susan Sward, "Public Housing Tenants Report on Drug Woes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 October 1985. The Housing Authority organized several meetings on the drug problem in the city's projects. In the meetings housing officials urged tenants "to cooperate more with authorities trying to stop drug dealing in the city's 43 projects" (3).

⁶⁷ Sward, "Public Housing Tenants Report on Drug Woes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 October 1985.

⁶⁸ See Robert Popp and J.L. Pimsleur's "'Family' Drug Gang Busted in S.F.," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 November 1985. Torri Minton, "3 Arrests After Wild Gunfight By S.F. Gangs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 January 1988. Rick DelVecchio, "S.F. Police to Step Up Watch on 'Drug' Gangs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 July 1988.

Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, and in some San Francisco projects, a number of San Franciscans assumed the worst about Valencia Gardens and its inhabitants. Long-time San Franciscan resident Melinda Ortega remembered fearing the project because of bad press: “I avoided to come live in the projects because of the condition they were in and what I read about in the papers. I don’t care how pretty they were in terms of painting...it didn’t matter. There was always something very bad on the news about them and I avoided them and then the day came when I had to eat my words. Financially I could not afford the rate of a one bedroom apartment.”⁶⁹

Other tenants’ experiences challenged the negative image of public housing and complicate the narrative of discord associated with the “projects.” A college student living in the project in the mid-1990s recounted that “People say, ‘don’t walk through Valencia Gardens because you are going to get mugged or your car is going to get stolen.’” Revealing the gap between public perceptions of the project and tenants’ realities living at Valencia Gardens, she went on to dismiss the warnings. “People shouldn’t have that idea and stereotype us that way. We aren’t all that way. The years I have lived here I haven’t seen violence that way.”⁷⁰ Having moved to Valencia Gardens in 1978, Beth Smith was embarrassed to admit that she had a negative preconceived notion of public housing generally:

I was scared to death with no legitimate reason. After a while it got more comfortable. After all these years I don’t care, I walk through anywhere, walk around anywhere. But at first it was scary. I grew up thinking that the projects was a really bad place where people died of overdoses or were murdered so it was kind of a scary thought to move in here. But after a year it was fine.... It is not what people think. People think everybody that lives here is on welfare or drugs

⁶⁹ Melinda Ortega, interview with Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁷⁰ Aleta Gomez, interview with Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

or an alcoholic. They stereotype people from the projects and you find after you live here for while that none of it is true. There are a lot of people that work, that live here and a lot of people who don't work but aren't on drugs or on alcohol and are trying to make it the best they can. It is really hard— you go through years of embarrassment because 'Oh, I live in the projects.'⁷¹

For some residents the process of negotiating the problems of project living, including crime, and negative stereotypes resulted in one goal—getting out. Resident Tressa Knox summed up the sentiments of tenants who wanted out of Valencia Gardens, and out of public housing. “What’s most important to me is getting out of here...trying to land a job that’s gonna provide benefits for me and my children and start saving for their college fund and letting them know this isn’t the only life that they have to live.”⁷² Maria Calderon, an immigrant from Mexico recalled the nadir of her time in Valencia Gardens in the early 1990s when in her stairway “they used to have a lot of sex and drugs and they go to the bathroom, and I was ashamed to go up when the steps were smelly, but today it is much better.” Despite improvements in the project, Calderon yearned for more. You might be wondering why we are living in Valencia Gardens if I came [to the United States] for a better life, well my plans didn’t come out the way I was expecting.” While resigned to her situation, Calderon hoped for better security at the project and “to have my neighbors to be united as one, not as different people and different nationalities, but all as one family.”⁷³ Fanny Castellanos, a single, working mother, unlike Calderon, found no solace in the project community that she wanted to leave.

⁷¹ Beth Smith, interview with Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁷² "The Valencia Gardens Oral History Project," American Institute of Architects, San Francisco Chapter, 1998 Legacy Project.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

My family hopes to move out...I told my daughter I don't want to suffer the kind of depression that I do...I think about all my life I have to go through this I feel like I'm going to go crazy, I go, I don't even want to think about it, you know it's live one day by one day, today is the day, I don't worry about tomorrow because it is too much...They (other single parents in the project) expect to live in safe place where people have respect for us—we are human beings.⁷⁴

The image of the project as a dangerous and run-down place did not take into account tenants' own concerns about drugs, violence, and filth nor the SFHA's failure as the landlord of Valencia Gardens. The project's problems were compounded by the Housing Authority's missed maintenance schedules, insufficient funds to update the buildings, and inconsistencies in policies and procedures because of the rapid turnover of executive directors. As crime and drug-trafficking increased at the SFHA's "Big Four," Sunnydale, Alice Griffith, Potrero Annex, and Hunter's View in the 1980s, the agency seemed to turn its attention and limited resources to providing damage control at these projects. Residents at Valencia Gardens felt neglected.

In 1985, residents' claims of being the "stepchild of public housing in San Francisco" rang true when they went without heat for several hours during the day for over three months during the winter.⁷⁵ Expressing frustration at the "steady deterioration" of Valencia Gardens, Marion Maxie blamed the Housing Authority: "They don't care how many times you call because they are not doing anything about it...I went to get in the shower one day last week and I had to jump out because the water was so

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Gabrielle Fuentes and other residents referred to Valencia Gardens as the stepchild of housing over the past three decades. These residents claimed that the Housing Authority poured its energy and resources into the "Big Four": Sunnydale, Hunters Point, Plaza East, and Potrero. Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author.

cold.”⁷⁶ Executive Director Carl Williams refuted Maxie’s accusations claiming that the SFHA had informed residents that solar panel installations at the project would require hot water and radiators to be turned off for several hours each day. Unfortunately for residents, the Housing Authority failed to respond to their complaints that the hot water and heat did not come back on at the end of the day. Vernell Guthrie, head of the Tenants Association at the time, and a resident since 1966, described the decline of the project environment. “They used to keep the place beautiful. But it seems the Housing Authority has given up on this place. They quit caring.”⁷⁷ Against the backdrop of neglect by the Housing Authority, internal problems at Valencia Gardens, and tense relations with the surrounding neighborhood, project residents contended with their own worries and outsiders’ loathing in their contested community.

As the Mission District declined and the media deemed Valencia Gardens as “one of the city’s most dangerous and dirty housing complexes,” project residents experienced double the scorn and blame for the area’s woes.⁷⁸ While residents freely admitted that the project housed some “bad apples,” overall, project residents, like their neighbors in the district, feared for their safety and wanted the drug dealers behind bars. Like North Beach Place residents, they also wanted to stop shouldering the blame for the district’s criminals who many residents believed were “outsiders” rather than project residents. Regina Gonzales, a resident and long time visitor to the project explained, “It is true we have a lot of trespassers that aren’t tenants...gangs...I know almost everybody in the

⁷⁶ Smith, Reginald, "Cold Days Inside as Well as Out at S.F. Housing Project," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 January 1985.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Jason B. Johnson, "Valencia Gardens Plan Unveiled; S.F. Project's Residents Receive Virtual Tour," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 May 1998.

whole development. We have lots of outsiders... They see the cops and they run in... and they deal... But we always **get the blame here** (my emphasis). It is not the group. We might have a bad apple or two... Everywhere in the world you find that.”⁷⁹

As the project became a repository for drugs, prostitution conducted in the hallways, and gang crime in the 1980s, tenants watched in frustration as the police cracked down on crime in the Mission while “ignoring” the problems at Valencia Gardens perpetuated by non-residents.⁸⁰ Similar to tenants at North Beach Place, many Valencia Gardens residents held fast to their belief that **other** projects housed criminals that preyed on public housing tenants and used project spaces across the city. Whether true or not, this framework enabled tenants to shift the blame off themselves, to feel some pride in their project for housing “good” tenants, and to posit a solution to their problems—keeping outsiders out of the project.

The problems at the project frustrated tenants, stoked stereotypes of public housing residents, and sparked criticism of the Bufanos placement there. In 1997, a researcher, Christine Bryant, wrote the Art Commission complaining about the Bufanos location in Valencia Gardens:

Many of the sculptures are in a very bad section of the city of San Francisco. The apartment complex on Valencia and 15th Street is in a very bad section of town; definitely not a place where many people will go to view his works. I felt frightened walking through the complex with a camera photographing the animal

⁷⁹ Regina Gonzales, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁸⁰ Betty and Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author. Both women asserted that the gang violence in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s involved few residents. Some of the gangs were from the Mission, and others came from the Sunnydale and Hunter's Points housing projects. Betty and Gabrielle see the project's location near the BART station and two major highways as one of the reasons their project attracted criminals. It was an easy location to hide in and to escape from. Betty stated that "no matter what, there were people coming from around the area and across the Bay doing things here."

sculptures.⁸¹

Bryant further asserted that the sculptures belonged in a park or sculpture garden—“safe,” spaces frequented by middle-class visitors.⁸² Arguably she might have felt more comfortable viewing copies of the rabbit, the cat, the cat and mouse, and the mouse located at the Hillsdale Shopping Center in San Mateo, California, a symbol of middle-class suburbia, rather than in Valencia Gardens.⁸³ The display of the figures at the shopping center uses shrubbery around the animals, precluding visitors from getting close to the figures, or children from playing on them. Shrouded by plants, the copies have become decorative landscape art, pieces to pass on the way to a department store. While Bufano’s sculptures are arguably more accessible at the mall, they serve no communal function. Like the suburban houses nearby funded by public housings’ twin New Deal housing program—the FHA—the statues stand alone, individuated, and homogenized by the surrounding landscape that forces the animals to “blend in.” The fully displayed

⁸¹ Christine Bryant to Debra LaHane, Civic Arts Collection Manager, 9 April 1995, Bufano File, San Francisco Arts Commission, San Francisco, California.

⁸² Between 1947, when Henry Miller complained about the city's loan of his friend Bufano's statues to the Housing Authority in his book *Remember to Remember*, and 1997, the pieces at Valencia Gardens receded from public view. A 1987 series on urban hikes in the *San Francisco Examiner* reminded city residents that the Bufano sculptures were at Valencia Gardens and that the location was a problem. By describing the project's reputation as a center "for drug dealing, high crime rates, and fourth-generation welfare dependency" the writer sent an explicit warning to readers about the dangers of going into Valencia Gardens, while at the same time challenging them to venture in to see the Bufanos: "Urban hikers may prefer the opposite side of the street, but the courtyards of Valencia Gardens include two murals and three forgotten sculptures by the late Beniamino Bufano." The message was clear—if you were brave enough, you could see the sculptures. "Lost Gardens: No. 14, *San Francisco Examiner*, 2 January 1987.

⁸³ An example of the preference for the security and familiarity of the shopping mall as a place to view the Bufanos appears in Randolph Falk's 1975 photo book, *Bufano*. Falk includes photographs of the animal sculptures taken at the Hillsdale Shopping Center in San Mateo followed by a caption listing the location of the originals at Valencia Gardens. Rather than going into the project where the statues can be seen clearly from all sides, Falk chose instead to visit the shopping center and photograph the Bufanos embedded in shrubbery and visible from two to three sides.

animals at Valencia Gardens, in contrast, have functioned as a critical community cohesive for residents—a concept critics have yet to understand.

TENANT TIES

Even as Valencia Gardens' residents experienced crime and deteriorating conditions over time, they contested stereotypes and tried to address project problems by forming a community within their housing project. Through informal and formal networks many tenants looked for ways to make the project "home," building relationships with project neighbors, finding common ground in the diverse project, and taking pride in the Valencia Gardens' "community." These tenants struggled to form communal bonds and forge ownership of their project: in doing so they reconfigured the SFHA's early vision of public housing to fit their own circumstances and needs.

New residents at the project often felt a sense of belonging to the project community— after a period of "initiation." Many tenants complained of initial fear and for some harassment by other residents upon first moving in to the project. Racial differences, at times, created barriers for residents trying to adjust to living in Valencia Gardens in their first year. Vietnamese tenant Hoang Kim Nguyen and her Chinese husband had problems when they first started living at the project. She recalled, "When I first moved in kids would knock on the door and window and at holiday time, Independence Day, they throw firecrackers inside the house... We didn't speak English and we didn't know how to speak to them to stop, we would say please don't, but the more we said it the more they did."⁸⁴ Another Vietnamese resident claimed that Valencia Gardens was "okay" but that she was afraid of the African Americans she saw selling

⁸⁴ "The Valencia Gardens Oral History Project."

drugs in the courtyard.⁸⁵ Her fear, based on her perception of tenants (or perhaps African Americans) as criminals, affected her view of and relationship with the project neighbors. Other Vietnamese immigrants and one Latina recounted their harassment by African Americans when they moved in. Yet after a period of a year or so, the harassment ended, as these tenants became known to others and vice versa. Hoang Nguyen, like many others who experienced “hazing” on their arrival, recalled that the trouble lasted “for the first year after we moved in,” and after that “everything [was] OK.”⁸⁶ Learning to live together, many residents claimed that their assimilation process into the diverse project community was eased by reciprocal respect summed up as “I don’t bother no one and no one bothers me.”⁸⁷ As new tenants transitioned into “insiders” many residents over time came to believe most people in the project community were “good people” and that “outsiders” brought danger to the streets around Valencia Gardens and into the courtyards.⁸⁸

Residents’ frustration and concern with “outsiders” who damaged the project’s reputation brought the community together. Stereotyped and blamed for the area’s problems tenants formed an “us” against “them” mentality. The use of the word “outsider” by residents to describe non-residents illuminates the difference between the Valencia Gardens community and the surrounding neighborhood while reflecting the ways in which tenants felt cut off from their Mission neighbors. Similarly bonded by the

⁸⁵ Anonymous, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁸⁶ “The Valencia Gardens Oral History Project.”

⁸⁷ Interviews by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July and August 1997.

⁸⁸ Conclusions drawn from over 80 hours of oral interviews with 72 residents at Valencia Gardens conducted by Roberta Swan in 1997 for the Legacy Project.

multi-pronged stigma that labeled Valencia Gardens as dangerous and branded its occupants as “lazy,” “on drugs,” “alcoholics,” or lacking ambition, many Valencia Gardens community members united against these chafing stereotypes.⁸⁹ The stigma thus worked to separate residents from the surrounding community while drawing them together as a marginalized group living in an oppositional space.

The racial and ethnic diversity of the project separated it from the Mission community and facilitated both pride and difficulties for Valencia Gardens’ residents. While city residents and leaders increasingly labeled the Mission District as a Latino/a district, Valencia Gardens, in contrast, grew more racially and ethnically diverse over the years. The project housed Asian immigrants, Asian Americans, African Americans, Latino/as and Euro-Americans starting after the 1954 *Banks vs. Housing Authority* decision. While racial differences served as a source of tension for some residents, many Valencia Gardens tenants embraced the diversity of the project, forming connections with others rather than interacting only with those like themselves. They also understood that the project’s demographics resulted in scrutiny. Regina Gonzales explained, “Everybody focuses more on the development because we have got a mixture, a combination of nationalities...If you got all the white out you’d be better, if you got all the Asians out you would be better. I don’t think so. I think the more we get together, the more we try to make it work, we can make a better world.”⁹⁰ When asked, Regina and other residents argued that racial differences were not the source of tenant tensions which they attributed to individuals’ failure to get a long. For them race was “no bigger a problem than outside

⁸⁹ Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author.

⁹⁰ Regina Gonzales, interview by Roberta Swan.

the projects.”⁹¹ Measuring the full impact of racial and ethnic differences on tenants over the years is not possible. However, understanding the ways tenants talked about racial diversity as a source of pride and an impetus for community underscores the tolerance produced by a multi-racial group living together—a rare formation in U.S. urban and suburban spaces in the second half of the twentieth century.

In contrast to the diverse tenants at North Beach Place who wrestled with ethnic and racial differences and relied on intra-ethnic and racial groups for support until the 1990s, a number of Valencia Gardens’ residents worked to overcome such differences and to foster an inclusive community dynamic. For residents such as Greg Sanders who “like[d] this multi-cultural outfit,” the diversity at Valencia Gardens made the project unique and served to solidify community ties.⁹² Similarly, some parents described the multi-cultural environment as educational and said they appreciated the opportunity to raise their children in such an environment. Tenant Charlotte Diaz suggested drawing on the project’s broad demographics to promote cultural awareness. She argued that diversity classes for children in Valencia Gardens would further promote tolerance and appreciation of different cultures. It might also cut down on teasing, which at times, she said, was race based.⁹³

The impetus to bridge racial, ethnic, and language barriers prompted community development for many residents and served as a consistent goal for others. When neighborliness occurred across race and ethnic lines, residents proudly pointed it out.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Greg Sanders, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁹³ Charlotte Diaz, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

Regina Gonzales' description of her neighbors demonstrated pride in improved project safety and accord among her multi-racial community:

I leave my door unlocked. I can leave my windows open. I don't have bars. Nobody breaks in. The only problems I have are the pigeons! I have Asians to my left side and right. To my corner an African American. And an American in the other corner. I am surrounded. I know them. I need anything I know where to run.... My granddaughter knows who she should trust.... and she knows were to go to get help. She is only five.⁹⁴

Cooperation rather than racial division aided a number of residents in their daily lives. From lending money and buying presents for neighbors' children, to taking care of another tenant's children and "protecting each other" many Valencia Gardens residents benefited from forming relationships with others in the project.⁹⁵ In a matrix of cooperation and reciprocity that for residents in need of childcare was critical, racial differences seemed to dissolve under the shared benefits of neighborliness. While arguably neighbor relations ebbed and flowed over time depending on the individuals living in the project and their attitudes and relationships, it stands that some residents throughout the history of the project enjoyed the advantages not only of neighborliness but also of friendship. These ties, along with the perks of living in a project situated in the sunniest area of the city and conveniently located near public transportation, stores, and a hospital facilitated a strong commitment to Valencia Gardens as "home."

Residents who experienced the positive potential of community cooperation also realized the tensions inherent in public housing living and looked for ways to overcome them. Both informally and formally, through the Tenants' Organization, active project

⁹⁴ Regina Gonzales, interview by Roberta Swan.

⁹⁵ Melinda Ortega noted that the neighbors in her building worked to protect each other. "The minute they see one of us in trouble they call the police. They don't have to ask... There are a lot of good people here." Melinda Ortega, interview by Roberta Swan.

tenants worked to facilitate community ties and overcome problems between tenants—whatever their cause. When asked how to strength the Valencia Gardens community, tenants offered a resounding solution—casual get-togethers. According to Regina Gonzales the key to community building was bringing people together.

You get together. Make it a small potluck...we have been doing it and we have been seeing a great change. Thanksgiving we did. We'll do it for Christmas. We want the parents to join us...This way we get to know hey you aren't as bad as we thought you were...My mother used to say, you have to stretch out your hands and reach. You have to try to make the community. If you don't make the community, the community will make itself.⁹⁶

Other residents echoed Gonzales, contending that face-time dispelled negative perceptions and garnered understanding—particularly of the range of cultures represented at Valencia Gardens. One long time resident active in the Tenants' Association recalled how the organization sponsored potlucks “where you have such a mixture it isn't even funny. I have done them in the senior room and we get Chinese food, we'll get Mexican food, Puerto Rican, Southern and Soul food and everybody chips in and helps.... we all try to respect each other and we try to share.”⁹⁷ When discussing ways to promote community, many female residents mentioned “potlucks,” “a community day,” and coffee on Saturday mornings. These events, for many female residents who participated in and facilitated them, served as a critical component in building a strong community. Although some residents acknowledged their participation in a “Vietnamese group” or a “Latino group” participation in these subgroups did not prevent many people in the project from hoping for and taking part in activities that bring these groups together.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Regina Gonzales, interview by Roberta Swan.

⁹⁷ Jamie Pickens, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

⁹⁸ Interviews by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July and August 1997.

In the context of continual negotiation of space, place, and race set against a strained relationship with the surrounding neighborhood, many residents actively participated in the Tenants Organization as an act of community improvement. Resident Sally Huyhn explained, “Once in a while we have a meeting with Vietnamese, Latino, and Americans (read white) all together. We get more communication and we understand each other. We try to take care of this housing together. That is what I am thinking about.”⁹⁹

Started in 1971 by a group of residents, the Valencia Gardens Tenants’ Organization, governed by a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary, held monthly meetings to discuss project business and to plan events. Tenants elected officers for two-year terms and officeholders were eligible for reelection.¹⁰⁰ Valencia Gardens Tenants’ Organization started later than tenants’ groups such as PYRIA at Ping Yuen and NBTA at North Beach Place. Perhaps as a result of this and the prevalence of crime around the project, the organization took a non-confrontational approach with the SFHA, requesting money for parties, classes, and security rather than carrying out rent strikes, writing petitions, and staging protests like residents at Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Hunter’s Point. The Tenants’ Organization also planned large project events such as annual holiday parties for which they drew on funding from the Housing Authority. Over the years the organization planned and hosted annual Halloween, Christmas, and Easter parties. Even when the Housing Authority had limited funds, the Tenants’ Organization worked to continue these community-building events. Jamie Pickens, President in 1990,

⁹⁹ Sally Huyhn, interview with Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

¹⁰⁰ The Tenants' Organization, under the presidency of Jamie Pickens, filed to become incorporated by the State of California as the Valencia Gardens Resident Council. The incorporation took place in July 1997. I will refer to the organization as the Tenants' Organization for the duration of this chapter.

recalled that the Housing Authority sent her a letter saying they would not be able to give toys to children that year. "I cried. I got mad. But then I saw the phone book and I got \$3000 that year on short notice. It is out there. All we got to do is ask."¹⁰¹ The Tenants' Organization has also lobbied for a day-care center, computers, and job training over the years, in an attempt to improve the project community for both children and adults.

By the 1990s, the organization's efforts to increase social services for project residents became secondary to their quest for safety. In the mid-1990s, the group's complaints that outsiders were causing problems in the project prompted the Housing Authority to take action by hiring security guards to work at Valencia Gardens and other projects. While the crime rate declined somewhat in the early 1990s, between March 1995 and March 1996 crime in the project increased 23 percent.¹⁰² Some residents were relieved when the SFHA posted private security guards inside the project in 1996; others felt the guards violated their privacy. The President of the Tenants' Organization pushed for an additional security measure—a gate.¹⁰³ Tenants debated the need for and effectiveness of fencing and failed to reach a conclusive decision on the issue. Meanwhile a few members of the Tenants' Organization went ahead and convinced the Housing Authority to install a perimeter gate in 1998. (Figure 22) Their belief that the gate would keep out the criminals and other outsiders who used the hallways as a toilet

¹⁰¹ Jamie Pickens, interview by Roberta Swan.

¹⁰² Gregory Lewis, "Guards Reassure Project Residents: Pilot Program With Armed Security Could Spread Through the City," *San Francisco Examiner*, 17 April 1997. While the crime rate increased at Valencia Gardens, the percentage of major crimes—homicide, rape, and aggravated assault—declined.

¹⁰³ According to Gabrielle Fuentes, Jamie Pickens as President pushed through the resolution for the gates without taking a vote. Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author, telephone, 6 August 2003. Over 80 hours of oral interviews with residents reveal that the community was divided over the gate issue. Some residents felt they were unnecessary and would further stigmatize the project while others hoped the gates would decrease crime and show the neighborhood and the city that the troublemakers were outsiders. Legacy Project oral interviews by Roberta Swan, 1997.



FIGURE 22

Valencia Gardens, San Francisco

Photo taken by the author

led to their unilateral decision that frustrated many members of the organization. In becoming a “gated community,” proponents aimed to increase safety and to challenge the popular perception that residents perpetrated crime in the project. Using the same rationale as homeowner associations in suburban gated communities, tenant supporters argued that the gates would keep the bad element out. To the surrounding community, however, the large metal gates seemed to further alienate project residents, hemming them in, and spatially separating them from the Mission District. Overall the fencing failed to solve the project’s problems. The gates were regularly propped open, due to complications with the keypads and the weakness of gate magnets, allowing outsiders easy access to the project.¹⁰⁴ Architecturally, the gate stood as a visual symbol of the chasm between residents and the Mission neighborhood.

Tenants’ Organization members viewed their group as pivotal for registering tenant complaints and trying to push the Housing Authority to attend to project needs and problems, but some residents saw the organization differently and resisted participation. The reasons for not attending meetings varied: some residents considered their stay at Valencia Gardens short term and did not want to spend their time in meetings. Others found the bureaucracy tedious. Donna Rogers, a resident on and off from the 1970s through the 1990s explained, “I know a lot of us don’t go to the meetings. There is a certain group that goes. It is a mess when you go. So most of us don’t go.”¹⁰⁵ Other residents who participated at one time left in response to new leadership. Married to the president of the organization in the late 1980s, Gertrude Smith argued that in those days

¹⁰⁴ According to Gabrielle Fuentes, the Housing Authority installed inexpensive gates that did not work properly. The keypad did not work on one entrance. The gates were usually broken so they were left open. Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author.

¹⁰⁵ Donna Rogers, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

“people came out for picnics, went to games together, etc.” Her frustration at residents’ lack of participation affected her own. “You don’t want to get into everything that is happening. I used to help my husband with the Tenant’s Association. I used to be in all that and now I don’t do any of that any more because it is such a bother.”¹⁰⁶ Arguments between participants and the failure of the organization to present more programs for children turned her away from the group. Bickering and fighting kept others away as well. Doug Mathis quit the organization because he suspected that the leaders owed the Housing Authority money and believed that the group did not produce results.¹⁰⁷ For those who once participated and quit and those who did not take part, the choice to disengage from the Tenants’ Organization, regardless of the reason, created tension among some residents. The friction between tenants, the bureaucracy of the Tenants’ Organization, differences in opinion and ennui have kept residents from embracing an organization formed to work on their behalf.

Even as non-members criticized the leadership at different times, the responsibility of governance and participation nurtured self-esteem and a positive view of community for many Tenants’ Organization members and officers—and in particular women. Through their participation, a number of female residents, like their peers at Ping Yuen and North Beach Place, actively sought to improve their living environment for themselves and their children. These low-income women, some of whom were on welfare, had few, if any, opportunities to lead or to wield power in or outside the workplace. Participation in the Tenants’ Organization empowered many female residents

¹⁰⁶ Gertrude Smith, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

¹⁰⁷ Doug Mathis, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

and gave them a chance to learn and practice management and leadership skills. Vice-President from 1997 to 2000 and President from 2000 to 2003, Regina Gonzales held back tears as she described how her involvement in the project and the opportunity to serve in a leadership position changed her life:

They [residents] have encouraged me in many things I haven't been able to succeed in outside. They have encouraged me in school volunteering. They let me work at Pre-K (Pre-kindergarten program). Nobody will give me the chance outside. I am sorry I am choking but Valencia has changed me too much. I feel I have a lot...I feel like I have the world now. Outside I never had it. Here they call. Here they give me a chance. I feel like I'm in cloud 10...They gave me my dignity back. I lost it when I was homeless. I feel I have more advantage out of life now than when I was a private citizen because they trust me more than when I was a private citizen. For me Valencia Gardens has done so much and I will keep doing as much as I can.¹⁰⁸

Jamie Pickens began assisting the President in 1989 and slowly became more involved until she won the Vice Presidency in 1992. Her office opened doors to a position on the Mayor's Task Force on the Mission and the 16th Street Safety Force. Because she "had the time" and saw there was a need she became involved. The opportunity to shape the project environment, especially through children's programs, increased her confidence and pride in the project. "So much can be done here. So much. And I just want to see it done.... [in coming together] Valencia will become a model for the whole United States."¹⁰⁹

A positive self-image from project participation was not limited to organization officers. College student, clown, and mother, Oleta Gomez found that her successes vis-à-vis her location living in a housing project bolstered her confidence and sense of self:

Struggling right now as a student is really good for me. I go to school and I am a

¹⁰⁸ Regina Gonzales, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording. Regina will stay on as president until the redevelopment project is completed.

¹⁰⁹ Jamie Pickens, interview by Roberta Swan.

professional clown. Everyone in the community loves me...I have also been an example for the teenage girls here because of all the things [I do] which they admire me because of the things I have been able to accomplish. I am a certified massage therapist...It is not the image people on the outside have. There is a lot of positive...Being a 4.0 student is really great in the community. People look up to you. Kids look up to you.¹¹⁰

Despite the crime, tenant tensions, neighborhood disdain, and the burden of the stigma related to living in Valencia Gardens, these women found purpose and self-confidence through their interactions with and leadership positions for the community. The opportunities and responsibilities afforded to Regina, Jamie, and other leaders and the communal praise received by Oleta most likely would not have occurred outside the project. In contrast to negative images of public housing, the experiences of these residents and others in Valencia Gardens proved important for personal growth and confidence, as well as community development.

Whether active in community affairs or not, several residents over the years formed “psychological ownership” of Valencia Gardens, viewing it as “home.”¹¹¹ For Regina Gonzales, her participation in the Tenants’ Organization and subsequent interactions with residents as Vice-President and later President shaped her connection to Valencia Gardens. As the caretaker of three children living in a small apartment, she refused the Housing Authority’s offer to transfer her to a larger unit in another project claiming that her home was at Valencia Gardens: “I don’t want to leave my location. I love my home. I’m dealing with my people. They are like family to me.”¹¹² While

¹¹⁰ Oleta Gomez, interview by Roberta Swan.

¹¹¹ Lawrence Vale interview by Gail Harris, “The Connection,” National Public Radio, 28 April 2003.

¹¹² Regina Gonzales, interview by Roberta Swan. Regina refused to take a larger unit at another project. Instead she stayed in her crowded apartment, opting to wait for a larger unit to open up at Valencia Gardens.

arguably the project's prime location and the sunny weather in the Mission factored into Regina's decision to stay, her clear and vocal attachment to the Valencia Gardens community revealed a non-material incentive for remaining—relationships, responsibility to community, and a connection to the project.

Other residents demonstrated their attachment through their use of space.

Painting, decorating, putting on new doors, and tending plants were some of the ways tenants made public housing apartments, assigned by the state, home. In a translated interview with Maria Herdandez she expressed her connection to her apartment: "She feels proud to be here...She has put so much love into it and slowly she has been trying to fix it putting carpet in the kitchen. She has been doing it slowly and she feels her love and heart is here....She is very happy here... She wants to get the place painted up."¹¹³

Eschewing the institutional white paint provided by the Housing Authority, Rick Davis claimed and personalized his apartment by painting it his colors. Choosing yellow for the bathroom, red for the kitchen cabinets, along with a lavender ceiling and gray walls in another room, he created the look he wanted for his home rather the one imposed by the Housing Authority.¹¹⁴

By adding personal touches such as paint, photographs, curtains, and knickknacks, residents participated in the process of psychological ownership. For residents who stayed at Valencia Gardens over several decades a strong sense of attachment occurred. The opportunity to construct a clean and safe space in and around one's apartment vis-à-vis the crime and filth that worsened at different times enabled

¹¹³ Maria Herdandez, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

¹¹⁴ Rick Davis, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

residents to remove themselves partially from the problems and stereotypes associated with living in Valencia Gardens. In a few cases, individual steps taken to improve a resident's living environment extended to the community, forming a bridge. A resident since 1969, Margaret Harris brightened her apartment area by decorating, baking, and gardening.

I tried to do a couple of things to make me feel better. A few years ago I planted a little tangerine tree. Each year it bears fruit...I didn't just do it for me...you know the neighborhood, therefore everybody watches over the tree. Any kid touches the tree that is a no-no. Any kid sees another kid touching the trees they say that is a no-no. It is gorgeous when it blossoms.¹¹⁵

Residents living in the project for two years like Rick Davis or over three decades like Margaret Harris created homes for themselves—places of comfort—places they considered their own, places that resisted the policy goal of public housing as a temporary stop for Americans on their way to homeownership.

Residents who called Valencia Gardens “home” and made efforts to carve out a clean, peaceful space within their apartments at times resented tenants who did not keep the project clean. Long-time residents Gabrielle and Betty Fuentes complained about tenants that had “a project mentality.” In contrast to tenants who “took care of their areas,” these residents had “an attitude that this is a project, you don't have to pick up, you throw things on the ground, and they do it all the time. It is a project, why are you cleaning up...It is like they feel they are living in a project so they don't care. It is not home to them.”¹¹⁶ Other tenants, claiming the rights of “ownership” over their rented

¹¹⁵ Margaret Harris, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

¹¹⁶ Gabrielle and Betty Fuentes, interview by the author.

apartments, worked to better their project environment and looked to redevelopment as a possible solution for altering the image of and problems at Valencia Gardens.

“HOPE” FOR THE FUTURE?

In 1997, Valencia Gardens came under scrutiny again, this time by the Housing Authority. The HOPE VI division of the SFHA had to decide which “severely distressed” project needed redevelopment as they prepared to apply for a third HOPE VI grant. Valencia Garden residents— through their stories of community, their desire for a better environment, and their demands for social services— swayed the Housing Authority to select their project for its HOPE VI grant application. Starting in 1997, a number of Valencia Gardens’ residents participated in an oral history project. Their aim was to dispel negative images of themselves and their project including; “Drug dealers lurking in every hallway. Drive-by shootings so frequent children hardly dare go outside. Lazy, alcoholic bums loitering under trees.”¹¹⁷ The “Legacy Oral History Project” began as a design contest in 1996. Roberta Swan of the San Francisco branch of the American Institute of Architects (SFAIA) received permission from the Housing Authority to host an architectural design competition on Valencia Gardens for exhibition at the 1998 AIA national convention in San Francisco. Swan recounted, “The original plan was to create a resident participation plan, do a design competition and continue to work together for the implementation of the plan.”¹¹⁸ After attending a Tenants’ Organization meeting where a resident complained, “People just think we are garbage if we live here,” Swan widened the scope of the project to include oral interviews.

¹¹⁷ Julie Chao, “Voices of Hope Rise From Projects; Oral History of Valencia Gardens Reveals Struggle for Better Life,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 22 January 1998.

¹¹⁸ “The Valencia Gardens Oral History Project.”

Responding to tenants' statements about life in Valencia Gardens, Swan initiated the Legacy Project of the SFAIA "in an effort to prevent [tenants'] individual voices and stories from being drowned out by the crush of attention given to gangs and crime."¹¹⁹ Swan first completed a pilot project interviewing twelve residents and creating a seven-minute tape made from the interviews. After the tape received the enthusiastic approval of Valencia Gardens' residents at a Tenants' Organization meeting, Swan presented it to the SFHA and the SFAIA. Both groups agreed to fund a full scale oral history project. The project lasted a year and Swan interviewed seventy-five residents. The final product of the "Legacy Oral History Project" consisted of seventy banners with interview quotes and photographs of tenants and the project put on display at the AIA annual convention and later in the community room at Valencia Gardens. Many residents, encouraged by the community participation in the Legacy Project and the ideas put forth by architects during the design competition [which ended after the SFHA won a HOPE VI grant], hoped the SFHA would select Valencia Gardens for renovations.

Residents' participation in the Legacy Project was a critical factor in the SFHA selecting Valencia Gardens as a HOPE VI site and most likely played a role in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarding HOPE VI funds to redevelop the project. According to HUD HOPE VI guidelines, "resident and community participation are key ingredients to a successful HOPE VI application. Involving residents and the community in the planning process and in shaping the HOPE VI application **should start well before the application is submitted**" (my emphasis).¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Julie Chao, "Voices of Hope Rise From Projects: Oral History of Valencia Gardens Reveals Struggle for Better Life," *San Francisco Examiner*, 22 January 1998.

¹²⁰ *HOPE VI Guidebook*, "Resident and Community Involvement," October 1999, 3.

Swan's early discussions with residents about their design wish-list along with the twelve initial interviews she conducted provided the SFHA with important evidence of resident participation. Members of the HOPE VI division of the SFHA believing that the oral histories would cinch the grant, applied for HOPE VI money to redevelop Valencia Gardens in 1997, using residents' interviews, photographs, and letters to support their application to renovate the project. In October 1997, Mayor Willie Brown announced that the SFHA had received a \$23.6 million grant to redevelop Valencia Gardens described as "a crime-ridden eyesore in the Mission."¹²¹ Residents' stories revealing that "the block-style apartment buildings house not only their lives but their community" aided in securing funds that would both refurbish the project and redefine the community living there.¹²²

With \$23.6 million in HOPE VI funds and \$30.8 in leveraged public and private funds, the SFHA moved forward with design drafts for a development of mixed-income, garden-style apartments based on principles of defensible space. Following HOPE VI regulations, the Housing Authority allocated up to 15% of the \$54 million budget for social and community service programs including childcare and recreational facilities and a computer center. At first, the SFHA followed the plan outlined in the grant application—and supported by tenants—to renovate the existing apartments. This plan allowed residents to stay on-site as the buildings were gradually remodeled. However, in a move repeated at North Beach Place, the SFHA, like many housing authorities issued HOPE VI funds, carried out redevelopment activities that differed "dramatically from

¹²¹ Philip Matier and Andrew Ross, "That's Not Just an Elevator, It's Public Sculpture, S.F. Style," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 October 1997.

¹²² Julie Chao, "Voices of Hope Rise from Projects: Oral History of Valencia Gardens Tenants Reveals Struggle for Better Life," *San Francisco Examiner*, 22 January 1998.

what...[they] originally propose[d] in their applications and describe[d] in their training and public information sessions.”¹²³ Despite an assessment by Carey and Company Incorporated, an architectural consulting firm, that Valencia Gardens “appears to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places,” and should be preserved, and promises to Valencia Gardens’ residents, the SFHA decided to use HOPE VI funds to demolish and rebuild the project.¹²⁴

The threat of relocation and the demolition of their homes alarmed and frustrated a number of project residents who had believed the SFHA would follow through on their original plan to renovate Valencia Gardens. While the lure of new buildings and better social and community services assuaged some tenants’ anger, other residents expressed deep distrust of the SFHA. Bernice Williams, a long-term resident, was suspicious of the Housing Authority’s plans for relocation and redevelopment. “It is exactly what is going to happen to these people is that they aren’t going to have a place to stay. Mission Housing [the group working in conjunction with the SFHA] will come in and there wouldn’t be a place for them. They aren’t going to put them back in here.” Ms. Williams went on to claim that a HOPE VI award for Valencia Gardens was a tool “to get people out!”¹²⁵ Other residents worried that rebuilding would decrease the structural integrity of the project. With a nod to Wurster and Thomsen’s design, resident Sally Huyhn argued that redevelopment could yield cheap, shoddy construction. “I think even though Valencia Garden is old, I love to stay because they built it very safety. The housing they

¹²³ National Housing Law Project, et al., “False HOPE: A Critical Assessment of the HOPE VI Public Housing Redevelopment Program,” (June 2002), <http://www.nhlp.org/html/pubhsg/FalseHOPE.pdf>.

¹²⁴ Carey and Company Inc., “Valencia Gardens: Historic Building Assessment,” 10.

¹²⁵ Bernice Williams, interview by Roberta Swan, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 1997.

build up [now] is not safe. But here is very safety. It is all cement. It is very safe...I said no way when I heard Valencia Gardens [might] be torn down.”¹²⁶ Gabrielle Fuentes agreed, recounting how dynamite went off at Valencia Gardens at one time and did little damage to the buildings. “We’re like hey, if this place can stand up to dynamite why are we getting rid of it?”¹²⁷ The SFHA responded that demolition was cheaper and would yield better apartments for residents.

Tenants, seeking to influence the future of the project, continued their involvement beyond the Legacy Project, by attending HOPE VI meetings and assigning leaders from the Tenants’ Organization to the Valencia Gardens Task Force, a committee made up of tenant, district, and SFHA representatives. The Tenants’ Organization officers invested their time in monthly and sometimes bi-monthly planning meetings. From the early meetings in 1998 to discuss design drafts to the more detailed Task Force planning meetings in 2001, many tenants united around the same, seemingly simple goal: a decent place to live. Betty Fuentes recalls, “People had the same issues about what they want...They want a decent place to live and they want their kids to live in a place where you aren’t looked down on. You mention where you live, oh Valencia Gardens, and people pull away or get in fights over it.”¹²⁸ Residents hoped the new project would erase the stigma long associated with their project.

Tenants’ participation at HOPE VI meetings resulted in a few important concessions. Through negotiations with the Housing Authority, the Tenants’ Organization successfully secured a phased demolition plan allowing some residents to

¹²⁶ Sally Huhyn, interview by Roberta Swan.

¹²⁷ Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author.

¹²⁸ Betty Fuentes, interview by the author.

stay on-site longer. Participants also weighed in on the project design. While residents did not agree on all the proposed features, they seemed pleased with the sketches showing defensible space elements intended to improve safety; private backyards and decks, separate walk-up entrances, secured trash access areas, and fenced-in play areas. As the plans shifted over time, tenants united around the necessity of one design element: the replacement of the Bufanos at the project. The Art Commission initially expressed ambivalence about extending the loan of the Bufanos at Valencia Gardens. However, after hearing about the Bufanos' importance to residents, and seeing the selected design that situates the pieces out in the open near the sidewalks for public viewing, the Art Commission's worries waned. Perhaps recognizing that the residents' use and appreciation of the sculptures over the past fifty-eight years have fulfilled the WPA's goal to "redefine the relationship between artists and the community, so that art no longer would be consumed only by the elite who could afford to pay," the Commission supported residents' request to keep the Bufanos as part of the Valencia Gardens community.¹²⁹ The Commission agreed to clean the animals, repair their bases, and return them for display when the project reopens.

As residents looked forward to a computer center, daycare center, new apartments, and Bufanos adorning the project, they also had to face the reality that their community was changing. The HOPE VI program held out the promise of a lower crime rate, a cleaner project, and improved social and community services. Yet, these improvements will not be available to all tenants displaced by the demolition of Valencia Gardens. As in many other HOPE VI projects across the country, the stipulation to create

¹²⁹ James Henretta, et al., *American History Since 1865* (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1987), 785.

mixed-income housing has decreased the number of low-income units available in redeveloped projects. If all tenants opted to return—and were eligible—there would not be enough units to house them. Slated to open in 2005, the new Valencia Gardens will replace 246 units of public housing with 247 mixed-income flats and townhouse units plus a new ancillary senior housing site with sixty apartments and a senior center. The SFHA designated 72 percent of the units for public housing, resulting in a net loss of low-income apartments. With the exception of North Beach Place, the SFHA has decreased the number of low-income units at all HOPE VI sites in order to construct units for higher-income families. Following the national trend at HOPE VI sites, the SFHA has contributed to the reduction of the supply of public housing, “some of the only housing guaranteed to be affordable to families with the lowest incomes.”¹³⁰ This move, coupled with San Francisco’s high rental rates, will inevitably push some low-income families out of the city to find affordable housing. Early relocation figures for Valencia Gardens confirmed the trend; out of forty-six relocated households fourteen used Section 8 vouchers, seven in San Francisco and seven outside the city, seventeen moved into other public housing projects and fifteen were either evicted or deceased.¹³¹ Under HOPE VI regulations, tenants taking Section 8 vouchers used to rent in the private market or moving into other HOPE VI projects are ineligible to live at Valencia Gardens when it reopens. These restrictions along with stricter regulations for residents have dispersed

¹³⁰ "False HOPE," ii. According to this report as of 2002 at least 70,000 housing units of public housing had been approved for demolition under HOPE VI. Averaging the proportion of public housing units replaced under HOPE VI with the number of units demolished, the report estimated that the country "is facing an estimated net loss of over 107,000 units through demolition" (7).

¹³¹ San Francisco Housing Authority, <http://www.sfha.org.hope/valen/htm>.

existing low-income communities, making it difficult for neighbors to reconnect or to reform their community in the future.

Tenants who want to return to Valencia Gardens have no guarantee that the SFHA will accept them even though they technically top the agency's priority list for housing. Because HUD has failed to issue specific regulations for the HOPE VI program, public housing authorities have the power to decide which tenants can return. The federal government's sole requirement is that housing authorities allow tenants "in good standing" the option of returning to HOPE VI sites. While this standard might appear reasonable, HUD has no official definition of "good standing." As a result, local authorities can choose what they want the term to mean and in doing so can dictate which tenants can return.¹³² According to HUD, "most PHAs apply admissions criteria for HOPE VI sites that are much more stringent than those they normally use."¹³³ A SFHA employee, Stephen Haines, and Valencia Gardens Task Force member Gabrielle Fuentes in 2003 stated that the Task Force had not yet determined all the standards of eligibility. They both confirmed that tenants with a police record could not move back in to Valencia Gardens.¹³⁴ National figures in 2002 showed that only 11.4 percent of former residents have returned or are expected to return to HOPE VI sites, nonetheless the SFHA

¹³² "False HOPE," 18, 25.

¹³³ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *HOPE VI: Building Communities, Transforming Lives*, 14 (Dec. 1999), www.huduser.org/publications/pubasst/bldgcomm.html quoted in *False HOPE*, 25.

¹³⁴ Stephen B. Haines and Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 27 May 2003.

continues to claim that approximately 60 percent of residents will return to Valencia Gardens.¹³⁵

The last tenants to relocate in 2003 had trouble saying good-bye to their friends and to a location they knew as home. A resident for thirty-three years, Margaret Harris viewed her departure as bittersweet. "I am a little bit sad...you think about the children growing up here but if this is what it took to get me out of here than hey I am ready...It was home and I am very thankful." Turning to resident Gabrielle Fuentes who exclaimed, "I am going to miss you guys," Margaret responded, "We are all going to miss each other. Let's not start all this or I will start feeling really low."¹³⁶ In August 2003, bulldozers demolished the sixty-one year old project. The new Valencia Gardens project will house many new tenants and some old ones in a reconfigured community.

Only time will tell if future residents will benefit from redevelopment and if, when, and how, community will function between mixed-income residents. Even as HUD has made the "mixed-income" model the popular standard in redeveloped public housing, "the basic validity and effectiveness of the model has never been established."¹³⁷ HUD officials contend that a mix of incomes will "result in a healthier community and the 'building [of] human social capital'—positive community interactions, mutually

¹³⁵ National figure from "False HOPE," iii. SFHA figure quoted by Stephen B. Haines, HOPE VI Construction Manager, SFHA, in interview with author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 27 May 2003. Haines based his estimate on the average number of residents returning to HOPE VI projects, Hayes Valley and Plaza East.

¹³⁶ Margaret Harris and Gabrielle Fuentes, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 27 May 2003.

¹³⁷ "False HOPE," iii.

beneficial networking, and the reduced isolation of public housing residents.”¹³⁸ This assumption overlooks the “positive” community bonds already in place at Valencia Gardens. Despite crime, internal problems, and neglect by the SFHA, many Valencia Gardens residents have formed strong communal ties—including “beneficial” networks—as they have made homes for themselves at the project. Under HOPE VI the SFHA has dismantled a community that managed to survive and at times thrive under oppressive circumstances in order to “artificially create a [mixed income] *community*.” Yet there is no empirical evidence that people with different income levels living in a project will do anything other than “simply share the same physical space.”¹³⁹ The effect of redevelopment on tenants who return to the project and on those who do not will emerge in years to come.

During the past sixty years, thousands of residents have lived at Valencia Gardens—a project that each resident experienced differently depending on who they were, when they lived there, and even where they lived.¹⁴⁰ From nostalgic childhood memories of playing on the Bufanos to grim adult recollections of the smell of urine, the sight of drug dealing and gang violence occurring periodically from the 1970s to the 1990s, project living revealed a complex, often harsh living experience worsened by widespread stereotypes associated with public housing and its residents. Despite the problems and crime that were sporadically evident over the past forty years and

¹³⁸ Ibid., 11. Inside quote from Arthur J. Naparek, *HOPE VI: Community Building Makes a Difference*, (Feb. 2000), www.huduser.org/publications/pubasst/hope.html.

¹³⁹ "False HOPE," 12. Quote on community from Susan J. Popkin, et al., "The Gautreaux Legacy: What Might Mixed-Income and Dispersal Strategies Mean for the Poorest Public Housing Tenants?" *Housing Policy Debate* 11 (2000), www.fanniemae.foundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd_1104_popkin.pdf.

¹⁴⁰ Many residents claim the Guerrero side of the project has always been much quieter than the Valencia side on busy Valencia Street. Tenants on both sides agreed that Guerrero was the "better" side because there has historically been less noise and fewer problems.

difficulties with the Housing Authority, district neighbors, and other tenants, many residents have forged relationships and community bonds in their multi-cultural project.¹⁴¹ Melinda Ortega, like many residents living in a city with historically high rental rates and from the 1980s on a large homeless population, expressed her thankfulness to live in Valencia Gardens: “Financially I could not afford the rate of a one bedroom apartment. My daughter moved out and when she was with me she helped pay the rent...I found myself without enough money. I am disabled....So now I thank God that I have this little apartment. I was so against moving in.... and I am grateful that I have it despite the things going on outside.”¹⁴² Built under protest in 1942, Valencia Gardens has been a continually contested space where residents formed bonds of community and created a home for themselves thus challenging the purposes and stereotypes of public housing in the United States and laying claim to the right to define its meaning for themselves and the broader community.

¹⁴¹ In the early 1990s, residents of the surrounding Mission made an effort to connect with Valencia Gardens' residents. Local shops including Safeway contributed funds to the project to help with their Operation Heart Program. Likewise, community service organizations in the area offered services (generally geared toward Latino/as) to residents, and two volunteers from a nearby church held art classes for children in Valencia Gardens. Nonetheless, the overall perception of residents was that the neighborhood looked down on them.

¹⁴² Melinda Ortega, interview with Roberta Swan.

EPILOGUE

“Space is political and ideological. It is literally a product filled with ideologies.”
Henri Lefebvre

“From an individual’s perspective public housing is usually seen as drab, institutional, unsightly project out of scale with the neighborhood, inhabited by people who are, by definition, undesirable—low-class, uncaring, of the wrong race, with bad attitudes, and a host of social pathologies that will ruin the neighborhood.” J. Paul Mitchell¹

Over the past seven decades, public housing has constituted a contested space in the American landscape. As a nation committed to the ideals of homeownership and individualism, the policy and practice of providing state-subsidized housing for low-income families has limped along without the full financial, cultural, or social support of the American people or the federal government. The combination of poor families moving into public housing, cutbacks in federal funding for maintenance and physical improvements, and the repeated location of many poorly designed projects in economically depressed neighborhoods fostered nationwide contempt of “the projects” and the people who lived there. Cast as the foil to the “American Dream” with its deeply entrenched connection between homeownership and “good” citizenship, public housing and its tenants have come to symbolize the “American nightmare.”

Negative stereotypes of public housing, supported by political rhetoric and news coverage of the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe and the Robert Taylor Homes have eclipsed

¹ Mitchell goes on to describe how public housing opponents contend that projects will destroy property values. As a result, the “public clamor for public housing has never materialized.” J. Paul Mitchell, “Historical Overview of Direct Federal Housing Assistance” from *Federal Housing Policy and Programs Past and Present*, ed. by J. Paul Mitchell (New Brunswick: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985), 188.

public housing's contribution to the affordable housing stock and unfairly stigmatized tenants.² As historian Rhonda Y. Williams explains, in "the popular imagination, urban public housing complexes are places of squalor and violence, inhabited predominantly by poor black women and their children subsisting on welfare. The reality is far more complex. The vast majority of public housing tenants are law-abiding people who only want to make a better life for themselves and their families."³ Williams' description points to the need, taken up in this work, for the continual reexamination of the meanings of public housing for residents and the actions tenants have taken to shape their living environments.

The stereotypes of public housing and its residents have largely been monolithic portrayals and have focused on the Midwest and Northeast. Yet the realities of public housing with its position at the crossroads of national, state, and local policies, politics, and practices defies simple categorization. As this study of public housing in San Francisco demonstrates, region (and regional patterns of racial and ethnic settlement and migration), city politics, individual neighborhoods, and project location serve as critical factors in assessing the history and future of public housing. In contrast to the Midwest and Northeast, public housing projects in San Francisco have served multi-racial, multi-ethnic populations representative of the historical migration patterns of the region. California's demographics and history of racialization differ from the Midwest and Northeast because of its ties to "trans-Pacific migration and the conquest of formerly

² As Rhonda Williams notes, President Ronald Reagan "created a debilitating type of language with the notion of the lazy welfare queen, a negative image of low-income black women that had roots in stereotypes of earlier periods." The conflation of "welfare moms" and public housing in the 1980s deepened the negative stereotypes of public housing and its residents. Williams, "Rhonda Y. Williams Explores Interplay of Race, Gender, and Class in Public Housing," 2.

³ Ibid., 1.

Spanish and American Indian territories...[and] its labor politics of anti-Asian agitation.”

“Antiblack practices” also dominated racial politics in the mid-twentieth century.

Likewise, Mexican labor migrations “and the racialization of Mexicans as external foreigners and cheap labor” resulted in discrimination against Mexicans resembling earlier patterns experienced by Asian migrants.”⁴

Situating the SFHA’s projects and neighborhood pattern policy within this context complicates stereotypes of who lives in public housing and illuminates the complex intersections of race and ethnicity, community, and spatial politics. Enacting a segregationist policy in 1942 as African American migrants began moving to the city in large numbers, the SFHA used the policy to segregate blacks and a decade later, Chinese families, in separate housing projects. While segregation ignited protest and resulted in African American applicants mounting and winning a legal challenge to move into the “white” projects, it had a different effect at Ping Yuen where the importance of project location and neighborhood history merge. Located in Chinatown with its long history of exclusion from the rest of the city, the project received wide, sustained support from the district that continues today. Holding out the promise of decent, affordable housing in a crowded district with rising rents, Ping Yuen and Ping Yuen North with their direct ties to the larger community demonstrate the positive possibilities for public housing. The support of the district, the hard work put in by tenants to fight for their rights, the aid of social service organizations in the area, and the convenient location served as key factors

⁴ Henry Yu, “Los Angeles and American Studies in a Pacific World of Migrations,” *American Quarterly*, 56 (September 2004): 538.

contributing to the project's success as a strong, viable community and "a good place to live."⁵

At Valencia Gardens and North Beach Place, tenants negotiated racial and ethnic difference in a range of ways. Located in the Mission District, increasingly identified as Latino/a, Valencia Gardens provided a multi-cultural environment that tenants embraced. Drawing on the project's racial and ethnic diversity as a point of pride, residents considered their project "unique" because of its demographics and residents' efforts to "get along."⁶ Diversity was a positive defining point of the project community. North Beach residents, on the other hand, relied on intra-ethnic and racial group networks for community support over time. This coexistence changed to inter-group connectivity when the SFHA threatened to dislocate tenants from the place they all agreed was "home."

Together these three case studies complicate the current scholarly and popular representations of who lives in public housing while also providing examples at North Beach and Valencia Gardens of multi-cultural living environments, a rarity in many American city neighborhoods in the second half of the twentieth century. The histories of Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens also point to the need for future research that considers migration and immigration in relationship to public housing. With a number of immigrants living in San Francisco public housing and elsewhere, it is important to consider what role, if any, public housing played in Americanization and to situate state-funded low-income housing within a larger narrative of global migration.

⁵ Quote stated by many long-term residents at Ping Yuen. Ping Yuen residents, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, 25 May 2003.

⁶ Valencia Gardens' tenants, interview by the author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, May 2002.

Incorporating tenants' perspectives as this study demonstrates is also critical to understanding how public housing policy actually works. As seen here, tenants at Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens employed a range of strategies to better their projects. Navigating federal policies and local implementation that included a circumscribed and imposed "way of living" pushed by the SFHA, many tenants individually and collectively challenged the state to make changes at their projects. Through means that included attending SFHA Commission meetings, letter writing, petitioning, picketing, and withholding rent, many tenants worked hard to better their project environment for themselves and their families.

Their battles, waged in similar and different ways, share a common denominator: tenants fought to protect and improve project space they defined as "home." Conceived by the government as "temporary" housing and culturally defined over the past four decades as dangerous spaces "where no one would want to live," public housing has escaped critical analysis as "home" to residents across the nation. Recent work by Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, Rhonda Y. Williams, Lawrence Vale, Kelly Quinn, and myself, illustrates the ways public housing tenants have created "homes" out of housing and "communities" within their projects.⁷ Supporting Gwendolyn Wright's argument that "neither the way buildings look nor the way people live in them can be reduced to a formula dictated by architects, [or] social scientists," tenants in San Francisco public housing have demonstrated the fluid meanings of "home" and "community."⁸

⁷ Kelly Quinn at the University of Maryland is writing her dissertation "Making Modern Homes: A History of Langston Terrace Dwellings" on Langston Terrace Dwellings, a public housing project designed by an African American architect, Hilyard Robinson, for African Americans tenants in the 1930s.

⁸ Wright, *Building the Dream*, xvii.

At Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens a number of tenants have used different approaches to make their spartan subsidized apartments into “home.” In interviews tenants described how they bought their own paint to express their taste or planted outside their apartments and in their tenant-organized community gardens. Through the placement of furniture, the meals cooked and served to their families, and the decorations placed in the apartments, residents made their subsidized apartment space their own. These small but significant acts contributed to the relationships tenants formed with one another through informal and formal networks. Their shared appreciation of their projects’ locations facilitated residents’ attachment to their “homes.”

In *rental* government housing, residents at Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens “imbued their places with experiences and aspirations similar to those of *homeowners* of various racial groups and classes.”⁹ In doing so they claimed and invoked the rights of homeownership to improve their projects. Valencia Gardens’ tenants’ fight for a fence to protect their project from “outsiders” and their insistence that the Bufanos adorn the new project, Ping Yuen’s tenants’ reluctance to have senior housing built on-site for fear it would reduce light and parking, and North Beach Place residents’ demand to return to their project after redevelopment, reveal San Francisco public housing tenants’ appropriation of homeowners’ attitudes and rights. These residents contested the ideological framing of “home,” the stereotype that public housing tenants—and more generally low-income renters—do not care about their property, and the culturally embedded notion of poor Americans as disengaged from their communities. Working to defend and improve their homes, a number of tenants at Ping Yuen, North

⁹ Kelly Quinn, “Just Enough for the City’: Landscape, Labor, and Leisure at Langston Terrace Dwellings,” paper delivered at the American Studies Association Annual Meetings, November 2004, Atlanta, Georgia.

Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens participated in tenants' organizations, took direct action through petitions and picketing, and reached out to their neighbors. Their actions pose a clear challenge to the ideological links between homeownership, class status, and "good" citizenship. Low-income, civically-engaged tenants at these projects offered their time and labor to build better project communities.

As demonstrated in Chapters Two-Four, residents at each project formed communities in a range of ways that changed over time. Ties between residents, based on needs including child care, shared interests, and the interaction of residents within a common space they cared about resulted in the formation of communities within the projects. These networks— strengthened in the shared space of laundry rooms, courtyards, and community centers — were exclusive and inclusive, fluid, and stable. Tenant relationships at Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens cemented around the need for help, support, and shared experiences. North Beach Place tenants came together because of their commitment to continue living in the beautiful, excellently located North Beach district. Residents at Valencia Gardens united around their appreciation of the Bufanos and their shared experience playing on and enjoying the statues. Ping Yuen tenants formed connections both within their project and with their surrounding neighborhood, creating a series of intersecting communities. Long-term leaders at Ping Yuen helped anchor the project's community over time raising questions about the future of PYRIA when these leaders pass away. The "communities" at these projects overlapped at times with some tenants participating in tenants' organizations and informal networks with others, some tenants keeping to themselves, and a range in between. At North Beach Place, mini-communities based on race and ethnicity overlaid

the experience all tenants shared of living in public housing in North Beach. The shared process of residents becoming “insiders” after a period of time at North Beach Place and Valencia Gardens points to another layer of inclusion and exclusion and the shifting boundaries of “community.” These bonds for many residents resulted in important, sustaining connections that deepened their dedication to their “homes.”

With the federal government’s commitment to extend the HOPE VI program through 2006, it is crucial to recognize the already existing communities public housing tenants created.¹⁰ The history of Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens challenge tenets of the HOPE VI program by showing that low-income tenants have formed communities—outside of a mixed-income model—that benefit a number of project residents. Rather than reducing the number of low-income units to build mixed-income projects that decrease the affordable housing stock, HUD and the SFHA should consider putting money toward improving existing projects. By redeveloping units, making connections with the surrounding community, and providing better management and a range of well-funded social service initiatives on-site for low-income tenants, these agencies could transform public housing. In its current form, HOPE VI has failed to meet its goal of benefiting residents of severely distressed public housing. The program has displaced tenants in San Francisco and elsewhere. At North Beach Place and

¹⁰ From fiscal year 2000 through 2003, the federal government funded over \$570 million to the HOPE VI program. In 2004, the Bush Administration requested no funding for the program. Congress appropriated \$149 million for the 2004 fiscal year and reauthorized HOPE VI through 2006. Responding to growing criticism of the program, Congress added tenant protections when reauthorizing the program such as “requiring the HUD Secretary to involve affected public housing residents at the beginning and during the planning process. In addition, during the grant selection process, a criterion has been added to reward minimizing permanent displacement of current residents of public housing and prioritizing tenants of the existing developments to return to the revitalized projects.” These long over-due protections do not help the thousands of dislocated tenants across the country. National Low Income housing Coalition, “2004 Advocates’ Guide to Housing and Community Development Policy—HOPE VI,” (2004), <http://www.nlihc.org/advocates/hopevi.htm>.

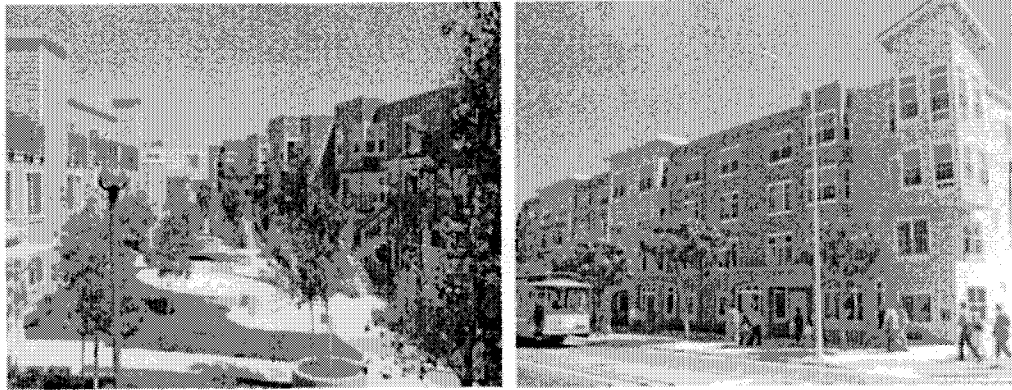
Valencia Gardens uprooted residents left a community behind and they may or may not come back. While the HOPE VI program has improved the look of public housing projects, provided more amenities for residents, and impressed some neighbors living near the projects, it has also dispersed low-income tenants and prevented many from returning.

Future research must consider the outcomes of the HOPE VI program on existing residents of public housing developments that become HOPE VI projects. Where do tenants relocate, and what are their experiences? What impact, if any, does leaving networks tenants established in their projects have on them and their families? Who is eligible to come back and why? Have housing authorities raised the rent at HOPE VI projects precluding some tenants from returning? What do returning tenants think about their redeveloped project? Are communities forming between low-income and middle-income families in the new developments and if so how and why?¹¹

In November 2004, the North Beach Place ribbon-cutting ceremony marked the “grand opening” of the HOPE VI project. (Figure 23)¹² The glossy color invitation with photos of the attractive apartments with tree-lined sidewalks bore no trace of tenants’ struggles to shape the environment and their place in it. The opening of Trader Joe’s held a few weeks prior to the project undoubtedly excited many district residents. A district resident wrote me to ask for more information on North Beach Place which he

¹¹ I plan to interview returning residents at North Beach Place and Valencia Gardens after they have lived at the new projects for a year or more to begin answering these questions.

¹² SFHA and Bridge Housing, Invitation, November 2004.



BRIDGE HOUSING CORPORATION, THE JOHN STEWART COMPANY AND EM JOHNSON INTEREST,
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE SAN FRANCISCO HOUSING AUTHORITY, INVITE YOU TO

NORTH BEACH PLACE
grand opening

FIGURE 23

Invitation, North Beach Place Opening

claimed “looks so good now.”¹³ The project, like many HOPE VI sites, has “dramatically improved the aesthetics of public housing.”¹⁴ However, the appearance denies the history of how the program dislocated tenants, disrupted pre-existing communities at North Beach and Valencia Gardens, and reduced the affordable housing supply in San Francisco and other cities. The SFHA has not yet determined the number of tenants who will return to North Beach Place and Valencia Gardens. Likewise, the agency does not have a complete record of where these tenants relocated. As a result, there is no way of knowing whether or not the HOPE VI program has benefited or will benefit the tenants of these distressed public housing projects displaced by redevelopment.

Taken together the historical case studies of Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens demonstrate the importance of studying public housing in the West; the need to compare public housing projects between and within cities; and the potential for a deeper understanding of housing policies and problems by engaging with tenants and examining their experiences. The federal Housing Acts of 1937 and 1949 effectively stymied housing reformers’ dream of facilitating community through architectural designs, communal services, and amenities for residents in subsidized housing. The SFHA in its early years worked to build a particular type of “community” within projects that modeled middle class “mores” to working-class families on their “way up” to homeownership. The agency gave up its stance as poorer families moved in during the 1960s. Over time federal policy changes and cutbacks, and growing internal problems

¹³ I received an email from a district resident who googled North Beach Place to find out the history of the project. The results returned my American Studies Association annual meeting paper entitled "Little Italy, Fisherman's Wharf, and the Projects: Redevelopment Politics at North Beach Place," presented November, 2004 in Atlanta. Email received November 5, 2004.

¹⁴ Urban Institute, "A Decade of HOPE VI: Research Findings and Policy Challenges," May 2004, 10.

led to increasing mismanagement and maintenance problems. Despite federal policies and SFHA procedures that undermined community support, tenants created their own bonds that resulted in friendships, beneficial networks, and activism.

With a nationwide shortage of affordable housing, it is critical to examine the history of public housing and to consider the role public housing played in the lives of its tenants. In the expensive San Francisco housing market, Ping Yuen, North Beach Place, and Valencia Gardens provided affordable housing in convenient urban areas. The range of problems tenants experienced at these projects requires careful study. At the same time, policymakers must also consider the positive aspects of the projects and how tenants made them “home.” Policymakers have many lessons to learn from the public housing program’s varied past, including its successes. Rather than continuing the HOPE VI program in its current form with its emphasis on “morality” and its impact on the decline of the affordable housing stock, the federal government should consider ways to improve and expand public housing for low-income families. A change in the aesthetics of “the projects” is not enough. When Americans start to destabilize homeownership as the cornerstone of the American Dream and a marker of status—and good citizenship—and take up inclusive community-building instead, low-income families will have better housing options and the nation in turn will have stronger, varied, and vibrant neighborhoods.

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