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## Denver's revitalized East Village includes renewed sense of community

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*Special to The Denver Post*

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The formerly blighted East Village section of Denver has come a long way over the past decade.

The Denver Housing Authority has been hard at work revamping the neighborhood just east of downtown.

East Village, also known as Benedict Park Place, has a history of being a Section 8-dominated housing project infested with gang activity.

But the redevelopment that began in 2004 and is set to wrap by early 2011 goes beyond physical appearance.

Ted Freedman, a member of the East Village Advisory Committee and an East Village resident since 1981, says the revitalization "affected the social structure of the community."

"Having a lot of people come in from different income levels living side by side, it's good to have that density in any city," Freedman says. "It's creating a sense of community that wasn't there."

The goal of DHA's project, funded in part by a federal Hope VI grant, was to combine mixed-income housing into a unified social network.

City Projects president Cherie Kirschbaum developed the first phase of East Village's rebirth, the 124-unit mixed-income apartment development at Benedict Park Place, with Bruce Heitler of Heitler Development.

Kirschbaum says a series of developers tried to revitalize the area over the past decade, with limited success. The process took time, but it also made area residents more knowledgeable about their community's needs.

Joe Colistra, a principal architect with In Situ Design in Denver, which is renovating a portion of East Village, says the area's woes date to the 1970s.

"A lot of the streets had been closed off, with clustered housing. It created a lot of dead ends," says Colistra, a senior instructor with the University of Colorado's College of Architecture and Planning.

East Village's current open setup offers a much safer environment, he says.

"People can look out their window and see if anything is going on," he says.

Colistra, whose firm is working on the project's fifth phase of work, says East Village's housing units no longer resemble government-funded buildings of yore.

"We're trying to abolish the notion that affordable housing should look like a warehouse," he says.

Ismael Guerrero, executive director of DHA, says the new urban-planning model calls for reconnecting sites like East Village to surrounding neighborhoods like Five Points.

Mixed-income models add stability to the community, Guerrero says, and they also allow residents to move into other parts of the area instead of going away when their income starts rising.

Longtime East Village resident Richard White describes his neighborhood as no longer a haven for transient renters.

"What I see more than anything is a sense of ownership in the area," White says. "We have no problems with the issue of low income being in the area. It's part of the fabric of the community," he says.

Kirschbaum says East Village's rich past includes hosting some of the biggest names in jazz music. All the renovation work being done in East Village is going toward respecting that past — and its people.

"The intention was not to change the entire cultural fabric of this community," Kirschbaum says. "We wanted to restore it."