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# Homes for Those Displaced by Renewal

By ELSA BRENNER JULY 23, 2006

YONKERS

AS formerly deteriorating neighborhoods here are slowly rebuilt and old tenements are turned into condominiums and co-ops, residents like Ana Matias and her longtime companion, Gregorio Medina, who are trying to scrape by on limited incomes, are being squeezed out.

Until this spring, Ms. Matias, a part-time dental assistant, and Mr. Medina, who was partially blinded during a shootout in a grocery store where he worked nine years ago, lived in an old low-rent building. But the landlord, determined to convert the structure to a condo in the city's improving market, wanted the couple and their two grandchildren out.

Too poor to purchase a home, unable to find another low-cost alternative as the supply dwindles in Yonkers and frustrated in their court battles against the landlord, the family faced homelessness.

"We hear stories like that all the time," said Robert Sandborn, vice president for real estate at Westhab, the county's largest nonprofit developer of low-cost housing. To address the growing need for low-income housing, Westhab this month opened a four-story stucco and stone apartment house here with 29 two-bedroom apartments.

With housing costs in many areas of the country exceeding the financial reach of low- or moderate-wage workers, governmental agencies and nonprofit developers like Westhab are responding with what they call work force housing.

Westhab's new \$7.96 million apartment building, which is at 217-227 South Waverly Street, has a welcoming lobby, bright corridors, 24-hour security system and underground parking. Rents for a family of four earning \$48,000 to \$57,000 a year, which is 60 percent of the county's median, are \$800 to \$1,000 a month.

"In most sections of Yonkers today, it's tough to find a two-bedroom for that price," said Jeffrey Landsman, an agent with Century 21 Wolff in Yonkers. "Most one-bedrooms start at \$1,200, and as gentrification moves ahead, landlords will ask as much as they can get." As the housing sales market slows, demand for rentals is increasing, further contributing to a rise in rents, he added.

Ms. Matias and Mr. Medina, who are both in their 50's, and her granddaughters — Anarosa Aquino, 14, and Wanda Medina, 13 — moved into the new Westhab building two weeks ago; they were among the first to do so.

Still surrounded by unpacked boxes but pleased to have brand-new quarters, Ms. Matias said she was especially happy that her granddaughters finally had their own bedroom. "In our other apartment, we were all in one room," Ms. Matias said. "Who knows where we would have ended up if we couldn't come here?"

Sensitive to the changing forces in the city's real estate market and especially to the gentrification taking place near the Hudson River waterfront (home during the early part of the 20th century to immigrants who worked in factories near the shoreline and lived in modest multifamily houses and apartment buildings nearby), Westhab began construction of its building on South Waverly Street in the spring of 2004.

"As Yonkers goes through this transition," Mr. Sandborn said, "market forces exert a lot of pressure on the Anas of this city who need to stabilize their lives and not worry about being put out on the street."

The low-income housing project, which was designed by Lawless & Mangione, a Yonkers architectural and engineering firm, was paid for with public financing from a combination of agencies. The largest contributor was the state, which gave \$4.337 million from its Homeless Housing Assistance Program, said Michael Hayes, a state spokesman. In addition, there was a \$50,000 loan from the Westchester Housing

Fund, a county agency, and \$1.126 million in county Industrial Development Agency bonds, along with a letter of credit from the Bank of New York.

Joe Paterno, the architect for the project, said the firm specified low-cost, high-performance materials, like vinyl tile and bamboo composite floors. The bamboo composite, Mr. Paterno noted, is made from a highly renewable natural source.

For the building's exterior, Lawless & Mangione used stucco and concrete blocks with a stone veneer. While there are sleeves for room air-conditioning units in the apartments, there is no central air, and the hallways and lobby are not cooled.

The apartment building occupies a site where a former steel processing plant operated, in a neighborhood of residences and small businesses on the southwest side of the city. It is several blocks away from the area where people are being displaced by the gentrification of the Getty Square neighborhood.

At night, this area, which is next to Park Hill, one of Yonkers's priciest residential neighborhoods, used to be frequented by drug addicts and prostitutes, Mr. Sandborn said. "It was terrible," he recalled. "In the mornings when construction began, the place was littered with their paraphernalia. Now that the building is open and security cameras are everywhere, though, the addicts and the prostitutes seemed to have gone elsewhere."

Westhab creates affordable housing by acquiring and renovating vacant apartment buildings as well as building new rental and home-ownership housing.

In the case of its new rental apartments on South Waverly Street, the organization first had to obtain a waiver from the court monitor overseeing the final steps of Yonkers's efforts to comply with a federal desegregation order, issued in the late 1980's, to be able to build affordable housing on the west side of Yonkers. The order requires the city to build affordable housing on its eastern, predominantly white, side. The administration is said to be just months away from totally complying with its court-ordered housing requirements to ensure that minority residents and poor people are not clustered in the city's southwestern quadrant.

**The apartment building and others like it have aided in reducing homelessness by providing housing that, together with county rent subsidies, helps the lowest-income people in Westchester out of the county's shelter system, Mr. Sandborn said.**

**In Mount Vernon, Westhab is overseeing a \$6 million renovation of a building that will house 20 families. In addition, the building will offer commercial retail spaces for a kosher bakery and a cafe that will serve food prepared by women who live at the Coachman Family Shelter, operated by Westhab in White Plains.**

**All told, Westhab is involved in seven new projects costing more than \$35 million, to house grandparents raising children, disabled veterans, adults with special needs and other low-income groups.**

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