Apartments give Asians new option; Developer addresses concerns of refugees
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Indochinese immigrants in San Diego finally have a few homes designed specifically for them.

This new development comes 15 years after thousands of Indochinese refugees flooded into San Diego County at the end of the Vietnam War. Initially housed in tents at Camp Pendleton, they settled in permanent housing in the county and the rest of the United States.

Many of these immigrants as well as others who came later have had to adapt to American-style housing.

Now a handful of them have another option, the Palm Gardens apartments in City Heights. The 20-unit apartment building and the adjacent 79 Supermarket at 47th Street and University Avenue look like many California projects on the outside. The buildings are made of stucco and painted in trendy grays and whites. The interiors are carpeted. A security system controls the entryway to the apartments.

But the $2 million mixed-use project, in the works for four years, clearly feels different.

There is more openness on the outside, more light streaming inside. The living rooms are bigger; the bedrooms and kitchens, smaller. There is no dining area, but there are extra storage areas in the stairwells. Garages allow for two cars to be parked in tandem rather than side by side to fit the lot more easily.

All this was not by accident. Developer James H. Kennedy, with two of his brothers as partners, had built other apartment projects not aimed at any particular ethnic group. But when he decided to redevelop the site of his late father's Hacienda Danceland nightclub, he hired a consultant to interview Indochinese families living in City Heights and East San Diego about their particular needs.

At the same time, the city Planning Department was urging developers to be more creative in redeveloping the growing Mid-City area, home to about 100,000 residents between North Park and the College Area around San Diego State University.

Community leaders had protested in vain against the apartment and condominium buildings that were replacing single-family homes in the neighborhood. One solution included in the area's new community plan was a provision for mixed-use development -- the incorporation of both retail and residential uses in one building.

In response to both the interviews and the community plan, Kennedy hired architect Mark Fehlman to come up with a specific approach that would address everyone's concerns. He also hired the Pacific Gateway Group to survey Asian residents in the neighborhood.

The interviews indicated that renters in the area commonly had large families, often with one
grandparent included, Kennedy said. Among the renters interested in Palm Gardens, for example, are one family with seven members and another whose 15 members from three generations want to occupy three adjoining ground-floor units.

The space inside the units needed to allow for a large dinner table in a large, flexible living room. The tradeoffs were small 11-by-12-foot bedrooms, no dining room and no hallways.

Fehlman said he took steps to offset the high density of people by providing more privacy. Instead of designing a single two-story building with interior stairs and hallways, Fehlman arranged the apartments in a two-wing, two-story configuration. He used outdoor stairways instead of criss-crossing catwalks to preserve the feeling of openness. Beyond the courtyard with its grass and palm trees, there are several concrete areas suitable for a children's play area.

The kitchens had to shrink in the standard 850-square-foot units to accommodate other space needs. But Kennedy said residents told interviewers they could work in small kitchens and were willing to sacrifice superfluous -- and expensive -- appliances such as dishwashers.

The residents also said that air conditioning was unnecessary. Fehlman said he located windows and doors to allow plenty of fresh-air ventilation.

Kennedy originally planned for the 9,600 square feet of adjacent commercial space on University Avenue to accommodate a handful of small shops. But about a year ago, he signed up 79 Supermarkets, a local Oriental market chain owned by Andy Pham and Carlos Go, to occupy the entire space. The store's grand opening was held last weekend.

Pham, who also is the project's resident manager, needed only one advertisement in a local Indochinese weekly newspaper to locate enough prospective tenants. While the units are open to all ethnic groups, he believes Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians will occupy all of the homes.

"Most of the people (who answered the ad) I knew," he said.

He said the renters liked the proximity to bus lines, the market (7 and 9 are lucky numbers in Asian cultures), the floor plans and the security system.

They also apparently liked the monthly rates: $610 for the 13 two-bedroom, two-bath units; $675 for the five two-bedroom-plus-loft units; and $750 for the three-bedroom units. The garages cost $60 more per month.

Renters were expected to move in last week.

Despite its merits, the project has not met with smooth sailing.

Kennedy said he fell victim to the interim development ordinance and then the single-family neighborhood protection ordinance, passed by the City Council at the height of the drive to control growth in 1988 and 1989.

Then he ran into various roadblocks in the Planning Department when trying to take advantage of the mixed-use-development concepts in the Mid-City Community Plan.
The rules encouraged such development -- but only in commercial zones. And the lots Kennedy acquired south of his father’s nightclub site were zoned residential.

Often developers can overcome these problems by working with a community planning group. But none existed at the time in the Mid-City area, and city planners had no way to proceed except to follow cumbersome zoning variance procedures.

As a result, the only mixing of uses occurs in the space occupied by the supermarket, which has several apartments above it. The two apartment wings are detached and have a side entrance off 47th Street.

Fehlman said the interviews with the Indochinese might have given him useful insight into designing for a new ethnic community. But he also fell victim to their fears.

For example, he said, the project would have been more attractive and neighborly if he had been able to include paths directly off the street and into the units.

But because the Indochinese expressed great concern over security and safety, the streetfront includes only one access point through a locked gate, and the rest of the site is heavily landscaped.

The color scheme and architectural style were chosen to minimize costs and rents, while remaining attractive to any prospective tenants, not just Asians, Fehlman said. The goal was to keep the property as affordable as possible. Sillman, Wyman & Associates was the construction architect that turned Fehlman's ideas into construction documents. Comfort Construction Inc. was the general contractor.

To finance the project, Kennedy obtained a construction loan from San Diego National Bank on the strength of the preleasing to 79 Supermarkets. Despite the currently tight lending market for developers, he said he expects to be able to secure a permanent loan because the project will be fully leased.

Kennedy does not plan to build other such projects because of new restrictions on replacing single-family homes with apartment complexes in older neighborhoods, he said. Higher building and utility hookup fees also will make it difficult to develop low-cost apartments, he said.

"It took as long to develop a small project as a large project," he said. "But I liked dealing with this quality and dealing with the Asian families."

Caption: 1 PIC
On the balcony of one of 20 new apartment units are, from left, merchant Andy Pham, developer James Kennedy, construction architect Larry Sillman, architect Mark Fehlman. (F-4)
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