

Plaza del Sol

San Francisco, CA

Biography

Project Type: Single family attached housing (rowhouse, townhouse),
Multi-unit housing, mixed use development (e.g. commercial/residential)
Project Context: Urban
Completion: 1994
Budget: Confidential
Building Size: 85,000 square feet
Cost per Square Foot: ~\$88 USD

The Plaza de Sol is a project that embodies a number of good practices for anyone designing affordable housing units. The project was designed by Hood Miller Associated, Inc. and was developed by the Mission Housing Development Corporation in San Francisco. Embodying very successful space planning strategies, a vibrant materials palette, and several interior courtyards, Plaza de Sol provides its residents with a secure living environment that also supports family activities through design that encourages communal access to well designed outdoor spaces.

Context

The Plaza de Sol was designed with a goal of meeting very high aesthetic standards. Located in San Francisco, CA, Hood and the architectural team sought to make the aesthetics of this project indistinguishable from other market locations. Infusing the project with lots of artwork throughout the interior courtyards, the Plaza de Sol features a great deal of local artwork that reflects the Hispanic character of its surrounding buildings.

Hoods philosophy was that **art could be used as a way to transform some of the less desirable design elements** so that the buildings weave seamlessly throughout the project. In this instance, art is both aesthetic and functional. One motivating factor behind much of the art is that if the spaces were already decorated in a pleasing way, it would discourage graffiti.

In other areas the art and lively colors are used to incorporate more mundane design elements. The handicap ramp, for instance was transformed into the Paseo de Serpiente, a winding ramp of colored concrete. Similarly the project features what is named "The Bridge of Sighs", a screened bridge that not only offers interesting vistas into one of the courtyards, but also one of the main ways to access the fire escapes. Finally, the entry gate itself is also ornamented with a large metal sun sculpture as a means of providing essential security to the complex, but in a way that does not read as foreboding or uninviting. Hood mentioned that the last thing they wanted was for the project to look like a fortress.

Sustainability & Strategies

Hood sought to be economic in this project not only with material usage, but also with space layout. **One strategy used throughout the building was to not double-load any of the corridors or lobbies.** Thus, with a smaller area being dedicated to circulation, more than 85% of the housing is in net rentable areas. Like with other affordable projects studied, the architects chose to work in materials that were not initially cheapest, but offered the lowest maintenance cost to save money and preserve aesthetics over time. Some examples of this mindset of inexpensive, but attractive and durable were the landscape products used. **Hood utilized colored concrete** in much of the interior to achieve an extremely low landscaping budget. Despite a variety of interesting courtyards, colored and designed by local artists, the cost of landscaping was less than \$4/sf.

Other Strategies Used

- cost-effective construction practices
- volunteer labor
- permit fees waived
- contributed developer's
- tax credits, low interest loans
- financial subsidies

Social Services & Community.

It is my personal belief that one key facet currently lacking in affordable housing is the amount of social services offered. While providing an affordable and well-designed habitat for others is the primary goal of these projects, with a keen eye for design and a creative use of existing infrastructure and local organizations, we as designers have the ability to create **more than a home for the needy, we can create communities.** In the end, the community atmosphere of any affordable housing is one of the main contributors to the success or failure of any project. Despite the difficulty of creating such an ephemeral quality, the feeling of **"ownership"** and **"place"** within these projects has been shown to help deter crime and drug abuse, and contribute to less turnover of renters.

How does one establish a sense of "community"? One solution is to offer more social services to the tenants. Typically, housing is not the only need for those whose income falls well below the AMI of any given area. For single, working mothers, day cares and after-school programs can be provided so that kids can be ensured safety as well as development. This is precisely the model used at Plaza del Sol. The designers recognized that the services of a local teaching college could be cheaply utilized, allowing student teachers to arrive at 3PM in the Learning Room and teach "latch key" children. This provides the students with valuable experience and intern hours, while the children receive an education as their parents continue to work.

This is only one of many examples. One affordable multi-family home in Atlanta, GA catered to women and children with HIV/AIDS. Work development programs for the homeless are also common. Given the broad range of those requiring affordable housing and social service, from the former homeless to firefighters and teachers struggling to make a living, **incorporating a vision for a service-oriented project in the early stages of design can create a lasting impact,** offering some a helping hand and other an opportunity to get involved.

