

Public Housing Revitalization

Rehabilitating existing units can be more cost effective than building new housing



Ping Yuen North in San Francisco, Calif. (Photo courtesy of Gelfand Partners Architects)

The Impact

Public housing revitalization involves rehabilitating existing units of public housing, thus improving the conditions for residents and the overall livability of the area. These renovation projects provide countless benefits to their respective communities and are often more cost-effective than building new housing.

Description

Public Housing Revitalization refers to the process of improving, upgrading, and modernizing public housing projects to enhance the living conditions for residents, ensure the sustainability of the housing stock, and integrate these developments more effectively into the broader community.

Public Housing Revitalization is often part of broader urban renewal and community development efforts. The goal is to not only improve the physical aspects of housing but also to address social and economic challenges faced by residents, ultimately leading to healthier, safer, and more vibrant communities.

Where It's Been Implemented

Two major case studies of public housing renovation in San Francisco have been the modernization of the Ping Yuen Housing in Chinatown and the rehabilitation of public housing in the Bayview-Hunters Point Neighborhood.

The original Ping Yuen projects in San Francisco were federally funded government housing created in the early 1950s. The conditions in these housing projects worsened over the decades. The Ping Yuens had failing elevators, broken water heaters, and insufficient security. In 2014, San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee used HUD's new Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program to transfer most of the city's public housing to community-based developers better suited to renovating and operating the buildings long-term. The Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC) was selected to take over, transform, and operate Ping Yuen and North Ping Yuen in 2016.

In 2019, renovations of 434 housing units in total were completed, along with construction of a new community building, an expansion of outdoor space, and the creation of a more welcoming exterior. According to the builder Cahill, the "renovation included upgrades to all major building systems, seismic and structural repairs, elevator modernization, improved security, all-new baths and kitchens, flooring, and paint, as well as new staff offices and community rooms." CCDC also collaborated with several partners to ensure sustainability in the renovated Ping Yuen, improving energy efficiency and installing a solar photovoltaic array.

Another RAD program project at Hunters Point East West and Westbrook rehabilitated 436 units of affordable public housing for families in the area. This project was a partnership between the John Stewart Company, the San Francisco Housing Development Corporation and Ridge Point Non-Profit Housing Corporation, which successfully completed a \$127 million rehabilitation. This renovation project helped to provide clean, safe housing for hundreds of families in a building complex that was previously dilapidated and hazardous. According to SF.gov, renovations included "roof and window replacement, a new automatic fire sprinkler system, exterior painting, landscaping, washer/dryer additions, replacement of sewer system, apartment renovations and energy use reductions." In terms of external improvements, the rehabilitation provided a new playground, improved sidewalks and parking, and renovated a community space. The city provided free, high-speed Internet access to all residents, as well as technology training.

Key Drivers

Housing renovation can be very beneficial in cities such as San Francisco, where much of the housing in low-income areas is outdated and dilapidated. Rehabilitating housing can also help revitalize neighborhoods by improving community ties through safer shared spaces and helping to bring building upgrades that are more environmentally conscious.

Key Factors for Success

Sufficient funding, such as from HUD's RAD program, is necessary for revitalizing public housing. In addition, support from residents is essential for success. Individuals living in Ping Yuen Housing were especially vocal about the need for renovation. Once renovations began, community meetings and continued collaboration made sure the improvements addressed tenants' needs. Finally, a sound pre-construction plan is essential to minimize the relocation of current tenants.

Key Obstacles

Securing adequate funding is often the biggest challenge. Public housing agencies may struggle to obtain sufficient government grants, and private investment can be limited due to the perceived risk or lower returns associated with public housing projects.

In addition to the lack of available funding, developers must often deal with restrictive land-use requirements, historical preservation mandates, toxic substances such as lead paint and asbestos, and onerous off-street requirements.

References and Resources

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- Wu, Gwendolyn. "[SF Chinatown Housing Project Overhauled After Decades of Turmoil. Will Change Last?](#)" San Francisco Chronicle, December 16, 2018

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