APPENDIX

Victoria Plaza Apartments
Brochure of the San Antonio Housing Authority, 1961.
VICTORIA PLAZA APARTMENTS
411 Barrera Street
This is the story of a building...

...of a building that grew from a recognition that with the present day increased life expectancy there would be increased needs for adequate housing for senior citizens - housing that would make longer life rewarding and fruitful. It is a story which proves how diverse groups and individuals - public and private agencies, civic organizations, artists, interested citizens - joined together in molding for the elderly a fulfilling environment with opportunities for the continuing contributions which enrich our society.

In 1956, the San Antonio Housing Authority began the planning for two new housing developments for low income elderly persons: one a motel-type arrangement of 36 apartments and a community center at the East Terrace Homes; the second, a nine-story building of 185 apartments and a 5600 square foot community center. It is of this building that this story is told, a story culminating on July 2, 1960, when the doors were opened for the first resident.

The Role of the Housing Authority

From the beginning of the public housing program in 1937, local housing authorities have provided older people on limited incomes with standard housing within their ability to pay. In San Antonio, in the small units intended for normal family occupancy, there live some 600 low income elderly persons. However, when planning for new construction in 1956, the Authority began its research to determine what characteristics of the aging process required special consideration in design. The results of this research are embodied in the present developments.
Let us go now on a tour of the living area of the Victoria Plaza Apartments, noticing first that the building is shaped in the form of a modified T, oriented to the prevailing southeast breeze, on its two and one-half acre site just seven-tenths of a mile from the center of the City. It is a thin building, each apartment having cross ventilation from front to back. The first floor Community Center is air conditioned.

Enter the self-service elevators (there are two with special safety features) and stop on any floor.

Galleries, which are also the corridors, have 4-foot high railings to give an additional feeling of safety, and there are porcelain panels in colors of shrimp and beige to serve as windbreaks for the apartment entrances.

Continuous hand rails throughout the building (and the adjoining grounds) make movement easy and safe.

The apartments themselves, 16 with 2 bedrooms, 16 efficiencies, 1 3 bedroom custodian apartment and the remaining with one bedroom, are designed for safe and comfortable living. Shelves and light fixtures are low. Refrigerators are set on a 14-inch high platform. Doors have levers instead of knobs and are wide enough for wheelchairs. There are no raised thresholds. Showers have Alaskan cedar seats and tempered glass doors rather than dangerous curtains. An emergency bell rings on the gallery when help is needed. There is an electric stove and also central heating. Dining space is by a window. The building residents provide their own furniture.

Of particular interest is the space flexibility. The apartments can be turned into one big room or separated through use of three movable closet units. The kitchen area is separated from the living room by a screen covered with bright vinyl fabric for easy cleaning.

There is a laundry room on each floor, large enough for comfortable visiting, with coin operated washer and dryer, and tubs and line for hand washing.

These are but a few of the special provisions which have been included to prolong independent living.
Housing for the elderly, however, means more than safety and convenience. What about loneliness, the absence of useful pursuits, or opportunity for learning, playing, for creative expression? It was the recognition of this fact that prompted the Authority to turn to the community and specifically to the Community Welfare Council for assistance. The result is a Senior Center on the first floor of the building where any man or woman in San Antonio may find companionship and recreation, opportunities for consultation on personal problems, and educational activities that will provide a more satisfying and productive retirement. Although built by the Housing Authority under the public housing program, the Senior Center operation and furnishings are financed through grants from foundations and from gifts of generous organizations and individuals to the Community Welfare Council. It will be staffed by local agencies providing services and will operate under policies established by a Committee on Management appointed by the Community Welfare Council.

Our tour now brings us to the Senior Center. There is a feeling of gaiety from the moment one enters the building, a feeling heightened in the lobby by the bright colors of the furniture, the activity around the billiard table, the music, the conversation of the persons waiting for the mail or standing in front of the elevators. There is a restfulness in the shady garden patio reached by a large veranda closed on three sides and opening off the lobby. There is an eight-foot brown brick wall to give complete privacy from traffic on the adjacent busy street.
Along the north wing of the building there are the management offices of the Housing Authority and the Center Director's office which is combined with the Board room of the Committee on Management. Adjoining the offices is the library and at the extreme end of the wing, the 8-room public health clinic with a nurses' station and examining rooms for use by the Public Health Department. Just outside is a public patio with benches and a play area for neighborhood children waiting to use the clinic.

In the west wing there are first the miniature post office and the two counselling offices to be staffed by representatives of local agencies.

Next is the community kitchen intended for the preparation of food or refreshments for parties, luncheons or banquets in the adjoining recreation room. Here there are card tables, a television, and a piano, available at all times to both persons living in the building and visitors from the surrounding neighborhood. For special events, such as plays or more formal entertainment, there is a movable stage and stage curtain.

Beyond the recreation room is a large area which will be used, as interest is shown, for crafts such as woodworking, ceramics, water coloring. In one corner of this large room is already installed a miniature self-service beauty shop, the contribution of a generous San Antonian.

The Senior Center again demonstrates what can be accomplished by pooling the efforts of public officials and private citizens in a sound community organization plan.
THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

It is safe to say that no public building is ever undertaken where controversy does not arise between the idea that a bare-bones structure is sufficient and the architect's desire to achieve some beauty of design within reasonable economy. When the San Antonio Housing Authority and its architects began their planning, they determined that the first high-rise apartment building in the low rent program of San Antonio should make a contribution to the city's beauty as well as achieve the necessary functionalism and economy. Fine art was not an inherent part of the building plans; however, the design attracted the artists of the city who were eager to participate in helping adequately to provide for all the needs of the elderly. From them have come generous and creative gifts to enhance the activity areas and add to the joy and spirit of the surroundings.

Our art tour beings with Cecil Casebler's mosaic abstraction, 45 feet by 6 feet, flanking the entrance of the building, seen across an expanse of lawn and trees. The bold theme executed in yellow, gold, gray, black and white enriches and gives a glow to the entire building. On the entry wall of the lobby, a Martha Mood tapestry and the panels of fused glass executed by Dorothy Steinbomer add charm and beauty. Entering the patio we see on the east wall Amy Freeman Lee's "Enchanted Voyages." The two panels 6 feet by 40 inches each translate Mrs. Lee's paintings into ceramics. The day voyage and its imagery is developed in brilliant sunlight colors while the night voyage is bathed in shimmering moonlight. On the south wall can be seen June Kroll's sand sculpture. Using Genesis as her theme, this sculpture of depth, set into the wall, demonstrates her personal style and use of unusual media.
In the corner rectangular pool, there is a whimsical fishing scene, the work of seven San Antonio ceramists. A young boy four feet in height executed by Mary Vance Green, holds his catch of a large enamel fish of golds and greens, the work of Nessye Sharlack. Surrounding the lad are several large ceramic birds, a frog, and plants in brown stoneware placed at different levels to catch the fountain water. Martha Mood, Bess Semmes, Margaret Wray, Mildred Cocke and Lola Smith contributed these pieces. The Victoria Garden Club provided the special water plants for the pool.

Outside the patio through attractive iron gates is a 7-foot sculpture in Austin limestone, surrounded by trees and set off by the brown wall background. It is the work of Robert Lancaster of Georgetown, Texas, and depicts three youths clinging to a huge symbolic figure that could be parent, grandparent, being or power. Entitled "Come Unto Me, Children," the work evokes multiple interpretations.

The library is enhanced by a mural in quiet shades of blue on one entire wall. Choosing themes from the Old and New Testaments depicting the seven gifts of the spirit, this large mural by Ruth Dunn is an intrinsic and natural part of the library decor.

The gay atmosphere of the recreation room is enlivened by a games mural in bright orange, yellow, turquoise and white, the work of Margaret Pace.

A host of others have helped to make this wealth of artwork possible, in particular, Harold Rams of Orco, who gave space and labor for the execution of the three largest pieces.
THE QUESTIONS

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

The requirements for eligibility are these: income of less than $225 per month for one person, and $242 per month for two persons; six months' residency in San Antonio immediately prior to application; minimum age of 62 for head of family.

HOW MUCH IS THE RENT?

The minimum monthly rent is $24 and increases by one additional dollar for each $60 of additional annual income. This is the usual public housing formula of approximately 20% of income for rent.

HOW WAS THE BUILDING FINANCED?

Planning and construction funds were borrowed from the Federal government through the Public Housing Administration. All operating cost must be paid from rent income. Subsidy is available to the Authority, if needed, for the total debt service.

HOW MUCH DID THE BUILDING COST?

The total contract cost was $1,927,000, with a room cost of $2,659, which is well below the Congressional limitation of $3,250.

MAY OTHER CITIES OBTAIN SIMILAR HOUSING?

For communities throughout the country faced with a housing need for their low income elderly, the public housing program offers one method of meeting the problem. This can be accomplished either through the expansion of existing public housing programs or through the creation of new Authorities. For both, financing is available through the Public Housing Administration. Other types of financing for housing for higher income groups is also available through the Federal Housing Administration. The San Antonio Authority believes that a variety of approaches is essential in the field of housing design for retirement, that solutions in this field are as varied as people themselves and the perfect answer will come for the individual when there is opportunity of choice.
Under the terms of office of these Commissioners, 1956-1960, this building was conceived and executed

H. P. Drought

W. C. White
Andres Rivera, Jr.
David Jacobson
Fred A. Slimp
E. R. Crumrine

Darrel D. Gray
John Gatti
Fernando Guerra
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Bruce Savage
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