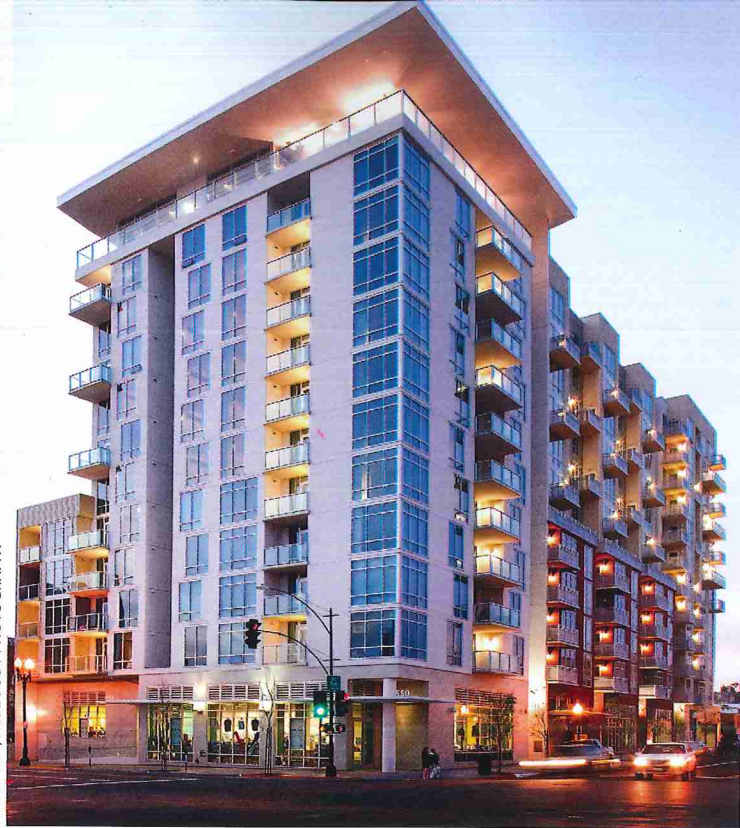


# KEEPING IT REAL (AFFORDABLE)

Q&A With Joseph Wong



PAUL BODY, PAUL BODY PHOTOGRAPHY



An affordable housing complex in downtown's East Village, 16th & Market was completed in 2009 and comprises 136 units.

**W**ith a happy childhood spent playing soccer in the streets of Hong Kong, Joseph Wong, FAIA, learned an early lesson in social interaction and community in an urban environment. Arriving in San Diego with his family at the age of 15, he was taken aback by the open spaces and car culture. But as founder and president of Joseph Wong Design Associates, he has made a mark on the city as the designer of large-scale, high-density housing projects — many of them affordable — that recall the neighborhood of his youth. His portfolio includes Alpha Square, living space for lower-income residents in the East Village; Atmosphere in Cortez Hill, which includes 50-plus units of housing for special-needs tenants; and the Ronald McDonald House, supplying residential accommodations for 47 families whose children are patients at Rady Children's Hospital.

**When did you start your firm?**

I started the firm in 1977, so this is our 40th year. It's interesting. Fifteen years ago, I told myself that when I got to this age I was going to slow down and do less. But I'm actually busier than I was 15 years ago — or five years ago. I truly enjoy my practice and working with our team.

**How did you develop an interest in creating affordable housing?**

I went to school at University of California, Berkeley. I was there in the early '70s, and the early '70s in Berkeley was an interesting time. In classes I attended, we'd learn about social needs and social responsibility. Those classes had a really profound effect on me. I learned a lot.

**Did you do housing from the beginning?**

After we established the firm, good design for multifamily housing was always our interest. When the economy changed in the last two decades, we had the opportunity to start designing what we call affordable housing. And I find it very rewarding, because I think back to my early days, my education.

**Is there a project that stands out?**

About 10 years ago, we had an opportunity to work on the Father Joe's Villages high-rise project at 16th and Market. At that time, the East Village was still a transitional area; and the idea had been a high-rise for families with children. Most of us think family housing should be a two-story townhouse or maybe in more of a suburbia-type setting, but creating a 12-story, 136-family building was very interesting to us.



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JOSEPH WONG DESIGN ASSOCIATES

This rendering shows the Millenia affordable housing development with 210 units scheduled for completion this winter in Chula Vista.

## What's the solution to the housing crisis?

You need leadership from the public sector that can set a strong social policy. If you look at other industrial countries, you see that they provide affordable housing. We need to provide a minimum of 10 percent affordable housing. And city officials need to look at efficient zoning and planning guidelines. The design guidelines are sometimes so rigid that you cannot afford a project in terms of the density. The planning codes are dated, and I think we need to really look at that.

## What's the role of the architect in this?

As design professionals, we should have our thinking hats on to come up with creative solutions that are also cost effective. We should consider how we might be able to work together with structural engineers and construction teams to look at more cost-effective, prefabricated housing solutions, as well as nonprofit organizations that can operate them to make sure the place is well maintained and creates opportunities for people to live and learn. As architects, we want to do our best to come up with good design, and hopefully each project we do is a small victory.

**There was an article in *The New York Times* last year that said the reason there's a lack of affordable housing in San Diego is the NIMBYism of San Diegans. Do you agree?**

Perhaps San Diegans should be more open-minded in terms of looking at new affordable housing. I think that — with special care,

attention to detail and creating a more human scale in a cost-effective way — an affordable housing project could be a good example of showing that diversity and mixed-use housing in any neighborhood can be a really great form of what I call "place making."

## Should San Diego be looking beyond downtown for these kinds of projects?

We should look at other areas besides downtown — like now we are developing a project in Chula Vista. It's part of a master-plan community called Millenia that mixes market-rate, lower-density townhouses for sale with retail and offices. I think that's probably the future. We should see more of this type of mixed-use community development. North Park and the College area also should be explored to see how we can have well-designed projects that fit into the neighborhood.

## Do you think more architecture firms should get involved with affordable housing?

Yes, absolutely. I think not only more architecture firms should be involved, but also we should see private development firms and other professionals like landscape architects involved so that we can all work toward one goal to provide good housing for all incomes. It's a challenging crisis, especially for San Diego and California. I feel this is a social responsibility for architects, city leaders and the private sector. It just takes a great effort from everybody to overcome this issue. ♦