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Owe'neh Bupingeh Rehabilitation Project Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo

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Many American families dream of owning a single family home in a suburban subdivision. Yet on tribal lands this type of housing can have devastating social and cultural consequences—especially for a community like Ohkay Owingeh, whose residents traditionally lived in high density housing surrounding central plazas. At Ohkay Owingeh, US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) policies supported the construction of new suburban subdivisions over the rehabilitation of traditional pueblo dwellings—and homes at the pueblo's core that had been occupied for generations slowly were being abandoned. The pueblo undertook to revitalize the historic village center in a way that celebrates traditional culture, bringing life back to the plazas that are the cultural heart of the nation.

Traditional Homes Abandoned

Ohkay Owingeh, the “Place of the Strong People,” is one of 19 federally recognized pueblos in New Mexico. The nation's small land base is located 30 minutes north of Santa Fe along the Rio Grande River and is home for approximately 3,500 community members. The village center, known as Owe'neh Bupingeh, has been occupied for over 700 years. Owe'neh Bupingeh consists of four plazas surrounded by historic pueblo-style homes. These plazas are the site of important dances and ceremonies held throughout the year.

Over time, however, the homes surrounding the plazas in Owe'neh Bupingeh fell into disrepair. Strikingly, while several hundred dwellings existed in old pictures of the village center, by 2005 only fifty-six houses were still standing. Large gaps appeared around the plazas as houses crumbled away. On feast days the area was busy, but most of the time there were few signs of life. Less than half of the homes in Owe'neh Bupingeh were used as primary residences and very few were in good condition. None of the remaining houses had their original second stories. Many of the homes were used only to host gatherings during the ceremonies and others were completely abandoned. The situation was complicated by traditional inheritance

practices, which not only created shared ownership but could also result in room-by-room ownership. When the kitchen was owned by a different family member than the living room or bedroom, who might be allowed to live in the house, and who was responsible for its upkeep?

Federal housing policies reinforced the decline of the village center by funding construction of single-family homes on the outskirts of the reservation. Many families moved out so that they could enjoy modern amenities in the new houses. However, moving spread community members out across the reservation and took them away from the traditional social structure of the Owe'neh Bupingeh plaza, which tied families and clans together. The depopulation of the historic village center wasn't just a pueblo version of urban decay, it was threatening the cultural integrity, language transmission, and life-ways of Ohkay Owingeh.

Revitalizing Culture through Housing

The Ohkay Owingeh Housing Authority, working closely with the tribal council, embarked on a complex, long-term project to revitalize the buildings in Owe'neh Bupingeh. The goal was to bring families back to live around the plazas. The project began modestly with a grant of \$7,500 from the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office to hire six high school students. The students documented the pueblo by utilizing GIS and GPS equipment to measure the buildings' existing conditions and interviewing elders to record their recollections and stories of daily life in the pueblo.

With this initial research in hand, the pueblo convened a series of community meetings with current village center residents, tribal council members, cultural leaders, and Pueblo citizens to identify the kinds of changes that could make Owe'neh Bupingeh homes more appealing. A consensus emerged that it was important to save the buildings since they "contained the breath and sweat of our people" but that modern amenities should be added. Having made the decision to renovate, repair, and rebuild, the pueblo next needed a process for clarifying ownership and responsibility for each home. The tribal council and tribal realty department established a transparent procedure for tribal members to record their claims on homes in Owe'neh Bupingeh and transfer ownership shares, making it possible for renovations to begin.

Early on, the Ohkay Owingeh Housing Authority also called a meeting of key parties to the project: the Ohkay Owingeh Tribal Council, New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority, New Mexico Division of Cultural Affairs Heritage Preservation Division, and HUD Office of Native American Programs. These partners signed a memorandum of understanding defining their commitments and roles and held regular meetings to help ensure smooth and culturally appropriate progress. The meetings were particularly important for helping manage competing agency standards. While HUD provided the bulk of project financing through income-based block grants and Indian Community Development Block Grants, by 2014 the pueblo had raised a total of \$9 million for the rehabilitation project from over 20 different sources.

To date, 34 of the homes in Owe'neh Bupingeh have been renovated and the results are inspiring. There is updated water and sewer in the village center area and the electrical lines have been buried. The renovated homes now boast modern kitchens, bathrooms, and even laundry rooms. Second floors were added to some units, creating spacious, light-filled bedrooms. At the same time, important traditional elements were preserved. The buildings maintain their original layout and connectedness to each other around the plaza. The outer walls have been restored to the historic mud-plaster adobe instead of modern cement stucco.

The revitalization of Owe'neh Bupingeh has created strong demand for village housing. With more families living around the plazas, interest in traditional practices and participation in ceremonies is growing. The families living in Owe'neh Bupingeh are asked to participate in mud-plaster training workshops and to contribute to the upkeep of the homes, and those living elsewhere on the reservation are encouraged to join in. This has revived a tradition that elders remember fondly from their childhoods—neighbors working together to maintain their homes. One tribal member observes, “The weakness and sadness that once existed is now laughter, voices, and aromas, which makes it a living pueblo. You can feel its strength and power as though you have entered a space that requires its highest form of respect.”

A Plan Driven by Community

The Owe'neh Bupingeh project has won numerous architectural awards for its design and careful attention to cultural norms. But the housing plan is also notable as an act of tribal sovereignty. From the beginning, the pueblo conceived and carried out the initiative based on its own priorities. Ohkay Owingeh consciously rejected the federal and state approach to historical preservation that required restoring the homes to their appearance at a particular point in history. Instead, architectural choices flowed from their usefulness in preserving the cultural value of the homes, bringing families back into the heart of the community and back into close contact. For Ohkay Owingeh, the rehabilitation of the homes surrounding the plazas was never just about housing. One tribal member notes that the renovation was “guided by historic research, but the village is not a museum, and it will continue to evolve organically.”

Positive intergovernmental relationships were another key ingredient of the Owe'neh Bupingeh revitalization plan. Initially, the tribal council was uncomfortable involving state and federal agencies in a project that dealt with the sacred and spiritual sites. But Ohkay Owingeh was able to work with the numerous partner agencies on its own terms, finding a way to balance the community's goals and vision with agency mandates. As one Ohkay Owingeh Housing Authority representative explained, “All funders and the state preservation office were brought to the table to understand the complexity of the project and to request everyone's patience and cooperation.” Ohkay Owingeh also created a cultural advisory team, made up of highest spiritual leaders, to take the lead on decisions about building materials and artifacts found in the area during construction. This proactive approach helped ensure that sensitive

matters were dealt with properly and within the community instead of defaulting to state and federal archaeological mandates.

Community participation was also fundamental to project success. The housing authority conducted “deep outreach” into the community, involving not only current and future residents of the village center, but also youth, elders, cultural leaders, the tribal council, and tribal departments. All interested tribal members could take part in regular planning meetings or serve on an advisory committee for the Owe’neh Bupingeh project. A housing authority employee noted that this extensive community input gave project leaders authority when speaking with outside partners. Community members were deeply involved in the actual construction project as well, constituting half the workforce hired and trained by a Native-owned project contractor. Ultimately, the project’s strong emphasis on community ensured that there was wide support for project decisions and reinforced the idea that the village center is central to the cultural heritage of all Ohkay Owingeh citizens.

Bringing Lessons Home

Building a home can be seen as a practical matter of providing shelter. The community of Ohkay Owingeh also knows that housing and housing patterns have far-reaching cultural consequences. The pueblo found a way to integrate modern lifestyles with a way of life that has been followed for centuries. Residents of Owe’neh Bupingeh are learning to plaster their homes in the same way their ancestors did and are teaching their children how to care for the pueblo in the future. By using the housing project to fulfill a broader community vision of bringing families back to the spiritual center of the village, Ohkay Owingeh is making sure that the area around the plazas will remain vibrant for the next generations. The tribal leader who now hears babies crying during ceremonial dances on the plazas can say with pride: “There is life here again.”

Lessons:

- Rebuilding the physical and historic core of a community can help rebuild relationships, revive cultural practices, and strengthen the nation.
- Investments in community engagement and planning are essential ingredients to sustaining Native communities.
- A strong vision and clear programmatic goals ensure the success of intergovernmental agreements and reflect sovereignty in action.