

Wrecking ball can demolish Orange Ave. projects — but not the memories

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Newtown's Orange Avenue
was the first housing project
in Sarasota



The Orange Avenue housing, built in 1941, was Sarasota's first housing project. The buildings have been demolished to make room for a 84-unit senior living community. [PROVIDED BY THE SARASOTA HOUSING AUTHORITY]

SARASOTA — When we think of history here, the Bidwell-Wood House, the Ca' d'Zan mansion and the Marie and William Selby house come to mind.

But another important link to the way it used to be is disappearing largely unnoticed amid the scramble to self isolate and prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.

This week, demolition began on the Orange Avenue housing units in Newtown— the area's first housing project.

Built in 1941, the 60-unit development on 21st Street, once called Newtown Heights, brought indoor plumbing, electricity and sidewalks to the long segregated black community of north Sarasota.

Traditional public housing across the nation is largely regarded as a failure—even by the agencies in charge. It concentrated poverty, degenerated into slums and tainted surrounding neighborhoods.

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When it rained, it rained inside your Orange Avenue apartment. Toilets that flushed upstairs in some apartments ran downstairs into living rooms. There was no insulation in the walls. In the summer, you burned up. In the winter, you'd freeze.

But if you've been around long enough, you might remember glimpses of humanity. You might remember the sandlot-style Newtown Turkey Bowl, where the housing development's finest football players hosted other area athletes in the open field behind the office. The Newtown Heights players always won.

You might remember the sense of community, where everybody knew everybody.

But times have changed. Sarasota, like about 160 other cities, is starting rebuilding plans from scratch. The Janie Poe Apartments and the Courts housing units are gone. For a time, Orange Avenue survived the projects that superseded it.

On Thursday afternoon, the structures were a pile of rubble.

Replacing Orange Avenue will be a \$19 million L-shaped, 84-unit three-story senior community. With a mix of one-and-two bedrooms, it will house people 62 and older. 42 units are set aside for households earning less than 60% of the area median income. The other 42 units will be subsidized for low- and extremely low-income residents.

“Newtown’s time has come and we’re going to make sure that they have the same kind of housing that everyone else in Sarasota has,” said John Colón, a Sarasota Housing Authority commissioner since 2005.

Some history

Overtown emerged just south of downtown in 1885, becoming Sarasota’s first African American community. But as downtown’s northward sprawl crept in, most of the segregated black community was pushed toward Newtown to make room for what would later become the Rosemary District.

The 60-unit Newtown Heights housing project on Orange Avenue and 21st Street emerged as city leaders encouraged more development in an area where indoor plumbing and electricity were scarce.

In the post-war years, Newtown families who could not afford even the most modest homes moved into public housing. Those units became Newtown’s largest residential developments and were considered desirable places to live for the working class.

For a long time, it was the only area on Newtown’s dirt roads with concrete sidewalks, remembered Jetson Grimes, 79, a community activist and business owner.

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“It was where we would all roller skate as kids,” Grimes said.

The Gilbert family and countless others moved in and out of the housing project over its nearly 80-year history. Walter Gilbert remembers what it was like to move back to Sarasota as an 11-year-old from Pittsburgh in 1963.

The Gilberts lived in one of the two-story duplexes that lined Orange Avenue. While most families had to share a front porch with the neighbor across from them, the Gilberts had a corner apartment.

“Prime real estate,” said Walter Gilbert, who grew up to be a civil rights activist and president of NAACP of Sarasota. You can typically find him on the weekends helping to lead historical tours of Newtown.

“The way the units were built, you were so close to your neighbors that you had to get along,” Gilbert said.

But time and desegregation brought decline to Orange Avenue and other projects that followed. The units gradually descended into blight, becoming eyesores that stigmatized residents and detracted from efforts to spark a Newtown revival.

After years of wishful talk and failed attempts to kick off urban renewal, city leaders struck a deal to take a wrecking ball to four of the city’s five housing projects.

Their 388 families were given rental vouchers to relocate as developers worked to erect market-quality apartments and condos.

Two-thirds of those homes will be set aside for low- to moderate-income families. The remainder are to be rented or sold to middle-class newcomers who might otherwise spurn that part of town.

The Orange Avenue Projects were fully occupied in the fall of 2018. All but five of the senior residents transferred to other public housing and will get priority placement in the new senior community when it’s built at the end of 2021.

When the dust is settled — and isolation guidance is lifted — several former tenants want to host a “tenant appreciation day” celebration.

“To remember, just for a minute or so, what these projects meant to the community,” Gilbert said.



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