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HISTORIC TAX CREDIT TOOL BOX

Brutalism: A New Frontier for Historic Tax Credits

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Brutalism has long been viewed negatively in the architectural community as “monolithic” or “imposing,” but has come back into vogue as changing tastes redefine design. At the same time, many of these buildings, built in the late 1960s through the 1970s, are reaching the 50-year threshold for National Register historic designations; thus, are potentially eligible for historic tax credits (HTCs). Due to their design and reputation, these buildings present unique challenges in HTC rehabilitation projects.

We will explore the unique challenges of Brutalist buildings through two case studies.

Origins of Brutalism

The Brutalist architectural style has its origins in the work of master architect Le Corbusier’s brand of Modernism in the 1950s through 1970s. The term “brutalist” stems from the widespread use of the material *béton brut*, or raw striated concrete. The style is further defined by bold geometric forms, large plazas and lawns, interior atriums and large open public spaces, which are often isolated from the surrounding urban fabric. While the style was

popular in France and the United Kingdom as early as the 1950s, it did not gain momentum in the United States until the late 1960s to mid-1970s, when it was popularized by renowned architect Louis Kahn. The socially progressive style aspired to address social ills through design.

In the 1960s, many of the buildings that performed government and university functions were redefined with Brutalist designs. American universities rapidly expanded in the late 1960s, utilizing Brutalist architect to redefine campuses. Paul Rudolph’s design for the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth is one such example. Government agencies also employed Brutalist architecture in new buildings, including the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Headquarters (1965-75) in Washington, D.C, and Boston City Hall (1968) by Kallman, McKinney and Knowles.

While contemporary architecture critics praised the style as revolutionary, urban planners, preservationists and architects alike have lamented that Brutalism’s form-follows-function anathema resulted in monolithic, imposing and isolating designs. The style’s detractors cited the style as a poor

continued on page 2

continued from page 1

example of urban planning which became associated with poverty, decay and crime. But, in recent years, after decades of demolitions and decay, these buildings are seeing a revival in popularity stemming from a newfound appreciation for bold forms and truth in materials. It is fair to assume that the real estate market will catch up with these changing tastes, and that more rehabilitation projects on Brutalist buildings will occur in the coming years.

Despite the style’s redemption, reuse of these buildings includes design challenges. The bold geometric forms, raw concrete surfaces, public spaces and plazas which define the style are difficult (but not impossible) to adapt to modern uses. The large interior public spaces, imposing concrete surfaces, elevated plazas and isolated relationship to the surrounding urban fabric can pose issues for reuse. Factors including current standards for energy efficiency, circulation, fenestration and finishes conflict with Brutalism’s character-defining features. In applying the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards to projects, the National Park

Service (NPS) assesses the impact of proposed work on a building’s character-defining features. According to Gary Sachau, historic tax credit reviewer at the NPS,

“In terms of rehabilitation approaches, the philosophical framework established by the Standards is relevant to all historic buildings, including Brutalist architecture. In fact, the Standards are intentionally broad to apply to all property types of all ages. Simply put, the Standards advocate for preservation of historic fabric and historic character. As with any building to which the Standards are applied, preservation of historic fabric and historic character hinges on the identification of character-defining features.”

Many Brutalist buildings were purpose-built for specific functions and are difficult to adapt to modern needs without significant alterations which could negatively impact historic integrity. In addition, many of the Brutalist buildings built in the 1960s and 1970s remain under government or nonprofit university ownership.

continued on page 3

Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting

The Holsten Real Estate Development Corporation kept renovation of the Raymond Hilliard Center in Chicago on budget and in line with the Secretary of Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation by retaining the former public housing complex’s beehive-style windows on the first four floors of the towers, while installing new energy-efficient windows for the upper floors.





continued from page 2

Consequently, many would not be eligible for HTCs unless a change of ownership to a private entity occurs.

Due in part to these challenges, as well as the 50-year threshold for listing in the National Register, HTC projects on Brutalist buildings have been minimal. However, the following case studies will demonstrate that there are opportunities for HTCs in the rehabilitation of Brutalist buildings. It is important to note that both case study projects were designed as housing and were rehabilitated for use as housing with minimal floor plan changes. Former government buildings and university buildings could present further challenges concerning the rehabilitation of the interior.

Case Study 1: The Hilliard Homes, Chicago

The Raymond Hilliard Center in Chicago, designed by Bertrand Goldberg, is a high-rise multibuilding apartment complex built by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) from 1963-66. Developed as low-income public housing, the complex was on an open lawn and included a playground and open-air amphitheater. The towers' design maximized the space allowed by the CHA standards while creating a sense of community through shared public spaces. The complex was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1997, for its exceptional design/construction; while just shy of the 50-year threshold.

By 2001, the buildings had suffered from years of neglect and were in a state of disrepair. Rather than demolish the complex, like the neighboring Ickes Homes, the Housing Authority granted Chicago-based developer Holsten Real Estate Development Corporation a long-term lease on the land and sold Holsten the buildings. In 2001-2006, Holsten rehabilitated the complex into a mixed-income community with 45 percent of the units preserved for CHA residents and the rest re-rented as affordable units. The development's financing came from a variety of sources. The CHA contributed \$46 million in capital improvement funds, tax credits raised

\$37 million and tax-increment financing (TIF) raised \$1 million. Most importantly, Hilliard's historic status qualified the rehabilitation for \$10 million in federal HTCs.

Among the challenges faced throughout the redevelopment process involved the windows, a common challenge for HTC projects. The complex features 2,300 "beehive"-style windows, composed of two rectangular aluminum horizontal slider sash with flanking radial fixed panes. Each of the flanking panes is angled away from the central unit by 22.5 degrees. While the Holsten Company recognized the importance of the windows, it concluded that the window units were not all salvageable. The single-paned windows were not energy-efficient and lacked drip edges. In addition, many lacked the original glazing. In order to keep the project within budget while meeting the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, a solution was reached, where floors 1-4 of the towers would retain the original windows, while new windows would be installed at the upper floors.

Case Study 2: Riverside Plaza, Minneapolis

Riverside Plaza (also known as Cedar Square-West) in Minneapolis was designed by Ralph Rapson in 1973 as a mixed-income housing development. The architecture firm of Gingold-Pink Architecture Inc. and landscape architects Sasaki Walker, aided Ralph Rapson in his design, as well, as did landscape architect Lawrence Halprin. The development features six buildings which contain 1,303 residential units, sited on an open lawn clustered around a fountain. In addition it was one of two projects originally funded by HUD under the "New Town in Town" program.

By the 1990s, the site had suffered from years of neglect, leading to the towers' reputation as a haven for crime. In 2011, Sherman Associates undertook a \$65 million rehabilitation of the distressed complex, using federal and state HTCs, which was completed in 2012. Listing

continued on page 4

continued from page 3

the complex in the National Register of Historic Places was one of the challenges Sherman Associates faced during the redevelopment process. Riverside Plaza was listed in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C for Architecture and Community Planning and Development, in 2010, before the 50-year threshold. The case for significance rested on the complex representing one of two HUD “New Town in Town” developments and its ability to meet Criterion G (properties that have achieved significance in the past 50 years). The rehabilitation focused on upgrades to the mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems which sought to increase energy efficiency. For its exemplary rehabilitation, Riverside Plaza earned the 2013 National Trust/HUD Secretary’s Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation.

Conclusion

As Brutalist buildings continue to age and public opinion becomes more positive, more opportunities for HTC projects will arise. Many existing Brutalist buildings are not on the National Register of Historic Places, partially due to the 50-year threshold, so future projects will have to contend with the listing process. Furthermore, the design principles of Brutalism may pose a challenge for adapting these buildings for a new use. Such developments will need to embrace the design aesthetic to be successful and achieve HTC approvals. In both case studies, the developers were able to overcome both the design and historic designation challenges presented by these distinctive buildings and perform successful HTC projects. ❖

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