

This is an excerpt from:

# ***Breakthroughs***

**RE-CREATING THE AMERICAN CITY**

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**and**  
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## *Farm Workers' Own Housing: Self-Help in Cabrillo Village*

**E**ndless groves of lemon trees. Fertile farmland, glowing lush green with strawberry and tomato plants, resounding with the clack, clack, clack of irrigation equipment bringing water to parched soil. Towering mountains, colored desert brown, cradling some of the world's most productive land. Freeways threading snakelike over the face of the land, filled at every hour with cars and people on their way to somewhere. Continent's end. The edge of America. The pounding, rough turquoise surf of the Pacific.

This is Ventura County, nestled along the Southern California coast, some eighty miles due north of Los Angeles. It is a backwater, really, of the sprawling, thriving City of Angels, hidden southward behind the barrier of the Santa Monica Mountains.

You feel the pulse of the American dream here, especially on radiant days when the sun shines purely and the haze and smog burn off to reveal the mountains, an azure blue sky, the breathtaking vistas, the towering rows of palms, the man-made landscape blooming on territory that would otherwise be bone-dry. Here is a magnet luring busloads of newcomers twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, with the promise that someday *they too* might realize their dreams.

At such times, it is easy to forget the brooding cloud; to ignore the fact that Southern California is also becoming our national warning beacon: that the land of honey is turning into a place where gangs of bored, alienated teenagers infest city and suburb alike; that Americans' Promised Land of milk and honey has become a mind-boggling agglomeration of traffic and senseless sprawl; that here is the land that contributed the drive-in restaurant *and* the drive-by

shooting to the American psyche; a place where the air is usually so filthy that murky skies are taken for granted; where buying a home—not a big mansion occupied by Hollywood stars but just a little place the average person can call home—defies the budget of ordinary citizens.

This schizophrenia hits one hard in Ventura, as strongly as anywhere else in the Golden State. This is neither farm country nor big city nor even suburb. It is neither the exclusive province of wealthy Anglos nor the shabby home of struggling Mexican immigrants who tend the fields and call this place El Norte. Many of the boulevards have proper Anglo names, such as Harbor and Main and Seaward, but a lot of the streets have Spanish names, such as Arroyo and Baja. It is a resort town that fills on weekends to the breaking point with blond-haired boys and girls catching a tan. Yet its workaday roots are too close to the surface for one to think of this as a Palm Springs or a San Clemente. While agriculture is Ventura's lifeblood, the subdivisions seem to go up faster than the tomatoes ripen on the vine. Farmers are called "growers" here, yet the last crop the growers usually bring in is houses. The professionals who live in Ventura's suburban ramblers routinely shell out \$300,000 and \$400,000 for the privilege (and those prices of the early 1990s reflected a 25 percent *deflation* in value as the hyperinflated California real estate market softened). The farm workers who form the backbone of the Ventura economy, however, work for some of the lowest wages in the nation.

This land north of Los Angeles can seem timeless. In a car cruising up the Pacific Coast Highway, winding around the hairpin turns that lead from Malibu to Point Magu (a majestic rock that juts defiantly into the Pacific), all one need do is throw on a Beach Boys tape to make everything feel like the 1960s again.

Then, quite suddenly, the coastline disappears and the coastal highway veers inland, slicing through the fields and past the buildings where oranges, lemons, lettuce, and the other produce grown on these lands are warehoused, waiting to be shipped around the nation. Out across the fields, one sees bands of immigrant laborers hunched over, picking strawberries and other produce by hand, figures transposed as if in a time warp from the Okies of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Then one's car gets caught in the traffic of Oxnard, a town grimly industrial in places, where discount tire and clothing stores line the road and their backsides face vast fields. Here and there, the landscape is broken by huge food storage warehouses and processing plants. Then, finally, one is upon Ventura and its *salsa* of farms and subdivisions.

Cabrillo Village occupies twenty-five acres of land on the edges of Saticoy, a little farm town, situated between Ventura and Oxnard, a neighborhood where agribusiness names such as Dole adorn many buildings and the streets often rumble with the sound of the tractor and tractor-trailer. To get to Cabrillo Village, you turn off the road connecting Saticoy with Ventura and bounce a short distance down a side road until you get to a sleepy little cluster of homes and stores. Cabrillo sits at the end of a dead-end road next to the Santa Clara River, a typical Southern California stream that has a channel but no water. There is one way in and one way out. Pastoral-looking lemon groves surround the village on three sides. On the fourth sits a railroad spur and a subdivision of recent vintage.

Late in the afternoon, the sounds of screaming, squealing children echo through the narrow residential streets of Cabrillo. They are kicking balls along Cinco de Mayo Street (named for the Mexican Independence Day). They are hanging off the jungle gym in the little playground set near the entrance to the community. A bunch of teenage boys are going at it on the village soccer field. The smell of Mexican food wafts out of countless kitchens. It is nearly dinner-time. A few people are tinkering with their cars, some of them junks and some expensive new imports. Some older kids—maybe of legal age, maybe not—are in an out-of-the-way corner downing a few beers, killing time next to an old wreck up on cinder blocks. “We gotta get out of this chickenshit town,” one of them laughs.

It is hard to imagine that this community of 160 new and renovated homes used to be a place where farm workers survived life in squalid housing owned by the growers who employed them. Cabrillo began life as a farm workers' camp, with dormitories, warehouses, and a company store. It was built in 1936 by the local lemon growers, planned for single men who followed the harvest north and came to pick the fruit off the trees. There were originally about one hundred worker cabins on the site. Most of them were tiny, less than five hundred square feet each. The streets were unpaved. What began as dormitory housing for single men slowly evolved into cramped homes for large families as many of the single workers married and took up permanent residence in the camp. The population quadrupled beyond what the housing was built to handle.

By anyone's standards, Cabrillo Village was a miserable place. The houses had single walls that left the houses freezing in cold weather. Plumbing was a toilet and a kitchen sink. The sewerage system for the houses emptied into two open settling ponds near the dry riverbed, with the result that when the wind was right, the entire camp had an aroma normally associated with Third World shanty-



***The old Cabrillo. What began as dormitory housing for single men slowly evolved into cramped homes for large families.*** (Photograph courtesy of Tim Street-Porter, Hollywood, California)

towns. To top it all off, the settlement was surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.

Cabrillo's residents remember the old days with nary a touch of nostalgia. We encountered Fidel and Amparo Martinez, residents of Cabrillo Village since 1968, sitting in the neat living room of their renovated home decorated with pictures of three of their children—a California Highway Patrol officer, a local police officer, and a firefighter. A big-screen TV silently displayed news coverage of America's latest entanglement in the Mideast—the crisis in Iraq. As his wife sat next to him knitting, Martinez remembered what life in his home used to be like. His wife gave him a knowing look as he began to speak. "It was deplorable," he said. "The house was half the size it is now. It was very cold at night because we had single walls with cracks in them, and it was very crowded."

### ***Birth of a Movement***

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In 1974, the nation was just becoming aware of the plight of immigrant farm workers in California. A man named Cesar Chavez—the

Mexican-American activist whose struggle to unionize farm workers and humanize their brutal working and living conditions caught the attention of a nation—was making the jump from California newspapers into headlines coast to coast. The farm economy was changing radically as well. The global marketplace was developing and growers in California—and farmers around the nation—were starting to watch their profits shrink after a long period of relatively good times. At Cabrillo Village, many of the formerly transient immigrants had become permanent residents and workers. The growers deducted their rent (about \$1.50 a week) from their checks.

The same labor unrest that had hit the great inland agricultural valleys of California was about to come home to roost in Ventura County. In October 1974, Cabrillo's farm laborers walked out on the local lemon growers, demanding higher wages and better working conditions. Several of the leaders of the action fanned out to labor camps around the county, trying to organize strikes by hundreds of other farm workers. The job action by Cabrillo's workers lasted for a tense month before the growers acceded to the workers' demands and signed a settlement. It included wage increases and promises of improved working conditions. The growers, however, proceeded to ignore many of the settlement terms, and so, the following month, the workers began a second organizing drive, this time under the auspices of Chavez's ornery United Farm Workers union, the UFW. The strike proved to be the first step in a chain of events leading not only to the organization of the workers but to the confrontations that would lead to the rebuilding of Cabrillo Village.

An election was scheduled for August 1975 to certify the UFW. A few weeks before the scheduled vote, hoping to forestall the vote, the growers fired 190 workers. Not only did the certification election never take place but six weeks later all of Cabrillo's residents received eviction notices. The families were given thirty days to leave the camp and were offered \$500 for relocation expenses—an amount that did not go far in Ventura County, even before the real estate boom of the 1980s began to raise housing prices beyond the reach of all but the most affluent residents. The growers said they had no choice. The camp needed to be razed because of a huge number of health and safety violations—some 1,600 of them—that California housing inspectors had uncovered. Among other things, the village needed a new sewer system and all the homes required completely new plumbing and electrical wiring. The state had also ordered the growers to put the cabins on concrete foundations. The renovations, the bulk of which resulted from decades of neglect by the camp's owners, would have cost millions of dollars, but on top of that, residents detected a more sinister motive at work: the local

growers were trying to quash the union organizing activities by dispersing the workers. Similar tactics had been used successfully to hamper organizing efforts around California.

At first, Cabrillo's residents reacted with fear. In the words of Jesus Macias, who moved to California as a farm worker in 1962 and took up residence in Cabrillo in 1972:

There was tremendous anxiety that the community would cease to exist. We didn't know what would happen. I had a big family. The salary was low. Most of us had nowhere to go. There was a feeling of loneliness and fright, especially the fear that we would end up homeless.

Then Cabrillo's people began to fight back. Chavez and other UFW leaders counseled them to stay put. Inspired by that word, the workers began to enlist the support of activists throughout the county and around the state. They pressured the governor—liberal Democrat Jerry Brown at the time—to put off the eviction so the residents could buy time to come up with alternatives. Brown and his associates were sympathetic to the farm worker movement. The political pressure exerted by Brown and others, in turn, won Cabrillo's residents several stays of eviction from the growers.

Fifteen years later, we visited Jose Campa, a strapping farm worker turned auto mechanic, in his Cabrillo Village home. Campa was dressed in navy blue work overalls and old brown work boots, shoes that told of hard work with worn leather. His thick hands were covered with grime and grease from working on the car in the driveway of his front yard, a spot presided over by two noisy cockatoos. Campa recalled the struggle to organize the union and keep Cabrillo from tumbling before the growers' bulldozers. He reached into his wallet and proudly produced an old union card, one of the first ones issued in 1975 by the UFW. Campa, who came to the United States in 1957 and moved to Cabrillo in 1965, remembered the collective spirit of the 1970s as though the events had taken place only weeks earlier:

Chavez and the union gave us courage. He told us to take courage in unity, that if we were evicted not to disperse. There was safety in numbers. In the many there was an opportunity for triumph.

As it turned out, many of the most activist of the farm workers in the clash with the growers would soon emerge as the leaders of the movement to preserve Cabrillo Village. One of them was Luis Magdalleno, who was described by Dewey Bandy, an associate at the Center for Cooperatives at the University of California at Davis (who studied Cabrillo in 1990), as



a cool, level-headed leader. His articulate, reasoned manner of public speaking was complemented with a keen analytic mind. He was highly respected in the village for his intelligence, integrity, and objectivity. Like other key leaders who were to follow him, Luis had a strong commitment to democracy and consensus. His style was to transform the aspirations and goals of the people into a workable plan of action.

Most Cabrillo families realized their only acceptable option was to fight, to fight hard, to fight to save the homes that many of them had been occupying for ten to twenty years. Under the guidance of such leaders as Magdalleno, they persevered, winning outside support and, finally, widespread media attention. There were protests. Children and teenagers marched for miles. All-night vigils were held at the homes of the growers. The UFW offered Cabrillo's residents training in leadership and empowerment. The Catholic church not only provided the village church for meetings but it sent a priest from its Migrant Ministry. He was the first person to suggest the workers buy their homes from the growers.

Discovering the growers had actually signed an option to sell a private buyer the entire village for \$80,000, the workers shifted gears and began a letter-writing and picketing campaign that eventually convinced the potential new owner to abandon his plans.

Then the growers escalated the struggle. One day, bulldozers appeared, ready to level the former homes of the few workers who had decided to take the \$500 in relocation money and leave. A classic standoff ensued. The residents linked arms and formed a "human circle" around the building that bulldozers had come to flatten. It was a pivotal moment in the struggle, one of those events tailor-made for the TV cameras, an opportunity to galvanize broad public support. Stopping the bulldozers was probably the single incident that turned the tide irrevocably toward the residents' favor.

Campa's narrative vividly illustrated the drama of the confrontation and how close to tragedy the situation actually came:

The growers came to scare the hell out of us with bulldozers to demolish the houses. After the first house was demolished, the families formed a human chain around the next one and the union representative stood there and told the bulldozer operator that he'd be responsible if anything happened to us. The police arrived, about sixteen cars. At that time, police intimidation had worked elsewhere. But here, they didn't harm anyone. They backed off because too many people were watching. I am certain that if the police had harmed anyone they would have been harmed. There were people in the community who were armed and ready to defend themselves.

In the six months that followed, the workers organized into a corporation, elected a board of directors, and began meeting with

the Saticoy Growers Association, seeking to negotiate a purchase price for the camp. Aid came in many forms and from different camps: from the UFW, the Catholic church, the church-sponsored Campaign for Human Development, Self-Help Enterprises (a Quaker-sponsored group), and from a man named Rodney Fernandez. The director of human relations for Ventura County at the time, Fernandez would later go to work directly for the Cabrillo residents, guide the rebuilding of the village through its most crucial phases, and then emerge as an advocate for low-income farm workers throughout Ventura County.

After months of hard-nosed bargaining, the residents and the lemon growers agreed on an \$80,000 sale price for the entire labor camp—precisely the amount the private buyer had been willing to invest.

### ***Realizing the Victory***

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Negotiating an agreement with the growers was contentious, but getting the residents to agree on a game plan was equally sticky. For their part, Cabrillo's residents had to determine what form of ownership they wanted. The majority voted to form a nonprofit corporation, but twenty families declined and organized as a separate for-profit group that made a competing offer to the growers to purchase the camp. Ultimately, the growers accepted the offer of the nonprofit group—the Cabrillo Improvement Association. On May 5, 1976 (Cinco de Mayo), Cabrillo's residents took ownership of the property. The dissenting families, called "the Twenty" by the other residents, continued to fight. The feud with the Twenty was eventually settled by Cabrillo's board of directors and the dissident families joined the nonprofit association. While the Twenty finally became members of the association in 1979, it would be years before the hostilities generated by the internal conflict began to subside.

Along the way, Cabrillo's residents faced a number of obstacles, stumbling blocks that could have tripped them up and ended the dream of rebuilding the village. The first challenge was raising the \$80,000 they needed to buy the labor camp. The task was all the more difficult because the so-called Twenty were pursuing their own independent strategy. To buy the project, each family had to invest \$1,000. Lacking investment from the twenty dissident families, however, the organizers came up short of cash. Some of the families were well enough off to put more money into the project and did. The UFW stepped in with loans to fill the rest of the gap. Eventually, the workers secured a loan from the Housing Assistance Council

that allowed them to pay back the UFW and the residents who had put in more than \$1,000. The families were assessed \$16.33 a month to repay the loan.

There were also showdowns about how to structure the development. The residents had a choice: they could form a limited equity co-op (the route advocated by Chavez and the other UFW leaders) or they could build a subdivision that would be developed on a for-profit basis. As it turned out, Ventura County zoning ordinances effectively barred development of a subdivision because of the village's seriously deteriorated infrastructure. It was unlikely the residents could raise enough money to do the repairs the county regulations would have required for a subdivision. There was an even more sizable obstacle blocking the for-profit route, however: as a money-making venture, Cabrillo would not qualify for grants and other financial assistance. In the end, the resident settled on rebuilding Cabrillo Village as a cooperative.

Fernandez, who saw Cabrillo grow from an organizers' dream to a living organism, recalled some of the difficulties:

It was rough because this was a totally foreign experience to the residents. They had the vision and they had the leadership, but not the experience. A lot of the early years were spent getting comfortable with self-management and making decisions even though there was dissension. Dealing with the dissension and the learning process were the hardest things. The project was blessed with strong leaders. But there were still really trying times as everybody learned how to live out their new roles. Relatively speaking, the development part was easy.

Even after they agreed on how to proceed, the residents still had to find a way to make Cabrillo Village habitable. The money required was far beyond what it had cost them to buy the labor camp. What followed was a long process of fund-raising that ultimately opened the gates to large amounts of public money and foundation grants. The California Department of Housing and Community Development took the first step, providing \$12,000 for the fledgling co-op to do a housing feasibility study and determine both the renovation needs and cost. Six months later, the Campaign for Human Development granted the co-op \$100,000 to hire a coordinator for a year and make the necessary hookups to Ventura's water and sewerage systems. Ventura County kicked in money for road improvements.

Financing the rehabilitation of the existing cottages—many of which would be more than doubled in size, from 500 square feet to 1,200 square feet—was not an easy task. In 1978, Cabrillo received a \$13,000 grant from the Rosenberg Foundation for a pilot project.

The residents would renovate one home using one paid supervisor and volunteers from the village. Self-Help Enterprises, the Quaker group, which had experience in developing rural housing, provided technical assistance for the demonstration project. The experiment worked, producing a simple yet very habitable home lacking in many of the “frills” later residences were to have.

With the first home complete and some tangible proof that the residents of Cabrillo were up to the challenge of rebuilding the village, the California housing department awarded the community \$216,000 for equipment and material for fourteen more homes. Cabrillo’s residents were lucky in more ways than one: their timing was crucial. This was the late 1970s, and the government money, from an array of programs, was still available. Only a few years later, in the early 1980s, the flow of federal funds would dry to a trickle and then virtually evaporate—at the same time that California coffers were drying up in the wake of the tax-slashing Proposition 13 passed by voters in 1978. Residents obtained job training money, for instance, from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, the much-maligned federal jobs program that expired during the first round of Reagan-era budget cuts of the early 1980s. The federal job training money allowed the village to set up four work crews of residents; a local community college provided on-the-job training as the renovation work went forward. Almost all of the laborers on the project were farm workers. The vast majority became skilled in a variety of trades, from carpentry to plumbing to electrical work. Many were made able to trade in their jobs as farm workers for higher paying craftsmen jobs after the Cabrillo construction work was completed. Many never returned to working the fields.

By the time the Cabrillo project was finally completed, the residents had received public and private development financing totaling \$7.94 million. The government money came from a panoply of programs: Nearly \$4 million was provided by the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), a government lender that rarely provided financing for cooperatives and in fact had its origins in assisting farmers and growers, not farm workers. California’s Department of Housing and Community Development provided a total of \$1.2 million. Nearly \$1 million came from the federal Community Development Block Grant and Comprehensive Employment Training Act programs. Another \$400,000 was provided by the federal Economic Development Administration, an agency that would be slimmed down to near invisibility as the Reagan-era proceeded.

The private sector and foundations also participated heavily in the Cabrillo undertaking: More than \$200,000 in loans were provided by private lenders. The Campaign for Human Development

and Rural America each contributed \$230,000. The Rosenberg Foundation provided \$175,000.

Another forty-six homes were renovated through 1980. Work proceeded at a pace of eight to ten homes per year (progress slowed as government money became less and less available) until all of the work was finally completed in 1986. The renovation work on the old cabins was extensive. New foundations were laid. Floors were replaced. Walls were insulated and finished on the insides of the homes. The exteriors of many homes received stucco finishes. New bathrooms, kitchens, and electrical and plumbing systems were installed. In most cases, the homes were expanded to add desperately needed bedroom space. Whenever possible, materials were salvaged and reused. Many of the fences in the village, for example, were built from siding removed from the old cottages.

As the old cottages in the village were slowly renovated and rebuilt, the co-op set out to add new housing on empty land at the edge of Cabrillo. One complex of town houses, thirty-five homes in all, was finished in 1981. Another complex of thirty-nine homes started construction in 1983. The Cabrillo homes built from scratch still displayed the sensitivities that the architects hired by the co-op had brought to the project. The designers did not have an easy charge. They were forced to walk a tightrope between the FmHA's bagful of regulations and the desires of residents, who had put much of their own thought and enthusiasm into the design of the new housing. By 1990, the buildings were starting to show signs of wear—front yards that were not kept up, paint that was needed here and there, solar panels that desperately cried out for a washing. Yet it was still remarkably hard to detect that these homes were, in fact, low-income housing. Cabrillo's new homes were light years from the stereotype of the grim, government-financed housing built to warehouse the poor.

The sensitive architecture of the new housing, which won kudos from *Time* magazine and several architectural awards, was the handiwork of two Los Angeles designers hired in 1977. The two, John Mutlow, an architect, and Frank Villalobos, a landscape architect, set about designing the housing with a process virtually unheard of in building low-income housing. They held weekly meetings with the community and wrote up a "space use questionnaire" to find out what preferences families had about the interiors of their homes. Residents' desires in large measure determined the housing's design.

As Dewey Bandy wrote in his study of Cabrillo Village:

The participatory, grass-roots style of Cabrillo Village constituted the foundation of this planning and development process. Residents played an



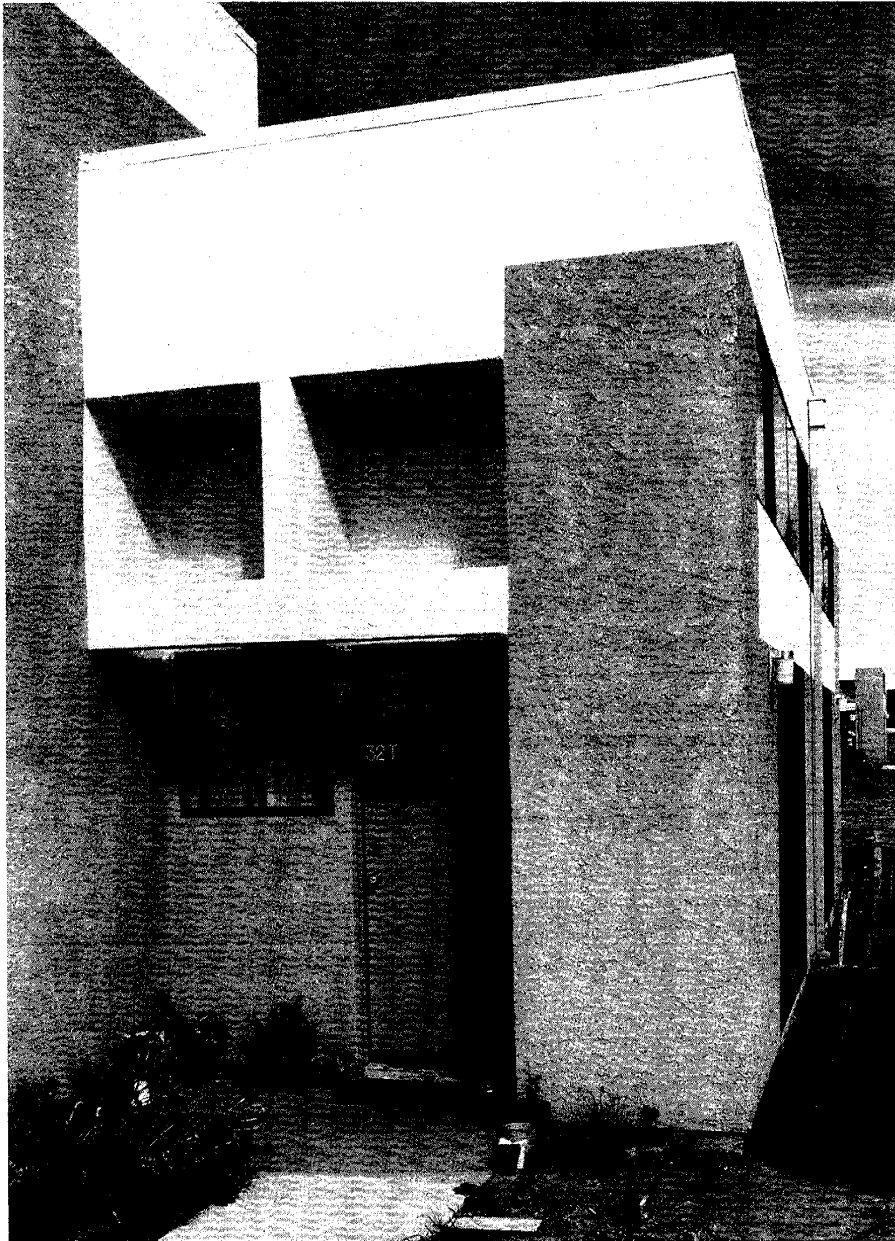
*Cabrillo's new homes are light years from the stereotype of grim, government-financed housing built to warehouse the poor. (Photograph courtesy of Tim Street-Porter, Hollywood, California)*

active role in formulating goals, weighing options, developing plans, and physically designing the rehabilitation of the village and the cottages.

Residents were given so much of a say in designing the new housing, in fact, that the architects ran head on into the requirements of the FmHA. The residents wanted single-family houses. The FmHA required multifamily town houses. Architect Mutlow came up with a compromise allowing the community to build units that

resembled single-family homes in layout, even though they were technically attached. The residents were concerned about how they would be able to pay utilities on their meager farm incomes, so Muttlow worked with them to win a grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to install solar energy panels. By using active hot water heating and passive solar space heating, residents were able to save nearly 70 percent on their utility bills.

When the time came to design the second complex of new



***Residents wanted single-family houses but government regulations required attached town houses. Smart design yielded a separated feeling.***

*(Photograph courtesy of Tim Street-Porter, Hollywood, California)*

homes, the architects faced even tougher FmHA-imposed design requirements. Residents wanted an area where their children could play under their supervision. The architects provided it by clustering the new units so that there was a shared central courtyard where the children could play safely. As we visited in 1990, on a late summer afternoon when the sun cast a soft orange glow across the courtyard, the space was one of the liveliest in all of Cabrillo Village.

Residents got around other strings that came with federal funds by simply doing the job themselves. Ventura County required new housing to have carports. The FmHA's requirements specifically barred them. The plans left space for carports and the residents built them on their own later. A community building was also planned as part of the second round of new housing construction. FmHA allowed a far smaller facility than the community wanted. The residents raised \$40,000 in cash to increase the size of the meeting space and built a community center with a meeting room big enough to seat the entire community, also including a kitchen and a laundry room.

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### ***The Fruits of Hard Work***

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Rodney Fernandez and Jesse Ornelas are unassuming and friendly but intense men. Both of them are slightly built. Fernandez is the more soft-spoken of the two but is far from quiet. Ornelas is more of a showman, a man who enjoys showing he is in charge, that he has a handle on things. Fernandez is more the quiet planner. Ornelas is the aspiring local politician. Together, they have helped guide the projects and built the organization that are bright spots in the struggle of Ventura County's working poor and working class.

Both Fernandez and Ornelas earned their stripes in the struggle to rebuild Cabrillo Village. By 1990, both had moved on to become prominent advocates for the low-income Mexican immigrants of Ventura County who found themselves caught in one of the nation's most desperate housing and economic situations. It was a situation exacerbated by Ventura's continued dual identity: an ongoing old rural economy rubbing shoulders with the more affluent, professional economy that blossomed in the 1980s.

Cabrillo Village remained as a model of empowerment on one hand, a reminder of the difficult plight of the working poor on the other. If the 1970s were a decade of struggle, victory, and hope for California's immigrant farm workers, the 1980s proved to be a period of dejection, deflation, and, for many, renewed desperation. The labor union that had scored so many victories in the 1970s, the



union that had become a national cause célèbre among liberal activists, fell on hard times. By the late 1970s, the UFW had won contracts with most of the major growers in the Ventura area. As the 1980s came to a close, most of the contracts were gone and many of the workers were back where they had started. Cesar Chavez, the man who had garnered headlines around the country, had disappeared from the press in California and become a nonentity nationally. In Ventura, many of the workers and activists who had worked closely with the labor leader in 1975 virtually scorned him in 1990. When they spoke of Chavez at all, they talked in past tense, using language usually reserved to discuss a close relative who had passed away. Chavez himself struggled to gain a foothold that might allow him to regain a measure of the influence he once held and the suasion he once exercised. He died in 1993.

The virtual demise of the UFW contributed to the tenuous existence of Ventura's farm workers, many teetering more precariously than ever on the edge of poverty. The labor market in the agricultural economy had gotten worse. Once workers had been in short supply. By 1990, the market was flooded with new immigrants willing to work for low wages and no benefits. Meanwhile, the baby boom generation professionals who repaired to Ventura County, hoping to outrun the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, brought high salaries with them. That, in turn, bid up the price of everything from food to houses.

No one had a firm count, but some 18,000 to 22,000 farm workers and their families lived in Ventura County in 1990. Unlike other agricultural strongholds of California, where much of the farm labor population was transient, Ventura's was relatively stable. It was not unusual to find older immigrants who first came north and settled in the county in the 1930s; it was routine to find families that had lived there since the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the farm workers—upward of 90 percent of them, by some estimates—remained desperately poor. Family incomes ranged from \$8,000 for families with one wage earner up to \$28,000 for large families with two spouses and several children employed in farm work.

Ventura County and its environs had become one of the toughest places in America to be poor. Virtually every city in the county—from the most affluent to the most modest—had a barrio of its own. Tent cities where male farm workers lived in pathetic lean-tos, in virtual, if not actual, homelessness, had sprung up on countless dry riverbeds. Most of the communities in Ventura, as well as the county itself, had passed tough growth control laws restricting housing development—but not the office development that attracted workers and residents. The growth measures virtually ignored the problem

that poor and working-class people faced in finding shelter. During the 1980s, for instance, 4,500 units of housing had been built in Oxnard. A total of forty-three were low-income units. Many families in the county got by by “doubling up” and “tripling up,” which was what they called it when two and three families shared homes designed to house a single family. When families doubled and tripled in Ventura County, there could be as many as two dozen people living under the same roof.

A “social needs survey” of three hundred leaders, sponsored by the local Ventura Foundation in 1990, found housing ranked as the most urgent of fifty needs in the county. Virtually everyone predicted that the area’s housing problem would become more serious during the 1990s.

Normally reserved, Fernandez became agitated when he told us about the lack of progress in housing the poor. He began gesturing with his hands to drive home each point:

There is a tremendous ignorance of the human and economic consequences of not trying to do anything about the problem and there may even be certain degrees of racism. The policy in many places has been to do as little as possible. But the poor people that no one wants are a big cog in the economy. The logic is that the county needs more housing for the affluent to add to the tax base and improve the image and attract business and industry. That’s the logic. But the shortcoming in that line of reasoning is that the most important part of the economic equation are the lower paid workers who are doing the bulk of the work in the community. If there is no place for them to live you either lose them or you can’t attract them in the first place. It’s gotten so bad now that mid-level workers and managers can’t even find a place they can afford to live.

Ornelas, who had waded into local politics and was vying to become a city council member in the smaller community of Santa Paula, painted a bleak picture of the consequences of continued inattention to the plight of residents of modest means:

The situation is going to get worse. Ventura County is becoming the second least affordable place in California. If we don’t address our housing needs we’ll have more homelessness. People are doubling and tripling and that creates a burden on the housing stock. Neighbors don’t like to live next to an area congested with parking and kids running around everywhere. It will lead to frustration and it will separate people along economic and cultural lines. The children will fall behind in education. They won’t have job skills. It will be a burden on the entire society.

Cabrillo Village not only served as a monument of what *could* be in Ventura County and similar areas across California. The group that had spawned the farm workers’ lead model of self-sufficiency

also became a beacon of hope on an otherwise dark landscape. Fernandez, who had taken over as executive director of the Cabrillo Improvement Association, organized a new nonprofit in 1981, the Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation (CEDC). In addition to searching out development opportunities for Cabrillo and its residents, CEDC was to assist other Ventura County organizations develop affordable housing and community facilities. By 1990, CEDC had developed 477 units of housing scattered in several large projects, and it had several hundred more in various stages of development or actual construction. Fernandez confidently told us he expected CEDC's housing production would exceed one thousand units within several years.

However impressive such numbers—especially for a single, small community development corporation—they also underscored the desperate housing needs in Ventura County. The Cabrillo community development organization remained the *only* such group in all of Ventura County. Of everyone we talked to, Fernandez might have been the most reserved in evaluating the impact a single group could have in the face of the county's skyrocketing demand for affordable housing. He said:

You have to be realistic. We are talking about a population of 20,000 farm workers that needs to be housed. How many of them can we adequately house ourselves? We certainly have the ability to keep doing our share and you will see more low-income people getting into decent housing. Still, our ability to take care of a significant share of the market is limited. The marketplace has to take 90 percent of it.

Whether the marketplace was up to the task remained one of the critical questions confronting not only Ventura but countless other counties around the Golden State. Still, the accomplishments of CEDC stood out as a model of what could be achieved even in the face of incredible adversity. One indicator of the possible was Rancho Sespe, a farm worker housing project that stood as a sudden break in the citrus groves some twenty miles distant from Cabrillo Village. This one hundred-unit project for low-income farm laborers and their families took its name from a huge local ranch that was sold to national agribusiness interests in the 1970s. The struggle by some ninety families to build a Rancho Sespe housing development became one of the most contentious in the nation, a project that almost made rebuilding Cabrillo Village seem like a harmonious, simple affair.

The new agribusiness owners of Rancho Sespe—a group Fernandez angrily called “a new breed of farmer who is callous and inhumane”—followed the Cabrillo model of serving eviction notices on

tenants who were trying to form a union. Some of the workers had been living on the ranch for forty years. The legal fight that developed dragged on for eight years. In the process, the case was taken all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and became the longest eviction battle ever fought in the United States.

Building on the Cabrillo experience, Sespe's residents promptly filed suit alleging that they were being evicted due to their union organizing activities. Even though the courts barred the evictions, the landowners embarked on a concerted war of attrition aimed at making life so intolerable that the workers would leave their homes of their own volition. The water was cut off. Sewerage services were shut down. Gas lines were cut, as was electricity. The residents fought back. They made repairs to keep some water flowing. They brought in bottled propane gas for heating water and cooking. The courts ordered the owners to turn the electricity back on.

Finally, the California Supreme Court—dominated until the mid-1980s by a group of liberal justices who were later ousted by voters—ruled the village would continue to stand and that the workers could stay until suitable replacement housing was found. The landowners appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which refused to rule in the case, letting the California Supreme Court's ruling stand. The task force set up by the California state government recommended buying new land for the replacement homes and that \$500,000 be made available for a land purchase and improvements to a new site.

That, however, was not the final shot fired in the battle. After several abortive efforts, the residents and CEDC found a suitable site, which was sold to them by a farmer from nearby Santa Barbara who was retiring. Owners of land adjacent to the newly purchased site filed a suit of their own, objecting to the new development. They charged it did not follow county development guidelines because it would remove several acres of agricultural land from production. The courts turned down these objections as well. FmHA provided about \$3.5 million to build the project. "The growers wouldn't go for the project because their long-term interests are building subdivisions," Ornelas said as he drove a pickup truck through the curving mountain roads where earthquake faults appeared as sudden dips and inclines in the road that led to the new Rancho Sespe development. "They didn't want farm worker housing in the middle of their twenty-acre subdivision."

Construction finally began in early 1989. The first of the ninety families that had stuck out the long eviction battle moved into fifty Rancho Sespe units that opened in early 1990. By 1992, CEDC

hoped to complete another fifty units, a child-care center, and a community center on the site.

## *Epilogue*

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As we approached the entrance to Cabrillo Village, a man named Juan Gomez, one of the leaders in the fight to save this place for its people, stood with a half dozen young boys applying white paint to graffiti marring the wall of a building. When Cabrillo opened, the whitewashed wall was a one-hundred-foot folk art mural painted by residents depicting the struggle to save their community. Village teenagers destroyed the mural with graffiti, resulting in a blank wall periodically covered with more graffiti to greet resident and visitor alike.

In 1990, Cabrillo was beginning to display signs of strain and the wear and tear from its long roller-coaster ride. The destruction of the mural might have been an isolated act of vandalism by village teenagers who had limited recreational opportunities. Certainly compared to urban communities facing difficult quandaries it was insignificant. Still, the mural's loss seemed to symbolize something more ominous: a creeping despondency, almost palpable in the air.

The farm worker movement that had stirred so many spirits now lay deflated and listless. The single-minded direction that deeply impressed any observer of the struggle to build Cabrillo had become a rudderless and rather depressing status quo. The 1980s had witnessed an inspirational rise for many of Cabrillo's residents, dozens of people escaping the world of farm work for other pursuits, young people becoming the first in their family to attend college and broaden their career possibilities. Yet by 1990, all that seemed frozen in its tracks. A ceramic tile factory, which Cabrillo leaders had once pointed to with pride as one example of the economic benefits of the village's renewal, stood sadly shuttered. Residents had hoped to market their tiles, which were used in rebuilding many of the Cabrillo homes, but discovered that making the tiles and selling them outside the village were two different matters. The factory folded.

It is fair to say that the Cabrillo Village we saw in 1990 raised as many questions as it answered. Physically, most of the project had held up well. Yet something was missing, a perception that was reinforced by nearly everyone we met in a place that still, ironically, continued to serve as an inspiration for everyone who came in contact with it. Fernandez explained part of the puzzle:

The reach challenge is finding enough local leaders to share the burden of placing themselves in leadership positions. Cabrillo was blessed by having

a series of leaders over time and that was a tremendous asset. But no one has been able to take the next step and serve as a leader to help the co-op develop the new programs it needs. Nothing has been put together.

Fernandez was referring to needs that virtually everyone connected with Cabrillo Village agreed existed. Many of the residents were concerned that plans to develop programs for the teenagers and other young people of Cabrillo Village were stopped dead in their tracks. Problems were beginning to appear in the form of increasing drug use and drinking by teenagers as well as run-of-the-mill vandalism. The child-care facilities that parents in the community desperately needed were still nowhere on the horizon.

We met Socorro Flaco Eilar, a brilliant young woman of twenty-eight who grew up in Cabrillo Village and participated in the marches, protests, and all-night vigils as a teenager. She had earned a degree from Harvard University and then returned home to manage Cabrillo Village for a time. Eilar's parents were both farm laborers. Her father worked for the local lemon growers for two decades, her mother in the local packing houses.

As she sat cradling her three-month-old son, she compared Cabrillo Village to an adolescent going through a troubled period. The transition period would not be easy, she said. She made special note of the fact that while a large number of her peers had gone to college locally and around the country, there had more lately been a precipitous decrease in the number of youngsters attending college. She added:

There isn't the same spirit as there was before. But it's like that with any struggle. You spend years and years fighting for something and when you finally achieve it there is bound to be a letdown.

Eilar had firsthand knowledge of some of the troubles Cabrillo Village faced. She was brought on to manage the project after a disastrous period of inept management in the late 1980s. In the job, she addressed a multitude of problems and got people thinking more about the village's needs for the future. She left the management job in early 1990 to have her child. Cabrillo's management situation then took another apparent turn for the worse when the community replaced her with a blond-haired, Spanish-speaking, Anglo Mormon missionary with no experience in running a residential project. When we visited, Cabrillo again seemed to be thrown into a netherworld of uninspired—at best static—management. Some residents were complaining bitterly that the community was stuck in neutral gear or had perhaps even slid into reverse.

Bandy, the University of California associate who studied and

wrote about Cabrillo in 1990, was at once circumspect and optimistic in drawing his conclusions:

The future is, of course, open. Which direction the cooperative will go in is something only time can tell. But whatever the direction, for better or for worse, it will be chosen by the residents instead of a rich Anglo grower or labor contractor. And it will be done by people who have stable roots in a community of affordable, high-quality housing.

There was no question Cabrillo Village would survive. The real question was tougher and infinitely more critical: Could and would Cabrillo Village thrive?

If Cabrillo could recover its former dynamism, it promised to stand as a tiny beacon of hope for the hard-working poor everywhere. In a blinding kind of flash, the Cabrillo Village experience had proven the capacity for brilliance, tenacity, energy, and vision among Americans so often written off by mainstream society. Facing the even tougher economic and social challenges of the 1990s, the Cabrillo movement faced a formidable new test of its mettle, but as great a test faced the greater society: whether it cared enough to learn from the Cabrillo experience, to open new doors to the resources, physical and human, needed to make many more Cabrillo Villages grow and flower.

### ***Commentary: Cabrillo Village***

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**ROBERT SHIBLEY:** This chapter presents a melancholy picture of Cabrillo Village in decline, but right off one should say "Hooray!" for what has been done there. Cabrillo Village has been a model for five other camp conversions over the past ten years. Living conditions, even now, are multiple orders of magnitude better than they were before. People moved from one-by-two single shell structures with poor sanitation, where parents felt their kids were unsafe, to a middle-class physical setting. They moved from shacks to homes.

**AARON ZARETSKY:** As with the other winners of the Rudy Bruner Award, such as New York City's TIL program, the key here was self-help. HUD Secretary Jack Kemp might see self-help as justifying the withdrawal of federal financial responsibility. The TIL and Cabrillo programs show that self-help doesn't mean erasing the necessity for public expenditures. It means self-direction, giving people control over the decisions that affect their lives.

My fear is that as we celebrate self-help, the unfortunate effect will be to support the notion of withdrawing public responsibility.

That view neglects the lessons of both these examples—TIL and Cabrillo—where we are dealing with blacks or Hispanics who for decades have been cut off from education, shut out of the market economy, and subjected to the kind of racism that has prevented them from being able to dream of attaining anything like building a house in Southern California with their own resources.

From the standpoint of public funding, the housing in Cabrillo is an incredible bargain. Each unit is self-contained, solar, and energy efficient but costs less than \$50,000. The tile factory, the community hall, and the cost of the CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] training program are all included in that price. The housing authority in Seattle, Washington, where prices are half what they are in Southern California, is delighted when it's able to build apartment units at \$60,000 to \$70,000.

**SHIBLEY:** It's also important to remember that this place received honors from *Progressive Architecture* magazine and was featured in *Architectural Record* for its scale and sensitivity, for an architecture that doesn't look like what it costs. With absolutely minimum funding, it has the character and ambience of a comfortable middle-class residential neighborhood. That's a pretty good success story all by itself.

**POLLY WELCH:** Self-help has given the Cabrillo Village owners upward mobility. One of the most engaging parts of the "limited equity co-op" is that it recycles that opportunity. If you move out you must sell at a predetermined price that allows another low-income family to become a homeowner. Self-help is not a one-time thing. It has an ongoing impact.

**ZARETSKY:** The limited equity co-op prevents the first owner from being the only one to benefit from public funding. There's no opportunity to sell at an inflated rate, and that prevents the low-income housing from being lost to high prices. It does allow first owners to get on their feet and make a choice between continuing to live in that housing, built with private and federal assistance, or moving on.

**WELCH:** Cabrillo Village is a poignant lesson of what happens when a project reaches adolescence. At the time I visited Cabrillo in 1989, none of the co-op units had ever been put on the market. They were transferred from one family member to another. There's a real sense of permanence, but the original residents also clearly have compassion for other people like themselves. This is reflected



in their commitment to getting the Farmer's Home housing built, so that other farm workers could have a chance at home ownership.

But there's an interesting twist here, an irony. The original owners sound different from the new arrivals. They speak with great emotion about what the project has done for their lives. The newer residents who bought into the second and third phase don't appear to have the same relationship to the village. They have less emotional investment, less willingness to come to meetings, less awareness of how much energy, time, and participation it takes to keep a cooperative going. The original organizers are having a difficult time finding new, younger board members.

**SHIBLEY:** The life of Cabrillo will go in cycles. Pretty soon someone will decide, for example, that it is not acceptable if fewer kids are going off to college than before. This is a very strong and family-oriented social group, and they will bring it back to life in the vision of a new generation of leaders. Right now they are in that awful in between, an adolescence. They won their first fight and haven't quite figured out what their second fight is, but there are positive signs. If the graffiti on the mural was a sign of the project's decline, the whitewashing is a layer that makes you optimistic about what is going to happen next.

**ZARETSKY:** When you're living in a tar-paper shack with no sewage, surrounded by barbed wire, your total being is focused on obtaining decent housing. Then there's an excitement around finally achieving it. Once you're living in a reasonable shelter, other realities descend on you. Those people are still isolated from America. In Southern California, you have a steam engine of progress for the material culture. These people are separated from that by lack of education, low wages, racism, the force of history. Having decent housing doesn't solve that. If they are despondent, it's because housing isn't their only problem.

**WELCH:** The story of Cabrillo Village illustrates the tension between mercy and justice. This was mercy funding, as opposed to righting the wrongs. You solve the immediate problem, in this case housing, rather than the larger problems of poor education and healthcare, drugs, much less giving people the services they need to solve family problems and get on with their lives.

The original eighty migrant families were able to use the mercy money to right other wrongs. For the original residents, the very process of creating Cabrillo was an education: people learning about financing, learning the politics of getting things from the county,

learning construction skills, learning how to manage. They became very articulate. They learned everything from empowerment to daily skills. Many have gone on to better-paying jobs. They aspire to get their children into college. In contrast, the people who moved into the brand-new units got a nice home rather than a migrant worker camp, but they didn't get the empowerment and self-education that organizing brings.

Another difference between the first and later generations at Cabrillo is in the appearance of the housing itself. Much of the first-phase housing is highly personalized. Residents rebuilt every inch of their homes. Even outside, people inserted tiles into the stucco, set up rose arbors, painted gutters different colors. The later phases of housing are attractive but with less expression of their occupants,

**ZARETSKY:** Part of the reason they were fixing up their homes has to do with the sense of ownership. It brings a sense of security. You don't fix up what's not yours.

**WELCH:** The original residents preferred the old housing; when the new housing was built, they chose not to move. The original owners participated in the design discussions for the new units, so the architects assumed that they would want to move in when the units were complete. No one did, to the surprise and disappointment of the architects.

They didn't want to move, in part, because the new homes were attached—not the American dream of the detached home. More importantly, it was because they had made an emotional investment in their first homes. The new homes didn't require that effort. They were complete. Some new homeowners are delighted not to lift a paintbrush, but for a person looking to make a home of her own, putting in that energy is important.

**ZARETSKY:** The concept of the work ethic is deeply ingrained in our culture. If you work hard you will have the good life. The reality for farm workers is that there is no more backbreaking, hazardous work with longer hours and yet they are totally impoverished. It's ironic that we would celebrate that they would have to build their own houses. It's a model of people going home after sixty to ninety hours of hard work in ninety-five-degree weather to build their own carports.

The story of Cabrillo Village is very much the story of the impact of racism in our culture. "Yankees" willing to work that hard would not be living in tar-paper shacks, building their own homes. They would be earning too much. The residents of Cabrillo Village

are not interlopers in a white culture. A hundred and fifty years ago, California and the American Southwest were populated by Mexican people. It's a testament to the impact of racism that they are now seen as outsiders coming in to do the drudgery.