

Artists move into \$61 million Ventura housing complex

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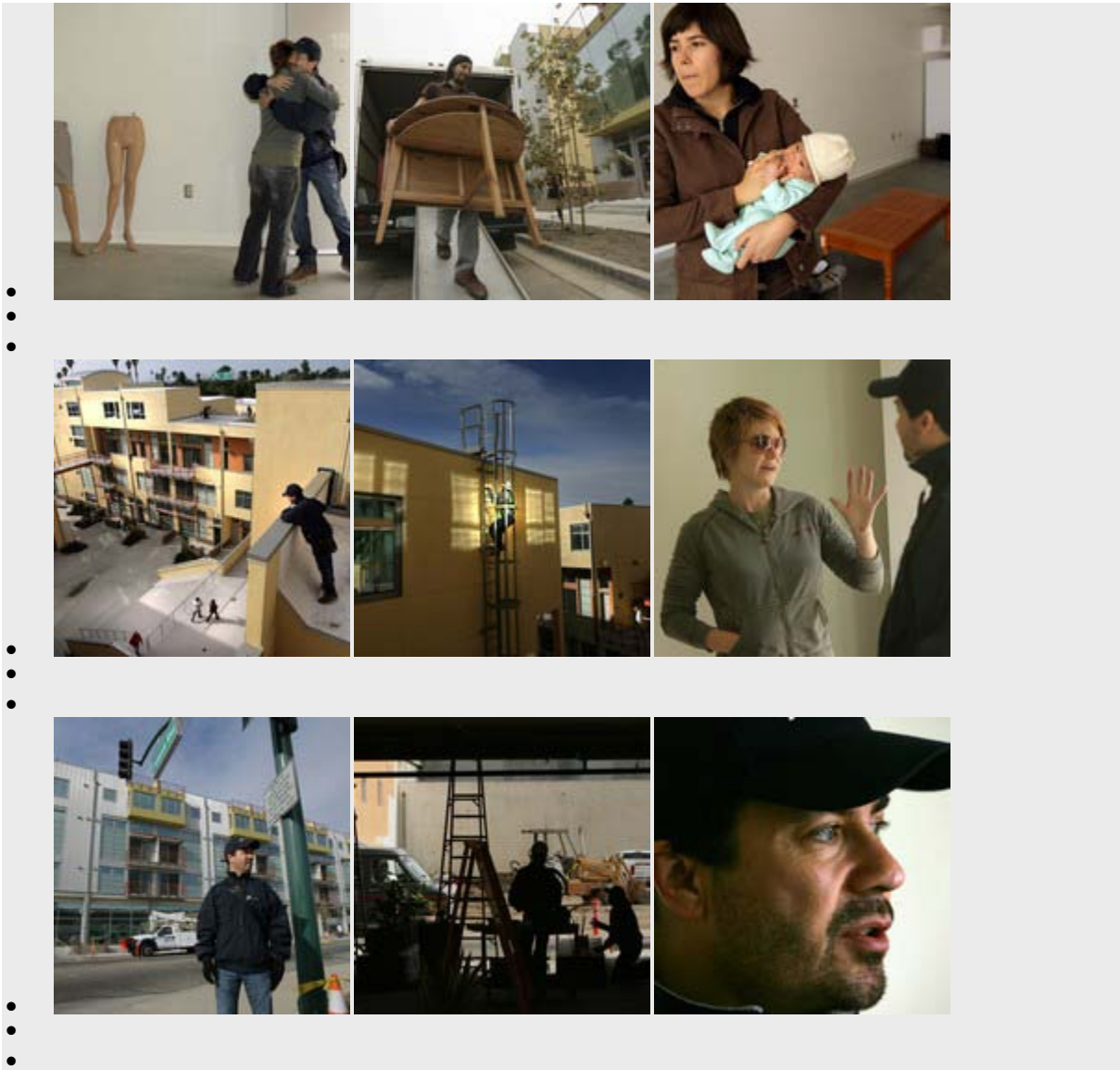
The “Wave” is open.

The first of dozens of artists last week moved their photography equipment, potter’s wheels, paints and easels — along with their belongings — into the Working Artists Ventura community, officially opening what Ventura city officials consider one of their most important projects in a decade.

Six stories high in some spots, the \$61 million WAV, pronounced “wave,” project will offer 54 affordable live-work units for artists and their families, 15 apartments for people facing severe poverty and trying to end their homelessness, and 13 ocean-facing, market-rate condominiums.

Spanning nearly 3 acres, the center has a 99-seat theater-gallery, parkland, arts-related commercial space and a small parking garage. Low-flow toilets sit in each bathroom, and rooftop solar panels shaped in the form of a wave are expected to harness enough energy to power the complex and add electricity to the regional grid.

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[Previous](#) 1 of 11 [Next](#)

For photographer and filmmaker Katrina Maksimuk, 32, moving in was a dream come true. No more days living in a mobile home. Now she can work from home: her unit, like others, was designed with high ceilings and roll-up doors for the living and working needs of artists and their families.

Rents adjust on a sliding scale, ranging from a few hundred dollars to \$1,500 a month for the complex's largest, four-bedroom unit.

Nearly 900 artists requested applications. Maksimuk was among a group of 135 who went through an interview process that probed beyond her letters of recommendation and portfolio.

“Your artist résumé only counted for half of your score. The other 50 percent was based on what you have done — your contributions, your willingness to contribute — to your community, however you defined that community,” said Maksimuk, who earned a degree in microbiology from UC Santa Barbara in 2003 but was drawn to photography and performance arts. With photography jobs scarce, coupled with Ventura’s high rents, she feared she would have to move.

“The way I see it, this is a special chance to co-create with other people,” said Maksimuk, who, in addition to her clothes and film equipment, arrived Thursday morning with her collection of vintage mannequins. “And our success depends on a community of artists coming together.”

Collaboration has been a hallmark of the project, said Chris Velasco, president of the nonprofit organization Projects Linking Arts, Community & Environment Inc., the

project's Minnesota-based developer. The organization, known as PLACE, works with cities to create communities that promote the arts, environmentalism and social justice.

The combination of varied housing options in a certified "green building" makes it unlike "any housing project in the state or nation," said Velasco, who was at the site Thursday welcoming new arrivals as workers planted new landscaping and a pair of interior designers tinkered inside one of the for-sale condos.

The project sits at Thompson Boulevard and South Ventura Avenue and is visible from Highway 101. It was designed by Santos Prescott Architects and CardeTen Architects.

Because of the affordability guarantee and units for the homeless, the project secured an array of financing, including millions in government tax credits and loans. Of the roughly \$61 million cost, about \$42 million was for construction.

"We've built it for about \$178 a square foot," said Velasco, who said if he did it again, he would try to work with a group of local banks. Some \$35 million in financing from Washington Mutual had to be absorbed last year by JPMorgan Chase & Co. after federal regulators seized WaMu and sold the bulk of its operations to JPMorgan.

Of the 13 market-rate condos to be sold, two are spoken for, Velasco said. The proceeds from the market units will help cover the overall cost. Other ongoing fundraising will continue.

The project has had its critics. Some have questioned the city's contribution of some \$1.5 million for affordable housing, or objected to artists getting special treatment for property the city helped acquire and sold to the applicant.

But to Mayor Bill Fulton, it's a small and justifiable price for a development certain to add new people, jobs and vitality to downtown. Coupled with a planned expansion of the Museum of Ventura County, the project will strengthen the area as a cultural and tourist destination, he said.

It is projected to eventually add more than \$100 million to the local economy, from prevailing wage construction jobs to anticipated art shows and street-level cafes and jazz clubs, officials said.

And that's not counting the human benefits, said Rick Pearson, director of Project Understanding, a Ventura-based nonprofit group that will coordinate the housing and social services there for low-income residents seeking an end to homelessness. Units also have been earmarked for 18-year-olds moving out of foster care or a facility run by Casa Pacifica in Camarillo, a nonprofit group that helps abused or neglected children.

"There is no way I could afford to live in a regular apartment," said Rose Sutton, 39, of Ventura, a recovering heroin user whose sobriety and can-do attitude earned her a spot in one of the 15 supportive housing units. With her rent capped at \$186 a month, she can afford college courses to become a paralegal and eventually attend law school.

"I'm incredibly grateful, as I know all my neighbors are," she said. "This is a start for a future for so many people."

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