

Column: Extreme rehab bolsters extreme neighborliness

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On the 1600 and 1700 blocks of Yakima Avenue in Tacoma, the neighbors are the same. It's the neighborhood that's new.

For 35 years, the Catalina Apartments dominated the blocks, two buildings with 43 units between them. But the Catalina had grown shabby. Fixtures had worn out. Framing had rotted. The plumbing was shot. The roof needed replacing.

The buildings were weak, but the bonds between the people who lived in them were strong.

Many residents were refugees from Vietnam who worked with or fought beside Americans during the war. Most had come here as older adults, and it was comfortable to live near others who spoke the same first language. They were within walking distance of health care, groceries and faith communities. They'd created a micro-neighborhood in which people looked out for each other, had get-togethers, shared traditions.

In 2005, those 43 families learned the two buildings were for sale. The owner was marketing them as condominium conversions.

This was dire news.

They all rented through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development's Section 8 program. They pay a percentage of their income in rent. HUD pays the difference.

In 1969, when the Catalina apartments were built, the feds offered tax incentives to build Section 8 units. The Catalina had a voucher attached to each apartment. That voucher would last the life of the tax break, longer if the building's owner wished to stay in the program. After the tax break expired, if the buildings were, say, converted to condos, the 43 vouchers would vanish from the pool of affordable-housing tools in Tacoma.

When the apartments hit the market, Intercommunity Mercy Housing scrambled to save them as affordable housing. The Seattle-based nonprofit worked with government agencies, the Gates Foundation-funded housing initiative Sound Families, and a private investor, Alliant Capital, to buy the buildings for \$2.1 million, then rebuild them from the studs out. In the end, the project cost \$8.2 million, or \$191,792 per unit. That's a fair price for quality construction that's an asset in a revitalized neighborhood.

Federal regulations required that this essentially new building sit over the foundation of the shabby old one. Though that can complicate construction, in a neighborhood with so much historic value it's a plus. No heritage was harmed in this production, or in most other Tacoma Housing Authority and Mercy Housing extreme rehabs. They've been built on vacant land, or, like the Catalina, on the footprints of old subsidized housing.

In all of those projects, the social services available to residents protect both the people and the investment.

Forty-one of the Catalina's 43 original families moved back in after half-year relocations. That's far higher than the average and an indication of serious neighborliness.

Already, residents are harvesting vegetables at La Grande Garden, a pea patch run by the Guadalupe Land Trust. They have set chairs out on their sidewalks, creating a variation on the front porch. Sitting in the sun, they keep an eye on the kids in the new playground.

Hao Nguyen and his wife, Thao Thi Nguyen, keep their apartment immaculate enough to receive guests at any time and show off every room. They are especially pleased with the kitchen appliances and bathroom fixtures. A toilet that flushes on the first try is something new in the eight years they've lived at the Catalina.

They walk at the mall most mornings. They garden at La Grande, mostly for the pleasure of being outside.

"We are all very friendly with each other," Hao said. "Each family pays \$20 for the food, and we celebrate with a party. There are a lot of different races here, and we are all very supportive. The neighbors are very nice to each other."

They've been a credit to the community for years. Now their homes are, too.