

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Henry K. Holsman, Evanston's architect of affordable housing

Part two of two articles on the work of Henry K. Holsman
by [Jack Weiss, Design Evanston](#) January 24th, 2023

Read part one of this series on Evanston architect Henry K. Holsman [here](#).

Shoreline Apartments (1928) marked the last of Henry Holsman's many Hyde Park and South Shore affordable, cooperative high-rise apartment buildings – nearly all in the Gothic Revival style. During the 1930s Holsman became increasingly involved in the problem of housing in blighted urban areas and less focused on the co-op buildings catering to middle- and upper-class residents. By the '40s and the end of World War II, the need for affordable high-density projects grew dramatically across the Chicago area.

The Community Development Trust

Holsman was a powerful advocate for affordable housing. After the war, designing housing for the postwar market consumed the balance of his career. He became the creator and spokesman for the Community Development Trust, which became the development arm of his architectural practice. He coined the term "Better Living Through Mutual Ownership." The Holsman Mutual Owner Plan applied to apartment buildings as well as larger communities of both apartments and houses.

According to the website for Holsman's Winchester-Hood Garden Homes in West Ridge, "The original concept was to provide innovative and economical family housing based on the collective ownership model of living. ... Instead of owning real estate directly, such as a condominium, ownership in a housing cooperative consists of owning shares in a [not-for-profit] corporation. The corporation owns and leases out the actual real estate. An occupancy agreement or proprietary lease gives the shareholder exclusive rights to live in a designated unit within the cooperative. This eliminates the need for an outside landlord, such as with rental properties, offering [the occupant] more control over the living environment and security of tenure."

This innovative concept gave buyers, in the years before the availability of the condominium concept, a new and affordable alternative to paying the full purchase price for a traditional cooperative unit in a single cash amount or entering into a long-term rental agreement that provided no option for ownership.

River Forest Garden Apartments

Built between 1939 and 1944, the River Forest Garden Apartments became the new model for Holsman's concepts of cooperative apartment buildings. Working in partnership with his son William, Holsman designed River Forest Garden Apartments, a complex of 125 units in eight four-story Midcentury Modern buildings clustered around a central courtyard on Harlem Avenue between Chicago and Oak avenues. This concept and building type dominated the balance of Holsman's career and his firm grew from 30 employees in 1945 to more than 60 by the early 1950s.



In 1941, Henry Holsman lived at 7202 Oak Ave. (above) in the River Forest Garden Apartments development. Credit: Google Maps



The 7202 Oak Ave. building is at lower left in this aerial view of the River Forest Garden Apartments. Credit: Google maps

Winchester-Hood project

Construction of 164 units of the Winchester-Hood project in West Ridge in Chicago started in 1946. This typified the second wave of Holsman’s work as he began to provide affordable housing utilizing Modest Midcentury design and incorporating his “mutual ownership” concept of cooperative living. The project included 22 buildings in a four-block area bounded by Granville Avenue on the north, Damen Avenue on the west, Norwood Street on the south and Ridge Boulevard on the east. Two subsequent Win-Hood projects added 116 units in 1948 (northeast area) and 92 units in 1949 (south area). Two different mutual ownership trusts operate the four groupings of residential buildings.



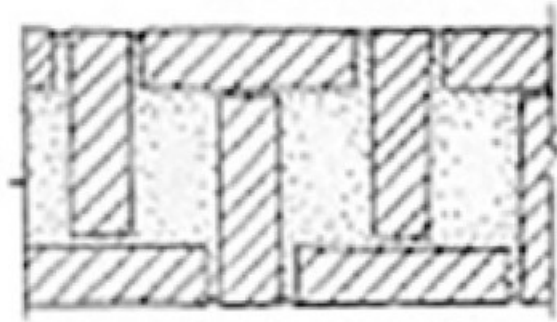
A view of 6155 N. Wolcott Ave. in Granville Terrace. Note the decorative cast concrete ornaments, identical to those used on the Sherman Gardens buildings in Evanston. Credit: Jack Weiss



The entrance canopy at 6149 N. Wolcott Ave. in the Granville Terrace complex is strikingly similar to the larger version that spans the gateway to Sherman Gardens in Evanston. Credit: Jack Weiss

The brickwork at the Winchester-Hood buildings was unique in both appearance and function. Holsman went on to use it in nearly every project that followed. Will Quam, who heads up [Brick of Chicago](#), describes the visual appearance as “rowlocks (the short header end of the brick turned tall) and shiners (the broad flat face of the brick laid sideways).”

But Holsman went beyond the visual. He patented what Quam calls the Rat-trap Bond. “Both interior and exterior of the brick wall look the same. Sandwiched between each side’s shiner is a cavity” filled with concrete. The wall is then reinforced with vertical steel rebar on 24-inch centers and horizontal rebar every third course. The system saved cost and construction time and was load-bearing, avoiding the need for columns and spandrels.



A rowlock brick wall at 6171 N. Wolcott Ave. (left) and a plan view of wall construction. Credit: Jack Weiss (left); David, Blogspot 2008 (right)

Frank Kornacker, Holsman's structural engineer, is credited for developing the innovative concept. In the late '40s, when Holsman was consulting architect with Mies van der Rohe on Promontory Apartments and 860-880 Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, Kornacker served as the structural engineer.

An impressive list of community-centered, mutually owned housing projects followed the Parkway Gardens, Winchester-Hood (Phase 1) and Sherman Gardens developments of 1945-46. Most can be viewed today and are identified by the decorative cast concrete ornaments designed by Holsman's wife Elizabeth Tuttle Holsman or the Midcentury Modern architectural features of corner-wrapping windows, diagonal balconies and free-form entrance canopies.

Lunt-Lake Apartments at 1120-40 W. Lunt Ave. in Chicago, completed in 1949, has 88 units in two nine-story elevator buildings and one four-story walk-up.

Rosemont Apartments at 2134-48 W. Rosemont Ave. in Chicago (1948), northwest of Winchester-Hood, has 36 units in one five-story elevator building and two two-story walk-ups. An interesting variation occurs at Leavitt-Rosemont in that all of the windows are double-hung, not casement as in all other Holsman buildings.



The entrance canopy at 2142 W. Rosemont Ave. is punctured with openings to allow light over the entry door. Credit: Jack Weiss

Winchester-Hood (Phase 2) became the 116-unit Granville Terrace (1948) mentioned above. Winchester-Hood (Phase 3) provided the final 92 units in the West Ridge project in 1949, filling the half block area between 1920 Norwood St. on the south to 1921 Hood Ave. on the north with six buildings surrounding a central landscaped courtyard. All of the buildings in the Phase 3 project are four-story walk-ups.



The courtyard at 6123-25 N. Winchester Ave. in the Winchester-Hood Phase 3 project. Credit: Jack Weiss

In his 30s Henry Holsman lived at 9026 S. Hoyne Ave. on Chicago's Far South Side. Throughout his life he was thoughtful in his decisions about where to live and work. By 1941 *Who's Who in Chicago* listed his residence at 7202 Oak Ave. in River Forest where, by that time, he was living with his wife Elizabeth and their three sons. His office was listed at 140 S. Dearborn St., the landmark Marquette Building in downtown Chicago by Holabird & Roche.

In 1949-50, Holsman moved to Evanston, where he combined two top-floor units in his recently completed Sherman Gardens at 1866 Sherman Ave. At that time, his development firm, the Community Development Trust, and his architectural practice, Holsman, Holsman, Klekamp & Taylor, were located at 39 S. State St. (also 6 E. Monroe St.), the Mentor Building, a well-known Loop high-rise designed by Howard Van Doren Shaw.

In 1955 he moved again, to 849 Ridge Ave., the Ridge Boulevard Apartments in Evanston, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Holsman spent his last years in Genoa City, Wis., where he died on May 15, 1961, at age 95.

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