

DUNBAR APARTMENTS, 149th Street to 150th Street, between 7th Avenue and 8th Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1926, completed 1928; architect Andrew J. Thomas.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2035, Lot 1.

On May 26, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Dunbar Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 28). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The City's Landmarks Preservation program has been discussed with the owners of the Dunbar Apartments, and they have indicated that they have no objection to the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Dunbar Apartments, named after the famous Black poet of the turn of the century, Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906), occupies the entire block bounded by 149th and 150th Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues. It was the first large cooperative built for Blacks and was Manhattan's earliest large garden apartment complex.

Financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and designed by the architect Andrew J. Thomas, the building was completed in 1928 and was destined, from the planning and sociological points of view, to occupy a pivotal place in the history of the Harlem community.

The complex consists of six independent U-shaped buildings, containing 511 apartments, and is clustered around a large interior garden court. Eight arched entranceways lead into the court and to public staircases. With its lawns, shrubs and trees, the garden court provides a quiet, green oasis removed from the traffic and noise of the surrounding streets.

Architecturally, the dominant note is one of simplicity. The architect successfully avoided the cold monotony of many later housing projects by breaking up the massive wall surfaces. He varied the heights of the buildings from five to six stories, alternately projected and recessed adjoining units and introduced a variety of window alignments and sizes. The warm tones of the Holland varicolored brick are set off by decorative accents of limestone. Handsome wrought iron balconies and window guards and architectural terra cotta at the roof level complete the decorative scheme.

Architectural Significance

While Thomas did not invent the garden apartment concept, it was he who popularized it. Thomas' prototype block plan for garden apartments, submitted to the New York State Housing Committee in 1919, became the basis for several subsequent large housing developments, in which he had demonstrated that better financial returns for the investor, as well as additional light and air for the tenants, could be secured by a coverage of 50% of the land rather than of 70%. The culmination was the Dunbar Apartments, with its large interior garden area and a playground in the center.

The complex was acclaimed on all sides as a model of what housing developments should be, while the architectural excellence of the project was immediately recognized with the award in 1927 of First Prize for walk-up apartments by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. And Thomas' pioneering spirit and bold planning concepts served as inspiration and model for later state and federal housing programs.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who had long been interested in housing for low income families, was approached by the Urban League in 1925 to help in financing second mortgages in Harlem. His real interest lay, however, in the construction of housing rather than in mortgage financing. Early in 1926, he bought the five-acre block in Harlem from William Vincent Astor for \$500,000 and called in Thomas, with whom he had worked on previous projects. Plans were drawn up and construction, begun in October 1926, was completed by February 1928.

Apartments were available only to tenant stock holders in the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Apartments Corporation. Rockefeller held all the preferred and voting stock. A minimum down payment of \$150 was required, plus \$50 a room in the five and six room apartments. The monthly payment was from \$11.50 to \$17.50 per room, depending upon location, with an average of \$14.50, all of which were higher than had originally been hoped for. Of this amount 54% represented interest and principal and 45% maintenance costs, including taxes and insurance.

The rush for apartments was so great after sales began on October 1, 1927, before the buildings were completed, that all units were sold out by May 12, 1928. Even though it did not reach the lowest income families, Claude M. Leigh, of the NAACP, acclaimed the Dunbar as the greatest contribution toward better housing he had seen anywhere in the world.

It is not surprising that the Dunbar Apartments were such a success from the outset. Dunbar provided much more than just a place to sleep and eat. It was, quote Roscoe C. Bruce, the educator who served as resident manager until 1937, "an adventure in community building." It provided for everyone's needs: a nursery, a kindergarten for young children, a playground, a clubroom for older boys, an athletic field, a men's club, a women's club, a forum and a Board of Advisors elected by the tenants. Vocational guidance and placement services were added in the first year of operation, as well as a legal aid bureau. Stores were part of the development, and on September 15, 1928, the Dunbar National Bank opened on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 150th Street -- Harlem's first bank and the first to have a Black manager and personnel. Thus a real community was created.

A list of tenants in the Dunbar reads like a Black Who's Who: Countee Cullen, poet; W. E. B. DuBois, editor; A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Paul Robeson, actor; Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, dancer; and Matthew A. Henson, to name only a few. Henson, co-discoverer with Peary of the North Pole, who lived at the Dunbar from 1928 until his death in 1955, is memorialized by a tablet at the Seventh Avenue entrance, dedicated April 6, 1970.

Later History

The Dunbar was highly successful for several years. Then, as the Depression deepened, tenants lost their jobs and were unable to keep up their mortgage and monthly payments. In the event they had to move out, their original equity was returned to them. At the end of 1932, a one-year moratorium on mortgage payments was declared. In December 1936, Rockefeller foreclosed the mortgage and transferred the property from the corporation to himself as an individual. The cooperative plan was abandoned and the equity returned to each tenant who was then put on a rental basis.

There is no doubt that Rockefeller brought hope to Harlem. In an article on Rockefeller's role in Harlem, "The Home Journal News" of January 16, 1937, stated that the Dunbar National Bank "stood like the Rock of Gibraltar in a weary sea of depression" and called the Dunbar Apartments "an oasis in a desert."

On October 29, 1937 Rockefeller sold the Dunbar Apartments to a private corporation. Since then the property has changed hands only twice, in 1949 to the New York City Society of the Methodist Church and in 1963 to the present owners, the IES Corporation.

The Dunbar was the beginning of a new planning concept in Harlem. Although the cooperative idea was ultimately abandoned at the Dunbar, it was revived after World War II in many middle housing projects throughout the City and in Harlem. It was the forerunner of the movement for decent housing in the area.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this complex, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Dunbar Apartments has a special character, special historical, architectural and sociological interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Dunbar Apartments occupy a unique position in the Harlem community, that it was the first large cooperative built for Blacks, that it was Manhattan's earliest, large garden apartment complex and that it was a prototype structure for both public housing projects of the Depression years and for later middle income housing.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a landmark the Dunbar Apartments, 149th Street to 150th Street, between 7th Avenue and 8th Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 2035, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.