

Vacant eyesores in East Orange become dream homes for lucky tenants

3 buildings fixed up for affordable housing

By Kevin C. Ditworth
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Claudette Bell's eyes gleamed and her smile was broad and warm as she toured newly renovated 61 N. Arlington Ave. in East Orange.

Steam-cleaned bricks accentuate ornate detail on the building's exterior, and the interior features polished wooden floors, freshly painted walls, and new appliances, sinks and tubs.

"It's great," said Bell, a widow and the mother of a 20-year-old daughter and two toddler children, as she toured some of the one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments Thursday. "It's like a dream come true. There's a lot of space here. And everything is brand new."

Bell said there is no comparison between the place she now calls home, a small two-bedroom apartment on Ellis Avenue in Irvington, and the three-bedroom North Arlington Avenue residence she and her family are scheduled to occupy on April 1.

Bell's dream apartment is one of 141 affordable rental units being placed on the market in East Orange, thanks to successful partnerships the city has forged with developers, lending institutions and the state and federal governments, Mayor Cardell Cooper said.

"The state is proud of its commitment to providing affordable housing in our urban areas," Community Affairs Commissioner Jane M. Kenny said during a tour of 61 N. Arlington Ave. "We're helping cities like East



The renovated building at 61 N. Arlington Ave. will be ready for occupancy by April 1.

Orange to give hard-working families an opportunity life in safe, decent housing that is within their means. This is a priority of mine and of the governors.

"We're working with mayors like Cardell Cooper, and with partners in the private and nonprofit sectors to provide a new sense of neighborhood in our cities," said Kenny, noting that the state balanced housing program, low-income tax credits and mortgages are helping make it all possible.

"We're doing that with a mix of affordable housing opportunities — new rental units like the ones in this building, and in the others."

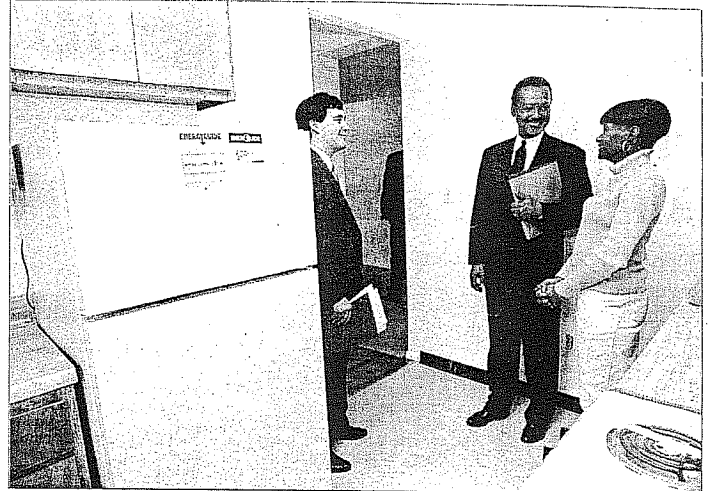
Aside from 61 N. Arlington, buildings at 139 N. Arlington and 725 Park Ave. also are being transformed into new apartments.

"I can't wait to move," said Bell,

noting that she is especially excited about the private day care center, for 46 youngsters, that will be located in the building's basement. "I'm very happy." Bell plans to enroll her two toddlers there.

Cooper credited developers such as Ken and Larry Regan, whose family-owned Regan Development Corp. in Yonkers, N.Y., is responsible for the renovation of the two North Arlington Avenue apartment buildings, for being positive visionaries who believe in cities like East Orange.

After standing vacant for 13 years and landing on a list of buildings scheduled for demolition, 61 N. Arlington Ave. looks like new on the outside and inside. The six one-bedroom apartments, 34 two-bedroom and four three-bedroom units will rent for \$300, \$600 and \$725 a month, respectively.



Developer Ken Regan shows East Orange Mayor Cardell Cooper and future tenant Claudette Bell the kitchen of one of the apartments at 61 N. Arlington Ave.

PHOTOS BY AMANDA BROWN

The other structure, 139 N. Arlington Ave., once a mess of code violations that the city closed down several years ago, will offer the same rents for people prescreened and qualified to move into the nine one-bedroom, 30 two-bedroom and the four three-bedroom apartments.

"The reason we made the choice to invest in this neighborhood is because we were welcomed by the administration and into the redevelopment area," said Larry Regan.

Carolee Beneche and her husband Andre Baptiste said they could not be happier and cannot wait to move with their three sons out of their crowded two-bedroom apartment on East Orange's Fourth Avenue and into a three-bedroom apartment at 61 N. Arlington.

"There's a big difference between where we live and this place," said Beneche, a nurses aide. "I like this place. It's beautiful and its safe for me and my family."

Park Avenue Apartments, a \$5.1 million venture, will offer 50 apartments with central air conditioning, dishwashers and a cable television security monitoring system. The former office building had stood as a vacant eyesore for 16 years.

By this summer, 14 one-bedroom apartments will rent for \$485; the 11 two-bedrooms for \$573, and the four three-bedrooms for \$684.