

Mutual Housing Takes Green Approach to Playground Design

The Sacramento-based nonprofit Mutual Housing California has just broken ground on a zero-net energy community for agricultural workers in Woodland, CA.

With 18 communities in Sacramento and Yolo County, it is expanding into other counties with its vision of sustainable communities for low-income families and individuals.

The green-friendly playground will be the first for Mutual Housing.

“A playground is a really important part of the community,” said Vanessa Guerra, Mutual Housing Project Manager. “We wanted to make this green-friendly to get our feet wet and start incorporating the ideas into all our new properties.”

While Norwood Mutual Housing Communities will have a traditional play structure, the landscape architect designed an open area with elements such as tree trunks, planks of wood and blocks. There currently is a focus on returning to simpler forms of play that allow children to be more creative in playground design that the architect has used.

“When children are given boards or bricks, the possibilities are endless,” said Peter Quady, Eider Design Founder and Principal, who designed the playground. “They can lay out an obstacle course, set up a balance beam or whatever. It’s amazing what kids come up with.”

This approach also teaches children to work together while building their own structures.

“Children help each other figure out what they can do and how they’re going to do it,” said Quady. “That type of socializing is a big part of learning.”

When surveyed, Norwood Mutual Housing residents voted for more traditional items such as climbing bars and ropes, a balance beam, slide and fort.

“We ended up looking for a play structure that would have the elements residents wanted: pull climb, rope climb, climbing bars, chin-up and pull bars as well as a fort-like structure,” said Quady.

Volunteers from the Northern California Construction Training program worked with residents to demolish the old playground and parts of the landscaping. The old play structure is being donated to Kids Around the World, a nonprofit based in Rockford, Ill. that recycles playgrounds to help

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children affected by war, poverty, illness and natural disasters.

“We wanted children in another community to be able to use and enjoy the equipment,” said Brandon Louie, Community Organizer at Norwood Mutual Housing.

A blueberry hedge and raspberries in raised planters also are part of the green design—and the learning experience.

“By adding berries, children can pick fresh fruit—and see the cycle of the seasons, the bare twigs in winter, flowers and leaves in spring, berries in the course of summer,” said Quady.

Playground construction just started. As part of the upgrade, Sacramento-based Rod Read & Sons, Inc. will be doing concrete work that includes Americans with Disability Act upgrades. A smart irrigation system with sensors that measure soil moisture, drought-resistant plants and no-mow turf were part of an earlier green rehabilitation of the multi-family properties.

With that and other green upgrades to the buildings, Norwood Mutual Housing recently earned the first green certification in Sacramento County for a rehabilitation from Build It Green, an Oakland-based nonprofit that certifies green rehabilitation projects as well as new developments.

Funding for the Norwood rehabilitation came from the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency and NeighborWorks America.

Founded in 1988, Mutual Housing California develops and operates well-designed rental housing for modest-income households. The communities have nearly 3,000 residents, nearly half of whom are children.

Through Mutual Housing’s focus on leadership, the nonprofit also provides training and mentoring as well as educational programs, community-building activities and services for residents and neighbors.