

# HING WAH YUEN

## Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### *A Case Study*



#### **THE CHALLENGE**

Hing Wah Yuen lives up to its name, which translates as “Prosperous Chinese Garden.” It dramatically demonstrates how homes within reach of working families can expand and revitalize a unique community, while turning “unusable” land into an urban oasis.

In the decade prior to Hing Wah Yuen’s construction in 1998, Chinatown’s population had tripled within the confines of a cramped, seven-block neighborhood. Nearly a quarter of its land had been lost to construction of an expressway, convention center, and other urban renewal projects.

The only option for Chinatown’s expansion was northward across the expressway, where a patchwork of properties owned by municipal, state and federal agencies had lain vacant for 30 years. The only viable institutions adjoining the site were Holy Redeemer Church and School, both of which only narrowly escaped demolition thanks to the creation of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation. According to the church’s pastor, Reverend Tom Betz, it was a “no man’s land – dangerous, desolate, and miserable...If we didn’t build a real neighborhood, we didn’t have a future.”

City officials wanted to move displaced residents out of Chinatown. But “our families have been here since 1860,” says Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation founding board member Cecilia Yep, “and we won’t leave...We’re the Chinese Alamo.”

#### **THE SOLUTION**

■ **Affordability:** Hing Wah Yuen is a mixed-income community. On average, residents pay 28.9 percent of their income for housing. Market-rate units were sold for an average of \$153,000, while affordable units ranged from \$56,000 to \$86,000. Deed restrictions require owners to sell at the same price for 15 years. No foreclosures have occurred, and no affordable units have been resold. Market-rate re-sales carry five-year restrictions and only two have occurred.

■ **Financing:** The public-private partnership for the \$7 million project included grants from city, state and federal entities, as well as a three-year real estate tax abatement from the city. PNC Bank and other private lenders provided construction loans and

mortgage financing. Units were pre-sold (with a back-up list) before construction, and settlements were completed in three or four days. Market-rate units were built first, with proceeds used to help fund the subsidized units. By the time construction began on the affordable units, a major portion of construction costs had already been paid off. When the rest went to settlement, the entire loan was paid.

■ **Land Use/Design:** It took seven years for the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation to acquire the land from local, state and federal agencies. Land on top of commuter rail tunnels was used for gardens and parking, serving as a bridge to the northern streets that are part of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation's long-term revitalization plans. Fifty-one units are arranged in clusters that face a park-like center, where a gazebo provides a vantage for watching the children's play areas. Hing Wah Yuen combines dramatic views of the city skyline with a green, suburb-like setting that is unique for Chinatown and most of the central city. For the structures themselves, Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation avoided an "artificial" Asian motif and built in the style of traditional Philadelphia townhouses. Chinese influence is subtly added at the entrance by a large stone and traditional wooden gate. Noise was reduced by installing triple-pane windows and placing bedrooms away from the freeway. The exteriors of the affordable and market-rate homes are indistinguishable.

## **THE IMPACT**

Hing Wah Yuen has "transformed the area," notes Reverend Betz, "making it safer and serving as a catalyst for other kinds of growth." The revitalized Chinatown now has genuine synergy with the nearby convention center and hotel complexes, while emerging as the cultural, social and commercial hub for Chinese throughout the region. Hing Wah Yuen "changed the whole perception of this area," notes Chin, "and made Chinatown viable as a tourist destination in its own right...Before, you couldn't get anyone to cross the expressway. Now for-profit developers are building homes here that start at \$400,000 and commercial investment will surge in two or three years." "We now have a real opportunity for a breakthrough in terms of sophistication and multiculturalism," says Mike Maffei, the avidly pro-gentrification owner of a nearby Italian restaurant.