

**SOCIETY OF
ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS**

30 September 2020

Mr. Gillian D. Brown, Executive Director
Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority
300 Perry Street
Buffalo, NY 14204
gbrown@bmfahousing.com

Re: Opposition to the Proposed Demolition of the Willert Park Courts / Alfred D. Price Courts, 373 Spring Street, Buffalo, NY.

Dear Mr. Brown:

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) opposes the proposed demolition of the Willert Park Courts / Alfred D. Price Courts, Buffalo, NY.

Willert Park Courts is a nationally significant, both culturally and architecturally. Its significance derives from its status as the first housing complex designed and constructed exclusively for African Americans in Buffalo and as an early example of the International Style. The complex consists of multiple buildings comprising 173 multiple two- and three-story brick multi-family residential units organized around a central courtyard, with significant cast stone bas-relief sculptural decoration. The complex, funded by the Federal Housing Authority, was designed by local architect Frederick C. Backus and completed in 1939, with additional units added in 1942 and 1944. Renamed Alfred D. Price Housing in 1969, in honor of Alfred D. Price, the only Black senior district manager in the Buffalo Housing Authority, who oversaw Willert Park Courts from its construction until his death in 1968, it remains commonly known as Willert Park.

Buffalo was an early adopter of federally supported public housing sponsored by the New Deal United States Housing Authority (established 1937), almost immediately proposing three public housing projects—including Kenfield Homes, Commodore Perry Homes, and Lakeview Homes—each of them for whites only. Even though the housing available to Buffalo's African American community was of the poorest quality and the most overcrowded, no public housing was available to African Americans. For many years, the Buffalo Urban League fought to allow Black residents to live in Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA) housing, but BMHA persisted in renting only to whites. Eventually, BMHA changed course by constructing the racially segregated Willert Park Courts. Even then, Willert court's original 170 units, the only public housing units open to African Americans, stood in stark numeric contrast with the 1,700 units of public housing available to whites.

The complex was notable for its planning and architectural design, particularly the cast stone sculptural panels, designed and executed by Robert Cronbach and Herbert Ambellan, which ornamented entrances throughout the complex. Willert Park Courts was celebrated for its use of modern architecture almost immediately: John McAndrew's *Guide to Modern Architecture, Northeast States* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1940) included Willert Park Courts among the eight buildings in Buffalo selected, a list that included such icons of modern architecture as Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Administration Building and Louis Sullivan's Guaranty Building. The complex has also been recognized as eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Although a nomination was prepared in 2011 the owner, BMHA, objected to listing and the nomination did not move forward.

In 2006 and 2009, portions of the complex were demolished in anticipation of the construction of new housing; all of the remaining units were vacated at this time. In 2017, the Buffalo Planning Board approved a proposal to demolish all buildings with the exception of the Administration Building, and replace the complex with forty new residential units. While the plan proposes to save the individual bas relief sculptures, they will be removed from the complex and lose their context. The New York State Historic Preservation Office has determined that the demolition of these properties will have an adverse effect upon historic resources, and public funding being sought for this project might not be approved. As a part of the Section 106 process, both Preservation Buffalo Niagara and the Michigan Street Restoration Corporation have objected to the proposal. These organizations are joined by Docomomo US and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which placed Willert Park Courts on its 2019 list of Eleven Most Endangered Places.

SAH joins with our colleagues in Preservation Buffalo Niagara, the Michigan Street Restoration Corporation, Docomomo US, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation in opposing the demolition of the Willert Park Courts, and strongly encouraging the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority to consider the several reasonable alternatives to this project. Thoughtful, inclusive planning and design could provide high-quality housing in this location, allowing the BMHA to achieve its goals while retaining the nationally significant Willert Park Courts, one of the examples of modern architecture that makes Buffalo a unique and treasured architectural city.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. C. G.' with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D., LEED AP BD+C
Chair, Society of Architectural Historians Heritage Conservation Committee

cc: Mr. Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.; Mr. Jeffrey Cody, Ph.D.; Mr. Anthony Cohn, AIA; Mr. David Fixler, FAIA; Mr. Theodore H. Prudon, Ph.D., FAIA, Ms. Pauline Saliga; Ms. Deborah Slaton; Ms. Victoria Young, Ph.D.; Members, SAH Heritage Conservation Committee; Mr. Daniel Mackay, NYSHPO; Mr. Darius Pridgen, President, Buffalo Common Council; Ms. Jessie Fisher, Executive Director, Preservation Buffalo Niagara; Mr. George Arthur, Executive Director, Michigan Street Restoration Corporation.