
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-14

Vizcaya Apartments
1388 Tuckerman Street NW
Square 2787, Lot 27

and

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-15

Valencia Apartments
5922 13th Street NW
Parcel 87, Lot 400

Meeting Date: September 22, 2016
Applicant: Hampstead Brightwood Partners LP (owner)
Affected ANC: 4A

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the apartment buildings presently known as the Vizcaya, at 1388 Tuckerman Street NW, and the Valencia, 5922 13th Street NW, as historic landmarks in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board request the nominations be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance. The two have been included in this single report, because they share a common building type, construction, neighborhood, and ownership. What may be said of one is largely true of the other.¹

The properties merit designation under D.C. Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) and National Register Criterion C for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types... or... [being] expressions of... urban planning, siting or design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia or the nation.”

The properties are also significant under District of Columbia Criterion B (“History”) and National Register Criterion A in the areas of community planning and development, for being “associated with historical periods ... or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia or the nation,” in that they are associated with the physical and social development of the Brightwood neighborhood during the interwar period, as a consequence of transportation improvements, a new zoning ordinance, and Depression-era population growth.

The properties qualify for designation under the Multiple Property Documentation Form

¹ The nominations are similar, and the properties resemble the Concord Apartments, designated by the Board in July, two other Brightwood apartment buildings designed by George Santmyers and owned by the present applicant.

“Apartment Buildings in Washington, D.C., 1880-1945” (see evaluation below).

Background

Until the early twentieth century, the Brightwood area of northwest Washington remained mostly rural. It had been the site of important transportation routes from at least 1822, when the turnpike to Rockville was constructed. The road network was augmented during the Civil War to serve the line of defensive fortifications, but it was not until the implementation of the Highway Act and the construction of streetcar lines that the neighborhood’s population growth took off. Streetcars and bus lines and cheap land values induced considerable construction of multi-family buildings during the interwar period, and permitted by a new zoning ordinance, they concentrated along the 14th Street corridor, especially around the intersection with Missouri Avenue.

Now called the Vizcaya Apartments, 1388 Tuckerman Street was known rather pretentiously as the “Chilchester Arms” when constructed and opened in 1936. The two-story building was designed for the Modern Construction Company by George Santmyers, Washington’s most prolific architect and one of its most prolific apartment designers. This was one of his earliest commissions in Brightwood, but he would plan several more multi-family projects there, including the Concord Apartments. This modest building shows Santmyers’s traditional background, with a classical limestone door surround and water table, keystone arches, and the brick panels at parapets that he began employing in apartment and rowhouse projects in the 1920s. The numerous projecting rowlocks might be taken for early streamlining but are intended as rustication. The soldier course over the second story is a Santmyers trademark that would appear on many of his projects until his death in 1960.

The three-story Valencia Apartments at 5922 13th Street followed the Vizcaya by only a year. It has more overtly Modernistic references, in the vertical limestone Deco details at the top of the front bays and simpler surfaces. A sheet-metal cornice may be seen as a traditional holdover, but its knife-edge projection may be a stab at the modern. The Valencia was designed by Joseph Gibbons Herbert, a prolific designer, although not as prolific as Santmyers. While he drew up plans for others, Herbert created mostly residences, including apartments, as not only their designer but as the developer-builder. This is one of those instances. He was one of a handful of developers who seized upon the opportunities offered by the city’s rising demand for housing and the low cost of land in Brightwood, transforming that area from a recently rural streetcar suburb to an urban neighborhood.

Both the Vizcaya and the Valencia were based on an H-shaped plan with a recessed central entry, although one leg of the Valencia’s H was omitted to fit a wedge-shaped lot bounded by Rock Creek Ford Road. The exterior walls of both are of brick-faced concrete block. Neither property has notable landscape features beyond a straight concrete walk through a lawn leading to the entrance, except that the Valencia sits on a berm, necessitating steps within the walk, and atop which there are some foundation plantings.

Evaluation

Following a thorough survey of pre-1946 apartments in the District of Columbia, the Board and the National Register of Historic Places adopted the Multiple Property Documentation Form

“Apartment Buildings in Washington, D.C., 1880-1945,” intended to designate quality examples of physical subtypes of the broader building type. The document’s registration criteria were necessarily broad, to reflect the range of types and examples, the elite and the more modest, and to recognize examples in all parts of the city. Of course, it was never the intention to encourage the designation of all examples, but the Board has designated a broad and representative range, often encouraging rehabilitations for low- and moderate-income rehabilitation projects. A few properties, lacking any distinctive architectural or landscape merit, have been rejected, as they were neither standouts nor particularly good examples warranting the protection of the preservation law..

The Vizcaya and the Valencia do qualify for designation as representative examples of the “Conventional Low-Rise Apartment Building” subtype as described in the multiple-property form, because they share the characteristics of the subtype, namely, that they are purpose-built, between two and four stories tall, contain more than five units, but lack elevators. Specifically, they qualify under the following registration criteria:

A-3, for apartment buildings that are “part of clusters, corridors or districts [such as Brightwood] that illustrate the patterns of development of the city”;

A-4, for buildings “that reflect economic forces [here, the extension of the 14th Street streetcar line, the creation of a zoning ordinance in the 1920s, and rapid population growth during the Great Depression]... that altered the development of the city”;

C-5, for buildings “that reflect changes in aesthetic philosophies” [applicable at least to the Valencia in a fairly simplified form]; and

C-7, for buildings “that are the work of skilled architects...”

Experienced as they were, Santmyers and Herbert were certainly assured in the layout of their apartments, masters in the broad sense of having thoroughly learned their craft. These two buildings are not master works, however, but fairly average examples that nonetheless characterize the rapid development of Brightwood before World War II and the proliferation of middle-class apartments near mid century.

The properties retain high integrity, as indicated by the photographs of the interiors. Their exteriors have been altered principally by window and door replacements.