

Land of Peace Renovated apartment complex gives Somalis an American home

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When the Winona Gardens Apartments came onto the City Heights real estate market several years ago, little interest was shown in the decaying, two-story complex.

Some potential buyers were put off by the poor condition of the buildings, recalled Sue Reynolds of Community Housing of North County. Others were troubled by the fact that the complex was almost entirely occupied by a well-organized community of Somalian refugees who began arriving in the early 1990s.

"When we discovered the apartments were on the market, everyone in multifamily real estate had looked at this building," said Reynolds, who serves as Community Housing's executive director. "They thought residents would stop paying rent or walk out altogether. We thought it was a strength. We do communities and they already had a community, so it was a good match."

Reynolds' group, which develops and operates affordable rental housing, saw the ramshackle, 27-year-old complex as an opportunity to fulfill its mission. The organization, which has expanded beyond North County to include San Diego and Lakeside, was incorporated in 1996 through the merger of two smaller nonprofit groups.

With financial assistance from a variety of organizations, Reynolds' group bought the property. The complex's new name, Bandar Salaam, has a special meaning to people who fled Somalia to escape a violent civil war, said Abdi Abdul, resident manager.

"Bandar Salaam means the land of peace," he explained, "In Somalia, where there is a war, people are running helter-skelter for their lives. You see people killed in front of you. That is why they say this is the land of peace."

Instead of viewing it as temporary housing for immigrants on their way up, many residents see Bandar Salaam as a permanent home.

Tim Baker, who oversaw the renovation of the complex, said he had never seen a San Diego rental property in worse condition. There were leaks that ran from the second-story roof to the ground floor. Inside the walls, he found bare electrical wires. What convinced Baker that the complex was worth saving was the determination of residents to make it a livable place.

"I walked the site in July of 1998 and you could see how bad the actual physical structure was," he recalled. "But you also could see a community there. Children were playing. Parents were watching the children. They were self-patrolling the project."

Little Mogadishu

Built in a steep-walled canyon in a section of San Diego known as Little Mogadishu (named for the Somali capital), the complex is typical of the two-story rental structures that began replacing single-family homes in San Diego's inner city in the '60s and '70s. As you enter the gate, you begin to notice differences, however. Some are subtle, while others are impossible to miss.

Many of the women are clad in traditional Somali clothing. Their brightly colored, flowing gowns cover them from head to foot.

Older men, some wearing full beards, address each other in their native language. Because custom discourages the wearing of footwear indoors, many doorsteps feature neat rows of shoes next to the welcome mats.

New stucco, green lawns, and new playground equipment have given Bandar Salaam the appearance of a new complex. When Baker first visited Winona Gardens in 1998, residents were operating a Muslim prayer room in space they had rented from the owner. That room was incorporated into the remodeling project as a religious training center, which now is operated by a private organization.

Although their community has improved, there have been new challenges for the residents. Some have experienced acts of discrimination outside the gated complex since the Sept. 11 attacks by terrorists on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Abdul said. Despite that, life goes on as normal.

"Yes, it has happened," he said. "Some people complain. They have had someone abuse them or throw stones at them, but generally there is no problem."

A strong sense of community helps residents take such setbacks in stride, he said. Instead of replacing the neighborhood leadership that had evolved at the complex in the early 1990s, the North County housing group has incorporated it into its management structure, Baker said. "In Bandar we have evolved the elders into a resident association."

Despite the fact that Bandar Salaam is a Somali community, there has been no effort to preserve it as a home for any ethnic group, Baker stressed. There are Hispanics, Asians and African-Americans on the waiting list to rent.

"Over the long term, this project will evolve to become multidimensional in terms of ethnic groups. Now, out of 68 units, almost all are Somali."

A transplanted culture

Fanik Jama is one of the community leaders that Reynolds and Baker met in 1998.

Elders are men and women who are honored for their age and experience, he said.

A court interpreter, Jama, 44, has lived at the complex with his wife and six children since the fall of 1995. "I came here as a refugee," he said, "I was a businessman when the civil war broke out."

The owner of an import-export business, he lost everything during his flight from Somalia. "I was allowed to take a pair of shoes and a shirt. A friend of mine paid a lot of money for my family's release. It was a terrible experience. I came directly to San Diego. I moved to Bandar Salaam the first night. It was Winona Gardens then."

The poor condition of the complex shocked him, "but I understood it was a place to start. It was an opportunity to change my lifestyle. It was a place where there were gangs and drugs were sold and police had a hard time coming in here. It was really a very dangerous place."

As more Somalis arrived at the complex, drawn by connections to friends and family, the apartments gradually became safer, he said. Established residents helped newcomers assimilate. Although he has had opportunities to move, Jama has decided to remain at Bandar Salaam.

"When I first came, I got a lot of help," he explained. "There was a time I didn't have a car. Members of the community whose children went to the same schools as mine would pick up my children, would take us shopping. I felt some sort of an obligation."

Reflecting on her experience at the complex, Fadama Hirsi said her life had changed a great deal since her arrival in 1995. At that time the units were infested with insects, she said, speaking through an interpreter. Since the recent renovation, she feels that she finally has found "the real American society."

"We thought we were still in Africa," said Hirsi, who lives with grown children. "Now we are entirely happy."

Ugaso Elmi, 72, arrived in the summer of 1999. Like Hirsi, she was appalled by the conditions she found. "Now this is a healthier place," she said through an interpreter. "It's almost brand new."

New appliances, kitchen cabinets, counter tops and carpeting combine to hide the age of the refurbished units. In some cases, kitchen counters were removed to make the most of limited space. The units range in size from one to five bedrooms. The largest ones measure roughly 1,350 square feet.

Renovating older rental properties such as Bandar Salaam can help solve the region's housing crisis, said Mick Pattinson, president of the California Building Industry Association.

San Diego ranks 13th among the nation's least-affordable metropolitan areas for rental housing, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition. The median monthly cost of a two-bedroom apartment countywide exceeds \$1,000. The county, which anticipates 942,000 new residents by 2020, has a pressing need for inexpensive rental housing.

"We need all types of housing," Pattinson said.

Bobbie Christensen, acting director of the Housing Commission's rental assistance program, said projects like Bandar Salaam are "a piece of the puzzle."

"It not only plays into the need for more affordable housing in San Diego, but the rehab work was considerable," she said. "It brought the standard of living up for very-low-income people."

Abdullahi Yusuf, 57, is an elder at Bandar Salaam. He practiced pharmacy before he was forced to flee his homeland with his wife, Lul Ali, and their six children.

Yusuf, who received a master's degree in 1973 from the Pyatigorsk Institute of Pharmacy in the former Soviet Union, lost everything when he left Somalia. He says he isn't bitter, however. A security guard at The San Diego Union-Tribune, he is embracing his new life.

"I came here in 1995 from Somalia with my family," he said. "I don't have any plans to move. I like my Somali community. I want to have always the connection."

While people in Somalia are divided into clans, things are different here, he said. Old cultural barriers seem less important. "I don't ask anybody what clan he belongs to. We are here. We are going to be Americans."

World of difference

As you pass through Bandar Salaam's gate, you begin to notice differences. Some are subtle, while others are impossible to miss.

Shunning Western attire, many of the women are clad in traditional Somali clothing. Brightly colored, their flowing gowns cover them from head to foot.

Older men, some wearing full beards, address each other in their native language.

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