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Approach to Rehabilitation Of West Harlem's Housing

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Galen Kirkland and Margaret McNeill of the West Harlem Community Organization outside West 116th Street buildings managed by the group.

To an outsider the offices of the West Harlem Community Organization on the second floor of a renovated walk-up on West 116th Street might seem spare. But for a 15-year-old community-based organization that grew out of the effort to resist expansion by Columbia University into Morningside Park and West Harlem, they symbolize a new stature.

Under the leadership of Margaret McNeill as executive director, the organization has moved strongly into housing management and rehabilitation. It is one of 16 community organizations that currently manage 3,000 apartments across the city in buildings that have fallen into city hands because of tax delinquency.

The West Harlem group is one of the oldest and most experienced of these organizations. Using Federal community development money, it has begun to do substantial rehabilitations of housing that dates mostly from the pre-World War I era. It has a $1.4 million contract with the city under which it currently manages 255 apartments in 19 tenement buildings.

Its task is formidable. Galen Kirkland, deputy director of housing for the organization, estimates that 40 percent of all the privately built housing in West Harlem has fallen into city hands through tax foreclosure. That means about 160 buildings in the 44 city blocks bounded by Morningside Avenue and Seventh Avenue, from West 110th Street to West 124th Street.

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As large as the city-owned stock is, he and others worry that it should be still larger if the tenants living in Harlem buildings are to get enough heat this winter. City delay in taking over financially unsound, tax-delinquent private housing condemns people to suffering through the winter, he said, and leads to greater rehabiliation costs later. The last such "vesting" in West Harlem occurred in June 1979.

But the Department of Housing Preservation and Development is wary about taking too many buildings in one lump without adequate resources to manage them. So it divided the Manhattan takings into three parts, and last month it took about 100 occupied Manhattan buildings with an estimated 1,200 tenants, plus about 150 vacant buildings. They are in East Harlem, Washington Heights, midtown and part of lower Manhattan, but not West Harlem or the Lower East Side. The next West Harlem taking is scheduled for March.

What it suggests is the collapse of the private rental housing industry in West Harlem, with the implication that government will either subsidize the buildings, often with community groups managing them, or the housing will eventually disappear through vacancy, vandalism and demolition. "I can't think of any private landlord who is making money here in a cost-efficient business," said Mr. Kirkland, a 30-year lawyer who grew up in Harlem.

The most dilapidated buildings will be demolished in any case, their tenants first being relocated to the better properties. But there are a substantial number of solid five-story and six-story buildings, many with avenue locations.

One of the first steps of the community managers is to lift rents to at least $40 a room, the minimum necessary for successful management, as buildings are made habitable. The average rent that tenants were paying in tax-foreclosed buildings has been $23 a room per month — the range is $11.50 to $37 a room — and the average vacancy was 20 percent, Mr. Kirkland said.

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The West Harlem organization has seven full-time maintenance people and three tenant-relations specialists, who manage buildings as well.

From the stock of managed buildings comes the pipeline for rehabiliation, starting with the four tenement buildings at 226 West 116th Street in which the organization has its headquarters. The long-term goal is to sell the apartments to the tenants as cooperatives.

About a third of the tax-foreclosed buildings are suitable for rehabilitation, Mr. Kirkland said. For the larger ones the community group plans to joint-venture with larger building organizations. For example, there are plans for a total rehabilitation to produce 109 apartments in five buildings at Morningside Avenue and West 116th Street, in partnership with Fred Clarke, a general contractor, and Inner City Drywall Inc. The estimated development cost is $56,000 an apartment.

Another prospective project is Paul Robeson Houses, the planned rehabilitation of two 1910 apartment houses on Seventh Avenue between 119th and 122d Streets and five brownstones across the street, for a total of 145 apartments. That is to be a joint venture with the Starrett Housing Corporation.

Although city takeovers of tax-delinquent properties form the pipeline for community-sponsored rehabilitations, Mr. Kirkland says that the city's procedures to speed up takeovers of tax delinquent buildings is not helping to preserve housing.

"The law isn't working," he said. "The only thing it's doing is bringing more buildings into city ownership. The city thought the owners would be more responsible and keep their taxes up to date. It hasn't happened. The landlords are still walking away."

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