

SECTION

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Praise Heaped on Strathern Park Apartments for Low-Income Families

■ **Subsidized housing:**
Residents voice their appreciation for complex that is held in high esteem by police and architects.

By TRACEY KAPLAN
FINIS STAFF WRITER

Closeted in a cramped apartment with her two youngsters, Maria Diaz Agrinisoni was wary nonetheless of moving to a more spacious unit in Sun Valley. The Strathern Park Apartments, after all, was a low-income housing project.

Then she saw the place.

The immaculate, 241-unit complex dotted with graceful pepper trees belies the image of a subsidized housing project as a crime-ridden slum.

"I thought, 'My God, these have got to be condos, not apartments,'" Agrinisoni said of the gated complex built a year ago with a combination of private and government funding in the 11100 block of Strathern Street.

Agrinisoni, who quickly plunked down a \$475 deposit for a three-bedroom apartment that she calls her "little villa," is not alone in her appreciation of Strathern Park.

Police and architects also hold it in high esteem

The two-story, cedar-sided complex recently won two highly coveted awards for architectural design from the Pacific Coast Builders Conference, a trade group that encompasses 14 Western states and the Pacific Rim countries.

"That particular awards program is very popular among architects," said Paul Welch, executive vice president of the California Council of the American Institute of Architects. "They feel very privileged when they receive recognition through that program and disappointed when they don't."

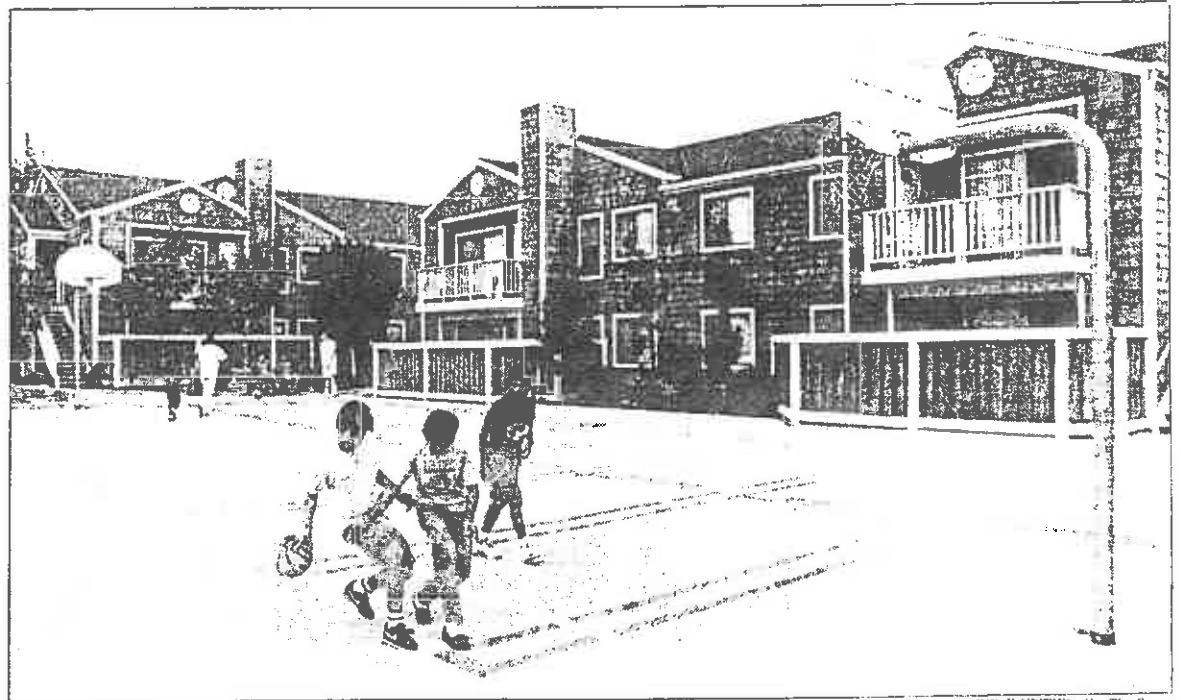
Strathern Park not only shared first place with a Hong Kong project in the category of best affordable housing development, it was also recognized as among the four best one- or two-story apartment projects in the region.

"It's a delightful project, one that . . . anyone would feel comfortable living in and yet it's extremely affordable," the judges said.

It also has a low crime rate, although nearby Sun Valley Park and Recreation Center still attracts drug dealers and gang members, said Los Angeles Police Officer Ed Brentlinger.

The complex was built on nine acres formerly occupied by several abandoned single-family houses that vagrants had converted into a "tent city," said Brentlinger, one of two senior lead officers assigned to Sun Valley.

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AXEL KOESTER For The Times

Young tenants of Strathern Park Apartments shoot baskets at one of several courts inside the Sun Valley complex.

PRAISE: Residents Give Views

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"It was the pits," he said. "But when they built the apartments, they got rid of the problem."

There are about 40,000 government-assisted units for low- and moderate-income residents in the city of Los Angeles, including Strathern Park, said John McCoy, director of housing for the Community Redevelopment Agency. They make up about 3% of the 1,210,819 housing units in the city, he said.

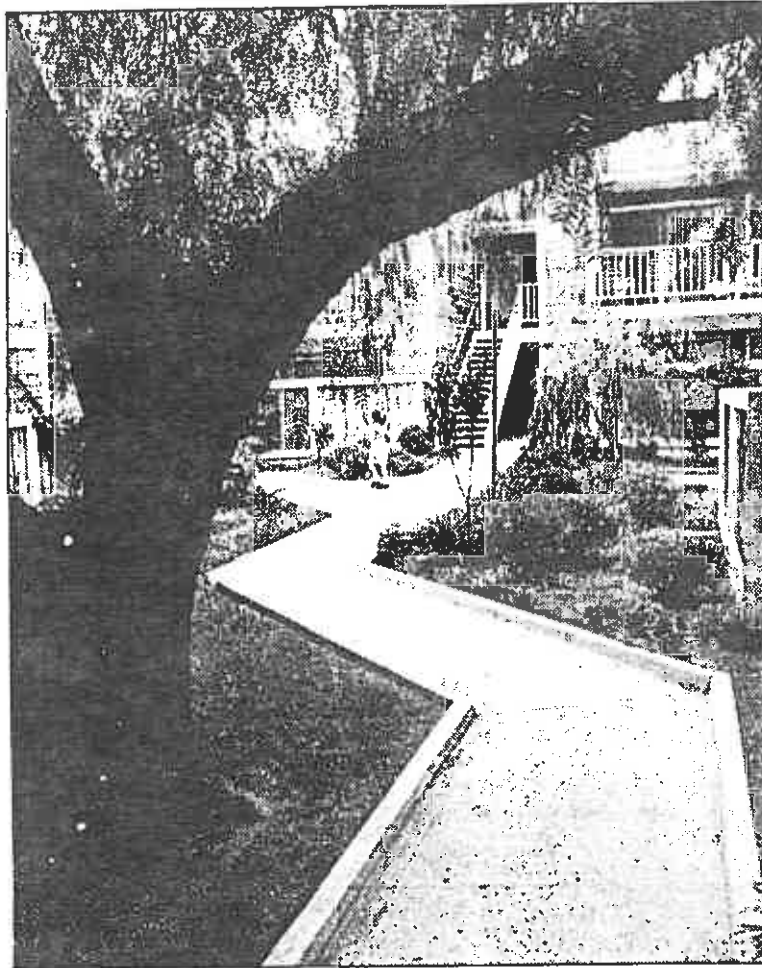
Other low-income housing projects in the city also have low crime rates, but Strathern Park is unusually attractive, McCoy said.

The apartments in Strathern Park are available only to those who earn 60% or less, depending on family size, of the annual median family income in Los Angeles County, which is \$42,300, said Maya Dunne, director of the policy unit for the Los Angeles Housing Preservation and Production Department. A family of four, for instance, cannot earn more than \$28,140 when they move into the complex, she said.

Strathern Park would not be reserved for low-income tenants if not for a shooting in Sun Valley Park in the mid-1980s, developer Tom Safran said. The shooting caused a key lender to back out of a deal to build market-rate apartments on the site, prompting Safran to seek government funding in addition to private financing.

Working with architect Dan Withee, Safran designed the complex with an emphasis on family living. Four playgrounds equipped with colorful slides and jungle gyms, shaded by leafy pepper trees, form central courtyards around which 18 buildings are clustered.

The complex was designed with-



Many mature pepper trees were saved and grace interior walkways.

out interior hallways, thus discouraging drug dealers and other troublemakers from congregating, Safran said.

Each upstairs unit has a balcony and each first-floor apartment has a fenced-in patio, which offer views of many of the 19 trees that Safran saved.

"We tried to put the emphasis on light and air," said Safran, whose firm also manages the project.

Only one family has been evicted (for not paying rent) since the complex opened in December, and there is a list of more than 300 people waiting to move in, Safran said. The screening process includes a home visit by resident

managers Phil and Cheryl Eddy, he said.

"We can always tell if they just cleaned up their house before we came, or if they are the kind of people who will keep the complex nice," Phil Eddy said.

Cesar and Clelia Elias passed the test with flying colors. But their new two-bedroom apartment is much easier to keep clean than their \$600-a-month studio apartment in North Hollywood, said Cesar, who works two jobs as a security guard and janitor. They now pay \$394 in rent.

"It's amazing what this kind of housing does for people like us," said Cesar Elias, 21. "We're actually saving money."