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Chinatown International District's decrepit, historic Publix Hotel rejuvenated as apartments

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The new building is 60 percent leased, with market rents as cheap as \$1,175 for a studio and 20 percent of the units rent-restricted for tenants earning less than the area's median income.

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The old Publix Hotel in Seattle's Chinatown International District, shut down for 13 years, has reopened as a shiny new apartment tower with a nod to the building's rich past.

The 120-room Publix opened in 1927 near Fifth Avenue South and South King Street as one of many single-occupancy-room hotels in the area designed for immigrant workers from Asia.

Facing high maintenance costs, it closed in 2003, but the Moriguchi family, owners of Asian grocery chain Uwajimaya, have spent the last four years on a \$24 million project to fix up the building and add a new six-story structure next to it.

Mayor Ed Murray and project officials marked the completion of the work in a celebration Wednesday, and residents began moving in earlier this month.

"There's a lot of history on this site," said Miye Moriguchi, the development manager for Uwajimaya. "It kind of lost life and now has become something new and different."

The building's history as an affordable living option — rent was as low as \$2 a week in 1937, and \$75 a week in the early 2000s — will continue: About 20 percent of the units will be rent-restricted under a city program that gives tax breaks for developers that include below-market-rate units. Renters earning between 65 and 85 percent of the local median income — \$46,600 to \$60,900 for a couple — are eligible.

About 60 percent of the 125 new apartments in the building, rebranded as simply The Publix, are already leased. The market rents range from \$1,175 for a tiny studio to \$3,400 for a few large three-bedrooms units.

"There's a new need for smaller apartments for a younger generation of people looking for in-city living, and rents for other apartments were skyrocketing so high," Moriguchi said.

In the original hotel, units were created by combining several old rooms, some of which were as small as 8-by-10 feet. The original storefront and hotel lobby have been preserved, along with many of the old hallways and doors.

"The sense of walking down the corridor is virtually unchanged from what it was before," said Kiki Gram, the project manager for the developer, Spectrum Development Solutions in Seattle.

In early stages of planning in 2013, Uwajimaya had envisioned a \$12 million renovation — half the cost of the final project — with most units renting for around \$1,000, but the owners ultimately decided to double the size of the project. To help fund it, the developers secured tax credits for preserving historic structures.

Of course, the building now includes plenty of modern features standard in today's new apartment buildings, like rooftop BBQs, a dog area and bike storage.

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