Model apartments: Remodeled low-income rentals shine with pride over national award
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When Winona Gardens Apartments in City Heights was remodeled two years ago, few people expected the low-income rental community to become a symbol of a rebounding Mid-City neighborhood.

Located on the floor of a steep canyon, the aging complex had fallen into disrepair by the time Community HousingWorks purchased it in 1998.

Most residents then, as now, were immigrants from war-torn Somalia. In acknowledgment of their hopes for a better life, the renovated complex was renamed Bandar Salaam, which is Somali for "land of peace."

Recently the Fannie Mae Foundation gave Bandar Salaam a Maxwell Award for excellence in affordable housing. There is no higher honor for such a project, said Nicolas Retsinas, director of Harvard University’s Joint Center for Housing Studies. "It's as prestigious an award in affordable housing as there is."

Six Maxwell Awards were presented nationally. Nominees were evaluated on the basis of creativity, design quality, financing innovation and affordability. What set Bandar Salaam apart was its effort to meet the needs of newly arrived immigrants, said Peter Beard, a senior vice president at the foundation.

Community HousingWorks, formerly known as Community Housing of North County, is a nonprofit organization that develops and operates affordable rental housing. It has offices in Escondido and City Heights.

When the $7.1 million City Heights project began, members of the organization talked to residents "to determine how the housing could best serve them," Beard said. "They were providing adequate housing for people who did not have the ability to negotiate better circumstances."

Low-income renters are charged between $419 and $650 per month for units that range from one to five bedrooms. Although most residents are from Somalia, the complex is not reserved for them or any other ethnic group.

"The current residents are Somali because they were there when the remodeling started," said Fanik Jama, a community leader who works as court interpreter. "Everyone kept his or her apartment, but the waiting list consists of all ethnic groups. It's public housing."
Jama has lived at the complex with his wife and six children since 1995. "The conditions were very bad, now they are much better," he said. "People tend to take care of it as if it was their own."

The apartment complex now serves the surrounding neighborhood as a site for public meetings and training programs, he said. While many residents wear traditional Somali clothing, children quickly are becoming Americanized, he added.

When the complex was for sale in 1998, some potential buyers were put off by the poor condition of the buildings, recalled Sue Reynolds, executive director of Community HousingWorks.

The 68-unit complex "was an embarrassment to the community," said Michael Sprague, a HousingWorks board member who also chairs the City Heights Area Planning Committee. Today, he said, it is a source of neighborhood pride.

In a sense, rehabilitation already was under way when Reynolds' group arrived. Residents "were taxing themselves and contributing money so they could have a space to worship in and a space for classes on everything from Somali culture to English," she recalled. "We found a community that had taken major steps to help itself."

Among low-income rental communities, Bandar Salaam has been unusually stable, Reynolds added. "The move-outs have been so few."

That's because residents have developed a true sense of community, said Jama.

As a recipient of a Maxwell Award, Bandar Salaam will receive $50,000. The money will be spent at the complex, Reynolds said. "It is going to support Learning Communities, our after-school homework club and computer center."

Two San Diego County projects have received honorable mentions in past Maxwell competitions. Community HousingWorks was honored in 1999 for a 22-unit project for the homeless in Oceanside. SER/Jobs for Progress was honored in 2000 for a 16-unit development for families in Escondido.

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Caption: 3 PICS
1. Dressed in distinctive Somali attire, two residents of the Bandar Salaam apartment complex chat in the common area. The affordable-housing project recently won a $50,000 Maxwell Award from the Fannie Mae Foundation. 2,3. Ahmed Deyle and Mubashir Khalif (with book) share a conversation in a courtyard at the Bandar Salaam rental community in City Heights (left), where the majority of residents are from Somalia. Asha Ali (right) enjoys the playground equipment at the Bandar Salaam apartment complex. Money awarded to Community HousingWorks will be used to support
Learning Communities, an after-school homework club and computer center. (I-10)
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