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igement: design a secure low-income rental development for big families with young kids in a tough neighborhood. Result: Strathern Park, located in a largely Hispanic enclave in San Valley, California, north of North Hollywood, a recent PCBC Gold Nugget Grand Award winner in the Best Affordable Housing Development category.

Five years in planning, the 246-unit, $25.5 million infill development was financed by a unique combination of funds from HUD, the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles and private sources. Construction started in the middle of 1992, and first move-ins were in December 1993.

Developer Thomas Safian built the property with the intention of keeping it and managing it. "The design criteria were set by the kind of project he wanted to run," said Dan Witten, partner in the architectural firm Witten Malcolm.
In the center, that meant one to five bedrooms centered around the kitchen area as a focus for family socializing during food preparation and meal times. Penthouses next to the dining areas add storage space. "The biggest challenges in affordable housing to build as much function as possible into limited space," said Withoe.

Large closets were part of the solution, as were decks and patios that could also accommodate storage. Most of the units are two- and three-bedroom.

Vaulted ceilings in second-floor apartments add a sense of openness. Every upstairs unit has a balcony and all first-floor apartments have fenced-in patios surrounded by concrete planters. "We focused on keeping the rooms as flexible as possible," Withoe said.

Outside, buildings are sited around different courtyards with on-site and children’s play areas that function as activity and social centers for the kids and their mothers. Each courtyard also has laundry rooms that look out on the play areas and picnic tables, barbecues, and other seating. Walkways connect the various courtyards.

The developer also wanted Strathem Park to blend with the two-story character of the surrounding neighborhood. At a density of 27.8 to the acre, the 241 apartments are arranged in 18 eight- and 36-plexes, so that there are no interior corridors. "This is a way to get the density without straitjacketing the buildings," Withoe explained.

The site was graced with several 50-year-old oaks, and Withoe Malcolm served as many as possible, moving the largest into the courtyards to provide shade. Cedar shingles complement the landscaping. The entire site is gated, and residents have to buzz in visitors. Strathem Park was completed one month ahead of time, and has a waiting list of 5,000.

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