

Community Endeavors

Fine Line Construction heads up a rigorous expansion of affordable housing in San Francisco.

BY CHRIS KELSCH

“The buildings are durable and the design is really timeless.”

EMILY LIN, VICE PRESIDENT



Fine Line Construction works with quality design firms to build unique, affordable housing units.

PROFILE

FINE LINE CONSTRUCTION

www.fineconstruction.com / HQ: San Francisco

/ Specialty: Affordable housing / Employees: 100

Given its current housing crisis, one does not often see the words “San Francisco” and “affordable” in the same sentence. High home prices plus high population density plus low availability have added up to San Francisco becoming the most expensive city in the country to rent an apartment.

And though it does not get as much media coverage, there is also a significant lack of low- or middle-income housing in the city. So much so that in 2014, San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee outlined an aggressive plan to build or rehabilitate 30,000 housing units by the year 2020. Included in the plan was the partnership with HUD and San Francisco Housing Authority to revitalize the City’s public housing stock utilizing HUD’s Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program.

The units are spread all over the city, from Chinatown to central San Francisco and even sites in the southeast neighborhoods including Bernal Heights and Hunter's Point and toward the Pacific Ocean. This has presented a welcome opportunity for Fine Line Construction, one of the few general contractors in the Bay Area that specializes in such projects.

"Overall there are 29 RAD sites to be worked on," Fine Line Vice President Emily Lin says. "And Fine Line Construction is the general contractor for 10 of those sites, so our pipeline has seen some significant growth."

"For Fine Line, the total number of units to be rehabbed is 1,100," Lin continues. "And so many of those units were in terrible condition, with deferred maintenance and inadequate amenities. It was a huge opportunity for the city and nonprofit developers to step up and stabilize a deteriorating situation."

UNIQUE SENSIBILITIES

In choosing Fine Line as GC on a significant portion of the project, the city and nonprofit developers such as Bridge Housing elected to go with a company uniquely prepared to handle such work. Since it was founded in 1980, Fine Line has specialized in nonprofit

housing, affordable housing, transitional housing, senior housing and multi-dwelling hospice communities.

On this present project, it was crucial to have a GC experienced in working with many tenants. "It takes a different quality of pre-construction service to make the project work," Lin says. "There is a lot of scheduling to be done with moving tenants out, and the renovations really have to be phased in."

In addition to its logistics know-how, Fine Line is experienced in simply making tenants' lives easier and managing anxieties during the process. "One thing that we have heard from tenants is that 'the construction process was hell, but we were treated with great respect and courtesy from your crew,'" Lin says.

Fine Line is also uniquely experienced in building throughout the Bay Area, including projects in Oakland and San Jose. This has made Fine Line well equipped to handle unique challenges as they come up, and there are plenty of those in San Francisco.

"One of the biggest challenges was access to the building," Lin explains. Indeed, San Francisco is the second-densest U.S. city behind New York.

"Often times we are having to work without an open area to bring in materials or equipment," she adds. "Also, while looking



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Fine Line Construction is uniquely qualified to work with tenants, and takes great care to ensure their needs are met.

out for tenants, we have to keep in mind the neighbors surrounding the sites as well.”

Generally, Fine Line rehabilitates units in blocks of 15-50, depending on the building configuration, to keep the number of tenants to be displaced at a manageable amount. Further, it is able to complete such blocks within a three- to six-month time frame. “Given the risk and cost associated with these projects,” Lin says, “It is critically important that we are phasing in them in as efficiently as possible.”

The first five buildings were started in late 2015 and work began on the second five buildings a year later. Overall, the project is being constructed in two phases. The first phase is considered easier than the second because the second phase has more difficult buildings in terms of size and their preexisting seismic conditions. Phase I completed in Summer of 2017, while Phase II buildings are scheduled to be completed at the end of 2018.

CITYBUILD

Given its extensive history of building throughout the Bay Area, Fine Line has developed long-standing relationships with many of San Francisco’s best subcontractors. However, there are many administrative barriers in publicly-funded projects, so Fine Line is cautious to rely on a select group of subs. “We really need to make sure that no one subcontractor is overextended,” Vice President Emily Lin says. “Because that is not going to do anybody any favors.”

Further, there are requirements on public projects calling for hiring workers from the low-income developments themselves. Fortunately, the city of San Francisco has launched “CityBuild,” a program designed to connect contractors with ready-to-work employees. “That program has really been a great tool,” Lin says. “It is available to all trades, who face daily challenges in finding new workers.”

The program began in 2006 as an effort to coordinate citywide construction training and employment programs with pre-apprenticeship and construction administration training.

MODERN DESIGN

Completed buildings on this project tend to look anything but institutional, as they are designed to enhance their neighborhoods. As Lin notes, this is completely by design. “The buildings are durable and the design is really timeless,” Lin says. “And that is absolutely intentional. We are fortunate to have clients who value not just affordability, but quality of life and community assets.”

Lin also notes that the finished product is a result of talented and committed design firms such as Gelfand Partners Architects, Barcelona Jang Architecture, Levy Design Partners and HKIT that design with the tenants in mind, but also keep in mind durability issues. After all, there might not necessarily be resources available for improvements every five years.

“That’s really where our quality focus comes in,” Lin says. “Nothing gives us more satisfaction than to hear someone say, ‘I didn’t know that was affordable housing.’”

PRIMED FOR GROWTH

With a full pipeline of projects, Fine Line is careful to keep its high standards and culture intact. “It’s important to acknowledge that Fine Line is really a diverse, family business,” Lin notes. “We have so much diversity not just in our office, but also in the field as well.”

That diversity is important because Fine Line serves a diverse group of tenants in the Bay Area. And within Fine Line, there is a major focus on maintaining a strong culture. “When a company is intentionally growing, we have to be mindful of continuing to build great teams,” Lin says. “We really want to maintain that culture of collaboration.” ■