

Atchison Village: A Cooperative in Richmond Changes with the Times

By Marcy Rein

Atchison Village Mutual Homes sits less than a mile from a shoreline park with postcard-perfect views of the San Francisco Bay—and on the edge of the “Iron Triangle,” one of the hardest-hit areas of Richmond, California, a city deserted by industry and ravaged by violence.

When you walk around the Village on a summer Sunday, you smell meat grilling and hear the buzz of lawn mowers and the bells of an ice cream truck playing, “Do your ears hang low?” Neighbors chat about gardening and kids play soccer or baseball in the park at the heart of the Village. A family might be setting up for a quinceañera in the wood-floored and paneled community building, where the Village also holds its meetings.

The federal government built Atchison in 1941 to house workers streaming in from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and the deep South to work at the Kaiser Shipyards, building ships for sale to Great Britain.

“The modest 450-unit complex was hailed at the time as a cutting-edge example of worker housing, designed following the tenets of the ‘city beautiful’ and ‘garden city’ movements,” Richmond architect and City Council member Thomas Butt wrote when Atchison became a national historic site in 2003.

After the United States entered World War II, defense industries boomed in Richmond.

“The factories and the shipyards worked 24 hours a day,” says Redell Randle, who has lived in Atchison since the 1950s and now serves on its Board of Directors. “The welding was like firecrackers all night, pa-pa-popping and sparking.”

The government built many more housing projects, but only Atchison survived. In 1956, when the residents heard the government was going to shut it down, they incorporated, raised \$150,000 for the down payment (in only two-and-a-half months), and became one of California’s first housing cooperatives.

“This was done by working people,” Randle says, and their work forged strong bonds. “They were on a mission, building those ships.”

The charter members of the Village set up an elected, all-volunteer Board of Directors to run the corporation, and wrote strict rules to prevent renting and speculation. Though Atchison remains an island of affordable housing, today’s members face the challenges of maintaining the 67-year old structures, and finding ways to reinvigorate the spirit of community.

Atchison has one-, two- and three-bedroom units in one- and two-story duplexes and fourplexes. The buildings are grouped around courtyards, with common space in front and yards or common space behind. Ten years ago, you could get a 2-bedroom in Atchison for around \$30,000. Now sellers are asking \$80,000 and up. The units exchange at “fair market value,” but the corporation must accept prospective buyers as members before sales can be final. Members own 1/450th of the corporation, and the “right to perpetual use” of their units. They pay monthly fees that range from \$212 to \$411, depending on the size of the unit and the amount of property tax they pay. The fees cover water, garbage, and basic maintenance.

“It’s like a little town here. You can know people if you want to,” says Bennie Singleton, who bought her unit in 1971 and served several terms on the Board. A handful of the charter members remain in the Village, and many of their younger relatives have stayed, but the Village has changed a lot in the last dozen or so years. Artists, activists, and professionals have come fleeing the sky-high rents and home prices of Berkeley and San Francisco, and many Latino families have moved in. Latinos now make up about a third of the residents.

“I have a name here,” says Esthela Diaz. “If I were somewhere else I would just be ‘the Mexican lady.’ And I love raising my daughters here, where they can

see two women or two men together being happy. I don't have to tell them anything about it."

Board of Directors Faces Challenges

The present Board of Directors includes two lawyers, an accountant, three union organizers and officers, and three in healing professions. Only one is African-American; none are Latino, though past boards have been more representative.

The 11-member board deals with a mind-numbing pile of problems, meeting at least once a week. It budgets and hires and fires, working with an office staff of two and a maintenance crew of six. It has to ensure that changes to the units conform to the Village's planning guidelines. It mediates sticky disputes over barking dogs, rambling cats, noise, fences and all the other things that come between neighbors.

It does all this in a group that changes with annual elections and has few written policies and procedures to fall back on.

"When new members start, they don't have anything to check out to see how things were done before," Singleton says. "We need rules and procedures. We don't do things in a businesslike way."

Only about one-fourth of the members vote in the Board elections, and fewer come to the monthly meetings—which range from effective to quietly dysfunctional to wildly chaotic. At one low point a few years ago, several people started shouting at once, ignoring the banging gavel, and a member was swinging a heavy flashlight menacingly in the back of the room. White-bearded Peter Brown, the Board's elder, took off a battered sneaker and banged the table to try to restore order.

"We need to create an environment where everyone in this diverse community feels comfortable expressing their points of view," says Vicki Sawicki, who served as Board president in 2004-2007. "When we can wade through our differences, the end result can be better for us as a whole," she says. And sometimes, neighbors don't hear each other. Sawicki recalled the meeting about the fence in September 2005.

Co-operation In Action?

Shootings just outside the Village had touched off an eruption of worry and fear. Members, many of



them Latino, packed the Board meeting. The group vented and brainstormed. They decided a fence along one edge of the Village would help protect them. Rafael Casillas offered to put in \$500 and work on the fence. Several other members chimed in with offers of money and help.

But the Board responded stiffly, with a request for an estimate and worries about liability and permission from the city. The moment passed. The fence hasn't been built.

Since then the Board has changed almost completely, and the new Board has made a point of translating meeting notices into Spanish and hiring bilingual office staff. The fence issue sticks in people's minds as a lesson in how members' energy could be put to work.

"We could take on simple, short term projects that would help with upkeep of our common areas," Board member Marcie Zellner suggested, adding that the common work could help bring people together, and possibly save money at the same time.

Savings would be welcome, because the last two Boards had to take the unpopular step of raising fees so the Village could begin long-deferred maintenance on roofs, windows, and plumbing. Longtime maintenance director Joseph Clark is optimistic.

"These are very well-built houses, solid wood buildings," he says. Other members are cautiously upbeat about Atchison's social structure as well. One new committee is building a community garden, and another is linking with Communities for a Better Environment to oppose the expansion of the Chevron refinery. Board meetings have calmed down and Board members have been helping re-organize the office.

"With modern-day technology and all the brains we have here, we should be able to make it work," Randle says. "They did it before. We can do it now." ■

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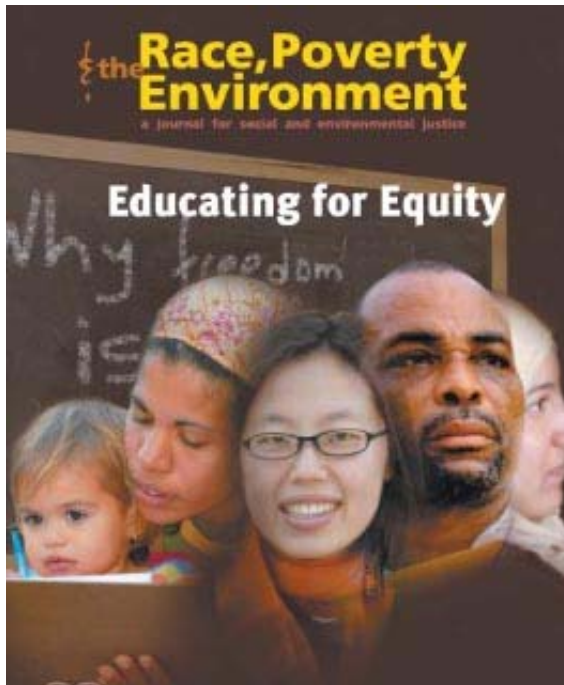
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