

RETURN TO ALLEN PARKWAY VILLAGE

Houston's best known, and most troubled, housing project reopens



A magnificent skyline view hasn't made critics any happier about the suburban appearance of the new housing units at Allen Parkway Village.

For a place that has generated so much controversy over the last few decades, Allen Parkway Village received surprisingly little attention in November when, after months of delay, it welcomed its first new residents in almost four years. There was a small article in the *Chronicle*, a tiny comment on television, a brief mention on the radio, and that was it.

Of course, by this time it's likely that many Houstonians are weary of hearing about the 1942-era housing project and its various woes. Since the late 1970s, when the city officials first began trying to empty and sell off the property on Allen Parkway near downtown, through the 1980s, as tenants fought the city on redevelopment, and into the 1990s, as the housing project was emptied anyway and a bargain struck to retain a third of its historic units while demolishing the rest, Allen Parkway Village has been a thorn in the side of Houston's sense of itself. To some, it was an area of blight that needed to be cleared away for the city to move into the future; to others, it was a reminder of a heritage that needed to be saved so the city wouldn't lose an important connection to its past.

So when the first group of tenants began unpacking their boxes in the renamed Historic Oaks of Allen Parkway Village, what they were unpacking them into was of more than passing interest. Part of what they were moving into was a still very active construction site; of the 500 units ultimately planned for the new Allen Parkway Village, only about 80 were ready for occupancy in November. They were part of the 222 units that have been built into the outer shells of what remains from the modern, flat-roofed structures designed in the 1940s with the assistance of MacKie & Kamrath architects. Though the exterior appearance of these rehabili-

tated units retain what architectural historian Stephen Fox has described appreciatively as "precisely defined contours, cantilevered concrete canopies, and artful brick and tile banding," the insides were almost completely new.

According to Horace Allison, acting deputy director of the Housing Authority of the City of Houston, about all that was retained of the original interiors were the mail slots to each apartment — an affectation, since mail will not be delivered door to door, but rather to boxes in a common lobby — and the crank windows, which were repaired by artisans imported for the task rather than replaced. Otherwise, everything had been gutted and redone. Central air-conditioning had been added, among other amenities, and the floor plans reworked to increase the size of apartments. Under the old floor plan, Allison said, the average space per unit was less than 500 square feet. The new floor plans in the rehabilitated buildings — the "historic" part of the Historic Oaks at Allen Parkway Village — average 600 square feet and above, with some apartments reaching 1,100 to 1,200 square feet.

Three stories high and designed with single-loaded corridors on the upper floors, the rebuilt units are paired, with every other one having a common lobby, mail room, and laundry room with coin-operated washers and dryers. Outside, the white picket fences that once defined the streets have been removed and the streets themselves widened, though in the historic section of the project, at least, the majority of the trees have been retained, leading to what Allison wryly refers to as "\$20,000 oaks" because of the cost of fitting roads around them.

Outside the historic section, which sits near the center of Allen Parkway Village's 37 acres, there are few trees, however. Riding along the ring road that connects the rehabilitated units to the 280 units of completely new construction can be jarring; though some of the new units have been given façades intended to act as a transition from the 1940s architecture to that of the 1990s, the impression is still of two eras clashing instead of combining. Whether landscaping and the addition of people will change this or exacerbate it remains to be seen, but for the moment



From the outside, the rehabilitated buildings at Allen Parkway Village look as they long did. But inside, much is different.



Floor plans of "historic" one-bedroom units: Rebuilding the older interiors resulted in fewer apartments, but larger ones.

Allen Parkway Village looks like exactly what it is, something caught in a struggle between the past and the present.

The rehabilitated units were to be reoccupied in three phases, the first the one that began in late 1999 and the remaining two by spring of 2000. The first residents are projected to move into the all-new units sometime in the spring as well, with the entirety of the project being populated by December. Given past delays, this schedule may well change. But even if it does, no one is expressing much doubt that this year will see Allen Parkway Village brought to life in a way it hasn't been for nearly a quarter of a century.

Horace Allison, for one, is eager to have that happen. Showing some visitors around the site late last year, he stopped by a rehabilitated unit to show off what he claimed was one of the best sights in the city. In a second-floor unit, he raised

the blinds on a window that looked out on a panoramic view of the downtown skyline. It was a view that seemed full of promise and possibility, two things that have long been lacking at Allen Parkway Village, and two things the housing project's new residents can only hope will return. — Mitchell J. Shields

Cite Takes Planning Prize

In December, the Houston section of the American Planning Association awarded *Cite* and writer John Kaliski its Highest Honor in Journalism prize for the article "The Main Idea: A Competition for Remaking Main Street." Kaliski's article, which was the cover story in *Cite* 45: Summer 1999, detailed the results from a design competition for Main Street that had been sponsored by Making Main Street Happen, Inc. According to the award announcement, the journalism prize is for increasing "public awareness of planning by fairly and accurately reporting on an important planning issue." A second place Merit Award went to the *Houston Press* and writer Brian Wallstin for "Placed on the Discard Pile," an October 28, 1999, story about problems in public housing. ■

Below: A kitchen in one of APV's newly opened units.

