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DAILY  
DESIGNATED AREAS HIGHER



Julia Martínez, left, and her sister, Lalicía Martínez, with her two children, Lilliana and Ana, at El Centro Apartments.

## 'It's quite beautiful'

Residents of former gang-infested Hollywood apartment complex say area has been reborn

STORY BY ROY CHUNG,  
PHOTOS BY MARILYNN YOUNG

**F**or the Ibarra family, life has taken a turn for the better since their home was torn apart early last year.

Because gone with the decrepit walls and insect infestations of the complex are the prostitution ring and the drug lab, the single apartments with 16 people in a unit, and the graffiti, gunshots and drug deals which had turned El Centro Apartments in Hollywood into a haven for the local street gang, whose leader was one of its residents.

In its place were resurrected the modest but comfortable California-style bungalows and apartments the buildings were designed to be when originally constructed in the 1920s. And with the addition of a few amenities by the new developer, El Centro has become a quiet community of windblown trees and park benches with plenty of space for children at play.

"Clearly, there's no comparison," said Bertha Ibarra, who now lives in one of the



The El Centro Apartments in Hollywood were rundown before renovation, above. Below, Valentina Ruthstein relaxes in the courtyard following the renovation.

low-income complex's two-bedroom units with her husband, Jorge, and 12-year-old daughter, Esmeralda. "The old apartment almost fell on top of our heads."

The \$11 million restoration efforts began with a \$4 million grant by the city's Community Redevelopment Agency to the low-income housing developer Thomas Safran & Associates who completed the work last July. The rest of the renovation funds for the complex on De Longpre Avenue came from a combination of city, state and federal programs.

Where there once were 15 sets of bungalows and apartment buildings — 51 units in all — slowly withering away, the developer left in its wake 88 units "built to a quality we would move into ourselves," said David Ferguson, vice president at the Brentwood-based company.

All residents receive federal Section 8 rental subsidy funds through the Los Angeles City Housing Authority and pay a rent equal to 30% of their combined family income, whatever it may be. Section 8 funds are reserved for persons who

# APARTMENTS

CONTINUED FROM 1

are homeless or whose income is below the city's median — \$17,950 for single people — yet pay more than 50% of it on rent.

El Centro was awarded the Project of the Year award last fall from the Southern California Nonprofit Housing Association for serving as a "model" for affordable housing, as well as the Charlie Award for historic preservation from the Hollywood Arts Council.

With amenities like a playground, lush greenery, discreetly hidden security gates, even a computerized entry system for visitors, most people are surprised these days when you tell them El Centro is a low-income housing complex, said Walter Fararo, resident manager.

But Fararo can still remember

the crowds of "bad people" who would hang out where there is now a pleasant courtyard and raise hell into the wee hours.

"Drug sales, drinking, shootings," Fararo said. "In the mornings we would go around and find bullet shells. We had bags filled with them."

Developer Ferguson said it literally took years before they could even begin to think about reconstruction, with his company arriving in 1991 with the task of getting the neighborhood on its side.

"There were some people that were really bad news," Ferguson said.

The "good people" stopped simply avoiding the bad ones, started calling the police, even painted over the graffiti on a daily basis until it stopped.

Nineteen of the former residents qualified for the low-income housing and still remain. The developer relocated those who

did not eventually leave of their own accord, including the local street-gang leader, whom the company found a house for near his girlfriend in the suburbs.

And all of sudden, manager Fararo's concerns turned from physical safety to helping neighbors get to know each other.

"It's quite different for me," said Frederick Washington, 46, who had been living in a homeless shelter on downtown's Skid Row.

Washington moved into his "slice of heaven" last August, absorbing the details of his new home, small but clean, a single room with an adjacent kitchen and bathroom that tends to all his needs. But the sounds were what struck him most.

"I used to have dope smokers and addicts outside my window," he said of the shelter. "Here I've got children playing. It's quite beautiful."