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Residents embrace new look of two complexes once beset by crime, disrepair
By Sarah Abruzzese/The Baltimore Sun

Parents at the Clay Courts housing complex used to hesitate sending their children outside to play, fearing for safety. But things are different now in this East Baltimore community. "It's changed a whole lot, you can send you kids out and they don't have to watch their backs," said Tiffany Smith, 28, who has lived there since 2000. "I can invite people over now." Clay Courts - and its companion three blocks away, the Lester Morton Court housing complex - had fallen into disrepair over the years, becoming a haven for criminals, according to residents and city officials. Yesterday, a new \$17 million look for the 214 total subsidized housing units was unveiled after large-scale renovations and a substantial boost in security. Baltimore City Council member Bernard C. "Jack" Young recalls growing up in the area and witnessing the deterioration of the properties, located just north of the Johns Hopkins Hospital complex. "Anything that could be done was being done here," Young said. Some residents say the drug dealers who used to conduct business at the complexes are gone, and killings are no longer a frequent occurrence.

Resident Pat Bennett says her two teenagers "have enough pressure at school; they don't need that kind of pressure at home." "A lot changed inside that needed to be done, new carpeting, new flooring and painting," said Bennett, 42, who has lived at Clay Courts for 11 years. "I got a new whole house; they put everything in, except a new stove."

Hampstead Partners, the San Diego-based company that owns the properties, estimates it spent \$32,000 per unit on construction, upgrading appliances as needed. Financing for the project came from federal, state and local sources, said Greg Gossard, Hampstead's project development manager. The outside has been improved, too. There is a new play area with a slide where Bennett's 13-month-old granddaughter can play. Smith said she moved into one of the renovated three-bedroom townhouses after her apartment was converted to a handicap-accessible unit. Twenty-one apartments in the complexes are now outfitted to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Hampstead specializes in revitalizing housing and renovating properties regulated by the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department.

For this project, Hampstead officials said they worked with a community organization and local officials to change the dynamic of the area. City police officers patrolled the properties daily on foot, and security guards have been hired to patrol at night. Fair Chance, an arm of the East Baltimore Community Corp., has assisted area residents in getting construction and landscaping jobs on the projects. Fair Chance will run the new community centers, helping with job placement and career training, said Bruce Jennings, the corporation's deputy director.

Housing preservation - Preserving affordable housing in redevelopment areas is important, said city leaders who attended yesterday's celebration. "This effort will be repeated throughout the area," said Paul T. Graziano, commissioner of the city Department of Housing and Community Development. The project is "an example of how things should be done." Hampstead is renovating two additional properties in Baltimore and has completed one in Annapolis. About 22,500 families receive Section 8 housing assistance in Baltimore, according to David Tillman, the housing department's communications director. Recently, Graziano said the department has had to go after irresponsible owners, but that Hampstead is doing what should be done by putting enough capital into the project and working "with the city and the neighborhood to preserve its affordable state." "The bottom line is it can be done," Tillman said of the city's goal to provide safe and affordable housing.

Bennett and her daughter hope that will continue to be the case at Clay Courts. They said they have seen other new owners and managers come and go. "You can get a lot of attention as soon as they come, but it doesn't last," Bennett said. She hopes this time it is different.