

Mo's amazin' makeover

Ex-Met's firm could revive East New York

By Andrew Lisa
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As outside forces drive up rents and force residents out of once-neglected neighborhoods, an experiment is under way in East New York to fix the community from within — without displacing the locals.

Outside help

The downtrodden Brooklyn neighborhood has caught the attention of Omni New York LLC, a company co-founded by former Met Mo Vaughn. The firm buys distressed, mismanaged properties and gives them a "full overhaul," replacing or updating everything from plumbing and appliances to security systems, according to the former baseball star's partner and Omni co-founder Eugene Schneur.

One of Omni's success stories is East New York's Grace Towers Apartments, where residents of the formerly dilapidated and crime-ridden 168-unit complex now enjoy a clean, secure and modern building, all with the guarantee of keeping affordable, Section 8 status.

Now, Omni is turning its attention to Remeeder Houses, a troubled housing complex of 260 units that it bought last month and is slated to undergo a nearly \$9 million overhaul just like Grace Towers, just four blocks away.

Will it catch on?

While the residents at Remeeder will certainly benefit from living in a nicer building, some wonder whether two dramatically improved sites in such close proximity can reverse the fortunes of an entire neighborhood synonymous with drugs, crime and unemployment.

City Councilman Charles Barron (D-Brooklyn), whose district encompasses East New York, thinks it will do just that.

"It impacts the entire community," Barron said, noting that crime has dropped since Grace's makeover. "It brings health back to our community, the interest in business increas-



A tidy courtyard is among the new amenities at Grace Towers Apartments.

On Mo's plate

Among the properties the baseball star has renovated:

- Thessalonica Court, Bronx: 286 units
- Target V Apartments, Bronx: 83 units
- Mill River Residences, Nassau County: 175 units
- Brookhaven Apartments, Bronx: 286 units
- Park Lake Apartments, Nassau County: 240 units

(Omni New York LLC)

es in our community. Once you do that, the whole area is something people take more pride in. The answer is not just bringing in more police."

Lifelong Brooklyn resident and borough real estate expert Charles D'Alessandro, who is a licensed broker with Fillmore Real Estate, agrees that pride can be contagious.

"An oak tree starts with a seed," D'Alessandro said, "and you have to start somewhere. The idea is that people move out when they can. This gives them a reason to stay and build a life there. You have to keep the people."

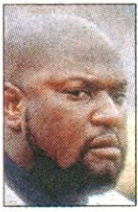
Local doubts

But not all are convinced that a few spruced-up buildings can change an area.

Muhammed Rahman, who owns Nice Choice Realty at 601 Liberty Ave., is packing up and moving to Queens later this month. When his business was burglarized on July 29, he lost



The dilapidated and crime-plagued Remeeder houses will soon get a comprehensive overhaul. (Andrew Lisa)



Mo Vaughn

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six computers and a new plasma TV. But his disdain for the community goes far beyond monetary loss.

"People do not have the right attitude," Rahman said. "They have no respect for another human being. That's why no one is coming in from the outside. If I get 200 calls, 198 are about Section 8," he said, referring to a government program that helps low-income citizens pay rent.

And some leaders are leery of developers, who in the past have exploited poor

residents there for profit.

"We would welcome them upgrading, renovating, and giving assistance to those who are seeking some sort of assistance," said Walter Campbell, district manager for Brooklyn Community Board 5, which encompasses East New York. "If that's the case, we'll welcome them with open arms. East New York is the place to be these days, but we are a low-income neighborhood and the residents there can not be displaced."

But Barron has high hopes that small changes can lead to big things at Remeeder Houses, East New York and beyond.

"As our district goes, so goes the rest of the city," he said.