

Once feared, Grove Apartments now honored

Affordable apartments on Madison score architecture award

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Lacey Sikora

Contributing reporter

Almost five years since the tumultuous journey from abandoned Comcast building to affordable housing began, the Grove Apartments at the corner of Madison and Grove in Oak Park has become an asset to the community in more ways than one.

A recent recipient of The Richard Driehaus Foundation's second place award for architectural excellence in community design, the Grove Apartments seem to offer that thing all Oak Parkers claim to love: architectural significance in both provenance and redesign. Dennis Langley of Chicago-based architectural firm Weese Langley Weese was involved in the project from its early stages when the Interfaith Housing Development Corporation (IHDC) asked for his firm's assistance in finding properties in Oak Park. According to Langley the unsightly Comcast building quickly proved to be more than just an eyesore.

"We knew early on that it was possibly a Kahn building," he said, referencing noted architect Albert Kahn. "We just didn't know what had happened under all that white dryvit. We found the Kahn building underneath, and that was what the design plans became all about: how to keep the original building's character and add on two floors."

Kahn was a Detroit architect who originally designed the building in 1927 to house a LaSalle Cadillac dealership. Once given a place of pride on Oak Park's automobile row, the building's limestone details, concrete piers and decorative brick were incorporated in Langley's design for the affordable housing project.

When the project was first conceived IHDC's Perry Vietti, an Oak Parker himself, notes that there was a community need if not much community interest in affordable housing in Oak Park.

"At the time this all started, the West Cook YMCA was talking about moving to Forest Park and closing its residential component. We were looking at a loss of about 120 housing units. We, along with the Oak Park Housing Authority, wanted to address the need for housing for single residents of Oak Park, and people who worked in Oak Park but couldn't afford to live here."

According to Vietti, another important piece of the puzzle was accessible, affordable housing. "We have a lot of apartment buildings in Oak Park, but many of them are walk-ups and not accessible to everyone. There was a real need there."

Back in 2010, a segment of the community, some immediate neighbors of the project, were vocal in their concerns that an affordable housing building was not necessary and might be detrimental to Oak Park. Neighbors voiced their concerns about property values, parking and the possibility of unstable or criminal renters being placed in their community.

From both an architectural and a community standpoint. It appears that those fears have not been realized. What was once a hulking monolith of white stucco with few windows surrounded by Comcast vans has morphed into an elegant brick building with green space, parking and wide windows to let in sunlight. An artist-designed stainless steel fence with a car and plant motif speaks to the building's original use as well as the prairie state.

Langley notes that the fear about the building was ill-placed. "It's pretty rare to find something historic enclosed in stucco like this. We think the building is a tremendous boon for that area of Oak Park. That stretch of Madison could use some redevelopment, and no normal developer would have touched that building. Not-for-profits were able to institute change here, and those who doubted were so far off the mark. They should be embracing and encouraging this kind of development."

Langley, whose firm does a lot of work for not-for-profits, thinks the mission of the building is something that cannot be overlooked, and Vietti says they have achieved all that they wanted and more.

"I like to say that we've achieved all the elements we were looking for. We had over 1,000 applications for the 51 apartments. The demand was there. We have rented seven of the eleven accessible units to people in wheel chairs, and we've been able to meet our targets of having residents who lived or worked in Oak Park and needed affordable housing here."

The IHDC continues to oversee the building's operations, and Vietti says the fears of those opposed to its construction have not been realized. Only one third of the building's residents have cars, so their parking needs are more than met with the adjacent parking lot.

"People are people so there are always small issues in all apartment buildings, but we don't have criminal activity or police calls. It's a very secure building with on-site management, and we provide soft services to help with jobs, veterans' services or advocacy. We have an advisory committee that includes at least two people who live in the neighborhood, and they have not seen any problems."

"Before we built, people may have struggled with the fear of the unknown, but we screen carefully. We want to serve people who have needs but who are responsible enough to live independently, and we are able to do that here."

And Sugar Beet's coming

Another worry when the Grove Apartments were planned was the retail space being set aside on the ground floor. What business would choose to locate below subsidized housing and on a street without considerable street parking.

Enter the Sugar Beet Cooperative which struck a very favorable deal on rent with the building owners and plans to open the food co-op this spring, taking the entire ground floor commercial space.