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## Groups Urge Opening of Vacant Condos to the Poor

By *BAO ONG*

In Downtown Brooklyn, the [be@schermerhorn](#) condominiums had a sleek facade with a fancy fitness center, an on-site parking garage and coffee bar among its many amenities. But this was before the recession hit and condo projects that the real estate market had in abundance were left in limbo.

This condo, with more than 90 percent of its 246 units sitting vacant, should be converted to housing for low-income residents with subsidies from the city, according to a recent report released by advocates for moderately priced housing. The New York chapter of the [Right to the City](#) recently called on city officials to revamp the 601 vacant buildings its members identified, from Downtown Brooklyn and Bushwick to the West Village and the South Bronx.

“These luxury condos are right in the midst of my neighborhood,” said Jill Reeves, a resident of Boerum Hill, Brooklyn. “But I can definitely not afford to live in them.”

Ms. Reeves, 49, who has struggled with drug addiction through the years, says she has been homeless since being evicted from her apartment two years ago. She has been couch-surfing, she said, but hopes the empty and stalled condo projects dotting the city can be converted into homes she and others like her can use to find more stability in their lives.

“Sometimes I feel that I should just walk into one of these empty condos,” Ms. Reeves said. “It bothers me they were there and that we couldn’t afford to live in them.”

The average price of a condo at [be@schermerhorn](#) is \$436,000, [Right to the City](#) reported.

Such prices are no surprise in New York’s real estate market. Advocates for moderately priced housing say the gentrification of neighborhoods traditionally affordable to minority and immigrant populations is an escalating problem.

“It seems everywhere you look in communities of color there are empty luxury condos and incomplete or abandoned development projects to create luxury condos,” said John Tyus, a member of [Families United for Racial and Economic Equality](#).

In New York City, the number of apartments low-income families — those earning less than \$37,000 — can afford decreased to 991,592 from 1,189,962 from 2002 to 2008, according to data the [Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy](#) at [New York University](#) analyzed. That is a drop of nearly 17 percent.

The city has allocated \$20 million to convert certain condos to moderately priced homes through the Housing Asset Renewal Program, which would aid developers who wish to convert

their condos into rental property or to finish projects that would result in more-affordable homes.

But a program that considers a single person who earns nearly \$69,000 a year eligible for the program will not help low-income residents, said Alexa Kasdan, the director of research and policy at the [Urban Justice Center](#), based in Manhattan.

Right to the City, a nonprofit group, plans to present a more thorough report by early January, with data from the Furman Center, Ms. Kasdan said.