

Rosenwald (Michigan Boulevard Garden) Apartments

Address: 4618 - 4646 South Michigan Boulevard
Date: 1929
Architect: Ernest Grunsfeld, Jr.
Style: Moderne
CHRS
Rating: Orange
National Register: Yes



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Courtesy of Mort Kaplan Public Relations



The Architectural Record, March 1929

Overview:

In 1929, the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments were constructed to provide working class African-Americans with quality affordable housing. For several decades, this complex was a desirable place to live and raise a family. It was well managed and profitable for the owners. After several ownership changes, occasions of mismanagement, and years of neglected maintenance, the complex currently lies vacant. No children play in the courtyard. No businesses occupy the busy 47th Street storefronts.

While developers had hoped to revitalize the building with financial assistance from the City of Chicago, these plans are 'on hold' and the complex continues to decay. If maintenance and rehabilitation is not provided soon, the complex will be damaged beyond repair. Prompt action is essential to return this significant place in Chicago's history to its former stature.

History:

Mr. Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck & Company developed the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments with the goal of providing decent affordable housing to working class black families who lived in the Washington Park and Grand Boulevard neighborhoods. His efforts were in response to the Great Migration of the 1920s which brought nearly 200,000 African-Americans to Chicago seeking work and a better life for their families. While jobs were available in several growing post WWI industries, quality housing for the working class was in short supply. Rosenwald employed the services of his nephew, Ernest Grunsfeld, Jr. to design the enormous five-story building. Grunsfeld gained notoriety as designer of the Adler Planetarium on Chicago's lakefront. He also designed the landmarked Jewish People's Institute and the historic Whitehall Hotel. The all-masonry apartment building features an articulated design to maximize windows arranged around a 2-acre inner landscaped courtyard.

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ROSENWALD (MICHIGAN BOULEVARD GARDEN) APARTMENTS

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Kaufmann & Fabry Co., courtesy of Mort Kaplan Public Relations



Courtesy of Chicago Historical Society

Eight individual entrances to the building minimized long interior corridors and allowed for a closer bond among neighbors. The exterior and courtyard façades are designed in the Moderne style. They feature sandy brown brick accented by horizontal bands of red brick. The entrances are marked by subtle bands of red sandstone that create bold doorways. For several decades, the building was a respected place to live for thousands of Bronzeville families. Mr. Robert Taylor, the first African-American chairman of the CHA, was a meticulous and demanding manager for numerous years, and other significant Chicagoans lived in the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments, including poet Gwendolyn Brooks, singer Nat King Cole, boxing great Joe Louis, and musician Quincy Jones.

Threat:

While the complex was a desirable place to live for thirty years, it currently stands vacant and appears abandoned. In the recent years, developers have proposed to rehabilitate the building by combining the original 421 apartments into 320 condominiums and upgrading the first floor commercial space for new businesses. Despite the National Register of Historic Places designation in 1981, this facility is not protected as a local landmark and the ongoing years of disrepair and neglect are taking their toll on this significant building. Today, nearly every window is broken, allowing water to decay the interior. It is in dire need of immediate stabilization and long-term rehabilitation.

Recommendations:

The revival of this significant mixed-use housing complex faces serious financial challenges. The public-sector appears willing to provide some degree of financial assistance to bring a bright future back to this complex.

1. Encourage Alderman Dorothy Tillman (3rd) and other local political and community leaders to support efforts to complete the rehabilitation of this complex.
2. Encourage the development team to actively seek new financial and professional partners who are capable of completing this project.
3. Encourage the Chicago Department of Planning to pledge financial support of the project through the use of TIF funds, New Market Tax Credits, HOPE VI, or other means.
4. Seek to rehabilitate the complex as part of Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics. The building could house visiting athletes or media groups and then be sold or rented as permanent housing.
5. Investigate the feasibility of re-using the building to include a number of different but compatible housing types. Possibilities include: cooperative housing (co-housing), youth hostel, student housing, senior housing, or artist live/work space.
6. Seek commercial partners to occupy the first floor space to provide job-training or goods and services to local community residents.

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