

Power Player

By CARA BUCKLEY

THERE are times when Maurice Vaughn, the former major league baseball player universally called Mo, is treated like a businessman — usually when he is deep in talks to buy ratty apartment buildings and make them habitable again.

Then there are times when he is treated like catnip — usually by women, like the ones who spotted him strolling through the cleaned-up courtyard of one such apartment complex in Brownsville, Brooklyn, called the Plaza, that Mr. Vaughn and his partners bought in 2007.

“How ya doin’ Mo Vaughn,” they crooned in near-unison. “Mo Vaughn? Mo Vaaaauuuuughhnn.”

Mr. Vaughn, 42 — and married with a 5-year-old daughter — cuts an unlikely figure in New York’s real estate world, not just because women are drawn to him, or because he is 6-foot-2 and 280 pounds under his custom-made suit, Donald Pliner loafers and diamond studs. Charismatic and massive, enduringly famous and comfortably rich, he brings a dose of glamour to the decidedly unsexy world of low-income housing.

This is where Mr. Vaughn, a star slugger for the Boston Red Sox who quit baseball in 2003 after a lackluster run with the Mets, decided to build what he called his “afterlife” from the ashes of his baseball career. His six-year-old company, Omni New York LLC, is on its way to becoming a major player in the low-income housing world. It has acquired 4,000 apartments, most of them in New York State’s scrappiest neighborhoods, housing the poorest of tenants (98 percent of them qualify for Section 8 rent subsidies).

In a city obsessed with the gilded cocoons of the rich, the company has forged a reputation for

turning around properties once deemed untouchable in the caste system of New York real estate — like the Plaza, where drug dealers once openly sold their own brand of heroin, guarded by pit bulls whose food was laced with gunpowder.

Mr. Vaughn, both teddy-bearish and intimidating, is the leader of an unlikely triumvirate. His Omni partners are a Russian expatriate named Eugene Schneur, 38, his lawyer and friend since baseball days, and Robert Bennett, 46, who has years of experience financing low-income housing. The firm began buying in 2004, focusing on so-called acquisition rehabs — older properties in various stages of decrepitude, often with absentee landlords and teetering finances.

Since then, it has bought and rehabilitated 23 sites in New York, Massachusetts and Wyoming for a total of \$503 million. Other deals worth \$205 million for 1,000 units, most in the Bronx, are scheduled to close in September.

“Is he a big deal in New York real estate? He’s becoming a big deal,” said Harold Shultz, a senior fellow with the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, a research group.

“It’s unusual to have someone famous; usually this field is small operators,” Mr. Shultz added. “But Mo, he was serious.”

Other professional athletes have become developers in retirement — Tate George, a former guard for the Nets, has spearheaded projects including affordable housing in places like Newark and Bridgeport, N.J. But many more have gravitated toward flashier, more commercial ventures, like movie theaters and restaurants (Magic Johnson); grilling devices (George Foreman); barbecue sauce (William Perry, “the Refrigerator”); and bars or nightclubs (too many players to count).

Mr. Vaughn, who was born in Norwalk, Conn., and now splits his time between a 3,000-square-foot rental at 52nd Street and Second Avenue in Manhattan and a five-bedroom home in Coral Gables, Fla., said he chose this field because it seemed like a way to both do some good and make some money, with minimum risk. And though he spent the high points of his baseball career in Boston and was largely lampooned as an overweight has-been while with the Mets, Mr. Vaughn said he chose to make this city the center of his business interests because he “felt bad how it ended for me in New York.”

“I always had dreams of coming to New York, driving through the boroughs, and knowing people through baseball,” Mr. Vaughn said from his office on the 31st floor of the Dag Hammarskjold building on the East Side. “Now I know people in the boroughs for different reasons. Good reasons.”

Looking out over the United Nations building and the East River below, he added, “I knew the test of a man was what he’s going to do with his afterlife.”

SHIRLEY VAUGHN, an elementary school teacher, taught her son to hit in the backyard when he was 2, showing him the left-handed stance he would stick with throughout his career despite being a rightie. His father, Leroy Vaughn, a high school principal and coach, used to pitch and Shirley would catch the fly balls (when she could). “From as far as I can remember back, and even in the big leagues, they almost never missed my home games,” said Mo Vaughn, who has two older sisters.

He went to a boarding school, Trinity Pawling, in upstate New York, where he excelled in football, basketball and baseball. The athletic director there was the one who started calling him Mo.

At Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., he studied communications and broke the career home run record, with 57 (in three years). Friends called him “Hit Dog.” He was Big East Conference Player of the Decade.

But Mr. Vaughn, a first baseman, left college without a degree for the minor leagues, logging 13 homers in 36 games with the Triple-A Pawtucket Red Sox.

He moved up to the majors in 1991, and his bleacher-reaching blasts made him a darling of Red Sox Nation, which greeted him with stadium-filling roars of “Mo! Mo! Mo!” The news media took the name and ran: Mo better. Mo hits, Mo R.B.I. Mo fun. “Mo appears destined for Im-Mo-tality,” a writer for The St. Louis Post-Dispatch raved.

In 1995, Mr. Vaughn was anointed the American League’s most valuable player; a year later, his batting average was a lofty .326. In 1998, the Los Angeles Angels signed him for a record-breaking \$82 million six-year contract.

And then Mr. Vaughn’s luck turned. On opening day with the Angels, while trying to catch a

pop fly, he tumbled down the dugout steps, wrenching his knee and tearing ligaments in his ankle. His game was never the same. He was traded to the Mets in late 2001, but was heavier by then, with a plummeting batting average and lingering injuries. After a disappointing run and more injuries — including getting his hand broken by a pitch — he retired in 2003.

Mr. Vaughn plunged into a disconcerting vacuum that he had long feared. A nightclub he owned in Ohio had closed, and his late-1990s investments in three East Village bars — Opal, Opaline and the Boysroom — had flat-lined. Mr. Schneur, the lawyer, urged him to think bigger.

Years before, Mr. Vaughn had met some low-income-housing developers who made a profit using what seemed like Monopoly money: federal tax credits, state-issued bonds and other subsidies. Fueled by a potent mix of guilt over his failures in New York, altruism and opportunism, Mr. Vaughn asked Mr. Schneur to look into the possibilities. Mr. Schneur called up a friend, Edward Skyler, who was Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's press secretary.

"Mo wants to give something back," Mr. Schneur recalled telling Mr. Skyler.

At the time, the city was in the throes of a tree-planting campaign.

"Does Mo want to plant some trees?" Mr. Schneur recalled Mr. Skyler asking.

The lawyer hung up and relayed the query to the retired slugger, who, Mr. Schneur said, responded something to the effect of he "didn't want to plant any expletive trees."

"I want to do housing," Mr. Vaughn repeated.

IN 2004, with the real estate boom in full swing, seasoned developers were closing on deals to build mixed- and low-income buildings at a quick clip. Mr. Vaughn and Mr. Schneur hired Mr. Bennett and several former city housing officials to show their seriousness, and scheduled meetings with the city's housing gurus.

"They were nimble, and very smart about it, which was great," said John Warren, a former first deputy commissioner with the housing department.

The city was shopping for a new owner for two troubled sites in the Bronx, Thessalonica Court and Brookhaven Apartments, that were nearing foreclosure. Officials figured they had little to

lose. “We thought, ‘Here’s a project that’s in some trouble, not a lot. No one’s looking to buy it,’ ” recalled Mr. Shultz, who was then special counsel to the housing department. “ ‘Let’s see what they can do with this.’ ”

Omni New York bought the two sites, totaling five buildings, with \$28.6 million in tax-exempt bond financing, and began what would become its signature overhaul.

Mr. Vaughn and his comrades met with tenants to issue assurances and log complaints. Construction crews patched holes, mended leaky ceilings and installed new lights, kitchen cabinets, bathroom tiles, toilets and tubs. Security cameras were installed by the dozens in hallways, forcing drug dealers and prostitutes into stairwells — until Omni installed security cameras there, too. Electronic wands replaced keys to thwart replication. Public spaces were repainted a pinkish hue selected by Mr. Schneur, who thought it uplifting and noninstitutional. The color would end up in all of their buildings; Mr. Vaughn calls it “Gene’s Peach.”

Two and a half years later, Omni New York cemented its reputation as a rescuer of lost causes by buying Noble Drew Ali Plaza in Brownsville, widely considered the worst complex in the city. It was rechristened the Plaza and Omni-fied, with new kitchens, Gene’s Peach and 356 security cameras.

The Urban Homesteading Assistance Board, a tenant advocacy group, helped engineer Omni’s purchase of 14 failing South Bronx buildings that speculators had bought and abandoned during the boom. Some critics grouched that Fannie Mae, which held \$23.8 million in mortgage debt on the buildings, provided too steep a discount in selling for \$5 million, but when the deal was finalized on July 12 this year in a courtroom auction, the benches were filled with cheering tenants.

“I love them — as much as I can love any landlord,” said Megan Reed, an Urban Homesteading organizer.

“You could hear the chatter go through the building, the older people saying, ‘Oh, this is just great,’ ” recalled Laura Andrews, who lives in a building that Omni recently took over in Harlem. “We weren’t asking for chandeliers, just basic things. We’re regular people, poor people, who want to live decently.”

Amid the accolades, some tenants complain that drug dealing has persisted at places like the Plaza, and that Mr. Vaughn should give more back. “If he really wants to help the community, he should pay for scholarships,” said Joan Johnson, one of the women who catcalled Mr. Vaughn in the courtyard that day. “You can’t get a job these days without a master’s degree.”

Mr. Vaughn and his associates would not say how large their rent roll is, how much profit the company makes or how much it spends operating the buildings. Low-income developers generally collect fees worth up to 10 percent of the purchase price.

“You run these properties well, you run a lot of them, you make money on volume,” Mr. Schneur said. “That’s always been our business plan.”

OMNI is hardly the city’s biggest affordable-housing developer. CPC Resources, based in Manhattan, has built three times as many units. But Omni’s quick growth — the company has 180 employees — has combined with Mr. Vaughn’s celebrity to turn heads (and raise hackles: One developer, noting his own decades of work in the field, said he was “insulted” at having been asked about Mr. Vaughn’s work. Why profile this upstart and not him?)

Mr. Vaughn’s office at the Dag Hammarskjold building is a disorganized amalgam of his life and “afterlife.” File folders and fan mail are piled high on window ledges. Boxes litter the floor. Framed baseball jerseys line one wall; a television fixed (and muted) on ESPN is mounted on another. Three Swarovski crystal gorilla figurines sit on his desk, gifts from his daughter, Grace.

“That’s how she sees me,” he said. “That’s Daddy, right there.”

If his wallet is firmly implanted in New York, Mr. Vaughn’s heart is in Florida. Every 10 days or so, he heads south — sometimes on his private tour bus because he does not like to fly — to be with his wife, Gail Turkovich; Grace; and their 11-year-old English bulldog, Juice-Man.

The couple met in 1994 at a bar in Cleveland, Ms. Turkovich’s hometown, and married in 2000. During the bitter winter of 2003, Ms. Turkovich went on vacation to Florida and fell in love. “Sell the house,” she instructed her husband over the phone, “and send my stuff.” The couple paid \$1.9 million in 2005 for a house in Cocoplum, a neighborhood of Coral Gables.

One evening in June, Mr. Vaughn, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Schneur sauntered into the community room of a Bronx apartment building to meet with tenants. Aluminum platters of chicken and

salad had been laid out, and Mr. Bennett popped a garlic knot into his mouth.

The Omni trio had arrived, as usual, in a black chauffeured sport utility vehicle, with Mr. Vaughn riding shotgun, Mr. Schneur behind him and Mr. Bennett behind the driver. They each wore crisp suits without ties, the first two buttons of their shirts undone. Mr. Schneur, baby-faced and balding, educated at Stuyvesant High School and Cornell University, is the brains of the operation. Mr. Bennett might be described as the beauty, in a slightly going-to-seed sort of way, with a gelled forelock on his forehead and a chin smudged with stubble. Mr. Vaughn, of course, is the brawn.

The three dozen tenants stared skeptically as Mr. Schneur explained Omni's grand plans and answered queries for half an hour, and then the old slugger lumbered to his feet.

The room quieted as people took the measure of Mr. Vaughn. His head seemed to brush the ceiling. His body seemed to block out light.

"I want you to understand," he began, "we're very good at what we do."

Mr. Vaughn complimented the tenants for organizing and fighting for new ownership. He told them to be patient. He asked for their trust.

The tenants began sitting up straighter. Heads began to nod. Mr. Vaughn was doing what countless coaches had done through the ages: giving an old-fashioned pep talk.

"I know you're anxious; I'd be anxious, too," he reassured them. "Although I've never been in a situation that you're in now, we've been doing this a long time. Just hang in there. Stay together."

He sat down to whoops and claps. The tenants looked at one another, allowing themselves a few hopeful grins.

Charles V. Bagli contributed reporting.