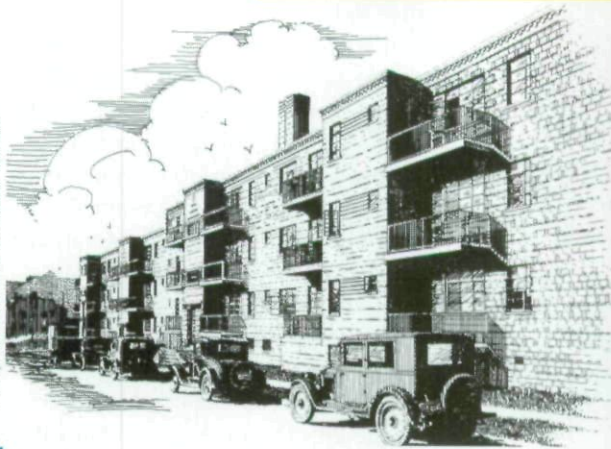


Plans to revamp Neighborhood Gardens are already taking shape. Left: a drawing of the landmark project as it looked in the mid-'30s.

Pat Hays Biber for Landmarks Association of Saint Louis



score one for

# modernism in St. Louis

A bold plan to save a 1930s project.

bauhaus in St. Louis? Absolutely. Neighborhood Gardens, just five blocks north of downtown, clearly shows the influence of German architect Walter Gropius, a founder of the famous design school.

For 15 years, the complex has stood empty, with broken windows and crumbling brick. Surrounded by high-rise public housing projects, derelict tenements, and vacant lots, Neighborhood Gardens declined along with its surroundings, a casualty of massive disinvestment in the old urban core of St. Louis. Redeveloping the site seemed all but impossible.

Now the Spanish Lake Development Company, a relative newcomer to rehabilitation of historic properties in St. Louis, has taken on the job. Dan Dalton, who has been overseeing the project for the past 16 months, estimates that it will be completed in about a year. The number of units has shrunk, from 252 originally to 144 in the redevelopment. All will be rentals.

## Beginnings

Neighborhood Gardens was sparked by a European trip taken in 1931 by J.A. Wolf, the executive director of St. Louis's Neighborhood Association Settlement House. Wolf had received an Oberlander Fellowship to study worker housing in Germany and Austria. He admired the large scale of the projects he encountered as

well as the consideration shown by their architects for light, ventilation, and open play spaces.

Upon his return, Wolf oversaw the creation of a solid, well-designed complex that for seven decades provided good housing for working families in St. Louis.

In October 1933, Wolf and the Neighborhood Association formed Neighborhood Gardens, Inc., a limited liability development company, and with a \$500,000 loan from the federal Public Works Administration they broke ground for their model housing project. Private investors provided an additional \$140,000.

Site control was simplified by the fact that the city block had one owner, a trucking company, with only a few storage sheds and outbuildings. Thus, when the developers bought the block, they required no exercise of eminent domain and incurred no land assembly costs.

Neighborhood Gardens was one of a handful of projects constructed in the U.S. in the years preceding the 1937 Housing Act, which established the federal public housing program. Though not as well known as Oscar Stonorov's Mackley Houses, built by the Hosiery Workers Union in Philadelphia, Neighborhood Gardens was designed and completed at the same time in the same architectural idiom: streamlined moderne.

It was the first low-rent residential block

By Joseph Heathcott

constructed in St. Louis—a city later known for the vast scale of its public housing program. For many, the 1972 implosion of one of the high rises in the Pruitt-Igoe complex symbolized the shortcomings of public housing nationwide.

In terms of design, materials, construction, and amenities, the quality of this early experiment was never surpassed in the city. "It was part of a new spirit of problem-solving," says Robert Leighninger, whose book on public investment in the New Deal will be published next year. "They were really planning for the future."

In terms of its social mission, Neighborhood Gardens proved less successful. Despite the multiracial, multiethnic character of its near north side surroundings, the complex restricted occupancy to white residents. A promised project for African American workers never emerged.

## European influence

The project's architects, the local firm of Hoener, Baum, and Froese, had strong ties to European modernist currents. Working closely with Wolf, they devised a scheme for an intricately organized group of buildings, arranged to maximize open space. The result was an interlocking footprint of rectilinear buildings, passageways, and courtyards that conducted air currents to keep the project cool even in the steamy St. Louis summers.



The 252 apartments were distributed in 12 three-story buildings of varying length. Amenities included a laundry room; a wading pool, fountain, and sandbox; and play spaces in the grassy courtyards. A curved, one-story building, partially sunk below grade, served as a community center, with two club rooms, a library, a social hall, and an industrial-scale kitchen.

In keeping with the streamlined style, exterior ornament was kept to a minimum—except for the brickwork for which St. Louis was known. Local masons faced the buildings' concrete block walls with double-sized bricks laid in a Flemish bond pattern. They then punctuated the design with angled brick courses to create a decorative rhythm.

The brickwork, coupled with the arrangement of cantilevered balconies on either side of the slightly projecting stairwell bays, produced a striking overall visual effect. Though clearly indebted to Bauhaus modernism, Neighborhood Gardens reinterpreted the vocabulary of the European worker housing block to reflect local talents and to suit vernacular conditions.

### Decline and rebirth

In the early 1950s, the St. Louis Housing Authority surrounded Neighborhood Gardens with a high-rise public housing project called Cochran Gardens. Despite the fact that Neighborhood Gardens was privately owned, its proximity to Cochran led most St. Louisans to regard it as just another housing authority project.

During the late 1950s and early '60s, legal challenges brought by civil rights and fair housing organizations resulted in the official desegregation of Neighborhood Gardens—and its subsequent abandonment by white families. By 1965, all the Neighborhood Gardens units were occupied by African Americans.

For some time, the complex continued to be viewed as a step up from the city's older tenements and the increasingly troubled Cochran project. As wealth and resources drained from the neighborhood, however, the homes, shops, and streets of north St. Louis lurched into decline. In the 1980s, Neighborhood Gardens cycled through a series of private owners, each one successively less interested in its maintenance. In 1990, the buildings were vacated and lapsed into tax delinquency, eventually to be seized by the city's Land Reutilization Authority. The once-superb facility lay in shambles.

Five years earlier, the property

had been listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the result of a nomination by the nonprofit Landmarks Association of St. Louis. Landmarks conducted exhaustive research on the social and design history of the project. But listing was not enough to save the buildings.

"Unfortunately," says Carolyn Toft, the association's executive director, "plans for reinvestment never materialized."

In 2000, the Landmarks Association included Neighborhood Gardens on its list of 11 most endangered historic properties. It remained on the list until last year.

Things began to look up in the late 1990s for the area surrounding Neighborhood Gardens, the result of a wave of reinvestment and real estate activity that began to alter the character of the near north side. Among the developments: the completion of the TWA dome for the Rams football team; new infill housing; and, in 2003, a \$30 million HOPE VI award to demolish the Cochran Gardens housing project and to develop 241 units of low-rise, mixed income rental properties.

### New life

With so much redevelopment nearby, Neighborhood Gardens' future was even more in doubt. The task was to convince prospective developers that the buildings, and not just the land, held great potential.

This was no small effort. "These buildings created during the modern movement are in peril everywhere," warns Gail Radford, a historian at the University of Buffalo and author of *Modern Housing in America*.

Enter the St. Louis-based Spanish Lake Development Company. It was convinced that Neighborhood Gardens' elegant design and its proximity to downtown made it a good candidate for redevelopment. In 2001, the company bought the complex and began to line up financing.

Last year, the firm began the laborious task of wrenching new housing out of the old buildings. Some aspects of the original design have had to be abandoned to accommodate new circumstances. The interior courtyards will be paved for parking, and the walkways will become roads. The apartments are being reconfigured to produce the larger units that today's market demands. Twenty-five percent of the 144 rental units will be reserved for low-income tenants.

Most important, Spanish Lake has saved a historically irreplaceable site. "These early experiments in mass housing are a real treasure," says Robert Leighninger. "They remind us that long-term public investments have created legacies for us to build on."

Joseph Heathcott is a faculty member in the Department of American Studies at Saint Louis University.

## Chicago's Lathrop Homes on Watch List

Just six years after Neighborhood Gardens, the Public Works Administration built the Julia Lathrop Homes on a 35-acre riverfront site on Chicago's North Side. Most of the 900 units were in 16 three-story buildings; there were also 14 two-story row houses. The modernist buildings occupied less than

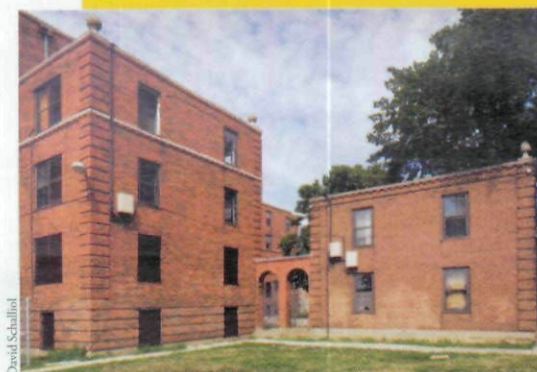
a fifth of the site, leaving generous room for open space, with plantings designed by the illustrious landscape architect Jens Jensen. The project, named for a founder of Hull House, the city's famous settlement house, has been declared eligible for listing on the National Register as a historic district.

This year, Landmarks Chicago, the city's leading preservation advocacy group, included Lathrop Homes on its "watch list" of endangered sites. The Chicago Housing

Authority has proposed to use federal HOPE VI funding to replace the complex with a new mixed income community (a third each market-rate, affordable, and public housing). The authority has not yet issued a formal RFP, giving preservationists—and some of the tenants in the 425 occupied units—a chance to lobby for a reprieve.

Ruth Knack, Planning

*A 1930s housing complex in Chicago—this one public—faces an uncertain future.*



David Schallhorn

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