



Garden Apartments of Los Angeles

Historic Context Statement

SUMMARY

prepared by

Architectural Resources Group

for the

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PROJECT TEAM

Consultant Team:

Architectural Resources Group, Inc.

Charles E. Chase, AIA, Principal

Katie E. Horak, Senior Associate, Architectural Historian

Steven R. Keylon, Landscape Historian

Client:

Los Angeles Conservancy

Linda Dishman, Executive Director

Adrian Scott Fine, Director of Advocacy

Flora Chou, Preservation Advocate

Marcello Vavala, Preservation Associate

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Lauren Weiss Bricker, Ph. D.

Janet Hansen

Luis Hoyos

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A boy rides his bike at Baldwin Hills Village (now Village Green), photographed by Julius Shulman, 1958 (Getty Research Institute)

NOTE: This is an abridged version of Garden Apartments of Los Angeles Historic Context Statement. For a complete, downloadable version of this document, please visit the Los Angeles Conservancy's website, at: <http://lac.laconservancy.org/gardenapartments>

INTRODUCTION

This Historic Context Statement, completed by Architectural Resources Group, Inc. (ARG) in collaboration with landscape historian Steven Keylon, is a study of garden apartments in Los Angeles. Its purpose is to provide a definition of the property type and a framework for future evaluation of significance. ARG was contracted by the Los Angeles Conservancy in 2011 to conduct this study as part of the L.A. Garden Apartments Network initiative.

Los Angeles has one of the largest and most notable collections of garden apartments in the nation. The abundance of the property type in Los Angeles can best be seen as the fusion of the following ingredients: Garden City planning principles, first espoused by Ebenezer Howard and Raymond Unwin in England and later by the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA); a nationwide call for more humane housing conditions during the adversity of the Great Depression;



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Wyvernwood, the first garden apartment in Los Angeles, c. 1940 (from *Architectural Forum*, May 1940)

the availability of funding from a number of federal initiatives focused on housing the nation's growing population; the influx of defense workers during World War II and the need to house them; the genius and humanity of a number of local architects, planners and landscape architects and their investment in building a better city; and the landscape, climate and vastness of available land in Los Angeles before and during the boom of the post-World War II era. Los Angeles, with its benign climate, was perhaps the ideal place in the country for garden apartments to thrive. As the 20th century progressed, architects and landscape architects were opening up the relationship between indoors and out in the construction of single-family homes. Garden

apartments offered apartment dwellers that same easy access to outdoor living that the modern residents of Los Angeles desired.

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Garden Apartments: Definition of the Property Type

Planned and constructed in Los Angeles between 1937 and approximately 1955, garden apartment complexes generally consist of concentrations of similar multi-unit buildings situated on a large – and often irregularly shaped – property. Complexes range in size from just a few acres to more than a hundred. Though some of Los Angeles's preeminent architects designed garden apartments at mid-century, the buildings themselves are typically (and deliberately) architecturally modest. Emphasis is placed, rather, on site plan and landscape; the designers relied on color, texture, planting plan, light and shadow to create visual interest. Building entrances face landscaped courtyards rather than the street, and parking and vehicular circulation is relegated to the perimeter of the site plan or within garage courts separate from pedestrian areas. Large, expansive green space is common; typically there are one or two large courtyards or greens at the nucleus of the complexes available to all residents. Garden apartments vary in appearance, size and plan; however, the following character defining features epitomize the property type in its purest expression:

- Superblock site plan, which deviates from the rectilinear urban grid by combining multiple city blocks or parcels into a single property
- Three acres in size or greater
- Low-slung buildings, rarely exceeding two stories in height
- Elimination of common interior corridors
- Repetition of nearly identical building models throughout the plan
- Stylistic simplicity; buildings are usually minimal in appearance with a lack of stylistic details and ornament
- Primary building entrances face common courtyards rather than the street



A c. 1948 aerial photograph of Baldwin Hills Village, showing its superblock site plan in contrast to the speculative development which grew around it (from Stein, *Toward New Towns...*)



Low-slung buildings at Pueblo Del Rio, c. 1942 (from *Homes for Heroes*)



Garage court at Carmelitos, 1944 (from *A Review of the Activities of the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles, 1938-1943*)



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Playground at Pueblo del Rio, adjacent to the nursery school, c. 1942 (from *Homes for Heroes*)

- Parking at the perimeter of the site plan, typically in detached, enclosed garage buildings or garage courts
- One or more large open spaces, or greens, located at the interior of the site plan, around which buildings are arranged
- Recreational amenities planned to help foster community
- Variety of landscape, often native or drought tolerant; low shrubs used to delineate outdoor “rooms”; allées; mature trees and the use of climbing vines to add visual interest to buildings



Buildings facing expansive, common green space at Wyvernwood, 1939 (USC Special Collections)



Variety of landscape at Baldwin Hills Village, 1958 (Getty Research Institute)

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Summary of Historic Contexts and Themes

Although garden apartments are nationwide in occurrence, examples of the property type in Los Angeles outnumber nearly every other city in comparison.³ Therefore an understanding of the property type and its significance as a pivotal moment in the architectural and social history of the city is critical.

The contexts and themes explored in this study are as follows:

CONTEXT: Public and Private Institutional Development

THEME: Public Housing in Los Angeles, 1937-1955

THEME: Defense Housing in Los Angeles, 1942-1945

CONTEXT: Residential Development and Suburbanization

THEME: Community Planning and Development: Garden City Planning Principles, 1937-1955

THEME: Ethnic Heritage and Segregation, 1937-1955

CONTEXT: Architecture and Designed Landscapes

THEME: Important Architects, Designers and Planners, 1937-1955

THEME: Designed Landscapes, 1937-1955

THEME: Important Landscape Architects, 1937-1955



Tenants were often recruited to help maintain the landscape. William Mead Homes, c. 1944 (Los Angeles Public Library, Photo Collection)



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Map of Known Garden Apartments, Los Angeles (City and County)

- 1 Avalon Gardens
- 2 Baldwin Gardens (now Cameo Woods)
- 3 Baldwin Hills Village (now Village Green)
- 4 Belford Park Apartments
- 5 Carmelitos
- 6 Century Square
- 7 Chase Knolls
- 8 Chesapeake Rodeo Apartments
- 9 Cienega Village
- 10 Crenshaw Village
- 11 Dorset Village
- 12 Estrada Courts
- 13 Fairfax Park Apartments
- 14 Garfield Gardens
- 15 Gloria Homes Apartments
- 16 Hacienda Village
- 17 Harbor Hills
- 18 Hollypark Knolls
- 19 Imperial Courts
- 20 Jordan Downs
- 21 Ladera Townhouse
- 22 Lincoln Place
- 23 Manchester Gardens
- 24 Mar Vista Gardens
- 25 Montebello Gardens Apartments
- 26 Nickerson Gardens
- 27 North Hollywood Manor
- 28 Park La Brea
- 29 Pueblo del Rio
- 30 Ramona Gardens
- 31 Rancho San Pedro
- 32 Rancho Vega
- 33 Rose Hills Courts
- 34 San Fernando Gardens
- 35 Sunset Barrington Apartments
- 36 Verdugo Mesa
- 37 William Mead Homes
- 38 Wyvernwood

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