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THE PHRASE “HOUSING project” conjures images of Chicago’s infamous Cabrini Green, images in Indianapolis by the occasional local news report of residents living in below-standard apartments, huddled around cooking stoves for heat and fighting off dog-sized cockroaches.

But, in 1938, “housing project” was a phrase that resonated with an entirely different tone when an Indianapolis project offered a wholly positive set of visuals. That year, Lockefield Garden, the city’s first federally funded housing, opened on the near Westside amid much ballyhoo and with great success.

Funded by the Public Works Administration (PWA), one of the Franklin Roosevelt administration’s New Deal agencies, Lockefield Garden was part of a slum clearance and low-rent housing initiative. The location for the project, an area between the Central Canal and White River, was blighted, and many of the homes were below even the relatively low living standards of Depression-era Indianapolis. This area was also almost exclusively African American, with the pulsing heart of the business and entertainment district on Indiana Avenue forming its northwestern border.

Some historians have argued that the term “slum clearance” was a catch phrase for racial prejudice that resulted in demolishing the homes of generations of African American families. There is probably some merit in that argument. However, photographs of the area between the then-polluted and vile-smelling Central Canal and the also polluted (and



▲ In 1938, Lockefield Garden was a New Deal project which turned out to be a near-Downtown success story for several decades.

Lockefield Garden once a thriving community

probably also vile-smelling) White River, show that a goodly portion of the homes were mere shacks which appear hardly livable. City reports of the period confirm that, as late as the 1930s, when most city homes had indoor plumbing, a large number of the low-income residents in this area were still using outdoor privies and wells.

The Great Depression, which impoverished even the formerly wealthy, had been especially difficult on African Americans whose job-types and earning capacity was so limited in the still-openly racist America of the 1920s and

1930s. The homes of this neighborhood reflected the suffering of their residents.

The double goal of the PWA housing program – to provide construction jobs and to improve housing in this blighted area, was a win-win situation for Indianapolis leaders. Black homeowners and renters in the area had little if any chance to protest. The city demolished 363 homes on 22 acres bounded by Indiana Avenue, Blake, North and Locke streets to make room for the project.

The local architecture firm of (William Earl) Russ and (Merritt) Harrison designed the project. They based their plan on PWA Housing Division models, but their attractive and functional design became a model of its own. Russ and Harrison placed the 24 buildings in two chevron-shaped rows flanking a wide, central courtyard. Landscape architect Lawrence Vinnedge Sheridan planted the courtyard with a grove of red oak trees and helped with the siting of the buildings so that each unit had maximum sunshine.

The yellow-brick buildings had flat-roofs and Art Deco-inspired limestone details. Interiors were stylish and modern and expressed the Art Deco style in tiled hallways and geometric stairway balustrades. According to the “Encyclopedia of Indianapolis,” renters could choose from three-room apartments or four-room “group homes.” Rents ranged from \$20.80 to \$30.10.

The segregated complex opened in February 1938. Lionel Artis, a leader in the African American community, was the general manager. With his master’s degree in social science Artis created a thriving community which became a locus of African American life in the city.

Among the retail businesses located in the Lockefield Garden buildings fronting on Indiana Avenue was one owned by Lionel Artis’s mother. Mrs. Artis’s clothing shop was the source of gowns for proms at segregated Crispus Attucks, dresses for evenings on the town in the open-all-night clubs of Indiana Avenue, and fancy stage clothes for many of the local African American singers and stage performers of the 1940s and 1950s. Flo Garvin, one of Indianapolis’s well-known and stylish chanteuses (inducted into the Indianapolis Jazz Hall of Fame in recent years), remembered buying all her gowns at Mrs. Artis’s shop in Lockefield Garden.

In a lemons-to-lemonade scenario, the construction of racially segregated Lockefield Garden gave many African Americans a good place to live in a model urban housing project. In a city where blacks were restricted from living outside of a few enclaves, they found a comfortable, affordable and attractive home in the midst of an insular and thriving community.

The fair housing laws of the 1950s, designed to end dis-



crimination, began to change the nature of that community, and eventually of Lockefield Garden. By law, subdivision developers who wrote covenants denying blacks home ownership and local realtors who refused to show them homes and denied African American realtors membership in their organization could no longer restrict black homeownership or rentals to a few inner city neighborhoods.

As the housing market opened to them, African Americans began to move to these newly available suburban areas. Sometimes they planned their own developments, such as Grandview on the city’s Northwest side. Other times they bravely moved into formerly all-white neighborhoods. By the 1960s, this movement away from the city center – coupled with the rise of a strong black middle class, whose members made too much money to meet Lockefield Garden’s new income requirements – began to empty the attractive apartments of Lockefield Garden.

By the 1980s, Lockefield Garden was falling into disrepair. More and more units were becoming vacant, Lionel Artis was deceased, and his mother’s swank clothing store was long gone. The pressing needs of nearby IUPUI and Wishard Memorial Hospital for more land brought about a plan to demolish most of the apartment complex and open the land for development. Although preservationists and other citizens protested, developers moved forward with that plan and, in 1983, demolished all but seven of the original 24 buildings.

Today, the remaining seven building and a portion of Lawrence Sheridan’s courtyard and red oak grove are all that remain of the Lockefield Garden model housing project. The tall, stately trees now line a driveway to IUPUI and hospital parking lots and to newly constructed apartment buildings nearby.

Although the last remaining buildings of Lockefield Garden are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, diners at the new Au bon Pain in the equally new Lockefield Place strip mall, probably rarely notice the lovely facade of the once-successful housing project across Indiana Avenue.

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