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Janet Witkin, founder of Alternative Living for the Aging, at right, takes group of seniors to view the newly refurbished El Greco apartments which they will occupy as its first tenants.

Buddy System Living

Preserved Older Building Will Be Haven for Elderly

By EVELYN De WOLFE, *Times Staff Writer*

A small group of independent-minded seniors will be moving into the El Greco Apartments this month as participants in another innovative buddy-system program of Alternative Living for the Aging.

Once located in the heart of Westwood Village, the relocated and refurbished Spanish-style apartment building at 817 N. Hayworth Ave., in the Beverly-Fairfax area, was donated to the nonprofit agency as an experimental low-cost housing option for elderly persons who want to forestall institutional living and stave off loneliness.

"The purpose of all of our programs is to keep people independent through interdependence with others," said Janet L. Witkin, founder and director of the organization. "People don't have to live alone, they don't have to live in institutions, and many have already found that living with an elderly roommate is often easier

than moving in with grown children.

"We are hoping to create a continuum of options for seniors between living alone and entering an institution. For the elderly, the latter often results in giving up their possessions or activities."

The grass-roots agency at 937 N. Fairfax Ave., West Hollywood, through its subsidiary, Housing Alternatives for Seniors, already manages two co-op experimental projects in the Beverly-Fairfax area, provides counseling for seniors and develops personality profiles to facilitate matching with potential roommates.

About 1,900 people, or 35 to 45 people a month, have been matched through this program, making use of a vast under-utilized housing stock, Witkin said. The agency opened in 1979.

"House sharing is a viable option that can provide older people with

EL GRECO: Buddy System for Elderly

Continued from Page 1

affordable housing, companionship, economic savings and a stronger sense of safety and security, both from crime and from physical illness," Witkin said.

"By sharing expenses, they are able to manage their finances better," she stated, adding that the agency also matches seniors with non-seniors, some as young as 18 years of age, who are looking for shared housing.

Each of the agency's co-op houses has nine to 14 private bedrooms with private baths, two kitchens, two dining rooms and large living rooms and outdoor areas.

The El Greco project differs from the co-op system in that it provides separate apartments with separate kitchens, building security features and a compatible group of tenants assigned to watching out for one another through the buddy system, Witkin explained.

Applicants for the El Greco have ranged from 62 to 86 years of age, and most are widowed. They will pay a monthly rent of \$391 for singles, \$460 for one-bedroom apartments, and some will qualify under Section 8 subsidized housing.

The two-story, 14-unit Mediterranean El Greco, with 12 apartments (single and one-bedroom units) had been slated for demolition to make room for a multi-unit apartment building. It was the first hotel and home for international film personalities in the Westwood Village area that reportedly included Erich von Stroheim, Michael Curtiz and Joel McCrea.

Moved to Vacant Lot

The 1930-vintage design of the Westside landmark is attributed to architect Clara Bertram Humphrey and was modeled after the artist El Greco's residence in Toledo, Spain. It was moved more than a year ago to the vacant lot on Hayworth Avenue.

"The background of this relocation is quite fascinating," Witkin said. "The tenants who had lived there banded together to preserve it to get the structure designated as a historical monument, and also fought its demolition.

"They were largely responsible for what resulted: donation of the structure to ALA by the owner, Dick Selby, who gave an additional \$55,000 toward the moving of the building. Contributions from the public and private sectors followed."

who were among the more vocal of El Greco's former tenants in Westwood, appealed to Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky for a viable solution. Yaroslavsky helped bring together the preservationists and the housing agency for the elderly.

Funding was obtained through several public sources; the city Community Redevelopment Agency, the city Community Development Department, and the state Office of Historic Preservation earmarked a \$100,000 grant for the building's relocation and rehabilitation in a neighborhood termed as "highly compatible and with one of the largest concentrations of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture in the city."

A painstaking process followed to preserve the integrity of the building, which in 1980 had been named a historical and cultural monument and a prototypical example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style.

The Los Angeles firm of de Bretteville & Polyzoides directed the relocation, site preparation, redesign and renovation, which cost about \$600,000, and that was largely funded through private donations from the W. M. Keck Foundation, the David and Sylvia Weisz Family Foundation, the Glendale Federal Community Housing Foundation and the Beverly Hills Charitable Foundation.

"The restoration needs of a historical building are quite critical to preserving its designation and are also quite costly," Witkin said. "With the El Greco project, which fits ideally into the existing neighborhood fabric, it was necessary to be sensitive, not only to the building's historic integrity, but to the needs of the elderly who would occupy it."

Evelyn Cohen, who specializes in the field, was brought in as a consultant.

Architect Peter de Bretteville addressed the special precautions that the restoration team had to consider. "The difficult relocation was accomplished by dividing the apartment structure into four separate sections, preserving all of the structure's Spanish roof tiles and other elements of the charming brick and tile courtyard, including its central fish pond, which was recreated to its original appearance on the new site," he said.

"The haul from Westwood required a great deal of preparation on the site, careful planning and finally settling of the structure in its new location.

"We worked within certain budget constraints and we tried to intrude as little as possible on the structure itself, I believe we came up with a good compromise. The building has been well reinforced, we have added air conditioning, a new side entrance and laundry area, hand rails and grab bars and added special security factors in our adaptive reuse concept for the elderly.

"The large effort that went into the El Greco project will all seem worthwhile to those of us who have been involved with it, if its tenants come to regard their new home as an extraordinary and wonderful place to live, knowing that people care enough for them to provide that aesthetic stimulus which can so positively motivate and affect their attitudes."