Resurrection

Developer breathes new life into a hellish tenement that residents fought to save

Rita Ross has lived in a tenement in New York's Hell's Kitchen for the last 54 years. In the '40s and '50s, she said, "it was a beautiful building." It declined over the next two decades, and in the '80s was purchased by speculators, who hoped to empty the rent-regulated building and flip it for a profit. Broken pipes, no electricity, rats and fires drove out all but a few tenants.

At one point, staircases deteriorated so much residents used ladders to reach their units; they pumped water from a hydrant outside; and Ross would take a kitchen knife up to the roof to scare away the drug dealers and prostitutes. Her neighbor Bob Kennedy, an insomniac known for his colorful attire—he wore a Scottish kilt with a Blackfoot Indian head-dress, a boa constrictor around his neck—would shoo the riff raff off the street at night. They endured three winters without heat.

In 1992, Clinton Housing Development Company, Inc., a 22-year-old non-profit, acquired the property for $1 million under the city's new single-room occupancy (SRO) program. Clinton turned the decrepit eyesore into an extraordinary 55-unit, elevator-ed SRO for the elderly and mentally ill.

Opened in May, the project contains three structures. Two streetfront buildings of uneven height were merged by adding a new story to one. A collapsed three-story building in the back was rebuilt, and is accessed through a courtyard attached to the lobby. A new community room with full kitchen adjoins an outdoor garden. A 24-hour guard mans the front desk.

While SROs are often designed as studios with individual or communal baths, this project responds to the way many people live in New York—sharing an apartment with a roommate, sometimes a stranger, said architect Richard Vitto. The suites resemble traditional two- or three-bedroom/one-bath units, except they lack a living room, and each bedroom has its own unit number in brass. The project includes triples, doubles and six one-bedroom units. "Between the layout requirements and ADA, it was one of the tightest designs we've ever done," said Vitto.

With a $55,000 budget for furnishings, Clinton could have settled for vanilla dormitory style. Instead, executive director Joe Restuccia hired a furniture coordinator, who decorates sets for film productions, to find high-quality, affordable treasures. The result is one-of-a-kind spaces with an amazing variety of personalities. The effort also proved an ingenious way to get neighbors, who donated or refurnished furniture, involved in the SRO.

By Laura Rowley
n early 1992, before renovations began, Kennedy, the block guardian, was murdered in his apartment. To honor his memory, “Bob’s Park” was built in an adjacent, garbage-strewn lot. Surrounded by wrought-iron fencing, the triangular space is paved in bluestone, with flower beds, trees, antique lamps and a play structure.

The city provided a $3.2 million, 30-year, forgivable mortgage to buy and renovate the building. But it left overhead and other costs out of the budget in error at the last minute. Restuccia said. The solution was to syndicate $1.8 million in Low Income Housing Tax Credits, purchased by two Enterprise Foundation funds. The project receives subsidies from the city’s Department of the Homeless, and has a 15-year Section 8 contract. Fountain House, a project partner, receives a Department of Mental Health grant to subsidize services.

Rita Ross has settled into her new one-bedroom; she scolds her three pugs, madly circling a dining room table, as she recounts a recent tenants’ meeting. The new neighbors are quickly forming a community. “It’s beautiful,” said Ross. “I just wish Bob was here to see it.”
The new lobby exemplifies old New York; walls are covered with Anaglypta, a pressed paper that imitates antique tin-plate. Each room has a ceiling fan, hardwood floor, wainscotting, a closet, two to four windows and a unique decor. Above, "Bob's Park."