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A Restoration Revealed Piece by Piece



PHOTOGRAPH BY FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

EXTREME MAKEOVER A \$7.7 million façade renovation at London Terrace Gardens in Chelsea is set for completion this fall. The building has many interesting features like eagle-shaped scupper drains.

By **ALISON GREGOR**

CHELSEA residents could be pardoned if they've forgotten what the Anglo-Italianate facade of the statuesque London Terrace Gardens apartment complex looks like: It's been shrouded in scaffolding for years while undergoing a painstaking restoration.

But that scaffolding, much of which is covered in colorful artwork, has been coming down piece by piece in recent months, revealing once again the grand entrances with columns and capitals along with the scuppers and spindles of cast stone that decorate the 10 buildings.

The entire three-year, \$7.7 million facade restoration project, which is being done to the standards of the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission (though the buildings themselves do not have landmark status), is expected to be completed by this fall, said Ellen Gribben Borne, the general manager of London Terrace Gardens, which is managed by Rose Associates Inc. Ms. Borne said the apartment complex has an employee whose full-time job is to coordinate the restoration with residents.

“It’s a gorgeous building — or rather, 10 of them — so the owners were very committed to a full restoration project,” she said. “They view this as being for the next generation; their interest is in not only maintaining the place, but making it beautiful.”

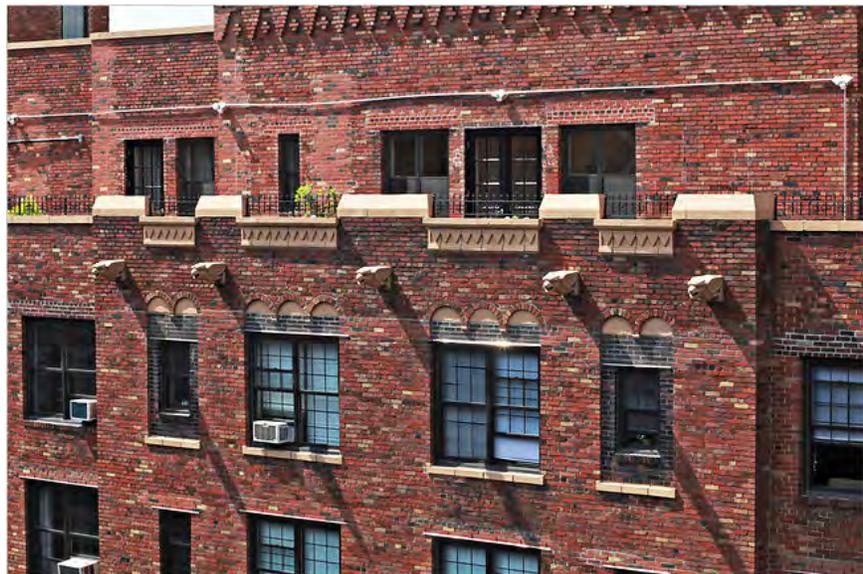
Gregory Stanford, an architect who has leased for about 18 years in London Terrace Gardens, said he was in favor of the project despite its length, because “they’re restoring the building, which is a beautiful building. I love the building, and being an architect, I know these things take longer than people normally think they should.”

He said he had not been personally inconvenienced by the work, adding, “My attitude is, if they’re restoring the building — if it means that a gargoyles will not fall off and kill somebody on the sidewalk — then it’s worth it.”

But others said many tenants were greatly inconvenienced by noise and dust, especially those on the second floor, which had scaffolding all the way around it and served as a sort of staging area, said Andy Humm, the president of the London Terrace Gardens Tenants Association. Mr. Humm said the scaffolding went up in 2007, a year before the facade work even began.

He said tenants, especially those in rent-stabilized apartments, were anticipating a rent increase once the major capital improvement is done. “We’ve calculated that it will be probably at least \$100 a month more per tenant in perpetuity to pay for this thing,” he said.

In response, Ms Bornet said: “We will file for a rent increase. However, we haven’t even begun to calculate the amount per room.”



PHOTOGRAPH BY FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The London Terrace apartment complex, designed by the architectural firm Farrar & Watmough in an ornamental Tuscan style, was originally 14 adjoining buildings with 1,670 units that filled the entire block bounded by Ninth and 10th Avenues and 23rd and 24th Streets. At the time it was built in 1930 and 1931, its developer Henry Mandel claimed it was the largest apartment complex in the world, with an acre of gardens in the center of its buildings along with a 75-foot-by-35-foot indoor swimming pool.

Unfortunately, the Great Depression hit as the complex was being constructed, and by 1934 London Terrace had been forced into foreclosure. The financial mess that resulted from the bankruptcy was not resolved until the mid-1940s, when the ownership of the 10 midblock buildings was divided from the four corner towers. Today, the four corner buildings, called London Terrace Towers, are co-ops, while the midblock buildings, called London Terrace Gardens, are about 1,000 rental units.

While the co-op towers recently underwent a facade rehabilitation, it was not the complete restoration to preservation standards that London Terrace Gardens is undergoing, Ms. Bornet said. Management at London Terrace Towers did not respond to phone calls requesting information.

For example, Ms. Bornet said that when both complexes found heavily rusted steel upon examining rooftop water tanks surrounded by distinctive brick bulkheads, the co-op towers opted to replace the steel without rebuilding the bulkheads. The ownership of London Terrace Gardens, however, comprised of several families in the construction industry who have owned the complex since 1948, are rebuilding the original brick bulkheads at great cost in time and money, Ms. Bornet said.

Howard L. Zimmerman, an architect who is overseeing the restoration project, said it was an unusual decision in the annals of New York City real estate.



PHOTOGRAPH BY FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

“Ownership could have decided, ‘Let’s save the money and not re-brick it, because nobody goes up there, and it won’t get us any rental income,’” he said. “But they wanted to restore it and honor what it was.”

Mr. Zimmerman, whose firm recently finished restoring the limestone of the Riverside Church in Morningside Heights, said that for decades refurbishment to London Terrace Gardens had been restricted to “Band-Aids.”

“We had a lot of rotted lintels,” he said. “We had broken and cracked terra cotta. There was a lot of decorative brickwork that had to be matched and replaced.”

Recreating the terra cotta features, which included columns with elaborate capitals, along with other features, such as scupper drains shaped like eagles, required the creation of more than a dozen molds, Mr. Zimmerman said. But these features are now made of cast concrete with a special glaze, a preservation-quality material that looks like terra cotta but is more durable.

“In our office, we say we try to leave no fingerprints,” he said. “We don’t want people to see where we’ve been.”

Rents in London Terrace Gardens, which is currently 100 percent occupied, range from \$2,600 to \$2,950 a month for studios; and \$3,450 to \$4,300 for one-bedrooms, some of which have fireplaces and other historic features. Penthouses start at \$17,000 a month. There are relatively few two- and three-bedroom apartments. Apartments have hardwood floors and have been renovated to retain the feel of their original design.

In the time it took for the restoration, the High Line park has opened less than a half-block to the west, providing strollers with an elevated view of the massive apartment complex.

After all the effort and inconvenience, the restoration is expected to last at least a generation, maybe two. “There’s always maintenance on a building, but this restoration should last 30 or 40 years,” Mr. Zimmerman said.