

Houston Journal; In the Eye of a Storm, Oasis of Peace and Quiet

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LEAD: Shirley Johnson lives in a dark, cramped two-bedroom apartment with her two children and two nieces. It is one of a thousand such apartments in Allen Parkway Village, a 37-acre low-income housing complex that is a maze of squat brick buildings and bare playgrounds. Downtown is a short walk across a road.

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It was once noisy here, with lots of people living close together. But five years ago the city's Housing Authority decided to raze the complex and sell the land to a developer for luxury condominiums. Profits from the sale, officials said, could be used to build other low-income housing further from the downtown area, where land is not as valuable.

But a legal fight has kept the city from demolishing the buildings, and the authority has decided not to move new tenants into the complex until the dispute is resolved. When a family moves out, plywood boards are nailed over their apartment windows and doors.

Now only 77 families live in the Village. When Mrs. Johnson hangs her wash, she does so in a deserted courtyard. And she does not keep watch while the laundry dries. "There's no one left to steal anything," she said.

When it was built 41 years ago, the Village was the most modern public housing project in the nation. It was the largest one in Houston, and housed one-third of the city's poor. Then, as now, tenants paid 25 percent of their income as rent.

Residents who remember the old days say they were not idyllic. "We were poor then too," said Edna Beard, who is 77 years old and has lived in the complex for 20 years. But, they say, repairs were done on time, the grounds were kept up and city officials left them in peace.

That changed in 1983 when the City Council, citing substandard living conditions at the complex, voted to allow the authority to apply to the Department of Housing and Urban Development for permission to tear down the project. Mayor Kathy Whitmire called the plan vital to Houston's economic growth and business leaders predicted that the sale price would be as high as \$120 million.

The vote changed life in the Village. "They stopped repairing," said Wessie Culver, who moved into her apartment in 1969. "The most vigorous activity we have around here is the collection of rent. That and boarding up the empty apartments."

"They haven't painted a thing since that vote," said Mrs. Johnson.

"They kept on asking us, 'Why don't you go on and move,' " said Mary Pruitt, a resident for 13 years. "We want to live here for the same reason they want rich people to live here. It's near the things we need. It's near the bus line, and we have a clinic nearby and it's near downtown."

The Village might have been leveled long ago if not for Lenwood Johnson, who moved there in 1980. By 1983 he was president of the Allen Parkway Village Residents' Council.

"I told them 'This is a democracy, you have rights,'" said the council president, who is not related to Mrs. Johnson.

With the help of the Gulf Coast Legal Foundation, which represented the tenants without charge, the residents' council argued that the Village should be rehabilitated rather than rebuilt. Susanne Sere, the Gulf Coast lawyer handling the tenants' case, said enough Federal and other money was available to pay some \$37 million that the Housing Authority estimates it will cost to renovate the complex.

The residents' council also challenged the projected sale price of the land, and released an independent appraisal, which said that in Houston's soft real estate market the value of the land was only \$28 million. They cited the list of 5,000 people waiting to get into public housing in Houston who would be forced to wait even longer if the complex was torn down and rebuilt.

Slowly, public support for the residents grew and now 88 community and civic groups have come out against demolition. Last week the City Council voted not to ask the Federal housing agency for permission to sell the land and ordered the authority to "re-evaluate" the future of the Village.

So the residents of the Village -those who are left - still wait. "They voted on what they weren't going to do," Mr. Johnson said of the City Council, "but they didn't vote on what they were going to do."

He and his neighbors admit that their homes are more peaceful than they would be if the complex was full.

"It's quiet," Mrs. Johnson said. "There are no troublemakers. On a beautiful sunny day, you go outside and you can pretend it's a nice residential area."

But, she said, "I still wish there were more people because there are so many people who don't have a place to lay their head."