



# DC PRESERVATION LEAGUE

## Most Endangered Places Nomination Form

Since 1996, the DC Preservation League has announced a list of *Most Endangered Places* to draw attention to Washington DC's historically, culturally or architecturally significant places that are in danger of destruction, significant alteration, or demolition through neglect or abandonment. To nominate a building or place to this year's Most Endangered list, please provide the information below to the extent possible.

**Site Name:** Capitol Park Towers

**Location or Address:** 301 G Street SW, Washington, DC 20024

**Year Built:** 1962

**Owner Name and Address:** CAPITOL PARK APARTMENTS LIMITED PARTNERSHIP  
301 G Street SW, Washington, DC 20024

**Specify occupant if different from owner:** Rental property

**Is the property occupied or vacant?** Occupied

**Historic Designation:**       National Historic Landmark                       National Register  
    DC Inventory of Historic Sites                       Not Designated or Don't know

**Submitter's name, address and telephone number:**  
Cecille Chen  
1229 4th Street SW, Washington DC 20024. 202.489.8137

### Please provide the following information:

1. The historic, cultural or architectural significance of the site.
2. A description of the threat facing the site and the immediacy of that threat.
3. Suggestions on what actions are needed to alleviate the threat.
4. A description of how listing on DCPL's Most Endangered Places list would help the site.

**Submit this form along with supporting documentation including photographs (mandatory), drawings, press clippings, and other research materials, by Monday, September 3, 2012 to:**

**DC Preservation League  
401 F Street, NW, Room 324  
Washington DC, 20001**

1. The historic, cultural or architectural significance of the site.

Capitol Park Towers was originally part of Capitol Park, a 3.1 acre site known as Subpart B of the Southwest Redevelopment Plan of 1952. It was the first and largest residential complex in the Southwest area and fashioned as a model planning project whose innovative combination of high-rise and low-rise buildings, arranged around a network of landscaped courts and walkways, represented a new prototype for residential Washington. Architect Chloethiel Woodard Smith, then a founding partner with Nicholas Satterlee in the architectural firm Satterlee and Smith Architects, helped plan Capitol Park as a community with a variety of housing types consisting of 1339 rental units contained in five nine-story apartment buildings and 399 townhouses. Although built in stages, the complex was designed as a unified whole and best known for its parklike atmosphere. With landscape design by Dan Kiley, mosaics by Leo Lionni and sculptures by Costantino Nivoli, Capitol Park exemplifies the integration of modern architecture, artwork, and landscape in a city with few notable examples of the style

In 1973, Capitol Park was subdivided into five separate developments. Capitol Park Apartments (now known as Potomac Place), the first high-rise building to be completed, was designated as a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites in 2003.



JAMES H. SCHEUER  
CONSTRUCTION CORPORATION

THE CAPITOL PARK  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

SATTERLEE & SMITH  
ARCHITECTS



Capitol Park Towers, one of the five high-rise apartment buildings in Capitol Park, was completed in August 1962. It presently contains 289 rental units, and includes a swimming pool and a covered parking structure on the north side of the apartment building. The building is nine stories in height, with a glassed in non-residential lobby floor located below the rest of the building. This ground floor glass lobby, with habitable floors raised above on pilotis, is reminiscent of Modernist designs by Le Corbusier, among others.



Each apartment unit has its own balcony, which is decoratively detailed with tile screens and entered via sliding glass window-doors. The façade of the building also shows lattice patterns in the brickwork and emphasizes brick and terra cotta materials, playing with sun and shadow and lending a dramatic flair to the overall design.



The tile screen design is replicated in the fence that surrounds the swimming pool.



Sculptural elements beside the swimming pool house a clock and a telephone box.



Smith used landscape features to enhance smaller spaces, framing the transitional space on the north side of the building with architectural elements (the animal sculptures seen below were a later addition). The parking structure on the left features an arched concrete roof raised on posts, similar to the outdoor pavilion that existed on the grounds of Potomac Place before the pavilion, wading pool and surrounding landscape was demolished in 2003.



Parking structure and landscaped area on the north side of Capitol Park Towers.



Pavilion and wading pool at Potomac Place, demolished in 2003.

The architectural significance of Capitol Park Towers lies in its reiteration of the modernistic concepts of the Swiss architect LeCorbusier. As discussed in *Southwest Survey*, a project sponsored by the Historic Preservation Office with funds from the National Park Service:

"The highrise apartment on stilts was an architectural element that Le Corbusier also promoted. The use of the terracotta panels with circular openings reminds us of the use of brise soleil also discussed by Le Corbusier. In fact LeCorbusier's ideas about urban redevelopment were adopted in the plans for Southwest. His . . . Plan Voisin for Paris required the use of highrises adjacent to lowrise residential units with high speed circulations and parks. The combination of low rise buildings adjacent to highrise is a feature clearly seen in the plans presented by the architects who promoted modernism and the international style in the new Southwest."

Capitol Park Towers and the other Capitol Park apartment buildings are further documented in *Buildings of the District of Columbia*:

"The apartment houses are notable for their planning and for their detailing—balconies protected with decorative tile screens laid out in flat planes, in curved configurations, and in lattice and basketweave patterns. Large glassed-in spaces on the first floors provide light for lobbies. The lowest floor that contains tenants is higher than the top of nearby town houses, thereby addressing concerns about the juxtaposition of high-rise and town house dwellings."

As an integral part of the Capitol Park complex, Capitol Park Towers has played a prominent role in the nationally significant Southwest Urban Renewal Plan. Capitol Park was built on the site of Dixon's Court, the most notorious of the former alley dwelling communities in the old Southwest. It received widespread attention as a model of progressive urban renewal in the local and national press, among design and planning professionals, and even from President Eisenhower. The urban renewal project is also significant for its association with the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Berman v. Parker*, which broadened the interpretation of the "public welfare" and strengthened governmental authority to exercise regulatory power for aesthetic purposes. Moreover, it was one the first racially integrated housing complexes in Southwest - a first for Washington, D.C., since racial integration became a requirement in all of the residential developments of the new Southwest.

The 49-year old building is a milestone in the career of Chloethiel Woodard Smith, a key figure in the development and implementation of the Southwest Urban Renewal master plan. Her success with Capitol Park led to further commissions in Washington, and helped make her one of few female architects to achieve renown during the mid-20th century.

2. A description of the threat facing the site and the immediacy of that threat.

Capitol Park Towers is currently a rental property owned by Capitol Park Apartments Limited Partnership. In March 2012, the building was put under contract to be purchased by Urban Investment Partners. The New Capitol Park Towers Tenants Association organized to exercise their right of first refusal to purchase the property under DC's Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA). The tenants association president has informed us that certain developers have expressed a strong interest in demolishing the parking structure and constructing another residential building in its place.

The tenants association president and many other tenants value the building's architecture and historical significance, as well as the open space and the privacy afforded by the park-like landscape of Capitol Park Towers. The tenants association partnered with a residential developer to purchase the building, and specifically chose that developer because he expressed an interest in preserving the building exterior and grounds. Lately, the parties suffered a setback in negotiations, and the developer pulled out. The tenants association was forced to partner with a second developer who has not expressed an interest in preservation. Until the TOPA process is complete, the status of that partnership, and the fate of the property, is uncertain.

What is certain is that if the property is not protected, and sold in the next few months, then the parking pavilion and the open space to the north of the building may likely be demolished and replaced with an infill building. Capitol Park Tower's parking pavilion and open spaces are an integral part of the planned landscape of SW, there is a history of detrimental infill to monetize them, and no current buyer has committed to preserve them, along with other significant features of the site.

One only has to look outside a window at Potomac Place and into another person's home in the apartment building constructed over the site of the former pool and pavilion to realize the importance of preserving the architecture and landscape of Capitol Park Towers. The D.C. Preservation League should not allow history be repeated, but instead should include Capitol Park Towers in its list of Most Endangered Places, in order that the property's plight may be publicized, and its historical, architectural and cultural significance be recognized.

### 3. Suggestions on what actions are needed to alleviate the threat.

The Capitol Park Tower tenants association is seeking a partnership with a preservation-minded developer; any publicity regarding the endangered status of the building will be helpful in this regard.

A landmark nomination for Capitol Park Towers needs to be filed in order to prevent it from experiencing a fate similar to that of Potomac Place. A group of historic preservation advocates in Southwest DC are preparing this landmark nomination. Research needs to be done to confirm whether the landscape was designed by Dan Kiley. As well, the creators of the mosaics and sculptures on the property need to be identified; they may very well be the works of the graphic artist Leo Lionni and the sculptor Costantino Nivoli, who contributed artworks to other parts of Capitol Park.

### 4. A description of how listing on DCPL's Most Endangered Places list would help the site.

The CPT tenants association president has indicated that the residents would support a partnership with developer who is interested in preserving their building exterior and the surrounding landscape. The publicity afforded by inclusion in DCPL's list of Most Endangered Places will shine a light on the historical and architectural value of Capitol Park Towers, and may attract investment by preservation-minded developers who understand the value of a historic property.

As well, a Most Endangered Places listing would draw attention to the Capitol Park complex, which already has one building on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and which will soon reach the 50-year mark, making the entire complex a good candidate for listing on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places. With the Southwest Waterfront and Southwest Ecodistrict projects looming on the horizon, the Southwest urban renewal area will be undergoing a magnitude of change that has not been seen in the last 50 years. The impending development makes it necessary to reevaluate Southwest's architectural legacy. Recently, critics in the press have been portraying Southwest's architecture and urban planning in a negative light. In order to have a balanced and nuanced public debate, it is incumbent upon historic preservationists to educate others about the aesthetic and social values that informed the construction of the Southwest modernist community—values that still resonate strongly today and that are highly prized by the residents of Capitol Park Towers.