

Victory One residents Ester McNair and Vincent Tyrone Carey share a laugh in their new rec room. Behind them, Arteriors Home mirrors hang on Graham & Brown wallpaper.



# Good Works Makeover

**Jazzy design ideas make this once-cavernous Harlem senior center finally feel like home.**

**BY BRIAN KEITH JACKSON**

**THE VILLAGE OF HARLEM IS STEEPED IN HISTORY AND CULTURE.** Music continues to pour out of its jazz clubs, and, on Sunday mornings, women wearing their finest hats still promenade down its brownstone-lined streets. Many of those brownstones, after years of being shuttered, are now being renovated to their former glory—ushering even more life to this legendary community and enticing new residents to, as Duke Ellington put it, “Take the A Train.”

Yet, as is often the case with urban renewal, gentrification brings with it higher rents. And longtime residents—the ones old enough to remember the first Harlem Renaissance—are being priced out of their homes. Fortunately, they have Victory One, an apartment building for low-income seniors.

“We provide affordable housing to people who aren’t the target of the current real estate market,” says Lucille McEwen, president and CEO of the Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement, a nonprofit that offers housing, as well as educational and health services, throughout the neighborhood. “Most of the seniors come to us while they still have independent skills, and we link them with the services they need so they won’t have to go into a nursing home.”

Rents are scaled to what people can afford—as low as \$118 a month. But that money | ➤



An unnecessarily large galley kitchen (above) was cut in half to make room for a radiant sitting area (left). Room & Board provided the furniture; Lowe's and KraftMaid donated the materials to update the kitchen.

doesn't buy a lot of space—one-bedroom units are only 389 square feet. So when residents want to entertain, they rely on the community room, which, according to 79-year-old tenant Eleanora Garrett, wasn't only an unpleasant space: "It was downright homely."

New York interior designer Elaine Griffin and *O at Home* changed all that, though—transforming the drab, basement-level area into a "great room" that's as vibrant as the people who use it every day.

Griffin first tackled the space's institutional vibe. With donated help from New York-based Lettice Construction Corp., she laid hardwood floors where there used to be vinyl tiles, added table and floor lamps to decrease the need for the overhead fluorescents, and made the dull metal doors and window frames almost disappear by painting them to

complement the walls. The existing kitchen, which looked like it belonged in a high-school teachers' lounge, was modified and retooled with quartz countertops, cabinets, and Cuisinart appliances—all provided by Lowe's.

With the heavy lifting out of the way, Griffin divided the 1,300-square-foot space into four distinct areas—one for cooking and dining, another for billiards, and two for seating and conversation. Rather than construct walls, she used a technique that works especially well in large living rooms: relying on rugs (or, in this case, Flor carpet tiles) to delineate different zones. Orange and rust-colored carpet in the seating areas—and rugby-striped Flor tiles in the dining section—



Griffin transformed the drab dining area (left) with white leather chairs, Flor tiles, and red, circular magnetic boards that disguise the utility doors (far left). Residents (above, from left) Ester McNair, Cira Sanchez, Christina Hailey, and Dorothy Lambert Kennedy.



Where they once had rickety gym equipment (right), residents now have a flat-screen TV from eBay, bookshelves filled with large-print books from Random House (above, left), and a digital piano (above, right).



helped her create islands within the larger rec area (each outfitted with a room's worth of furniture from Room & Board). Then she further distinguished each section with accent walls, one wallpapered with a retro orange pattern and the other painted a complementary yellow.

Griffin brightened the once-dark space by adding accessories that fit the new color palette—dynamic paintings from Artaissance, patterned pillows from Hable Construction and Jonathan Adler, and a bright orange Pratesi throw from ABC Carpet & Home. As with any residential design, she says, it's little touches like these that really make a place feel like home.

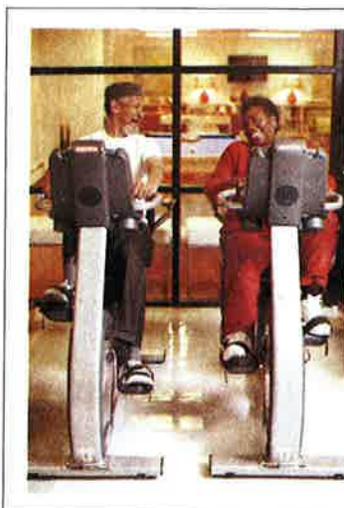
That—and a whole lot of fun: Griffin designed a state-of-the-art entertainment center (courtesy of eBay) by hanging a 42-inch flat-screen TV and lining the wall beneath it with console-height bookshelves filled with a DVD and CD player and a Nintendo Wii. A.E. Schmidt Billiards Co. provided a custom-made, wheelchair-accessible pool table, and—striking a particularly sweet chord with the residents (50 percent of whom play the piano)—Frank & Camille's Fine Pianos donated a digital baby grand.

"It's a total transformation, artistically done, and it will be well used," says resident Robert Ralston, a 72-year-old saxophone player who, back in the day, jammed with jazz legends such as Art Blakey and Max Roach.

"I'd stopped coming down here as much, but now I could live here. It's a nice room, and we're going to fill it with our spirit."

Glass towers may be changing Harlem's skyline (condos in the shiny building across from Victory One go for up to \$3 million a pop), but Elaine Griffin has made certain these seniors will never be in their shadows.

"People think low-income should mean less. I feel it should be equal, especially for the elderly," says McEwen, who was moved to tears after seeing the space. "The residents couldn't have afforded what's in that room. It wouldn't even be an option. But this renovation shows them that they are as good as God's got." **D**



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Residents Robert Ralston and Christina Hailey take the new Gym Source bikes for a spin.

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