

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

CENTENNIAL PLACE'S RENEWED PURPOSE

A decade later, proponents hail housing as success

By Eric Stirgus
Monday, December 29, 2008

It was one of the great civic experiments in recent memory.

Tear down Techwood Homes, one of the Atlanta Housing Authority's roughest public housing complexes. Rebuild it and get renters willing to pay market rate to live alongside public housing tenants.

Then, build a new school nearby that specializes in math, science and technology.

Finally, construct a YMCA that offers activities for children and job training.

The experiment, Centennial Place, began in 1998 with the Y's grand opening. A decade later, many involved say without Centennial Place, the area might not have been attractive enough for the likes of the new Georgia Aquarium and World of Coca-Cola. "None of that would had been built if Techwood Homes was there," said Egbert Perry, a developer involved in the project. "Nobody was going to invest real money with 60 acres of that [Techwood Homes]."

Proponents also believe Centennial Place showed mixed-income communities can work, such as the Villages of East Lake. The community, once known for brazen violence, went through a similar transformation and is now considered a success.

But some are not sure that the experiment has worked. A team of Georgia State University professors — with help from tenant leaders and community activists — released a study earlier this month that found most elderly and disabled tenants in public housing don't want to leave. The tenants are familiar with their current surroundings and worry it will be more difficult to get to public transportation, health care and other services if they live elsewhere.

The researchers also questioned whether tenants who take vouchers to help offset rent payments rather than live in public housing are better off.

"It is ... unclear whether residents who remain in private-market housing [with or without a subsidy] have experienced improved living conditions in neighborhoods with less poverty," the study said.

Techwood Homes was the original experiment. Opened in 1936, it was the nation's first public housing complex. It housed 604 families in seven two-story row houses and 13 two-story apartments with modern amenities such as closets in every room, built-in bathtubs and hot and cold water. Techwood Homes was desegregated in 1968, but by then, the complex was no longer a modern marvel. In 1981, the U.S. Housing and Urban

Development department approved \$17 million to replace the roofs, flooring, heating, plumbing and windows at Techwood and its nearby neighbor, Clark Howell Homes.

Tenant Beverly Fambro moved to Techwood in 1972 with her two young children. In her first years there, Fambro said it was a nice place, with pink and white dogwoods lining the quiet streets she walked without fear, even at 2 a.m.

Techwood was trouble by the late 1980s. Like most of the tenants, Fambro welcomed the housing authority's plans to tear down Techwood and rebuild it.

So did other neighbors, such as Coca-Cola, Georgia Tech and the Bank of America.

Fambro moved to southwest Atlanta during the renovation. She returned a year later to an apartment complex now called Centennial Place and a new three-bedroom apartment with wall-to-wall carpeting. A neat freak, Fambro preferred the tile floors she loved to mop and wax in her old apartment. That was about the only thing she missed about Techwood Homes.

There was a new sense of purpose at Centennial Place.

A police substation was built nearby. Officers patrolled the area, some on bicycles. The school required students to wear uniforms. Georgia Tech faculty helped interview prospective teachers for Centennial Place Elementary and was involved in creating the school's curriculum. Some kindergarten classes were taught Spanish.

"It felt groundbreaking," said Betsy Lenahan, group vice president of the Metro Atlanta YMCA. "You couldn't have had more people trying to make this work."

Cynthia Kuhlman, the first principal at Centennial Place Elementary, said "I knew there was a lot of pressure on me to make sure Centennial Place was the best school in the world."

Teachers asked for more from students and the Housing Authority demanded more from tenants. Tenants were required to work at least 30 hours a week or be in school. Centennial Place Elementary students couldn't have unexcused absences.

The poverty rate of the students who attended Centennial Place Elementary School dropped from 89 percent in 1998 to this year's estimate of 55 percent, said Kuhlman.

The employment rate (64 percent) is highest in mixed-income communities like Centennial Place, according to Thomas "Danny" Boston, a Georgia Tech economics professor who does research for the Housing Authority. The average household income is nearly \$3,000 higher in those communities as opposed to public housing, the professor said.

Crime is way down.

"All in all, we did good," said Fambro, a recreation instructor for the city of Atlanta.