

GRAND CONCOURSE HISTORIC DISTRICT

The “Grand Boulevard and Concourse” was conceived in 1891 by French engineer Louis Reiss as a means of connecting Manhattan’s mobile population with the expansive parks of the Bronx, and reflected the urban planning principles of the City Beautiful movement. The four-mile boulevard, with landscaped areas flanking and dividing the roadbed and elegant bridges spanning underpasses for east-west thoroughfares, was completed in 1909 and became the major north-south artery of the western Bronx.



Several factors contributed to the rapid and intensive development of the western Bronx in the period between the two World Wars, including the relatively low cost of land in the outer boroughs, the opening of subway and elevated rail lines beginning in 1908, and the 1920 passage of a state law allowing a 10-year real estate tax exemption for apartment buildings constructed between 1920 and 1924. These factors paved the way for an influx of middle class citizens into the Bronx as the Grand Concourse and surrounding area became the site of intensive residential development.¹ A majority of these new Bronx residents were Jewish, having left behind the older tenements of Manhattan’s Lower East Side for the spacious, well-lit, and modern elevator apartments being promoted by speculative real estate developers.²

The first phase of the Bronx apartment-building “boom” was characterized by revivalist architectural styles including Gothic, Tudor, Renaissance, and Colonial, but beginning with the Park Plaza Apartments at Jerome Avenue and 164th Street (designed by architects Horace Ginsbern and Marvin Fine and completed in 1931, a designated New York City Landmark), Art Deco and Moderne became the residential styles of choice for the Grand Concourse and surrounding streets. By the mid-1930s, the Grand Concourse was known for its spectacular collection of Art Deco and Moderne-style apartment buildings designed by a group of lesser known yet talented architects, including Ginsbern, Martin Fine, Israel Crausman, Herbert Lilien, and Jacob Felson.

The new apartment buildings on and around the Grand Concourse were significant for their modern and sophisticated appearance, created through the inventive use of materials like polychrome brick, cast stone, metal, glass block, mosaic tiles and terra cotta, as well as through the use of features like rounded or jagged bays, corner windows, and asymmetrical façade compositions. More importantly, however, these apartment buildings represented a new and innovative form of housing—the “garden apartment”—which took shape in the late 1910s and 1920s as real estate developers discovered the profitability of building low-rise, relatively low-density apartment buildings on larger lots in areas of the outer boroughs where land was cheap and the demand for

¹ Robins, Anthony, *Park Plaza Apartments Landmark Designation Report* (Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1981): 2.

² Plunz, Richard. *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 132.

modern, technologically up-to-date middle-class housing was rising. Architects responded to these conditions by designing larger buildings of no more than six stories that sometimes occupied an entire city block and were characterized by groups of apartment units organized around interior and/or exterior courtyards. The large courtyards incorporated into the design of these buildings maximized exposure to light and air within each apartment and also provided the common visual element of landscaped gardens, often featuring lavish elements such as pools, fountains, ponds, and sculpture. Technically referred to as the “perimeter block scheme,” the garden apartment building typology achieved unprecedentedly low lot coverage and endures as among New York City’s most livable housing stock.

By the 1960s, the West Bronx had entered into a period of profound transformation. The rapid deindustrialization of the city, increasing suburbanization, heavy-handed urban renewal policies, disinvestment by area landlords, and the redlining of much of the Bronx by local banks all contributed to the economic downturn of the neighborhood. Many of the apartment houses suffered through years of neglect as a consequence. Yet the buildings within the proposed Grand Concourse Historic District retain much of their distinctive architectural character

The demographic composition of the Grand Concourse neighborhood has also undergone substantial changes since the first apartment buildings began to appear along the boulevard. The area’s original residents, largely of European Jewish extraction, began to leave the neighborhood in the 1950s—often moving to suburbs such as Westchester County or to more modern apartments such as those in the newly-opened Co-op City. The once-homogenous West Bronx soon became a diverse urban community as African-Americans and Latin American immigrants, particularly from Puerto Rico, settled in the area.

The proposed historic district comprises approximately 73 properties in total, stretching along a section of the Concourse between 153rd to 167th Streets. A significant number of the properties are Art Deco and Moderne-style apartment buildings. Other buildings of note include Thomas Gardens, the Concourse Plaza Hotel, the Executive Towers white-brick apartment building, and the Bronx Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The proposed historic district also includes two designated New York City Landmarks: the Renaissance-inspired Andrew Freedman Home for the elderly (architects Joseph H. Freedlander and Harry Allan Jacobs, 1922-24; wings, David Levy, 1928-31) and the Art Deco masterpiece Bronx County Building (Max Hausle and Joseph H. Freedlander, 1931-35).