A LONG JOURNEY TO OWNERSHIP NEARS ITS GOAL
Residents being displaced by Columbia will buy affordable homes built by the university

By JOSH BARBANEL
Feb. 17, 2016 7:26 p.m. ET
http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-long-journey-to-ownership-nears-its-goal-1455755210

Ms. Muentes and her friend Luisa Henriquez were part of a community of 20 neighbors who lived together in a century-old, six-story walk-up on West 132nd, just west of Broadway.

The city foreclosed on the building in 1978 because of unpaid taxes. Since then, it has promised the tenants several times that they would be able to purchase their apartments for $250 each as part of a low-income co-op, if they showed they could manage it themselves, said Ms. Henriquez, a retired assistant preschool teacher.

Then, in 2003, Columbia began discussing plans for a new campus. In the end, Columbia agreed to put up the new building with “equal or better housing” for displaced tenants on a site it purchased in 2008. Residents are to move in this spring.

The building will provide 42 affordable apartments, with rooftop patios for tenants with views from the George Washington Bridge to Midtown skyscrapers. Some laundry rooms and meeting rooms have Hudson River views.

Columbia will sell 20 apartments to the tenants of West 132nd, who in turn will set up their own co-

After waiting decades for a shot at home ownership, Hilda Muentes, 80 years old, a retired sample maker in the garment industry, bounded Tuesday through a new apartment in Hamilton Heights that she soon will buy for $250.

She pulled out her cellphone and took a picture of the shiny, single-handle faucet on the tub in her new bathroom. Then she turned to the kitchen and photographed a window facing Broadway. “Look a window in the kitchen,” she said.

The 12-story building, at Broadway and West 148th Street, was built by Columbia University. It fulfills a promise to build replacement affordable housing for tenants whose old building is to be razed to make way for the university’s new Manhattanville campus rising along Broadway above West 125th Street.

Luisa Henriquez, left, and Hilda Muentes visit the roof deck of the new building they will occupy after being displaced by Columbia University’s new campus.

PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A photo of the new building hangs in the hallway of the 132nd Street structure that will be razed.

PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The building will provide 42 affordable apartments, with rooftop patios for tenants with views from the George Washington Bridge to Midtown skyscrapers. Some laundry rooms and meeting rooms have Hudson River views.

Columbia will sell 20 apartments to the tenants of West 132nd, who in turn will set up their own co-

Luisa Henriquez, left, and Hilda Muentes visit the roof deck of the new building they will occupy after being displaced by Columbia University’s new campus.

PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
op. Seven more units will go to former tenants of a second building on Broadway also being displaced by Columbia. The rest will be filled by the city with a housing lottery, a city spokeswoman said.

The tenants at West 132nd Street named their new co-op the Exodus Housing Development Fund Corp., reflecting their long journey toward home ownership. The building will also have retail space to be retained by Columbia, and a new home for the Meeting with God Pentecostal Church displaced from West 130th Street by the Columbia project.

“We were waiting for many years, looking for a new location, and finally God opened the door through Columbia University,” said Rev. Henry Mercado, the church’s pastor, after it relocated to a temporary space in 2009.

Isabel Rodriguez, a partner at Solomon & Bernstein, represented the tenants along with partner Joel Bernstein. They credited the tenants with holding their building together during decades when many other uptown buildings deteriorated or were abandoned.

Ms. Muentes moved into the West 132nd Street building in 1968. A few years later, an uncle, Arturo, purchased it for about $1,300 a unit. After he died in 1975, Ms. Muentes said her husband took over the building and stayed on as superintendent after the city foreclosed.

Columbia will cover most cost increases over the next 15 years to keep maintenance and rents low, provide reserve funds for both co-ops, and pay $7,000 to cover relocation costs, plus $2,000 for tenants who use their own movers.

The building was designed by Magnusson Architecture & Planning, a firm with extensive experience with cost-conscious affordable housing. Since the scaffolding came down, the building has faced some criticism.

Have something to say about an article in Greater New York? Email us, along with your contact information, at gnyltrs@wsj.com. Letters will be edited for brevity and clarity. Please include your city and state.

It includes yellow, beige, black, red and blue brick, and an irregular pattern of windows, that several architects and preservationists said is largely disconnected from the century-old brick buildings with terra-cotta trim that line nearby sections of Broadway.

“It is a good-faith effort by Columbia,” said Andrew Dolkart, director of the Historic Preservation Program at Columbia. “They are sticking to the deal they made.”

But he said the building looks like “affordable housing” without context. “You see that a lot in the Bronx, in neighborhoods where there isn’t that much context.”

Ms. Rodriguez disagreed. “They didn’t build Versailles but they built a beautiful building that fits with the architecture of New York,” she said. “The roof deck is gorgeous.”

Write to Josh Barbanel at josh.barbanel@wsj.com