

***Village Park: Site Planning for a Medium-Density, Low-Income Rental Project for Laotian Refugees in Sacramento, California***

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**Abstract**

*This study examines the planning for Village Park, a 50-unit, low-income townhouse project in Sacramento, California. The two main goals of the project were to create medium-density housing that incorporates some amenities of single-family residences desired by rental tenants and to balance assimilation of low-income refugee families into the larger community with maintenance of their traditional culture. The clients for the project, a group of Laotian families (Hmong and Mien), worked with the architect/author to ascertain their design priorities for rental housing. The goal of balancing community assimilation with cultural maintenance was achieved by creating an outward "street face" which conforms to typical Sacramento neighborhood appearance and an inward "village core" which supports traditional behaviors in a protected, interactive setting. The Village Park concept draws upon and reinforces the medium-density planning concepts by Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian (1986) and McCamant and Durrett (1988). Rapid growth in Hispanic and Southeast Asian populations, tremendous shortages in low-income housing, and rising land costs have dictated the need for more medium-density, low-income housing developments. At the same time, local resistance to concentrations of low-income residents has stalled housing efforts. The Village Park concept promotes attractive enclaves of housing that fit well with the surrounding community and an internal site design that provides enough space for a variety of residential activities based upon tenants' needs. Thus, the Village Park concept presents the new culture to the community in a worthy, less threatening manner, while respecting cultural maintenance and assimilation goals of its low-income residents.*

**Introduction**

Affordable housing for low-income families is at a critical point in California. The influx of Hispanic and Southeast Asian immigrants and the rise in homelessness are exerting tremendous pressures on the state's declining low-income housing stock. High land and infrastructure improvement costs are driving nonprofit housing developers out of the single-family, low-income housing market. Because they cannot keep pace with the need, nor compete with fair market developers for acquisition of high-cost land, low-income housing providers are beginning to look at medium-density, rental housing projects as an alternative housing form in order to provide a greater volume of housing with reduced land use. However, nonprofit housing agencies have serious concerns about the design suitability of medium-density housing as a family-living environment and about the acceptability of medium-density, low-income housing to the established community. Comparisons of housing quality between modest, self-help homes provided by nonprofit housing agencies and existing, low- and very low-income rental housing projects are not generally encouraging. Both housing tenants and communities at large place far higher value on single-family homes, no matter how modest, than they do on low-income apartment projects. Typically, basic site elements such as private yards, safe playground areas, site security and the quality of self-esteem that are assumed in

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single-family residences are lacking in most low-income housing projects.

Rural California Housing Corporation (RCHC), a nonprofit housing corporation located in Sacramento, California, has been debating the turn to higher density housing projects and has realized that it can only support a medium-density design approach that provides some of the amenities and social worthiness of single-family residences. RCHC decided to explore the potential of medium-density housing through the development of a 50-unit townhouse apartment project using a 4.2-acre site in north Sacramento. RCHC retained the assistance of the author, who would act as the architect, and a client group of Hmong and Mien refugees from Laos, who would be tenants in the constructed project. Realistically, the Laotian group was not the only client; the final design turned out to be a reasonably satisfactory compromise of goals between the Southeast Asian family group, RCHC, and the Planning Department of Sacramento with the architect serving as the balancing agent. The Hmong and Mien set forth their design priorities, which were then integrated with site constraints, RCHC's concerns for maximizing shared open space, and the city zoning and building requirements (Figure 1).

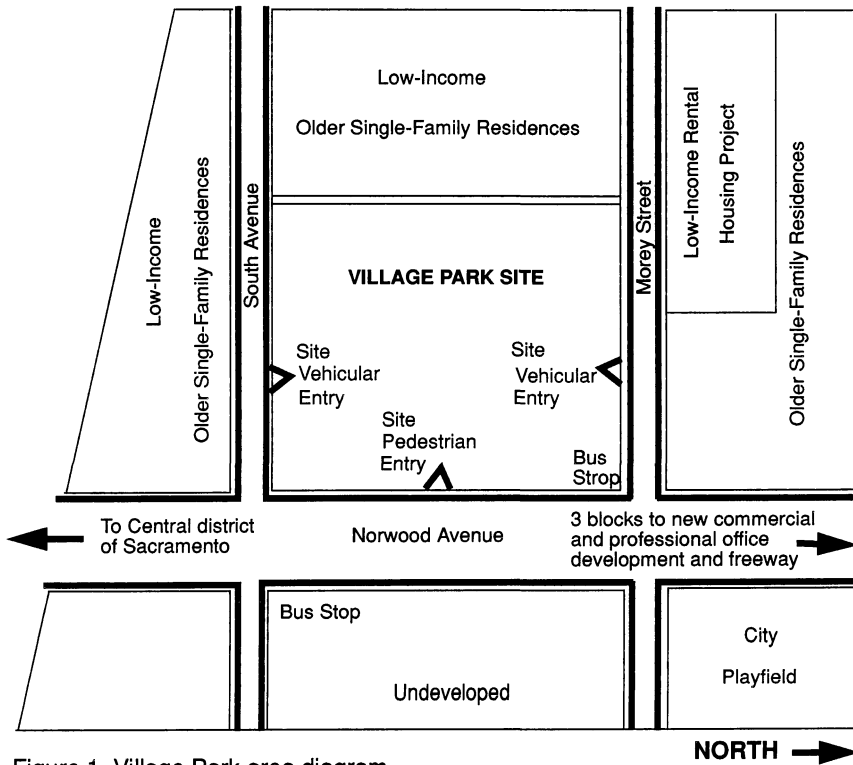


Figure 1. Village Park area diagram.

In addition to planning a medium-density project that could provide a positive family setting, the transition of immigrants from a rural, economically-impooverished background to the complex demands of life in California was a concern of the architect and RCHC. The generally accepted goals for new immigrants are that they find work to support their families, assimilate to a level that allows full participation in community life, ed-

ucate their children in order that they may attain higher economic achievement, and retain their cultural traditions and dignity. This process needs to occur within a context suitable for both the refugees and the general community. Supportive housing circumstances for refugee families, especially in the rental housing market, are critical to all aspects of cultural assimilation and community acceptance. This concern prompted particular sensitivity to tailoring the project to the Laotians' design criteria and to looking for an effective community fit for the housing.

This paper presents the site design priorities expressed by the Hmong and Mien refugee families and the manner in which their priorities were interpreted into the design of the townhouse project. Subsequent papers are planned to address the design of dwelling units for Hmong and Mien cultural patterns and post-occupancy evaluation of the completed project.

The design priorities expressed by the low-income client group were quite similar to many of the design guidelines stated by Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian (1986) in the low-income housing settings they studied and also have much in common with some co-housing concepts expressed by McCamant and Durrett (1988). The Village Park site concept, however, adds an additional design component that attempts to balance cultural maintenance with community assimilation by addressing the need for families to interact comfortably in a traditional manner while also providing a community-conforming appearance to the surrounding area.

### **Background**

Before proceeding with the design priorities of the Hmong and Mien, it is important to briefly discuss some of the issues relevant to understanding the three aspects of the project: (a) the site design, (b) the clients, and (c) the relation of this project to other current work on medium-density housing.

Medium-density housing in the North Sacramento Community Plan is defined as 11 to 24 dwelling units per acre. Village Park with 50 dwelling units on 4.2 acres is at the lowest end of this density scale. This factor is very important to the planning concept because it permits approximately 50 percent of the site, exclusive of buildings and parking areas, to be usable open space for tenants. A variety of outdoor areas from private to common and a range of activity zones from low to high user capacity may be achieved within the boundaries of the project. Since the site will house approximately 350 residents of all ages, this density factor may prove to be significant.

#### ***Hmong and Mien Client Background***

The Hmong and Mien people, the clients for this project, are ethnic minorities from the mountain highlands of northern Laos. During the Vietnam War, these peoples were divided by a civil war in Laos between the Royal Laotian government, then in power, and a leftist movement called the Pathet Lao. The Hmong and Mien were involved chiefly because of their pursuit of independence and security for their homelands. Many Hmong on the right cooperated with the CIA in the Vietnam conflict and the "secret war" in Laos and Cambodia in exchange for anticipated support of their own struggle for national security. Support never materialized and noncommunist Hmong and Mien were driven from the country. They have been (and continue to be) relocated from refugee camps in Thailand to the United States and other countries.

In 1983 there were thought to be about 61,000 Hmong and Mien in the United States, living mostly in enclaves in California and Minnesota (Dunnigan and Olney, 1985), but also found in Oregon, Washington, and other states in increasing numbers. Hmong and Mien peoples tend to migrate to areas in clan groups, calling more family members to an area as they become established (Thao, 1982; Waters, 1989) Approximately 2,000 Hmong and Mien refugees live in the greater metropolitan Sacramento area (Vang, Vang and Voe, 1989-1990).

They remember their homeland in northern Laos with extreme fondness. They long

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for a life where land is freely used by all in a pattern that had been established long ago and where materials to build a home and establish a livelihood are readily available. Living in Sacramento has offered little chance for personal or family self-sufficiency within the adults' lifetimes; instead, their most intense efforts are placed on cultural activities, children's education, gardening, and for some, the hope of returning to Laos to retake their homelands by armed force. The families are largely unemployed or under-employed in marginal service occupations, have generally poor English language skills, and receive social support benefits.

The Laotian families in this project came to the attention of RCHC because they had organized a rent strike to protest their current housing conditions. RCHC has focused on creating self-help housing projects for the last 23 years. In planning for this medium-density housing project they expressed two goals: providing amenities of single-family residences in a rental setting and supporting immigrants in their assimilation process. They felt that the Hmong-Mien refugee group was an attractive focus for the project because the cohesiveness of their family organization lent itself well to the concept of a cooperative housing community and because their practice of family gardening created a typical private-residential activity around which to develop the site.

### ***Previous Work in Medium-Density Housing***

There is a significant body of work related to the design of medium-density housing, but two recent studies are of particular interest to new design approaches for low-income, medium-density rental housing. Literature includes *Housing as if People Mattered* (Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian, 1986) and *Co-housing* (McCamant and Durrett, 1988). The design guidelines of Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian are drawn from observations of medium-density housing and interviews with moderate and low-income tenants. The authors recognize the social problems inherent in the rental environment and offer sensitive and detailed directions to create humane and supportive residential settings. While many of the guidelines that they set forth are not new architectural design ideas, the collected guidelines are a convincing outline for a new approach to low-income housing in the face of California's housing crisis. Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian state that recognition of the needs and living patterns of families and individuals is essential to the success of a housing project. Attendance to these guidelines can play a significant role in personal identification and satisfaction with rental housing as "home."

Co-housing, the Scandinavian community housing concept, provides single-family residential amenities, maximizes land use by balancing smaller private family areas with high-quality common spaces and works to eliminate the social isolation of separate dwellings. At the heart of the co-housing concept is the residents' belief that they are banding together to create a mutually beneficial environment based on common family and social values. The site design of co-housing environments is physically structured in "layers" of living spaces from private family zones to semi-private outdoor areas to more generally shared spaces. This "layering" of spaces physically and socially allows for both family privacy and for informal, cooperative group interaction in a denser housing environment. Although the residents of co-housing projects tend to be homeowners, ethnically similar, and generally middle class, the conceptual and site design principles of co-housing have been proposed in the design of Village Park.

The chief difference between co-housing and a new approach to rental housing lies in the social class, ethnic and ownership distinctions. Rental housing tenants do not necessarily choose to be neighbors, and their ability to form a cohesive community is dependent upon more complex forms of cooperation, mutual respect, access to social opportunities and housing management practices. However, in a setting planned for long-term family occupancy, group bonding might be translatable to an ethnically or socially similar low-income group, provided that their goals for family well-being and economic attainment are related and that they have an interactive role in the housing management. The distinctive private-to-shared site qualities of co-housing were integrated into Village Park's site design and may play an important role in developing a

strong sense of proprietorship and community among low-income renters.

### **Procedures**

Communication about the project design with the Laotian family representatives developed through a typical architect-client relationship; that is, alternative drawings and sketches were presented for review and discussion. These drawings were then modified to incorporate clients' preferences, suggestions, and criticism, re-discussed at an increased level of development and complexity, again modified, and so on until a general level of consensus was reached. Naturally, the Hmong-Mien group's responses to the planning process reflected their experiences: constructing their homes in Laos, adjusting from a rural setting to an urban setting, and on-going tenancy in low-income rental housing.

The Hmong-Mien family group selected approximately ten men to act as the client committee. Hmong and Mien women remain in the background in mixed social settings, but have a strong role in family life. At the meetings the women would gather around the perimeter as drawings were discussed and occasionally make quiet comments to their spouses, which were apparently considered. As design of specific housing units proceeded, the women's interests were greater, and their comments over location of washing machines (in the residence as opposed to a laundry room) were presented to the architect directly. Separate meetings with women only, ostensibly to discuss details of the kitchens and cooking styles, were very lively and reflected considerable understanding of the entire planning process.

The majority of the group had never seen architectural sketches and drawings, so simple diagrams of the site were presented initially, including rectangular building shapes, parking spaces and driveways, and open area. Concepts of the relationship of parking to dwellings, site access from streets and private and community space were explained. As the meetings continued, more elements of the design were added: trees and landscaping, fencing, walkways, refuse areas, private yards and community spaces. Local zoning requirements for parking, setbacks, tree preservation, fire access and refuse collection were also presented for the clients to factor into their comments. The group appeared to understand the content of the drawings in principle, and their opinions became more refined as the design process moved along. Most of the men referred their comments to their group leader, who spoke fairly good English and had taken some architectural drafting courses at a community college. He often engaged in intense conversation with the group about the points, assessed general attitudes and conveyed the comments to the architect. Discussions were often very animated with individuals pointing to drawings or making sketches to reinforce a point.

The inability to speak their language created some problems and frustrations. At first this situation worked to everyone's advantage because the group could speak freely in front of the architect. It seemed to promote their confidence to contribute. After several meetings, however, communication barriers eased and participants and architect "spoke" freely by asking the group leader to explain a question or comment, or by sketching or by pointing to areas on the drawings and using "sign language" and sketches. In these cases the group leader was less a synthesizer and more a translator between architect and clients.

### **Discussion**

#### ***Site Design Priorities***

The four main site design priorities that the Hmong-Mien client group stressed were a "closed site" which they interpreted as being fenced with controlled access, parking near, preferably within sight of, one's residence, private family garden space and some communal garden space and an on-site meeting place where the men could hold their meetings. Secondary goals included play areas for children, front porches similar to traditional homes and picnic-barbecue areas.

### ***The Closed Site***

The primary concern expressed by the Hmong-Mien family group and a dominant theme in all discussions was the desire for an inward-looking, secure setting with controlled access for outsiders. In their minds this concept of a restricted site included perimeter fencing and limited points of access. Both McCamant and Durrett (1988) and Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian (1986) state that co-housing and other medium-density housing tenants prefer limited site access for outsiders. Limited site access means, to them, a sense of family security and site proprietorship generated by a clear definition of the relationship between the housing property and the surrounding community.

In the case of the Laotian group, the origin for this feeling arises from their current housing circumstances. They live on a densely packed site with minimal fencing or landscaping to distinguish private and shared areas. Access from public streets is unimpeded; window privacy and the distinction between individual dwellings are absent; outdoor play-area security for children, private outdoor areas for family use and separation from the noise and movement of the street are nonexistent. The environment feels "wide open," and theft and vandalism, particularly around the parking lot, are constant problems. Controlled site access, especially at night, was seen as the answer to these problems.

A second, more deeply held reason for this attitude are the circumstances which have forced the Hmong and Mien to be very protective of their lives and their culture. In Laos they were involved in a war which entailed repeated invasion into their homelands and forced migration from loose country enclaves into more densely populated, protected villages. Similarly, in refugee camps in Thailand they were held in a tenuous setting over which they had little control, their freedom curtailed, but nonetheless protected in fenced, guarded compounds. In Sacramento the conditions of survival in American society are often overwhelming. The immigrants seem to be looking for an ideal environment where their differences from the mainstream culture are not constantly thrust upon them. The idea of a "secure enclave" of dwellings, similar to their experiences and traditional housing relationships, is a very appealing concept to them.

Special care was given to the "inward-looking," restricted access site because of its potential to "ghetto-ize" the project. Absolute enclosure would turn the families completely away from the surrounding neighborhood and impede their assimilation; however, controlled and limited site access seemed an appropriate response to the surrounding low-income housing area. The concept of a closed site was developed to the satisfaction of Hmong and Mien and balanced with community orientation by using the front elevations of the townhouse apartments as a formal "wall" dividing the heart of the site from the street scene. Limited site entry was enforced by creating only three entrances: a pedestrian entry gate along the main street (Norwood) and two driveways to parking areas on the side streets. The "street face" presents front facades and a formal landscaped yard to the community, as do single-family residences, while the informal, backyard "village setting" addresses the center of the site. Front porches with built-in benches facing the street and a well-developed site lighting system provide observation points and exposure of unauthorized site visitors. From the street the site looks like a typical Sacramento neighborhood with large shade trees, vigorous landscaping, and green lawns. The row-house appearance identifies the complex as a community. To "enforce" the implied wall, a band of low planting surrounds the site restricting entry except at the designated points.

By grouping the townhouses to face the street, small enclaves of 12 to 15 dwelling units were created on the interior of the site. This arrangement intensifies the sense of a protected compound because it reduces the number of dwellings each resident regularly perceives. Observation of other tenants, children and guests within that domain is easily achieved in the performance of daily activities. At the core of the enclave, each dwelling looks onto private yard areas adjacent to dwellings, followed by a shared path system, then a communal area, and the enclave's covered tenant parking (Figure 2).

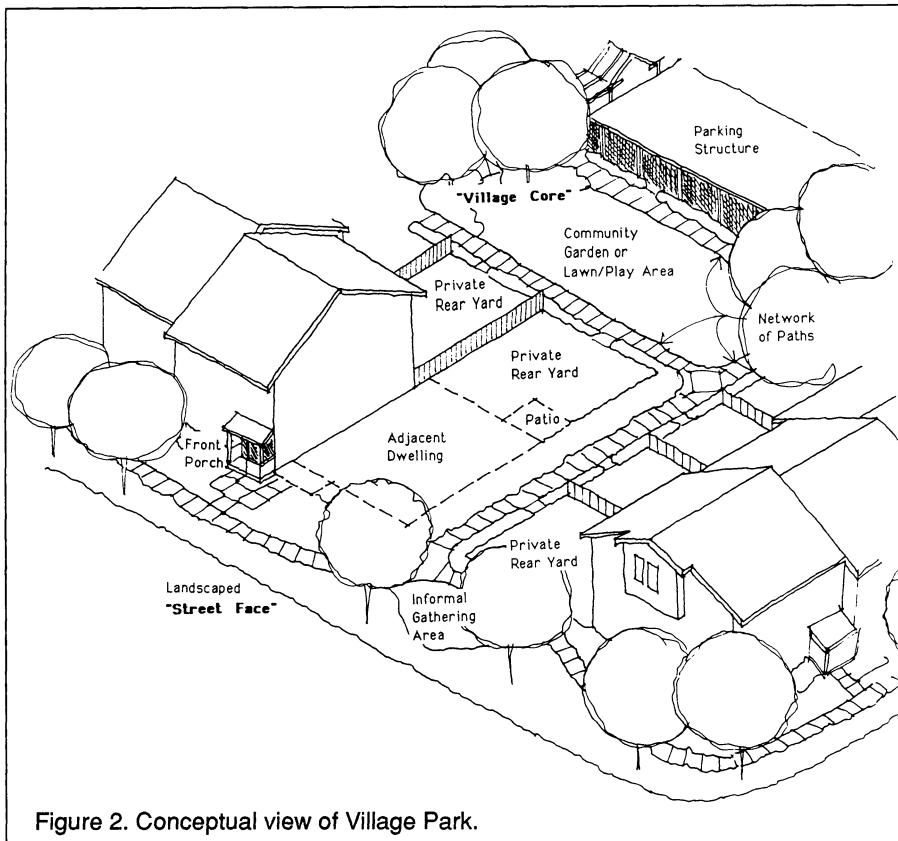


Figure 2. Conceptual view of Village Park.

The enclave arrangement can be seen as similar to co-housing, especially when viewed in terms of the site as a whole. Realms of privacy and small group acquaintance are created, but connected to the larger site community by repeating enclaves and a network of paths linking the units.

#### ***Parking Close to the Dwelling***

Following the concept of the restricted site, parking near the residence was considered the most important factor in the design. Issues noted by the Hmong and Mien include the fact that a car is often the low-income family's most costly and essential possession. Proximity to the dwelling ensures security and convenience. The group has also observed that parking by one's residence is a convenience of standard middle-class residences.

Initially in the site planning, the group was shown several site diagrams in which the parking was laid-out in small blocks at some distance from the townhouses in the more idealized "garden setting." Although the planning for usable open space was appreciated, the concepts were rejected because of distance to the cars. Layouts in which parking was created as a ring around dwellings, which in turn ringed an open space core, were also rejected by the families because it left vehicles too exposed to the street.

In the final design, parking close to the residence was achieved by grouping the townhouse buildings in small enclaves around parking, rear yards, community garden

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and general use areas. The covered, tenant-assigned parking stalls are within easy sight and walking distance of dwelling spaces and adjacent to well-used community spaces. However, landscaping or garden spaces adjacent to the dwellings buffer the parking and relegate it to a secondary visual status in the setting. Visitor parking is located near the site entrances, and through-traffic on the site is possible only for emergency fire vehicles.

The strong connection of vehicle to residence is not prominent in co-housing designs, but the Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian guidelines do recognize the importance of parking proximity. In rental housing, assigned parking spaces near the dwelling offers a sense of belonging. Furthermore, knowing that one's vehicle is easily accessible makes the dwelling/garage bond more like that of a detached home, and regular, informal surveillance provides the most reliable form of security for the vehicle.

#### ***Private Rear Yards***

Following the parking priority was the strong desire for a small family garden plot adjacent to the dwelling. It is traditional for Hmong, Mien and other Southeast Asian families to create household gardens to grow herbs and spices for healing and cooking practices and to grow fruits and vegetables for eating. In the site design each dwelling has a 25-foot deep rear yard garden space fenced on each side by a 4-foot high chain link fence and at the rear by a chain link fence and gate paralleled with a "soft" hedge along the public pathway. Community garden areas on the site provide space for larger plants and cooperative gardening activities.

Gardens allow residents to participate in the care and distinctive quality of their home environment, and they also provide a rich source for self-esteem. Children, for example, can see parents who may be otherwise unemployed working in a productive setting. Gardening also facilitates tenants' communication and supervision of site behavior, and the garden provides the informal meeting ground for neighbor interaction.

Selection of plants for shared open spaces and site landscaping was discussed with the family groups. While they have expressed interest in "edible landscaping," debate over fruit trees was strong. The men felt that the trees cause friction between tenants over fair distribution of fruit and that the temptations for children to create mischief with ripe fruit are too great. They were very interested in planting some bamboo on-site to make furniture and many other household objects.

Clotheslines have also been included in each rear yard at the request of the family group. They stated that they often do not have money to buy clothes dryers or to use coin-operated dryers. Their common alternative, quite evident in their current housing, is to hang clothes across fences and shrubs around their dwellings, effectively reducing the social appearance of the housing. At one point in the site design process, in response to the "inward-looking" concept for the site, placing rear yards along the perimeter of the site facing the street and letting front doors face the centrally located parking lots was considered. However, the realization that street-facing rear yards with household laundry exposed would negatively impact the general residential character desired for the site. This helped to clarify the "street face" and "village core" concept for the site. In the final site design, clotheslines are provided in each rear yard, but no rear yards face public streets.

#### ***An On-Site Meeting Place for Men and Secondary Site Design Criteria***

The Hmong and Mien men were very interested in having a building on site where they could hold social and clan business and even offered to rent the building for such occasions. RCHC was interested in a small multi-use facility which would serve as meeting space, child-care center and cultural arts building for women. However, other factors lobbied against these goals, including the need to apply for a mixed-use variance, insurance issues, the added management complications of operating such a facility, and most significantly, the reduced number of dwelling units it would create. There is a community park and meeting building two blocks away which the families can rent for more

formal celebrations, but the decision to omit an on-site community building, common in co-housing, may turn out to be a mistake. Potential for regular cultural activities on site such as traditional festivals, child-care, women's sewing groups and classes in literacy, citizenship, and health-care is lost.

It was decided, however, that an outdoor gathering area suitable for men's meetings and other group events would be included with the outdoor amenities. Several environmentally protected live oak trees on the site greatly influenced placement of buildings and parking, and it was thought that they might provide the focus for the outdoor gathering locations. The final site design has several types of areas where men or families can gather for social or clan-related functions. The largest is at the center of the site and composed of a grassy play area, volleyball/basketball court and surrounding barbecue-picnic area. Smaller locations within each building enclave include play areas for children, picnic tables, barbecues and comfortable benches in shaded settings.

A network of paths evolved in connecting the various activity zones of the site. Individuals will be able to take a varied stroll or bicycle or tricycle on a path network that takes them past front porches, rear gardens and community areas without leaving the site. Opportunities to meet, interact and observe can be a natural part of daily routine. Small landscaped areas with benches permit stops for rest or gathering points for chats along the way. The centrally located mail boxes are one of these meeting points. Well-screened refuse enclosures are also part of the circulation system (Figure 3).

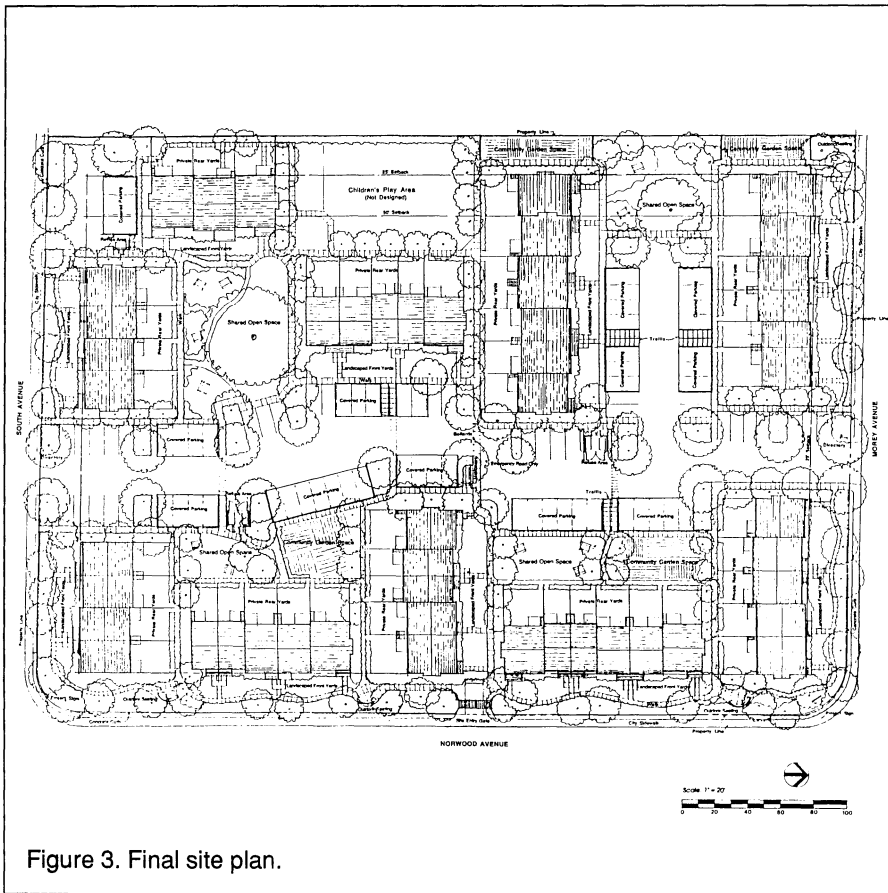


Figure 3. Final site plan.

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Low-income dwellings are generally smaller than the norm; yet, they house large family groups. In observing several apartment projects where Hmong and Mien live in Sacramento, it became evident that spending a portion of the day outdoors relieved pressure on tight indoor spaces. Also, Hmong and Mien, like other rural Southeast Asians, are outdoor-oriented people. Gardening and outdoor socializing are common practices among the people in the project. Grandparents often walk very young children around the neighborhood. However, many existing housing projects, including the one currently used by the Hmong and Mien family group, do not provide decent outdoor areas for tenant use. The dehumanizing design aspects of many low-income environments make outdoor activities untenable. In Village Park the path system encourages individual participation in site activities.

Porches and patios play an important role in the use of the outdoor spaces by creating a secure and comfortable location for observing outdoor activities. Elderly Hmong and Mien residents like to sit outdoors, chat and supervise small children. In their current housing many women spread small cloths to sit on the bare ground because they do not have porches or benches. When this observation by the architect was translated into front porches with small benches, there was considerable approval from the family groups. In Laos it was very common for the elders to sit on stools under a lean-to roof of their dwellings to sew or perform other tasks while watching children play or perform their chores.

All of the units have a covered front porch with a built-in bench and a rear patio with a simple trellis covering. Large, low-income families need outdoor space to provide inexpensive, alternate locations for household retreat and activity that cannot often be developed within dwellings due to high construction costs. Many Hmong and Mien in the family group are under-employed, unemployed or work undesirable late night hours, so the porches and patios create a "legitimate place" for adults to be, when viewed from the public streets. Because of their employment status, they are seen as "hanging around" their low-income housing during the day, fostering unfavorable attitudes about their worthiness for social assistance. Being given "places to be" like porches, patios and gardens, maintaining their home setting or vehicles or playing with children will help them to be seen, and to see themselves, as more substantial members of the society.

#### ***Connection with the Rear Garden***

In discussing the design of dwelling units, it became apparent that the sliding glass door planned between the dining room area and the rear yards in the townhouses closely paralleled the so-called back door-to-garden relationship of the traditional Hmong homes. In that setting the back door was actually a double wide door opening from the main gathering space of the dwelling to the side yard of the home where the family garden was located. A lean-to porch roof also covered this doorway, and it was the chief means of access and egress for women and children. In the townhouses the connection between the dining/kitchen area and the garden is quite similar, since the sliding door becomes the informal entrance to the home and domestic area and is closely connected to the activities of the garden and common areas beyond (Figure 4).

Door etiquette is important in Hmong culture. Men of the same clan enter dwellings through front or rear doors on a convenience basis, as do women guests, depending of course on the occasion, but men of other clans use only the recognized front entrances. In Village Park, the family group believes the front doors of the units will be used in the traditional manner, even if it means a bit of extra walking to visit a neighbor on a formal occasion. They voiced pleasure in a certain ceremonial etiquette of approach that will parallel the visiting excursions of their homeland.

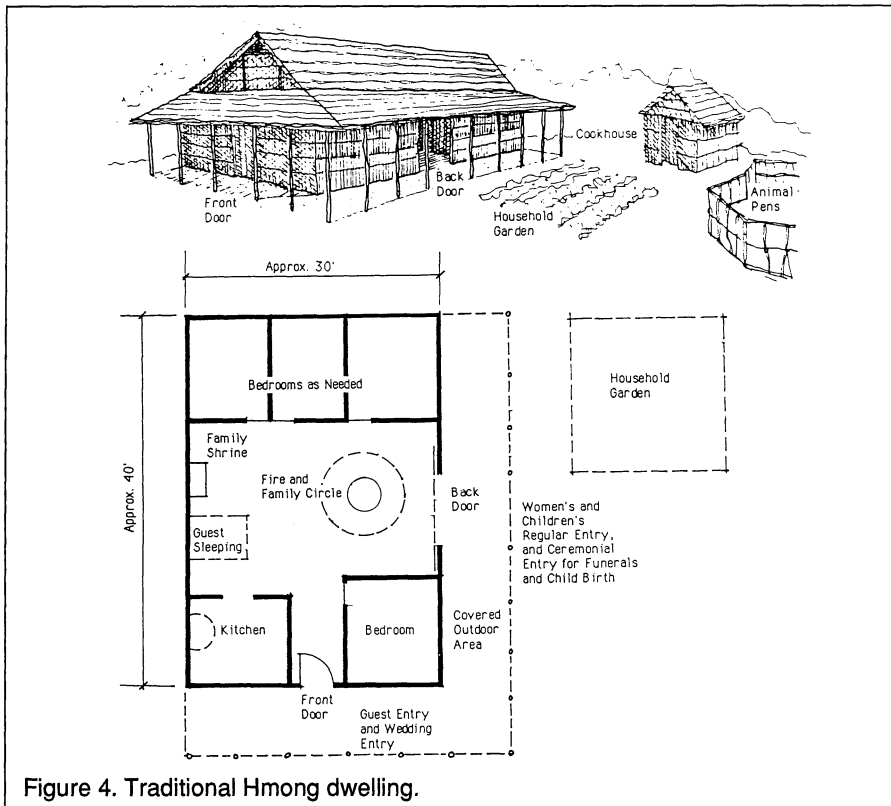


Figure 4. Traditional Hmong dwelling.

**The Appearance of the Housing and Construction Materials**

Hmong and Mien traditional homes in Laos were handmade dwellings constructed from tree limbs, bamboo and grasses on the bare earth. The houses were subject to deterioration, but construction of new homes was taken for granted as it was customary to move every six to eight years to fresh farming areas. These dwellings were typically windowless, rectangular forms with gable roofs, lean-to “porches” and vertical siding. Interiors of the dwellings were divided into bedrooms, a kitchen and a large common space where the family gathered for meals and social interaction. Since the Hmong and Mien homes were fairly expendable, little attention was lavished on their design or embellishment.

Designing Village Park’s appearance drew from traditional gable roofs, porch activity areas and a motif of vertical siding. Particular attention was given to the location of doors and the relation of indoor and outdoor activity areas. Front doors greet more formal areas as was common in Laos, and back doors face the rear gardens and community spaces. Decorative motifs from Hmong and Mien textiles are worked into paving patterns, stencils on the porches, site entry gates and other site furnishings.

Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian state that medium-density housing tenants want their dwellings to reflect middle-class norms of their area. Unusual materials and forms that “stand out” in the neighborhood only call attention to the differences the project might have from the surrounding community. In Village Park there is a conscious effort to keep the construction uncomplicated, to spend the funds on quality roofing, siding, and window materials, and most importantly, to develop the landscape.

### Conclusion

Planning for Village Park around a group of Laotian immigrants set out to accomplish two things: to incorporate single-family residential qualities into a medium-density, rental environment for families and to balance cultural assimilation of immigrant families with cultural maintenance. The housing design priorities stated by the Hmong and Mien tenant group, and incorporated into the design of Village Park, are quite similar to the medium-density housing guidelines of Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian and the observations of co-housing by McCamant and Durrett. At the center of both the authors' analyses and the Laotian refugees' criteria are restricted site access, a private outdoor domain for the family and parking near the dwelling. The presence of these factors in housing effectively mirror the elements of single-family residences but provide the additional benefit of an interactive, supportive community. Based upon discussions with the Hmong and Mien, a medium-density housing environment that responds to these design criteria appears as well-suited to the economic level and preferences for social interaction of these low-income immigrant families as does co-housing for middle-class families.

The chief design difference noted between the low-income tenants and typical co-housing residents is the great importance the Hmong and Mien place on site security and on the proximity of parking to their residences. These feelings reflect the locale of their housing, the role of vehicles in their economic well-being, and their fears about physical security in a low-income environment.

Along with the addition of amenities of single-family residences based on tenant design criteria, the Village Park concept introduces a second important element: the balancing of the assimilative "street face" of the housing project with the culturally supportive "village core" of the site. The design is significant for two reasons. First, the conforming neighborhood "street face" reduces the perceived barriers of difference between the low-income minority renters and the surrounding community by providing elements of middle-class residences mixed with representations of their native culture. Potential resistance to low-income housing in the community may be influenced by efforts to tailor the appearance of the housing to the community norm. Second, the "village core" provides a protected setting where residents can retreat from the economic and social challenges they face and can interact in more familiar patterns. Traditions can be supported in a dignified manner and assimilation can proceed at the pace that is most appropriate for each individual.

One direct benefit of using potential tenants as clients is the building of the "sense of proprietorship" that Cooper-Marcus and Sarkissian discuss. The Hmong and Mien saw their comments and criticism reflected in the development of the design and became very engaged in both the design process and the means of financing the project. When funding is approved and the construction is assured, their further involvement will be solicited for more detailed planning on aspects such as planting, site decoration and color schemes. Further "ownership" ties with the housing will be promoted through direct employment of some of the group in the site construction and participation in the tenant management committee.

Reduced site density is very important to the success of the Village Park concept. In order to provide the range of outdoor space desired by the tenants, half of the site is devoted to private or shared landscaped areas. This percentage is far higher than is required or commonly provided. The zoning of Village Park allows for 125 units instead of the 50 that will be constructed. However, with a long term rental community as the programmatic goal for this residential project, increased landscape area must be committed. The financial "return" will have to be measured in residents' length of tenancy, participation in the community life of the site and contribution to the community's economic base.

Post-occupancy evaluations of the sense of community and proprietorship should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of the Village Park concept after construction

and habitation. Other measures also worthy of study include the management system and tenant committee effectiveness, the incidents of vandalism and theft, police calls to the site, tenure of residents and success of the children in local schools. It will be interesting to learn if similarities in economic and social status override cultural differences when members of other minority groups are included in the community. If Village Park proves to be a successful housing development, the Village Park concept may guide efforts to alleviate California's low-income housing crisis and to respond to its rapidly changing population demographics.

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