

The dreary and dilapidated Ocean Village in the Rockaways, Queens, is finally getting an entire makeover after decades of being left to fall into disrepair

A \$75 million project is turning a drug-plagued complex with more than 1,000 units into a decent place to live

BY [MATT CHABAN](#) / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
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Marc Jahr (r.), president of the New York City Housing Development Corp., and Rick Gropper, development director of L&M Development Partners, lead a tour through a Mitchell-Lama project in the Rockaways that is being transformed into a new apartment complex.

It's amazing what you can do with a new coat of paint — and a \$60 million repair budget.

For years, the Ocean Village development in the Rockaways had all the charm of a barren, concrete-clad 1970s housing tract.

Inside was even worse. Apartments were filled with toxic black mold and most appliances hadn't been replaced in decades. The dim overhead lights inside and out made the place look like a prison. Some 350 of the 1,094 apartments were abandoned entirely.

And that was before Sandy hit.

A year later, the 13-acre complex is unrecognizable. Gone are the drab concrete walls. Gone are the maze-like planters, where drug dealers used to loiter. Gone is the sense of despair that plagued these thousand homes for decades.

Lola Vaughn lived through the bad years in a 14th-floor two-bedroom she has shared with her family since 1978 — four years after the complex opened. She can hardly believe the transformation.

"I've been here 35 years and this is the first time I've seen an upgrade," Vaughn says, sitting inside the still dumpy community room as construction workers with L+M Development demolish walls by hand in the lobby beyond.

"They're my saviors," Vaughn cheers.

The buildings went up under the Mitchell Lama housing program by a syndicate of investors: attorneys, doctors and other professionals looking to pad their portfolios with the reliable 7.5% return guaranteed by the publicly funded project.



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Most tenants will remain at Ocean Village after upgrades are complete.

Just after construction finished, the investors — with little experience or interest in running a massive apartment complex — exploited a tax loophole that let them ignore maintenance and repairs while still reaping huge write-offs for putting up the affordable units.

They never fixed Ocean Village up or made an improvement. They never looked back.

“This happens all too often, but this was one of the worst,” says Marc Jahr, head of the city’s Housing Development Corp.

The city never found a way to hold the builders accountable, but after years of attempts, Jahr and the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development turned to L+M, which has rescued dozens of similarly neglected properties across the five boroughs.

“A thousand units right on the beach — how could you pass that up?” says Rick Gropper, director of preservation at L+M. “Plus, you get to help save a project and help save a community.”

The affordable housing builders began negotiating for the property in the summer and took over management in late November — even after Sandy dealt the development another blow.

“The day after, we were down here, mud up to our knees, the water line almost to our heads,” Gropper says inside the old furnace room. The mechanicals have since been moved upstairs and sit on giant bridge trusses that could support a tank.

“We were prepared to remake this place, but Sandy made us rethink what we’d already rethought,” Gropper says.

But first they had to get Ocean Village back up and running — a tall task considering L+M didn’t even own it yet.



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The Ocean Village project could serve as a model for how to rehabilitate damaged housing.

Residents had to be evacuated and housed. There was a scramble for generators, which were purchased and hauled in from as far away as Ohio — most on personal American Express cards.

It was a tough time to make a first impression, and the developers found themselves in a race against the Long Island Power Authority.

“We knew if LIPA turned the power on before us, we were screwed,” Gropper says. “Everybody here would just think, ‘Oh, more deadbeat owners.’ ”

L+M lost the race to LIPA by about a week, but their hard work helped win over tenants. The power was back by the middle of November and everyone returned to their apartments by the December.

But what came next was even harder. The company had to renovate every apartment while most of them remained occupied. Each received new kitchens and bathrooms and in some cases floors and a fresh coat of paint.

The work wrapped up on the units at the end of the summer and for the first time in years, the entire development is actually at 100% occupancy.

Work is now underway on new lobbies and common areas. The crumbling planters outside are being replaced with lush, salt-resistant plantings — the Atlantic is just over the fence, after all. Boardwalk-inspired pathways criss-cross the property. The prison-style lights are gone, with new lamps dotting the lawns.

But the most dramatic change is to the facade of the towers.

“We knew we had to fix the way the place looked if we were going to make people proud of their homes again,” says Richard Weinstock, L+M’s president of construction.



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Construction is under way on turning units damaged by Hurricane Sandy into a new apartment complex.

They did it with some of the most high-tech paint on the market. Workers slathered the exterior of the building with layers of insulation, epoxy and sealant, protecting it from the elements while freshening up the formerly dull facade. It keeps out moisture, keeps in heat, and gives the entire place a visual pop.

White and gray squares play off each other, while once-drab balconies and building entrances shine in gold.

“You can already tell the difference,” says Lenny Brown, a 14-year resident. “There hasn’t been a fight in a while.”

Brown even got tapped for a few odd jobs on the project, along with a number of tenants looking for work.

Residents even got to vote on a new name for the complex recently, and chose Arverne View.

“We have to get beyond just providing affordable housing to figure out how to build vibrant communities for all New Yorkers,” says Ron Moelis, the “M” in L+M and the company’s CEO.

He’ll get another chance next door, where L+M just unveiled the results of its Far Roc competition, held in partnership with the American Institute of Architects and City Hall.

The goal is to transform 80 barren acres demolished in the 1950s and now controlled by L+M. Known as the Arverne East Urban Renewal site, it will become a lab for post-Sandy living.

It could result in 1,500 new homes and apartments, many of them reserved for low-income New Yorkers, plus 35 acres of waterfront open space and dozens of new shops. The project is designed by Sweden’s largest architecture firm, which won L+M’s competition.

“The city is not about to turn its back on its neediest communities, who were some of the hardest hit after Sandy,” Jahr said.

Longtime Ocean Village residents like Vaughn hope their new neighbors will enjoy the ocean-front digs without having to endure the hardships they did.

“I was proud when I moved here,” says Vaughn. “There were some dark years then. But now, I’m prouder than ever.”

Read more: <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/queens/ocean-village-despair-dream-true-article-1.1501853#ixzz2jhC5Esvo>