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Living on the Edge of Landmark Status

Preservationists and developers battle over 12 postwar apartments in Mar Vista. The modest complex is located near million-dollar homes.

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It's easy to miss the 12 one-story ranch-style apartment buildings that line National Boulevard just west of the 405 Freeway.

Nonetheless, the low-slung Westdale Village Courtyard Apartments have become the focus of a pitched battle over historic preservation similar to ones playing out in neighborhoods across Southern California as property values soar and developers look for prime places to build high-end projects.

Preservationists argue that the Mar Vista apartments should be spared from demolition because they represent an important period of Los Angeles history — when thousands of World War II veterans poured into the region to find jobs, start families and put down roots.

Perhaps more important to some, the apartments rent for \$300 to \$1,200 a month, well below what is typical for the Westside, in a pocket where many single-family houses are selling for \$1 million or more.

The preservation effort began after a portion of the complex was razed last year and replaced by a 30-foot-high building with half a dozen condos that sold quickly for more than \$800,000 each.

Mar Vista activists are not alone in the fight to protect both architecture and a way of life.

Residents of the postwar Modernist Lincoln Place apartments in neighboring Venice have been fighting to save that complex. Even though the state has deemed them historic, the landlord is evicting remaining tenants and plans to redevelop the site, primarily with market-rate condos.

Similar fights have played out, with varying results, over apartment complexes in the L.A. communities of Westchester and Sherman Oaks and in Santa Monica, Pasadena and West Hollywood, where the debate over preservation and housing rages even as the city conducts a survey of its buildings to see which might merit protection.

Developers, who see these communities as ripe for denser development, accuse activists of manipulating preservation laws in an effort to maintain low rents, often for senior citizens, and block development.

"They're cute, but they're not monuments," said Anna Marie Brooks, a consultant hired by owners of the Westdale Village apartment buildings.

One Los Angeles planner agreed. "People seem to be abusing the process of monument definition where something clearly doesn't meet the criteria, and the motive, in fact, is something [else], such as for purposes of trying to preserve affordable housing or just the notion of NIMBY," said Lambert Giessinger, a city planning staff member who evaluated the monument application.

But preservationists see the Westdale Village Courtyard Apartments as a symbol of many battles to come as Los Angeles deals with a dwindling stock of older apartment buildings, a housing shortage and skyrocketing land costs.

"It's a symptom of the frustration people have, their sense of powerlessness to maintain the character of neighborhoods," said Jay Platt, a preservation advocate for the Los Angeles Conservancy, the region's leading preservation group. "The reasons they chose to live there [are] evaporating before their eyes."

Westdale Village is seen as a test case over where to draw the line on historic preservation. Although the effort so far has generated no support from city planners, prominent preservationists, including the Historic Resources Group, have come out in favor of protecting this relatively young and little-known property.

"There's no doubt that this is among the first ranch-style buildings to be put up for landmark status," said Alan Hess, a noted authority on postwar architecture and author of a number of books on the subject, who supports the preservation campaign. "It's very early in the process of recognizing a style and documenting its significance, showing how it fits into the story of Los Angeles and its growth."

Advocates argue that converting affordable apartments into upscale condos dramatically alters a community's appearance. It also tends to eliminate housing opportunities for the low- and middle-income residents who help give a neighborhood its character.

Ken Marsh, a semi-retired artist, said the loss of his \$1,150-a-month two-bedroom Westdale Village apartment would force a difficult choice. "Other than finding another under-the-radar place like this," Marsh said, "it would be good riddance to Los Angeles."

In some ways, the debate is reminiscent of the "teardown" controversies that have erupted in many single-family neighborhoods, as modest homes have been bulldozed and replaced with hulking structures that many residents consider out of character. But apartment teardowns have the added complexity of displacing renters.

Postwar properties like Westdale Village are becoming attractive to developers because of their locations and existing multifamily zoning.

The relatively low square footage — and the structures' advancing age — allow developers to purchase the properties at a lower price, demolish them and replace them with denser development.

"It has only now happened that land is so valuable that developers could tear down two-story buildings and replace them with four-story buildings," said John Chase, urban designer for West Hollywood.

Mar Vista, south of Westwood and east of Venice, is known for its collections of single-family houses built by some of America's leading Modernist architects in the years after World War II. (The Gregory Ain Mar Vista Tract was the first postwar housing tract, and the first group of Modernist buildings, to become a historic preservation overlay zone in Los Angeles.) But like other neighborhoods in the Westside and beyond, the community has seen increasingly dense development in recent years.

The one-story Westdale Village Courtyard Apartments have served as an airy buffer between busy National Boulevard and the enclave of pricey single-family houses beyond.

According to Dorothy Nichols, a homeowner who is leading the preservation charge, the apartment buildings were part of the original architectural plan for the area. The subdivision was developed in the late 1940s by Paul W. Trousdale, for whom Trousdale Estates in Beverly Hills is named.

Trousdale sold the National Boulevard lots to builder Phil Yousem, who erected apartments that resembled the houses in Trousdale's development, which is bordered by National, Palms, Inglewood and Sawtelle boulevards. At one time, 19 of the apartment buildings lined National, but over the years seven have been razed and replaced with multistory apartment or condo buildings.

Each of the remaining buildings contains four small apartment units, and each pair of buildings, shaped like reversed Ls, features an expansive lawn, with garden beds outside the units' front doors. Some of the lots are separated from sidewalks by fences, behind which rose bushes bob. Lining the parkways in front of the four-plexes are stately Italian stone pines.

"They represent the most intact 1949 structures in Westdale Village, and their social history should be preserved," said a statement prepared by Nichols and others.

So far, the preservationists' efforts have failed. The Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission recently voted 3 to 2 against declaring the Westdale Village apartment complex a historic-cultural monument.

Councilman Bill Rosendahl, who represents Mar Vista, is attempting to push the monument designation through the City Council. The council is expected to decide the matter next week after hearing a committee's recommendation.

The developers and their historic consultants counter that the apartment buildings don't warrant preservation and that opponents are merely anti-development.

Bob Green, who owns three of the buildings, said: "It would be good public policy to have the higher density on these lots that front a secondary highway and are near a freeway."

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