

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

Part one of two on the work of Henry K. Holsman

by [Jack Weiss, Design Evanston](#) January 12th, 2023

When I researched and wrote the essay about [Sherman Gardens](#) in Evanston, I had no idea of the full extent of architect Henry Holsman’s career. Nor was I aware what part Sherman Gardens played in the context of his career.

In 1950, Holsman’s architect son, John, who assisted in the project, received a Multifamily “Award of Excellence” from the American Institute of Architects for Sherman Garden Apartments.

The following year, at age 85, Henry Holsman won the AIA Chicago Chapter “Honor Award” for his “trademarks of intensive landscaping, economical use of space, large windows, and exterior decorative cement panels” at Sherman Gardens.

A brief mention of Holsman’s similar buildings at Granville and Wolcott avenues in Chicago’s West Ridge by real estate writer Dennis Rodkin piqued my curiosity so I paid a visit in October.

What I discovered was truly amazing. Twenty-two buildings, similar to those in Sherman Gardens, span several blocks between Ridge, Wolcott and Granville avenues as well as Norwood Street. All are clustered in groupings of four to six around lushly landscaped courtyards and all built at about the same time as Sherman Gardens—1946.



The park-like gateway to 1912 W. Hood, one of four buildings surrounding a central courtyard located between Wolcott and Winchester Avenues. Credit: Jack Weiss

Fortunately, I was joined by my partner, Eva, who is equally curious about architecture but also a person who can encourage informative conversations.

We met Jean SmilingCoyote, an owner who was busy with one of the gardens. It turned out she had a collection of Holsman research material and was enthusiastic about sharing it.

Henry Holsman's history

Henry Holsman (1866-1961) earned a Bachelor of Arts at Iowa College (now Grinnell) in 1891. He went on to become superintendent for contractors, Chicago, 1891-1893, then partner in Brainerd & Holsman, architects, 1893-1897.

He later became a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. He was a member of the Chicago Architectural Club (director and treasurer), Illinois Society Architects, Western Society Engineers, Chicago Association of Commerce, Association of Arts and Industries (director) and Municipal Art League.

Early in his architectural career Holsman expressed concern about quality of life issues in housing. In 1932, he wrote a book, published by the Architects Club of Chicago titled, *"Rehabilitating blighted areas: studies of blighted areas, how they evolve and their effect on society."* In 1945, he published two works on the subject of mutual ownership co-operation and the urban home – a concept he promoted throughout his career.

In the early to late 1920s, Holsman specialized in Gothic Revival luxury high rise apartment buildings in Hyde Park and South Shore. Most are still standing, although now they have been converted to condominiums or rentals.

One of the last, Shoreline Apartments (1928), at 2231 E. 67th St. was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2017 and received a \$15 million restoration in 2019.

The 1929 market crash and World War II intervened but Holsman and his firm, Holsman, Holsman, Klekamp & Taylor (HHK&T) went on to design mid-century modern community-centered affordable residential housing projects from Evanston (Sherman Gardens) to Chicago in 1945-46 that included nearly 1,000 units. It's no surprise then that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe chose Holsman, with his wealth of experience, to be his consulting architect for two impressive projects, Promontory Apartments (1946), and 860-880 Lakeshore Drive (1948).

As director of the Association of Arts & Industries, Holsman was very likely involved in helping to bring the New Bauhaus to Chicago.

His deep connection with Bauhaus architectural design concepts is revealed in an interesting sidelight. In 1937 Moholy-Nagy opened the New Bauhaus: American School of Design in the Marshall Field mansion at 1905 South Prairie Ave.

According to Lauren Richman at the Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University, "With renovations led by architect Henry K. Holsman and Moholy, the Second Empire style building transformed into a modernist emblem: travertine marble framed the entrance; Bauhaus alumnus Herbert Bayer's original sans-serif typeface stretched across the doorway; the original rounded glass façade was reshaped by cement block."

It's hard to know where to begin to tell the even larger story of Henry Holsman. For example, Holsman is the only Evanston architect who is recognized as having designed three National Register Historic Places: The Holsman Historic Campus District (1983) at Parsons College in Fairfield, Iowa, Parkway Garden Homes (2011) in Chicago's Greater Grand Crossing, and Shoreline Apartments (2017) in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood.

Architecture of Henry K. Holsman Historic Campus District (National Register of Historic Places, 1983)

The Historic Campus District is located in [Fairfield, Iowa](#) on the campus of Parsons College, now Maharishi University. At the time of its nomination it included six [contributing buildings](#) that were built from 1903 to 1915 designed in the [Collegiate Gothic](#) style by [Henry Holsman](#). It includes [Ewing Hall](#) (1857), which is individually listed on the National Register. Foster Hall and Fairfield Hall (1903), and the Carnegie Library (1907) have elements of the [Beaux-Arts](#) style. Other Campus District buildings included: Barhydt Chapel (1911) designed by Holsman, Parsons Bible School (1912) and Parsons Hall (1915). Sadly, between 2000 and 2005 Maharishi University overruled preservationist objections and demolished the Carnegie Library, Barhydt Chapel and Parsons Hall, destroying the integrity of the entire Historic Campus District.

Parkway Garden Homes (National Register of Historic Places, 2011)

The Parkway Garden Homes district, located in the Greater Grand Crossing community of Chicago, is a large-scale multifamily residential development begun in 1945 and completed in 1955. The district consists of 35 historic buildings: 11 eight-story “elevator” buildings and 24 three-story “walk-up” buildings. The landmark nomination states: “The buildings are minimally decorated with early modernist features, including offset canted window bays, projecting cantilevered balconies at the open stairwells, corner ribbon windows, and streamlined concrete entrance canopies.”



A typical 3-story “walk-up” building at 6426 S. Martin Luther King Drive. Credit: Wikipedia.org

The nomination continues: “The landscaping within the Parkway Garden Homes district is simple and functional. The symmetrical arrangement of buildings on the 15-acre site creates primary and secondary areas of outdoor space within the complex. The primary elevations of buildings generally front inward towards informal courtyards or transitional spaces with open lawns framed by curved intersecting pedestrian pathways that connect to various areas throughout the complex.”

This is a feature that Holsman and his firm’s landscape architect, William Beaudry, employed in nearly every project that followed.



This aerial view captures the scale of the Parkway Garden project. Note a majority of buildings set at angles to capture more sunlight, another feature echoed in nearly all of Holsman's midcentury projects. Credit: Google Maps

Parkway Garden Homes was added to the [National Register of Historic Places](#) in 2011 for its architectural significance and its role in African-American community development. The real estate firm Related Companies, a major affordable housing and mixed-use developer purchased Parkway Gardens that same year.

The company completed a significant renovation of Parkway Gardens in September 2013, providing an affordable place for 2,000 people to live. The renovation received the 2014 Chicago Neighborhood Development Award for Outstanding For-Profit Neighborhood Real Estate Projects.

Shoreline Apartments (National Register of Historic Places, 2017)

Shoreline Apartments is located at 2231 E. 67th Street in [South Shore](#). Built in 1928, the 16-story building was one of the tallest in South Shore on its completion. Marketed as luxury apartments, the building's units had six to seven rooms. The building was operated originally as a residential cooperative before later becoming condominiums. The [Gothic Revival](#) building features a brick exterior with a stone base, arched windows at the base and the penthouse, stone [quoins](#) and patterned brick on the third and fourth floors. The lobby includes decorative arches, ceiling beams, and [wrought iron](#) light fixtures.



Shoreline Apartments typifies Holsman's early work in the 1920s—Gothic Revival, multi-story apartment buildings located in Hyde Park and South Shore. Credit: Rent.com

Zidan Management Group purchased the building in 2016, invested \$15 million and re-introduced the fully restored property in 2019 as Park Heights by the Lake. The updated building includes about 100 rental apartment units averaging about 850 sq.ft.—a big departure from its original format of 50 luxury units.

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