

# Parkmerced into current century

In 2011, San Francisco has the chance to haul its southwestern corner into the 21st century.

That would be Parkmerced, and it's about time. Built just before and after World War II, San Francisco's largest apartment complex remains stuck in the middle of the 20th century. Designed for the primacy of the automobile, it's carved apart by wide roads aiming to move traffic through quickly rather than knit the neighborhood together.

The aging, largely lowrise buildings speak more to the suburban location Parkmerced was in 1941 than to the urban bustle that's grown around it since.

So it's good that a \$1.2 billion plan to expand and radically rework Parkmerced has survived the complex's recent change of ownership intact, and this year will make its way into San Francisco's approvals process.

But there it may collide with another mid-20th century relic: rent control. Nearly everywhere where artificially restricting rents has been tried, its unintended effect has been to limit both the quantity and quality of rental housing.

In San Francisco, however, rent control is — even for centrist officials — less an instrument of public policy than an article of political faith to which unquestioned allegiance is expected.

Stellar Management, which has continued to manage Parkmerced after ceding ownership, understands there's no mileage in fighting City Hall on this point. It has guaranteed that rent-controlled Parkmerced tenants who are displaced by the redevelopment will be rehoused in rent-controlled new units, and that nobody will be moved until there is a new unit ready to rehouse them. (It's legally trickier than it sounds: Rent control's failure led to state laws that limit cities' abilities to impose it on new buildings.)

Still, this is nearly identical to the model that worked in the redevelopment of Trinity Plaza. There, owner Angelo Sangiacomo rehoused rent-controlled tenants in new units with the same lifetime guarantee, clearing the way for 1,900 apartments.

So with the most contentious issue resolved, everything should be relatively easily settled ... except that this is San Francisco.

Gaining half a loaf without much of a struggle has whetted some tenant activists' appetites to push for a larger slice. They are suggesting that redevelopment should work around rent-controlled units rather than replacing them — or if it can't, then rent control on the new units should survive existing tenants into perpetuity, something that applies not even to other rent-controlled housing in San Francisco.

This is where San Francisco's new Board of Supervisors, which will ultimately decide on redoing Parkmerced, will show what it's made of.

For much of the last decade, the board has been largely controlled by a faction for whom the baying of a favored few frequently trumped the interests of the city as a whole — and few were more favored than the self-appointed, if frequently self-defeating, advocates for San Francisco renters.

Land use matters in particular were regarded as vehicles in which various shades of progressive or anti-developer ideology could be taken out for a spin. Squeezing a developer for something well beyond a very reasonable existing offer, beyond what the law requires or even permits, would have been expected — even if it jeopardized thousands of affordable apartments in the process.

If the new board is cut from different cloth, this is an excellent opportunity to prove it. Parkmerced would add 4,000 relatively if not officially affordable units in a city that desperately needs them — and which desperately lacks the resources to build even a fraction of that total on its own. ■