Valencia Gardens
An Unsettled Community within an Architectural Legacy

Nick Griffin
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Dolores Streets in 1783. The friars who oversaw the Mission used the subjugated Costanoan Indians to work the surrounding lands, primarily to grow wheat and raise livestock.

In the early 19th century, Mexican and Spanish ranchers had their homes in the immediate area. The names of these families, Guerrero, Noe, and Valencia, amongst others, live on in street names. The wide street and block in front of the Mission was known as the Quadrangle and was the scene of many festivities and parties. Dances, horse races, bullfights and “bear-and-bull fights” took place there as well as open-air markets.

In 1822 Mexico gained independence from Spain and secularized the mission system. Much of the missions’ land was turned over to private owners. Even church services at Mission Dolores dwindled. By 1849, the Mission itself was taken over by squatters who set up a brewery, doctor’s office, gambling hall, and hotel on the site. It was not until later that Catholic immigrants revived services in the Mission.¹

By the mid-1840s, Anglo-Americans outnumbered Spaniards and Mexicans in California. The Mexican American War of 1848 resulted in Mexico ceding California to the United States. After the war, Captain John Fremont, who in 1847 provoked the war by claiming an independent California in Sonoma, lived with his family in a cabin near what is now 14th Street, between Valencia and Mission Streets.

The Gold Rush drastically changed San Francisco as the population jumped from 1,000 to 34,000 from 1848 to 1850.² A plank road was built in 1850 to connect the Mission to Portsmouth Square, then the center of town. This further opened up the area for residential and commercial development. Additionally, the district became a recreation area for the downtown denizens. Bars, gambling dens, and dance halls sprang up in the area to serve the gold miners.

² Waldhorn, 3.
The former farmlands near the Mission were developed into outdoor entertainment establishments, pleasure gardens, hotels and even country cottages for San Franciscans who wanted to remove themselves from the noisy, congested downtown. Directly next to Mission Dolores was Witzelben's brewery. Further south were two racetracks, the Union and the Pioneer, and on Mission Street between 18th and 19th Streets was The Willows, one of San Francisco's first pleasure gardens.

In the 1850s and 60s, improved transportation technology brought further development to the area around 15th and Valencia Streets. In 1863 horse-drawn rail car service went from the waterfront out Valencia to 25th Street. This was followed by streetcars in 1866. A grid street pattern was laid out in the "Mission Addition" in the 60s and 70s. With these improvements in place the Mission District experienced a construction boom. By the 1890s, the basic land-use patterns were established and the area was mostly built-out. Mission, Valencia and 16th Streets were established as mixed-use commercial and residential strips. Medical institutions also settled in the healthy climes of the Mission District. The Deaf and Dumb Asylum was built in the early 1860s at the corner of Mission and 15th Streets.

During these years, the land bounded by 15th and 14th and Valencia and Guerrero Streets was used for vegetable gardens.
Woodward's Gardens

An important San Francisco institution resided in the land adjacent to the future site of Valencia Gardens. Woodward's Gardens was opened in 1866 by Samuel Woodward, owner of the famous What Cheer House hotel. Woodward's Gardens came a few years after the Willows and another pleasure garden, Russ Gardens. It was located on four acres centered on 14th and Valencia Streets. The Gardens contained a baseball diamond, a dance hall and amphitheater that seated 5,000, a lake with boat rentals, a roller-skating rink, a restaurant, a conservatory, a zoo, an aquarium, and a museum of "miscellany," amongst other attractions.3

Woodward's Gardens started losing business in the 1870s after the opening of Golden Gate Park; San Francisco residents then had a free municipal park in which to find green, open space. Woodward's Gardens eventually closed in 1892.4 The City bought the land from Woodward's Gardens to build the brick State Armory and Arsenal Building, formerly know as the National Guard Armory, in 1914. This move, however, was viewed critically in subsequent years: "It will be ever to the discredit of the city government that it allowed this tract to be cut up into thrown lots. In these later days, the site would have provided a fine breathing space in one of the most congested parts of the City."5

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4 Max Kirkeberg, San Francisco State University, class notes, Spring 1997.
Recreation Park

The lot at 15th and Valencia became Recreation Park, a professional baseball field, after the earthquake and fire of 1906. Recreation Park followed a lineage of 19th century San Francisco ballparks. The first enclosed ballpark on the West Coast was built in San Francisco in 1868 at the intersection of 25th and Folsom Streets in the Mission District. In 1885 Central Park opened at 8th and Mission Streets. The original Recreation Park then followed in 1897 at 8th and Harrison Streets and lasted until it was destroyed by the fire of 1906. The last incarnation of Recreation Park opened in March 1907 at 15th and Valencia Streets, the future site of Valencia Gardens. San Franciscans came to call it "Old Rec".

Opening Day for Old Rec attracted more than 10,000 fans. By 1913, however, the park was already considered inadequate because of its shoddy construction. A new park, Ewing Field, was built for the 1914 season on Masonic Avenue in the Richmond. Fog quickly doomed this park and the Seals moved back to a remodeled Recreation Park for the 1915 season. Despite the remodeling, local sportswriters joked that the park was "being built of warped lumber and hazardous chicken wire." R. Scott Mackey, author of Barbary Baseball: The Pacific Coast League of the 1920s, characterized Recreation Park as "ramshackle" and as a "dilapidated bandbox". Jerry Flamm, in his book Good Life in Hard Times, referred to Recreation Park as "rickety" and wrote, "its structures may have creaked when the wind came up." Despite this, Flamm also says the park had an "intimacy

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7 James Joseph McSweeney, "The Development of San Francisco and the San Francisco Seals from 1918 to 1931" (Masters Thesis, San Jose State University, 1991), pp. 149-151.
and warmth” and was “the focal point for much of the City’s sports action.”

In 1918, the “Valencia Street Vanderbilts” bought the controlling ownership in the San Francisco Seals, the city’s Pacific Coast League baseball team. The ownership group earned this nickname because of the obvious reference to industrialist Cornelius Vanderbilt as well as the location of the Seals’ offices, then housed at Recreation Park.

The Pacific Coast League shut down during World War I as players either joined the Army or worked in essential wartime industries. The owners of Recreation Park still had to pay the rent so they organized city and industrial leagues that were held at the ballpark. These leagues were well received by the public.

During the 1920s and early 30s, San Francisco had virtually continuous baseball as the San Francisco Missions, a team purchased by banker Herbert Fleishhacker and moved from Vernon, California to the city, joined the Seals at Recreation Park. At the time the season extended into the early winter and had as many as 225 games. The Missions and Seals shared Recreation Park, one team playing at home while the other was away on road trips. In the off-season city industrial leagues and barnstorming professional teams played in Recreation Park. Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth performed in exhibition games before thousands of fans.

Recreation Park sat approximately 16,500 around three sides of the field with home plate being at the corner of 15th and Valencia. Along the left field fence were 20 or so rows of bleachers.

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10 McSweeney, 82.
11 McSweeney, 91.
12 McSweeney, 122.
13 McSweeney, 130.
The distance for a home run was only 311 feet to left but the low bleacher wall allowed the winds to come in and prevented many home runs. Right field was very shallow, only 235 feet. To increase the challenge for left-handed batters, a fifty-foot high screen was mounted on top of the wooden fence. Forty or so rows of additional bleachers ran down the left field foul line, separated from the main grandstand by chicken wire. In deep center field there was a clubhouse, a "ramshackle, wooden cottage with a peaked roof, and two floors for the players' dressing rooms and lockers."  

A former player said of the clubhouse, "I've seen barns that were just as good."  

Along the center field fence were several signs and figures that served as targets for potential home run hitters. To the right of the center field clubhouse was a wooden cut-out figure of a bull from a Bull Durham tobacco ad. On the right field fence was a sign of a man’s head for Tom Dillon’s hat store on Market Street near Third. 

Beyond the screen, outside the park, were some of the best seats for games atop the neighboring buildings' roofs and back porches on 14th Street between Valencia and Guerrero. Kids waited out on Valencia and 15th Streets to catch foul balls that left the park. The Seals, however, had a system set up by which they would sound a buzzer to indicate to a worker on which street the ball would land. This ball “hawk” was responsible for retrieving the ball. 

An infamous part of Recreation Park was the Booze Cage. The Booze Cage consisted of eight rows of wooden bench field level seats enclosed in chicken wire that ran from first base to home plate and around to third base. The seats were only fifteen feet from the base lines. Before Prohibition, a Booze Cage seat and a shot of whiskey cost 75 cents. During Prohibition, despite being illegal, the liquor flowed just as

\[14\] Flamm, 64.  
[16] Flamm, 63.
easily.\textsuperscript{17} The crowds in the Booze Cage were notorious for their rowdy behavior. Carl Dittmar, shortstop for the Seals in 1927, described Recreation Park and the Booze Cage:

Recreation Park was a big wooden structure. The first time I played there I thought the outfield fences were awfully close. I remember the Booze Cage. We had to walk past it to get our bats. It was just a screen, chicken wire, you know, in front of the fans and they used to throw dirt at us and call us everything. It was mostly all men as I recall, drinking, hollering and carrying on. They gave everybody a bad time, not just the visiting team, but they were not too hard on me when I played for the Seals.\textsuperscript{18}

In addition to the Booze Cage there was an acknowledged and unofficially permitted gambling section in the upper unreserved grandstand seats above first base.

The attendance record for Recreation Park was set on September 11, 1927 for Lefty O’Doul Day, honoring the Seals pitcher/oufielder who later managed the Seals for sixteen years. Approximately 18,000 fans were in attendance, 8,000 of these kids admitted for free.

The Seals’ success during the 1920s ultimately led to calls for a new baseball stadium. The 1928 team was called “the greatest minor league team of all time” and it was felt such a team deserved a stadium more becoming of such accolades. Recreation Park was so poorly received that people wrote letters to the editor of the Chronicle calling for a new park:

It is very embarrassing to have our friends and relatives visit us, tout the town, show them the excellent things San Francisco has and then listen to their remarks subsequent to a visit to the ballpark. The State leagues of Iowa or Minnesota would not tolerate such a disgrace. Very truly.

Edwin L. Jones, 2350 Union Street\textsuperscript{19}

Another letter from that same year, 1928, referred to the park as a “rat trap.”\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} Mackey, 90.\\
\textsuperscript{18} Mackey, 180.\\
\textsuperscript{15} McSweeney, 137.\\
\end{flushright}
The Seals' owners had originally wanted to buy up the entirety of the block bounded by 14th and 15th Streets and Guerrero and Valencia in order to build a new stadium. This effort was complicated by the church on 14th Street that had a covenant in the estate that forbid the land from being used for purposes other than religious services.

This fact contributed to the team purchasing land for a new stadium at 16th and Bryant Streets in January 1925. Fans hoped the team would move into a new stadium for the 1926 season. Ownership, however, made it clear things would not proceed so quickly. The team's lease at Recreation Park ran through 1936 and this presented an obstacle. Legal and financial considerations delayed the process and the stock market crash of 1929 complicated matters even more.

The last game played at Recreation Park was in October 1930, an exhibition game that followed that year's World Series. The team started the 1931 season at the new Seals Stadium. The land at 15th and Valencia was now ready to accommodate a new use. Nonetheless, it would take more than a decade for Valencia Gardens to open for occupancy.

![Figure 10 Recreation Park.](image)

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20 McSweeney, 157.
Early Public Housing Design

The federally funded housing projects developed in the late 30s and early 40s followed European planning and design practices that were then being trumpeted by Catherine Bauer. William Wurster's design for Valencia Gardens incorporated these ideas into one of the country's first large-scale, urban public housing projects.

The dominating philosophy in public housing design was to create abundant open and green spaces; allow for plenty of sunshine and ventilation; eliminate traffic from living and circulation areas; and, to design for visual supervision to create safe environments for children. The use of large lots, or assembled parcels, was to allow for building on a large scale to design communities rather than simply freestanding buildings. In regards to the specific architectural style being employed, the European model of a "sleek, functional International styling" was followed.

This school of thought called for breaking from the established grid street pattern to create "super-blocks." The traditional manner of siting housing on the grid was criticized: "The houses on these lots symbolized a narrow way of life." By 1945, Bauer wrote, "The fresh concept of neighborhood planning on the basis of a 'super-block' with open space designed for varied use, however elementary in public housing practice, is already having a wider influence."

The goal of this philosophy was to affect the quality of peoples' lives through design. The San Francisco Planning and Housing Association published a survey of San Francisco public housing that said, "though esthetics are less important than livability they nevertheless have an inestimable value in creating morale and interest in the good things of life." In discussing Peralta Villa, a contemporary of Valencia Gardens, the Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey wrote, "Housing built during this period represented a radically new approach not only to the design and building of housing, but also to the social engineering of entire neighborhoods."

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22 City of Oakland, Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey, Historic Resources Inventory, Serial Number: A-228, p.8.
26 City of Oakland, 2.
Early Public Housing in San Francisco

The San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA) was created in 1938 by a resolution of the Board of Supervisors. The Board was responding to the mandate set forth in the United States Housing Act of 1937. The Act’s main goal was to decentralize federal responsibility and authority over public housing provision. It called for the establishment of local housing authorities; the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority and the New York City Housing Authority were two of the first of these, established in 1935. By 1940 there were over 500 such local authorities. These local authorities were to replace direct federal involvement in construction and ownership by themselves building, owning and operating public housing, with federal subsidies. The Act also linked the creation of low-income housing to slum clearance.

Valencia Gardens was the fourth housing project developed by SFHA. Holly Park was the first, completed in 1940. Potrero Terraces and Sunnydale followed in 1941. Valencia Gardens was put out to bid in 1939 but construction was not completed until 1943.

Despite the legislative authority, acquiring the necessary land for Valencia Gardens was challenging. The specific site was obtained because it was the only parcel within that crowded portion of the Mission District that could be purchased for a price in line with federal guidelines. The site’s acquisition was heatedly contested at public hearings of the Board of Supervisors and special hearings were repeatedly called for at the weekly meetings of the Commission of the Housing Authority. A mayoral appointee to the Commission, E.N. Ayer, fiercely opposed the purchase of the land at 15th and Valencia. Alice Griffiths, a commissioner at the time, recalled that, “All efforts on the part of friends of good housing to support the decision of the Authority were denounced by him (Ayers) as utterances of Communists.” Then Commission chairman, Marshall Dill, and allies such as Griffiths staunchly countered such opposition from within the Commission to Housing Authority policy and saw through the decision to purchase the land at 15th and Valencia.

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William Wurster and Valencia Gardens

Valencia Gardens was William Wurster’s first public housing commission. According to Gwendolyn Wright, Wurster pursued the commission simply because he needed work. This is inconsistent, however, with Wurster’s demonstrated interest in such projects. Wurster had toured Europe in 1937 with landscape architect Thomas Church and his wife and they had investigated social housing projects in Denmark, Sweden and Germany. Wright acknowledges Wurster was influenced by this trip in her list of the cultural sources apparent in the Valencia Gardens design:

a close approximation of the efficient unit plans for Ernst May’s Frankfurt Siedhungen; an appreciation of the lyrical spatial organization in Scandinavian cooperative housing, which Wurster had recently visited; and allusions to the smooth brightly tinted walls and spacious courtyards of the Mexican vernacular, evoking the heritage of Latino residents in the surrounding neighborhood.

Wurster received the commission for Valencia Gardens in 1939. This project would be Wurster’s first in multi-family housing and his largest urban project yet.

Wurster was also clearly influenced by Catherine Bauer who he would marry in 1940. Wurster’s travels in Europe to look at housing followed Baur’s own trip of a few years earlier and her subsequent writings on the matter. Wurster’s partner in later years, Donn Emmons, commented that Bauer, “made a liberal out of him.” After their marriage in 1940, Wurster went on to build more large multi-family public housing. Following Valencia Gardens, Wurster designed approximately 5,000 units in the Vallejo and Sacramento areas, most notably Carquinez Heights in 1941. Regarding Bauers’ impact upon Wurster, Gwendolyn Wright wrote, “Mutual friends agree that she undeniably politicized him; Wurster’s projects and pedagogy after 1940 are infused with Bauer’s social and political aspirations.”

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31 Wright, 187.
33 Wright, 189.
Valencia Gardens Construction

Preliminary planning for Valencia Gardens began in 1939. Construction proceeded before and during the war with interruptions as materials became unavailable. The project was completed in the spring of 1943. The 246 total units were sited on 4.96 acres, with 27 percent building coverage of the project site. The total land cost was $230,000, the construction cost $997,000, and the San Francisco Housing Authority's loan contract with USHA was for $1,129,000.

Valencia Garden's building coverage was lower than its antecedent, Holly Courts, the first SFHA project. This was achieved because Valencia Gardens built upward in order to create more open space for gardens and playgrounds. Valencia Gardens also had the higher density, 49.6 as compared to Holly Courts' 44 dwelling units to the acre. This is because Valencia Gardens was the first apartment development, as compared to the previous developments which were essentially row houses.

Valencia Gardens has 114 one bedroom, 102 two bedroom and 30 three bedroom units laid out in 22 three-story buildings. Concerned about San Francisco's cold northerly wind, Wurster wrapped the building blocks in a serpentine pattern to create three southern-facing courtyards.

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34 Housing Authority of the City and County of San Francisco, Sixth Annual Report, 1944.
35 Housing Authority of the City and County of San Francisco, Fourth Annual Report, 1942.
36 San Francisco Planning and Housing Association, 8.
and two service courts. Running these spaces north and south reduces shade. The southern facing courtyards open onto 15th Street, providing access to that cross street. The northern-facing service areas house two “drying yards” and a play area. These open onto the parking area that runs the width of the northerly end. Thomas Church designed the garden courtyards as play and social areas with raised planting beds with brick retaining walls that doubled as benches. Sculptures by Benny Bufano, created as part of the Works Projects Administration, were added to the courtyards soon after construction and remain there.

The buildings are of poured-in-place concrete and consist of eight different plan types and their reverse plans. Each building is 27 feet wide with an off-center row of interior columns to permit flexibility in the use of the spaces. The larger buildings have two stairwells and a transverse concrete wall divides the buildings into two units each. The stairs are enclosed in concrete and separate the dwelling units from one another. Units that are entered from the balcony also have a transverse wall separating the units. These balconies are seen as an amenity but with the trade-off of a loss of privacy as they are also public hallways.

Pencil Points, in 1944, reported that the six more units were to be built on the corner of Guerrero and 15th once the small apartment building there was demolished. This parcel has never been acquired and the building still stands.

![Figure 12 Remaining building at corner of Guerrero and 15th Street.](image)
World War II delayed the construction of Valencia Gardens. Many of the slum clearance projects initiated under the USHA came to be seen as part of the war effort. In 1940, President Roosevelt signed a bill authorizing the USHA and local authorities to build housing for the families of enlisted men as well as for workers engaged in essential wartime industries. The federal Defense Housing Coordinator then requested that such properties be made available to defense workers. This clarified what, at the time, was a controversy over who Valencia Gardens' tenants would be. The project had been intended for local low-income families, of which there was an extensive waiting list. These families were then superseded by war workers, and, as Wurster noted, "probably only in-migrant workers at that."  

Ironically, a 1946 survey discovered that, by virtue of being military personnel, the residents of Valencia Gardens were unsatisfied with living there. They would rather have been purchasing their own homes but because of wartime slowdown in new construction they were unable. This made the residents feel "entirely impermanent."  

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37 Griffiths, 8.
39 San Francisco Planning and Housing Association, 26.
Reviews of Valencia Gardens

Wurster’s design of Valencia Gardens was, for the most part, well received at the time. The most extensive review of the project was in the January 1944 issue of Pencil Points. The article says Valencia Gardens meets expectations and that an important aspect of the project was the “essential humanity of the basic scheme.” This is represented by a quote from the architects:

Early in the design we agreed to do all we could to stress the dignity of the individual. There would be no emphasis on the great axis which would only serve to show how small each family was in the sum total... Each living room has a window with a low sill, and a railing for security, so that a mother may look down into the garden, or to see her children... For the same reason we painted portions of the buildings in different colors, so that the immensity might be reduced, and at the same time the whole might be lively and gay.

Regarding the individual units, Pencil Points described them as “individualized.” The article quotes the architects as saying, “we always designed each idea or phase as if we, personally, were to live there; or as if it were for our most tony clients.” Pencil Points also praises the colors and materials utilized as well as the layouts of the apartments and common areas.

Pencil Points concludes that Valencia Gardens is “one of the true architectural expressions of our time – a set of buildings humbly conceived in the idea that human beings are human, and deserve a dignified human environment in which to live.”

Figure 14 Courtyard with Befaio sculpture, early 1940s.

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40 Pencil Points, 26.
41 Pencil Points, 32.
42 Pencil Points, 34.
A survey of pre-World War II architecture by the Museum of Modern Art of New York, included Valencia Gardens. The entry reads:

Outstanding among urban housing schemes for its easy livability and the logic of its site plan, Valencia Gardens has little of the institutional atmosphere which haunts many of the others. The occasional starkness of the facades makes the general cheerfulness all the more remarkable.43

The laudatory nature of such national reviews was not always equaled by the reception at home.

The San Francisco Planning and Housing Association reviewed Valencia Gardens and was not so positive. The Association criticized the design for being “heavy.” The project was seen as large in scale as well as size. Details, such as concrete balustrades and overhanging cornices, are “as heavy as the elemental forms of the buildings.”44

The San Francisco Planning and Housing Association also echoed a consistent commentary about Valencia Gardens -- the abundance of paved space. Church’s raised grassy areas succeed in breaking up the space and give the impression of having ample green space. Nonetheless, the Association reported that:

a pedestrian walking through the five courts is more impressed with the quantity of pavement than with the garden area. Probably it is fair to say that the remarkable thing about the gardens is that they exist at all in this part of town, for amazingly this project which is called a garden, seems less so than any of the others.45

And, “the interesting pavement and island planting is in itself good but so divorced from the buildings as to lose its effectiveness.”46

These early reviews of Valencia Gardens were within the context of the styles and concerns of the day. As the project aged and social conditions changed, public perception of the complex changed considerably.

44 San Francisco Planning and Housing Association, 8.
45 San Francisco Planning and Housing Association, 8.
46 San Francisco Planning and Housing Association, 10.
Valencia Gardens Today

Marc Trieb, in his book The Everyday Modernism: The Houses of William Wurster, wrote, “the architecture of Valencia Gardens was as severe as a Wurster building would ever get.” Trieb’s 1995 assessment and use of the word “severe” could be used to summarize the general perception of Valencia Gardens in the 80s and 90s, and not solely in regard to the architectural merits of the project.

News articles of the day refer to Valencia Gardens as “fearsome-looking” and “notorious as one of the city's most dangerous and dirty housing complexes.” It was characterized by “the run-down apartments and barren, crime-ridden courtyards that have long defined this dingy public housing.”

Conditions were described in another article: “Drug dealers lurking in every hallway. Drive-by shootings so frequent children hardly dare go outside. Lazy, alcoholic bums loitering under trees.”

In 1988, a federal report maintained the San Francisco Housing Authority had “virtually lost control of eleven of its projects, including Valencia Gardens.” Then in March 1996, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) took over management of the Housing Authority’s properties claiming mismanagement by the agency and deplorable conditions in a majority of the agencies projects.

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Crime statistics confirm the perception of Valencia Gardens as being a haven for crime. In 1996, the project had 883 criminal acts per thousand individuals as compared to 339 in the Mission District and 186 for the city overall.\textsuperscript{52}

Deteriorating conditions, both physical and social, have been addressed over the years by the Housing Authority. Much of the work undertaken was for “modernization,” appropriate given the housing’s age. Other projects were to address safety concerns. A partial list of projects, as cited in Housing Authority records, follows:

1978 Windows and Exterior Building Painting Modernization
1986 Fire Protection Sprinkler System
1987 Rehabilitate Heating Systems
1987 Security Lighting
1990 Rehabilitate Heating Systems
1993 Entry Buzzer System
1993 Kitchen Renovation
1993 Paving Repairs
1997 Security Fencing

To address the deteriorating physical conditions at Valencia Gardens, and hopefully the social ones as well, the San Francisco Housing Authority received a $23 million HOPE VI Revitalization grant from HUD in 1997. HOPE VI was passed into law in 1993 and calls for “a full transformation of the nation's most distressed public housing projects - places that have been both physically and socially devastated by extraordinary concentrations of poverty, and years of disinvestment.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{52} Mission Housing Development Corporation, \textit{Valencia Gardens HOPE VI Application} (San Francisco, 1997).
HUD has collaborated with the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) to develop criteria by which communities receive HOPE VI funds and to guide their revitalization efforts with “good design principles.” This thinking views the neighborhood as critical to creating healthy cities and communities. Design and place-making need to be incorporated into the HOPE VI revitalization process. The language is strikingly similar to the design philosophies Catherine Bauer championed and William Wurster practiced. Yet HOPE VI is intended to address the conditions that have been attributed to the “severe” design of Valencia Gardens.

Mission Housing Development Corporation (MHDC) was selected to implement the HOPE VI renovation of Valencia Gardens. Distinct from other HOPE VI projects in San Francisco, Valencia Gardens will be renovated, not demolished and then reconstructed. This decision was made because of Valencia Gardens’ history and architectural design. MHDC plans to renovate the current 246 units and create a total of 320 units of housing at two sites, 260 at the current site and 60 new units at a nearby site. MHDC’s proposal runs counter to most HOPE VI initiatives in that it will increase density. But this also addresses a major criticism of HOPE VI, that it is reducing the number of federal public housing units.

Figure 17 Proposed HOPE VI renovation site plan, 1997.

MHDC’s HOPE VI application describes the “many positive aspects of the design and open space that make the project a good candidate for renovation.” Amongst these, “the existing buildings have inherent characteristics which make site plan improvement simple, yet effective.” MHDC proposes to construct infill buildings to break down the larger open spaces to create smaller ‘communities’ and to update the existing buildings. The application states, “Wurster designed the elevations with a rhythm and order that can be enhanced with simple architectural manipulation of the site.”

The decision by SFHA and MHDC to renovate Valencia Gardens presents difficulties, however. HUD is skeptical of the project’s ability to bring out the New Urbanist principles that drive HOPE VI. This difference in opinion between the local and federal authorities has led to delays in the process. SFHA and MHDC are committed to rehab in order to minimize, if not avoid, the relocation of the current residents; the relocation of residents in previous San Francisco HOPE VI projects has earned the Authority much criticism and controversy.

The San Francisco Housing Authority is also concerned about Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. This legislation requires agencies using federal funds to ascertain the impact of their project on historic properties. The San Francisco Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board, by granting Valencia Gardens protected status, could trigger this process and require SFHA to undertake Section 106 review, a process that would add further delays to the renovation of Valencia Gardens.

A Historic Building Assessment undertaken by Carey & Co. found Valencia Gardens to constitute a district that appears to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The report found the project to probably be significant under Criterion A, because of its place in the social and architectural history of public housing, and under Criterion C, because it is the work of a prominent architect, landscape architect and sculptor.

55 Mission Housing Development Corporation, 21.
Valencia Gardens Tomorrow

The city block that is today the home of Valencia Gardens has always been out of sync with its surroundings. As San Francisco grew in the nineteenth century this parcel was used for vegetable gardening while the blocks around it were built-out for residential, commercial, and industrial uses. Then following the earthquake and fire of 1906, a time of rebuilding throughout the city, this block still eluded contextual development – it was used for a baseball stadium.

The construction of the Valencia Gardens public housing in the early 1940s gave this block a use that conformed with its neighboring blocks. Nonetheless, the housing took a form, both through its siting and architectural design, that still maintained a degree of incompatibility with its surroundings. Compounded by social conditions that have, conclusively or not, been blamed on the project’s design, the Valencia Gardens block is still an aberration within its neighborhood.

It remains to be seen if Mission Housing Development Corporation and the San Francisco Housing Authority can successfully execute the HOPE VI renovation of Valencia Gardens. If they manage to create a healthier community and one that is integrated into the larger neighborhood, they will have achieved for this San Francisco block something that has eluded it for the previous three centuries.

Figure 18 Courtyard, 2000.
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Figure 1  The California Missions: A Pictorial History. Menlo Park: Lane Book Co., 1964.

Figure 2  San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Figure 3  San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Figure 4  San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Figure 5  San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Figure 6  James Joseph McSweeney. “The Development of San Francisco and the San Francisco Seals from 1918 to 1931.” Masters Thesis, San Jose State University, 1991.


Figure 8  Jerry Flamm. Good Life in Hard Times: San Francisco’s ‘20s and ‘30s. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1978.

Figure 9  Flamm.

Figure 10  Mackey.

Figure 11  Pencil Points. “Valencia Gardens.” January 1944.

Figure 12  Photo by author.

Figure 13  Elizabeth Mock, editor. Built in USA: 1932-1944. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1944.

Figure 14  Mock.

Figure 15  Photo by author.

Figure 16  Photo by author.

Figure 17  San Francisco Legacy: Valencia Gardens, CD-rom. 1997.

Figure 18  Photo by author.