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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SAINT BERNARD HOUSING PROJECT, PHASE I, BUILDING NO. 22

HABS No. LA-1380-W/F

Location: 1412-20 Senate Street, New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana

Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates:
29.99804312063115°, -90.0784184038639°

USGS New Orleans East Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) coordinates:
15.781847.3322163

Date of Erection: 1940
demolished in 2008

Architects: Herbert A. Benson, George H. Christy, and William E. Spink

Owners: Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO), City of New Orleans

Significance: The Great Depression of the 1930s spurred the first peacetime federal government attempts to systematically address the lack of adequate affordable housing for low-income residents. The federal government financed local building efforts through a series of new laws. Among the third wave of these projects planned and built in the ~~late 1930s~~ 1940s, the construction of Saint Bernard Housing Project addressed two major issues of the era: the housing reform movement (i.e. – urban "slum clearance") and the reemployment of large sections of the labor force.

History: Please see ~~historic report~~ field notes for HABS No. LA-1380 for the general history of Saint Bernard Housing Project.

Description: The architects of Building No. 22 of the Saint Bernard Housing Project designed the building to echo the brick townhouses of the Vieux Carré. Yet it was a modern multi-unit apartment designed to allow the lowest income residents in New Orleans a safe and sanitary place to live.

Even after many storms and two major hurricanes (Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and Hurricane Katrina in ~~2008~~ 2005), the brick, concrete and terra cotta "tile" walls had no structural failure. The asbestos tile roof was almost completely intact. Only surfaces, plumbing, and electrical systems needed cleaning, repair or replacement. The original site plan labeled Building No. 22 as type "E", not be confused with HABS No. 1380-E.

The building stood 135 feet long, a little over 27 feet deep, and about 39 feet tall at the ridgeline of the central block. It had three stories with fifteen units. The walls sat on concrete footings with an approximately three foot high knee-wall forming a vented crawlspace. Terra cotta "tile" masonry supported the twelve-inch thick walls with a brick exterior veneer. The floors were six-inch thick concrete slabs. The only wood could be found in the roof: trussed rafters spaced 23½ inches on center.

Both end units' entrances fronted the side elevations. Canopies covered the six-foot deep concrete stoops at the side entrances. The seven other entrances all front on the façade at five stoops. The first and fifth concrete porches extended a little over six feet out from the façade, with front steps. Balconies covered both porches with low slope roofs covering the balconies. Steel double columns supported the balconies. Canopies covered the six-foot deep concrete stoops at the second and fourth stoops. The third porch, also extending six feet from the façade, stretched in front of the center three front doors. A continuous balcony, supported by steel double columns, covered the entire

porch. Plain iron railings wrapped the balcony, covered by a low slope roof. Back stoops were about five feet deep and uncovered. Five chimneys were spaced down the length of the building.

Exterior doors were simple affairs with eight-light over panel front doors with no brick detailing. An important point of comfort: all doors had a secondary wood screen door for summer ventilation (while protecting the people from insects). Four first floor units had windows adjacent to their rear doors.

Designers specified most windows as eight over eight pane wood double-hung windows. Interestingly, eight over eight-pane window are more common to the northern half the United States. (Traditionally, most historic New Orleans houses use six over six double-hung windows.) In contrast with Lafitte, C.J. Peete, and B.W. Cooper Housing Projects, architects used double windows (two windows in one opening) extensively. Historically, second floor windows were situated over first floor window of the same width. The use of double windows gave the elevations a sense of rhythm not found in other housing projects. Unfortunately, all the wood windows had been removed. Contractors created new aluminum casings to fit over the wood casing; aluminum sashes replaced all the wood sashes.

The contractor installed asbestos tile shingles on the gable roof. A wood fascia obscured the eave vents (for air intake). Architects included ridge vents for air outtake. This passive ventilation moved accumulated attic heat outside. Box gutters with downspouts carried rainwater off the roof.

The first floor contained seven one-bedroom apartments. The architects arranged the rooms flanking the staircase that ran straight back from the front door, but wrapping around the rear stairs. Eight two-story apartments started on the second floor. Six were two-bedroom apartments; two were three-bedroom apartments. The front stair railings were not of a residential type: instead of a newel post, railing, and banisters, a sold half wall flanked the stairs. The rear stairs ran between floors in "U" shape, creating extra egress. Staircase was constructed of metal: a square newel post and plain railings.

The architects used traditional residential finishes: floors with wood (later tile), plaster surfacing over the terra cotta walls and concrete ceilings. All walls had a simple, but well crafted wood baseboard. All doors were two-panel doors with a plain surround that matched the baseboards. The chimneys existed to provide ventilation for the heating units.

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