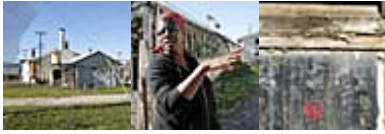


## Developers, preservationists work together on prewar Richmond site

[Tyche Hendricks, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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The white frames and glass panels of the tumbledown greenhouses can just be glimpsed by drivers whizzing south through Richmond on Interstate 80. At street level, wedged between the freeway and the BART tracks, more than three dozen old greenhouses, the former Sakai, Oishi and Endo family nurseries, occupy 14 acres in a corner of a down-at-the-heels residential neighborhood.

Now derelict, with windows shattered and paint peeling, the nurseries are a last fragment of a centurylong chapter of Japanese American history in the East Bay, in which dozens of immigrant families built flower-growing businesses in the early 20th century. But the greenhouses, along with several houses, numerous packing sheds and outbuildings, are about to be torn down to make way for new homes.

Historic preservationists and housing officials are hashing out a plan to repair and maintain a few of the original structures. As they debate, the tough, persistent rosebushes, gone wild over a decade of neglect, climb toward the glass ceilings, putting out fragrant blossoms. Sparrows and juncos twitter in and out of the broken panes, pecking seeds from the profusion of weeds.

The city of Richmond and two nonprofit housing developers, Eden Housing Inc. and Community Housing Development Corp. of North Richmond, have been looking at the property for the past few years. The city purchased it in 2006 with plans to build close to 200 units of market-rate and affordable housing on the site, including single-family homes, townhouses and apartments, both for sale and for rent.

"The governor's office is very clear - we need to build more affordable housing in California," said Patrick Lynch, housing director for the Richmond Redevelopment Agency. "Typically you don't have the opportunity because there are not large parcels left. So when we saw the opportunity to acquire 14 acres of prime land, we went for it."

The development is to include a community center, a children's tot lot, the restoration of a stretch of Baxter Creek, and a footpath connecting the neighborhood to a new greenway that will link to the El Cerrito del Norte BART Station and shopping districts on San Pablo and Macdonald avenues. The property is considered a brownfield because the soil is contaminated with lead, petroleum and pesticides, including DDT, but Lynch, accustomed to coping with the pollution left behind by heavy industry, said the cleanup will be straightforward.

The greenhouses are rooted in a century-old wave of immigration from recession-plagued Japan to the West Coast. In the 1890s, brothers Kotoro Sakai and Seizo Oishi arrived in the Bay Area. They bought land in Richmond in 1906, before there was a freeway or BART or much besides farms. On it they built their first greenhouses and began growing roses, carnations and snapdragons for the emerging cut-flower market in San Francisco.

"Japanese immigrants came from agrarian stock, so they brought in their agricultural techniques and some relatively new techniques for horticulture," said Rosalyn Tonai, director of the National Japanese American Historical Society in San Francisco. "There was a lot of backbreaking work, but they had a love of the soil and cultivating plants."

The brothers sent for their wives and raised their children on their land, putting them to work early in the greenhouses. Along with the Sakais and the Oishis, Japanese immigrant families who started nurseries in the area included the Adachis, Sugiharas, Mayedas and Hondas.

Other families started flower businesses in Alameda and San Mateo counties. A few of those families, including the Shibatas and Okus, are still in business, though not on their pre-WWII properties.

Overwhelmingly, though, cut flower cultivation has declined in the face of overseas competition. The Shibata family's Mt. Eden Floral Co. still grows some roses in California, but mostly imports flowers from Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico and Thailand.

In the early part of the century, Japanese immigrants to the Bay Area faced virulent anti-Asian bigotry from groups like the Asian Exclusion League, formed in 1905, and

expressed in stories in *The Chronicle* and other newspapers with headlines like "The Yellow Peril - How Japanese Crowd out the White Race."

Then came the internment of Japanese Americans in militarized camps during World War II. The Sakais were forced to leave California during the war and the Oishis were incarcerated for several years, first at the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, then at the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah. They left the nurseries in the care of a local florist, who raised flowers for a bit but then found it easier to rent lodgings on the property to the many African American families who migrated from the South to work in Richmond's shipyards.

"He was getting rent to make payment on the taxes so we didn't have back taxes when we came home," said Tom Oishi, 85, the youngest of the seven Oishi children, who, with his brothers, took over the business after the war.

The Japanese workers the families hired to help them in the nurseries gave way over time to new immigrants from Mexico and Laos, many of whom also came from agrarian backgrounds and who also struggled to establish themselves in a new land.

Historians who assessed the significance of the property for the nonprofit housing developers found that several structures appear to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The Craftsman-era bungalows, refrigerated packing sheds, and rows of greenhouses with louvered windows operated by elaborate pulleys and gears are not grand architecture, but they reflect the history of hardworking immigrant families building lives under difficult circumstances, said one of the report's authors, Donna Graves, who also directs a project documenting the history of California's Japantowns.

"If you wipe away all traces of the past, you lose a way of connecting to all the steps that have brought us here, and also the connections we can make to each other," said Graves. "To be able to touch the place, move through the place, is very powerful. It's hard to get the same emotional resonance from a book or a plaque."

The city and the housing developers have agreed to some form of historic preservation. They have arranged for archival-quality photographs of the nurseries, and they plan to create an interpretive exhibit about the site's history, either within the development or in a more public location, such as along the greenway or as part

of the National Park Service museum about Richmond's history on the home front in World War II.

Although most of the buildings will be demolished to make room for the housing development, Lynch and others say they will try to preserve three structures - the 1921 Sakai residence, a water tower, and the first and smallest of the greenhouses - if feasible, though they may want to move them out of the way of the new homes.

"The site does have an interesting history; what we're struggling with now is, what's the best way to honor that? ... It has been somewhat contentious," said Katie Lamont, a senior project developer with Eden Housing. "With the greenhouse, we're having a hard time committing. ... We want to be sure that someone is the steward of it. I'd be most comfortable if some community garden group would come forward and say, 'This is how you can do it and we can help.' "

Redevelopment staffer Natalia Lawrence was visibly excited by the project as she walked through the site one recent day, talking about revitalizing the neighborhood with high-quality homes built with environmentally sustainable methods and plenty of trees and landscaping. She has asked developers to submit proposals to build the single-family homes and hopes for a good response by the Dec. 19 deadline.

As Lawrence conjured a vision of the future, the echoes of the past were everywhere: in the cylindrical wooden water tanks, the litter of old rubber boots, and, in one shed, a small collection of mildewed school books, one inscribed in 1918 by Susie Sakai, another in 1929 by her little sister, Ruby Sakai.

"The history is important," said Tonai, of the Japanese American Historical Society. "I sit on a nonprofit affordable housing board, so I know the need for family housing, but I think there's an opportunity there. ... It doesn't need to be an either/or issue."

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*<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/11/24/BAQQTGU6U.DTL>*

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