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Nonprofit developers play vital role in housing

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One of the Bay Area's largest developers turned 30 last month and threw itself a party, but some of the guests you might not expect: an immigrant family whose daughter is headed to college and a disabled man who spent nine years living on the streets.

The connection is that they're among the residents of the 14,000 homes that have been built

since 1983 by Bridge Housing Corp., a San Francisco-based nonprofit. Several economic cycles later, Bridge continues to extend its geographic reach and overall mission.

Besides providing an excuse for a bash with 730 guests and such speakers as actor Edward Norton, Bridge's survival testifies to the Bay Area's heritage in building housing for residents who need it the most. Not just by Bridge, but the entire community of nonprofit developers and committed architects that has evolved.

"They've become very knowledgeable about development, which is not an easy thing," said John Rahaim, San Francisco's planning director. "Some of them are as sophisticated about how to get things done as any for-profit developer, and that really helps."

Bridge differs from other nonprofits in that it began by emphasizing production - as many homes as possible in as many communities as possible. The initial funding came from an anonymous grant of 10,000 shares of IBM stock, then valued at \$650,000. The first leader was Donald Turner, who had his male staffers wear jackets and ties to convey a serious image.

Turner died in 1996 in a plane crash in Croatia. His successor, Carol Galante, is now a top official at the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Current President Cynthia Parker took the job in 2010 after leading another Bay Area nonprofit, Mercy Housing.

Nonprofits more typically form in response to specific community needs. This can be geographic, as was the case in Oakland in 1966 with the creation of Satellite Housing. Community Housing Partnership in San Francisco was founded in 1990 to provide supportive housing for the formerly homeless.

Cooperate and compete

As the world of nonprofit housing has matured - and the need for low-income housing most definitely has not gone away - the players have learned to cooperate, as well as compete.

For instance, Community Housing Partnership and Bridge are collaborating on the Rene Cazenave Apartments, soon to open at Folsom and Essex streets in San Francisco. Named for a lifelong housing advocate who died in 2010, the eight-story structure is being built by Bridge, which cobbled together the \$43 million budget from 10 funding sources. Community Housing Partnership then will manage the 120 apartments, which will be reserved for the formerly homeless and include counseling and medical services.

The first residential building to open in the city's new Transbay district, the stocky but dynamic structure features deep cuts of aqua green and blue. The look is of a supersize graphic more than a traditional building with bottom, middle and top. But in the context of the skinny glass towers planned for Transbay and Rincon Hill, alongside a Bay Bridge exit, the thick bars and bands are an emphatic change of pace.

Saving interior touches

The architect is Leddy Maytum Stacy, one of a half-dozen local firms that have made a specialty of low-income housing. Another is Van Meter Williams Pollack, which is finishing up a Bridge project in Oakland, Terraza Palmera. That complex includes the restoration of a convalescent hospital from 1912 into 84 senior apartments, and the construction of 58 family

units at the rear of the large site on International Avenue near the Fruitvale BART Station.

The restoration is an absolute joy; the architects found ways to save interior touches that had survived a 1970s office conversion, leading to such surprises as classical moldings above the fire stairs and a brick wall in one laundry room. The new wing is a strong but subdued counterpoint to the older structure.

Another mark of longevity is that nonprofits are now restoring buildings they developed in the first place.

There's a playfully pronounced example of this in downtown Oakland, where Satellite's senior housing tower on 21st Street from 1970 has new double-glazed windows, a seismic upgrade and inviting new common areas. But what catches the eye is the patterned facade, with its paint ranging from deep plum to gold, plus perforated metal sunshades above each balcony.

"Back then there was a sense that publicly funded housing shouldn't look nice, it had to look basic and utilitarian," said Berkeley architect Anne Phillips. Her firm did similar upgrades to four other blocks built at the time by Satellite Housing, which merged last winter with Berkeley-based Affordable Housing Associates.

In a region where the median price of housing is \$540,000 - and San Francisco condominiums routinely bring twice that - the need for nonprofit developers is more pronounced than ever. They can't reverse the tide, but they can provide safety nets and opportunity to residents. Often as not, their buildings also are handsome and pedestrian-friendly additions to their neighborhood settings.

Bridge, Community Housing Partnership and Satellite Affordable Housing Associates are three examples. A half-dozen others could have been featured. The Bay Area is lucky to have them all.

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