

New Columbia experiment still a work in progress

By Anna Griffin, The Oregonian

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Any decent scientist knows that you must document your experiments, even social ones such as the North Portland neighborhood of New Columbia.

Filmmakers Sue Arbuthnot and Richard Wilhelm have kept their camera trained on this 82-acre community since the summer of 2003, when bulldozers ripped down the old Columbia Villa public housing complex and replaced it with mixed-income apartments and houses. The project has drawn national attention as planners and social scientists work to move past the old model of government-subsidized housing as socially segregated ghettos.

Yet as Arbuthnot and Wilhelm show in their new film, "Imagining Home," the story of New Columbia isn't anywhere near as simple or settled as the people who envisioned it might hope.

"It's not as easy as just picking up the old and replacing it with the new, and assuming you've solved all the problems," Arbuthnot says. "The bricks and mortar are finished, but this community is still a work in progress."

Arbuthnot and Wilhelm, a husband-and-wife team, make their living producing shorter, documentary-style films for nonprofits, government agencies and other groups. They stumbled onto the tale of New Columbia while working on a piece about the construction of the yellow MAX line, which runs through North Portland.

The work became a bit of an addiction. For months at a time, the couple would throw their gear in the car and head to "The Villa," a rundown complex of small homes, streets and sidewalks built during World War II to house shipyard workers. After some initial reluctance, Housing Authority leaders gave them complete access as residents moved out, relocated in temporary housing and then packed up and headed back.

Arbuthnot and Wilhelm interviewed dozens of residents over several years, eventually boiling 140 hours of footage down to a 78-minute feature film.

The film documents the stories of the village's families and the voices of some of Portland's poorest.

It's a story told in shades of gray. During the 1980s and early '90s, Columbia Villa became known for drug – and gang-related violence. "It taught me how to survive," one longtime resident says in the film. "If you were weak, you got run over."

Yet many residents loved their small, secluded neighborhood. The Villa was a haven for women fleeing abusive husbands, seniors struggling to pay the bills and recent immigrants just beginning to establish themselves. It was home, in other words, with all the emotional weight that word conveys.

"It would have been simple to make a film that just said, 'This is a good thing. It's an improvement,'" Wilhelm says. "But there was a cost."

New Columbia is an undeniable improvement, a \$155 million new urbanist collection of brightly painted apartments and houses laid out around a new park and elementary school. It's a grand social experiment, an attempt to both provide decent housing for people in need and prove that folks from different classes and races can live together and get along.

Such noble notions don't always translate into reality. On camera, renters complain that homeowners don't give