

# South Side Community Art Center

3831 South Michigan Avenue

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SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS  
SEPTEMBER 8, 1993



City of Chicago  
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development  
Valerie B. Jarrett, Commissioner

**SOUTH SIDE  
COMMUNITY ART CENTER**  
(George A. Seaverns, Jr. Residence)  
**3831 S. Michigan Ave.**  
**Chicago, Illinois**

**Architect: L. Gustav Hallberg**  
**Dates: 1892-93 and 1940**  
**Remodeling: Hin Bredendieck  
and Nathan Lerner**

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value.

Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

This report, which summarizes the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark, should be regarded solely as a preliminary document. It is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the Commission's recommendation to the City Council should be regarded as final.

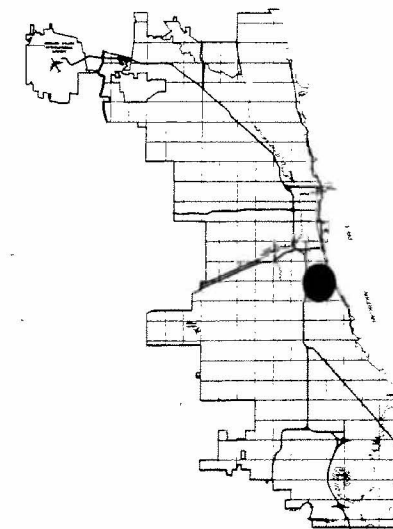
The Commission makes its recommendation to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

Cover art: A painting, "Sunday in the Park" by Archibald Motley, Jr.; an exterior view of 3831 S. Michigan Ave.; and the personnel of the South Side Art Center, c. 1940-41. Those pictured include: Peter Pollack, the first director (top row left); Joseph Kersey, sculptor and teacher (top, second from left); Pauline Kigh Reed, the second director (top, middle); Robert Davis, poet and actor (top, middle); and Margaret Goss Burroughs, artist and board member (bottom row, middle).

When first lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the house at 3831 S. Michigan Ave. in May of 1941, it was not to have tea in the home of one of the affluent that once resided on the street. By that time, the effects of the Depression had brought about the deterioration of much of the housing on Chicago's near South Side. Instead, the building Mrs. Roosevelt was visiting now housed the galleries and studios for a community art center that was being dedicated. The rehabilitation of the house by the South Side Community Art Center not only helped help revive this declining structure but marked an important milestone in the African-American arts community.

For more than half a century, the Art Center has been a focal point of artistic and cultural activity that has had an impact locally and nationally through the work of its teachers and students. The Art Center building has, since its establishment, extended the opportunities of cultural education, exhibitions, and presentations to an audience previously isolated from the arts. In housing this mission it has been associated with many noteworthy activities and careers in the cultural life of its community and the city of Chicago.

Its remodeled interior is also a significant aspect of the Center's history. The conversion of the house was executed from plans by two of the leading figures associated with the New Bauhaus, a school of design founded in Chicago in 1937. This remodeling is a rare surviving example of the architectural principles of this internationally recognized movement.



Locator Map

### Early Ownership (1892-1940)

The South Side Art Center is housed in the residence built for George A. Seaverns, Jr. (1864-?). Seaverns joined his father in the grain elevator business in 1885, and became a partner in 1890 of what later was known as the Alton Grain Company and the Alton Elevator Company. He later established his own real estate development company, became an officer of the Armour Grain Company, and eventually founded his own firm, the Seaverns Elevator Company, which he operated until the 1920s.

In 1892, two years after being named a partner in his father's business, Seaverns commissioned architect L. Gustav Hallberg to design his new house at 3831 S. Michigan Ave.

This section of Michigan Avenue--from the Loop to Garfield Boulevard--was one of the toniest addresses in the city between 1880 and 1910. The development of this and neighboring streets was dominated by large-



South Michigan Avenue was lined with stately homes, as seen in this 1887 view of the 3300-block.

scale, high-style homes for the affluent. Among those living within two blocks of Seaverns' property were J. Ogden Armour (3724 S. Michigan; demolished), president of the Armour Meat Packing Company; Edwin G. Foreman (3750 S. Michigan; demolished), president of the Foreman Brothers Bank and a prominent supporter of Jewish charities; John Griffiths (3806 S. Michigan; standing), owner of a large contracting firm that built such buildings as the Civic Opera House and the Merchandise Mart; Robert L. Vierling (3760 S. Indiana; standing), president of Vierling, McDowell & Company, manufacturers of structural and ornamental steel for architectural uses; and Louis Diesel (3809 S. Wabash; demolished), the president of the Union Stock Yards Can Company.

Another prominent member of the immediate community was Seaverns' next-door neighbor, Martin Barnaby Madden (3829 S. Michigan; demolished). Active in Republican Party politics, Madden served on the Chicago City Council from 1889 through 1897



The exterior of the South Side Community Art Center and its coachhouse (right, in this 1986 photo) are virtually intact.

and, from 1905 to 1927, in the U.S. House of Representatives from the 1st District.

A variety of sources refer to the house at 3831 S. Michigan Ave. as the former home of Charles A. Comiskey (1859-1931), co-founder of the American League of Baseball Clubs and owner of the Chicago White Sox. City directories of the period place the Comiskey family in a number of residences in the neighborhood from the time they arrived in Chicago in 1900, but never at this address. (From 1900 to 1903 the Charles A. Comiskey family resided on E. 44th St.; from 1904 to 1909, they lived at 3952 S. Michigan Ave.; from 1910 to 1911 at 4332 S. Michigan Ave.; from 1912 to 1914 at 4358 S. Michigan Ave.; from 1915 to 1918 at 3816 S. Michigan Ave.; and from 1919 to 1928 at 5131 S. Michigan Ave.) County records indicate that neither Charles Comiskey nor his son Louis ever owned the property at 3831 S. Michigan Ave.

Seaverns' house was completed in late 1892, and he lived there until 1904. He sold the property in 1906 to Anna R. and Owen H. Fay, the president of the Fay Livery Company, a printers' delivery service. The Fays lived in the house through at least 1923, and rented it until about 1932 when it was sold to a relative, Victor Rietz, who also used it as rental property.

During the 1910s, the area's prestige for wealthy white families began to decline with the encroachment of light industry and the movement of African-Americans into the area. Chicago's African-American population grew dramatically as many from the south migrated to northern industrial cities to fill the jobs produced by the booming World War I economy.

Because the prosperity of the African-American community was short-lived due to the Great Depression, many of the South Side mansions were subdivided into rooming houses. Rietz probably subdivided the house into about eight apartments during the 1930s.

The building was deeded by Victor Rietz to the Pennsylvania Mutual Life Insurance Company in 1934. It was from this company that the South Side Community Art Center bought the home in 1940, through a lease-to-own agreement; it was not until 1948 that the title to the property was actually deeded to the Center.

## Origins of the South Side Art Center (1935-39)

The founding of the South Side Art Center in 1939 was the result of two important circumstances: the establishment of local arts organizations beginning in the 1920s and the formation of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Arts Project in 1937.

Many of the early members of the Center had previously been associated with two prominent local clubs, the South Side Art Association and the Arts & Crafts Guild. The South Side Art Association sponsored events and annual exhibitions of its members beginning in 1922; an early handbill listed Lorado Taft, sculptor, educator, and arguably Chicago's most famous artist of the era as its honorary president. Its goals reflected the sentiments of those who, like Taft, saw the arts as essential to the moral betterment of society.

The South Side Art Association had no facilities; its exhibitions and lectures were held in hotels and at the Ida Noyes Hall of the University of Chicago. Defining itself as a "club," this group concentrated its efforts on the presentation of occasional public lectures and exhibitions that were open to all, and encouraged the interaction of artists of African-American and European descent. Among the artists represented in the exhibitions sponsored by the South Side Arts Association were Alice L. Bidwell, Ethel Couch Brown, Charles A. Corwin, Charles H. Mullins, Josephine L. Reichmann, Increase Robinson, and Florence White Williams.

The Arts & Crafts Guild was an informal group of African-American artists organized in about 1935 by the painter George Neal (1904-1937), a student at the Art Institute, and William McGill (dates unknown), a signpainter by trade and a painter on canvas by avocation. In spite of his death at 33, Neal had a profound impact on many of the artists who became the founders and important early members of the South Side Community Art Center including Bernard Goss, Margaret Goss Burroughs, Eldzier Cortor, and Joseph Kersey.

Their association, which was primarily a means of learning and sharing information about artistic technique, provided the inspiration that was in large part realized by the founding of the Center in 1939. Unlike the South Side Art Association, the Arts & Crafts Guild had classes that met regularly, but had neither a regular space for exhibitions nor a regular exhibition schedule.

**The South Side Art Center is the only continuous survivor of the more than 100 centers established by the WPA.**

Making use of spaces in local homes and in Neal's studio at Michigan Avenue and 33rd Street, the Guild's programs were the only opportunity for many promising young artists in the community to attend organized art classes or to have the opportunity to present their work to the public.

Although both the Art Association and the Guild were active organizations with ambitious intentions and strong connections to their community, neither had the facilities or significant sources of funds to establish a permanent art center. Consequently, Chicago's South Side presented a perfect opportunity for the Community Art Center Program of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project.

### The WPA's Federal Art Project (1937-43)

In its effort to stimulate the Depression-era economy, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) initiated the construction of buildings for a gamut of governmental functions, including post offices, customs houses, schools, and libraries. As one of the agencies formed under the WPA, the Federal Art Project connected practicing artists with these governmental development projects through organizations in each state.

By placing the decorative schemes of new federally financed buildings in the hands of the Project, the arts were brought to a more diverse audience than ever before while providing experience and employment for a large number of artists. These individuals worked in media ranging from the fine arts of oil painting, mural painting, printmaking and sculpture to traditional folk crafts such as quilting, woodworking, ceramics, and hand-wrought decorative metalwork.

One aspect of the Project was its expansion beyond production to include exhibitions, lectures, and instruction. The Community Art Center program was founded to coordinate and focus these functions, extending the opportunity for local artists to teach their respective disciplines, and to make cultural education available to a socially and economically expansive audience. The concept underlying this program was outlined in the *WPA Technical Series* publication of October 8, 1937:

The purpose of the Community Art Center is to correct the unequal distribution of cultural advan-

tage through the organization of community art centers in regions and localities where no such agencies previously existed. In establishing these centers it is the objective of the Federal Arts Program not only to provide the public with opportunities to participate in the experience of art, but also to provide useful work for unemployed artists and art teachers.

The expressed intent of the art center program closely reflected the objectives of the existing South Side Art Association and embraced the inherent initiatives behind the establishment of the Arts & Crafts Guild: to develop a larger and better informed audience for the arts and artists of the community, and to provide artistic instruction to people who would not have had that opportunity otherwise.

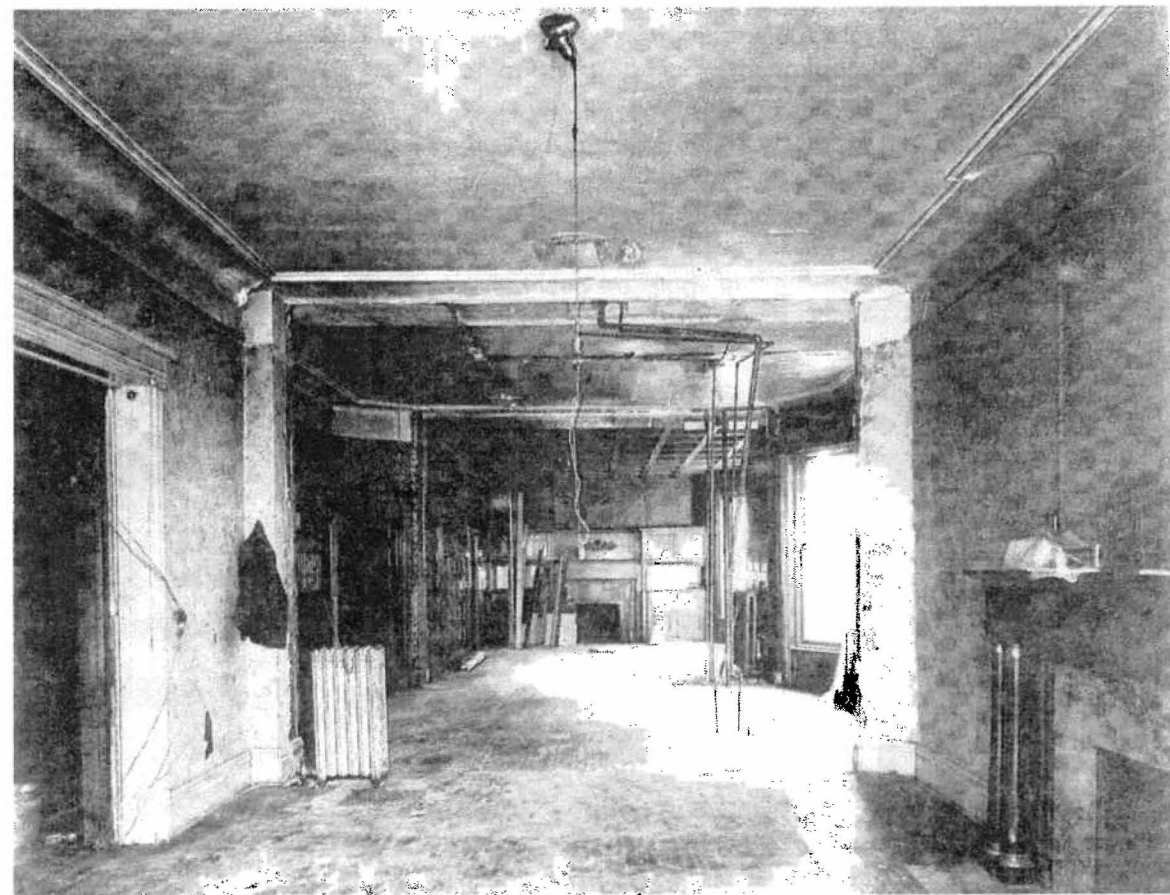
While the Federal Art Project provided the institutional framework and the WPA provided the financing for the instructors and directors of the community art centers, the Community Art Center Program was designed so that the local community would be responsible for securing the materials, the facilities, and the



A board of directors meeting, c. 1941. From left: Annabel Prescott; Katherine Dickerson, wife of Ald. Earl Dickerson; Onieda Anderson; Peter Pollock; unidentified; and Pauline Kigh Reed.

funding for the continuing operations of each art center. The guidelines for the establishment of the art centers specifically emphasized that educational programs for children were to be given special attention and importance.

Two community art centers were established in Illinois under the auspices of the Federal Art Project--one in East St. Louis and another on Chicago's South Side. Peter Pollack, a photographer and the owner of a North Michigan Avenue art gallery that had been the first commercial gallery in the city to exhibit the work of local African-American artists, was the staff member of the Illinois office of the Federal Arts Project who was responsible for the organization of the South Side Community Art Center, and became its first director.



The first floor of the South Side Community Art Center, looking east, before conversion from residential to institutional use. Note the woodwork and fireplace of the original 1892 design.

### The Establishment of the South Side Art Center (1940)

Efforts by private citizens to create a new permanent arts organization on the South Side predated the formal establishment of the South Side Community Art Center by the WPA. As early as 1938, fundraising efforts were underway for local arts activities, specifically including the annual "Artists and Models Ball."

This gala event, which was held annually from 1938 until about 1960, became one of the most important social occasions on the calendar of Chicago's South Side. Newspapers serving the African-American communities of Pittsburgh, Detroit, Louisville, Memphis, Atlanta, and New Orleans all gave extensive coverage

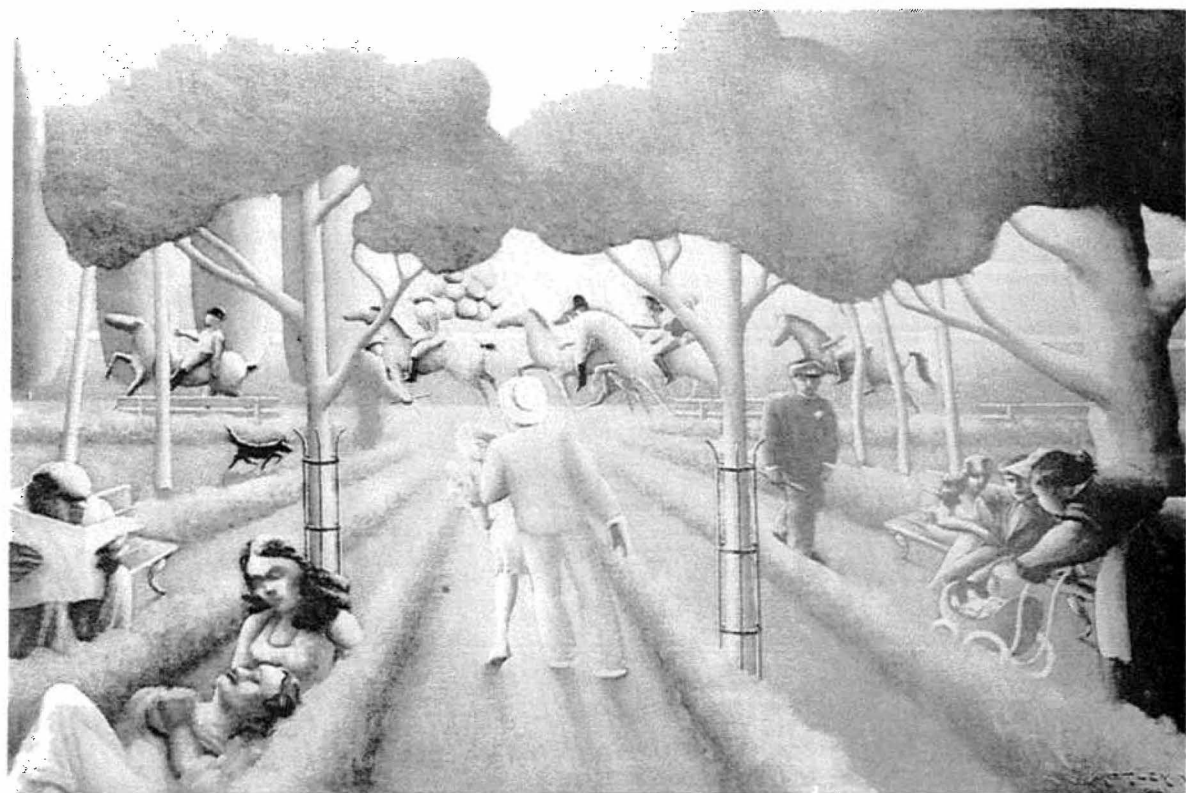


The Center's first floor gallery space following renovation in 1940, looking west. (This remodeling largely survives today.) The exhibition on display was the Center's inaugural installation.

to the Artists and Models Ball and, by the middle of the 1940s, prominent members of those communities would travel to Chicago to attend.

The Ball was held in various prominent local hotels, featuring cabaret-style performances by teachers and students of the Center. The proceeds provided the largest source of income for the Center during its early years, contributing significantly toward the purchase of the building. Memberships and fundraising drives also helped pay for operations of the Center.

Initially, the South Side Community Art Center had met in local schools and at the headquarters of the Chicago Urban League. However, it soon generated enough donations and memberships to allow it to purchase the house at 3831 S. Michigan Ave.



"Sunday in the Park," which was painted by Archibald Motley, Jr., was included in the Center's dedication exhibition in 1941 and was one of the first in the Center's permanent collection.

Work to convert the house from apartments into gallery and work spaces was begun during the summer of 1940, under the auspices of the Federal Art Project. The spaces on the first floor were converted into galleries, with lecture rooms, offices, and studios on the upper floors and a ceramics studio, kiln, and photographic darkroom in the basement. By late fall, the conversion of the gallery space was completed.

The inaugural exhibition opened on December 15, 1940, under the title "South Side Community Art Center presents: Opening Exhibition of Paintings By Negro Artists of the Illinois Art Project, Works Progress Administration." The exhibition was a survey of prominent local African-American painters including Henry Avery (1902); Charles W. White (1918-1979); sculptor Joseph Kersey (1909- ); and painter Archibald Motley (1891-1981), who had been influential with the Arts & Crafts Guild. Other painters in the first exhibition were Raymond Gabriel (dates unknown) and Eldzier Cortor (1916- ), two artists who were committed to the South Side Community Art Center during its first decade.

Motley was arguably the most prominent and admired African-American artist of Chicago. A graduate



The addresses at the Center's dedication in 1941 were carried live on national radio. From left: Ald. Earl B. Dickerson; Peter Pollack; Pauline Kigh Reed; Patrick Prescott; and Eleanor Roosevelt.

of the School of the Art Institute, his work had received broad exposure around the country and overseas; he was also reputedly the first African-American painter to have had a solo exhibition in a commercial gallery in New York, in 1929.

With the completion of the classroom and studio spaces and regular classes, the official dedication of the Center was held on May 7, 1941. The African-American and cultural communities of Chicago celebrated the dedication of the center with many visiting dignitaries, most notably including Alain Locke, professor of philosophy, art, and humanities at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, an avid supporter of the Federal Art Project. In her presentation, Mrs. Roosevelt applauded the efforts of the community to realize the dream of creating the Center, and challenged it to continue to realize its mission "to create a democracy in art."

The dedication was a major fundraising event as well as a celebration of the new institution. The exhibition on display for the dedication was titled "We Too Look at America, an Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture,



John Walley lecturing at a South Side Art Center meeting in the main gallery.

and Drawings." Featured in this show were works by many of the same artists who were represented in the opening exhibition of the previous December, along with a number of prominent South Side European-American artists, including Gertrude Abercrombie and Margaret Brundrage.

From the beginning, the South Side Community Art Center was a racially integrated organization, with Americans of European as well as of African descent on its faculty, on its board, and included in its exhibitions. The first director of the Center, Peter Pollack, as well as a couple of board members were white, but most board members were business people and others of prominence in the African-American community. In a highly unusual circumstance for its day, the Center openly pursued a policy of integration, making it one of the few institutions of any kind in Chicago where people of various racial backgrounds were welcome and associated with one another on a regular basis.

The programs presented by the Center in its first years were ambitious; according to its records, in its first year the Center hosted 25 exhibitions that were seen by an estimated 28,000 visitors, and the classes it sponsored drew 12,000 registered children and adults. The second year drew even more participants.

Many of the exhibitions were organized by the Center and featured its instructors and students. Some works by artists associated with the Illinois office of the Federal Art Project were donated to the Center, forming the nucleus of a permanent collection that has continued to grow over the years. Some of the exhibitions organized by the Center traveled to local public libraries and housing projects and were shown regionally in Springfield, East St. Louis, and Milwaukee.

There were also a number of exhibitions organized around materials loaned by major local institutions, such as the Art Institute and the University of Chicago. The intention of these exhibition programs was to bring the works of significant artists into the neighborhood, making them available to an audience that had largely been isolated from them previously.

Among these early shows was the "Exhibition of Religious Art" which included reproductions of Irish Catholic antiquities, nineteenth-century Jewish manuscripts, Mexican retablos, and Buddhist artifacts. The Art Institute's continued interest in the Center also was demonstrated by its lending of such works as prints by





"Black Children and White Doll," a 1942 photograph by Gordon Rogers Parks, a former teacher at the South Side Art Center and a longtime staff member of *Life* magazine.

Honore Daumier and George Rouault and "An Exhibition of African Art & Craft."

In addition, the Center cooperated with the South Side Federal Theater Project that was headquartered in the Lincoln Center, located on Oakwood Boulevard. The Theater Project presented a number of plays in the third floor hall of the South Side Community Art Center in the early 1940s, and at least two exhibitions organized by the Center were installed at the Lincoln Center facility. Among the actors who worked with the South Side Theater Project and went on to some reknown were Jimmy Payne and Harry Belafonte.

#### Associations with Famous Artists

Many prominent artists spent significant portions of their careers at the South Side Community Art Center. In addition to such local artists as Raymond Gabriel and

Eldzier Cortor, mentioned above, was the internationally renowned **Gordon Rogers Parks** (1913- ).

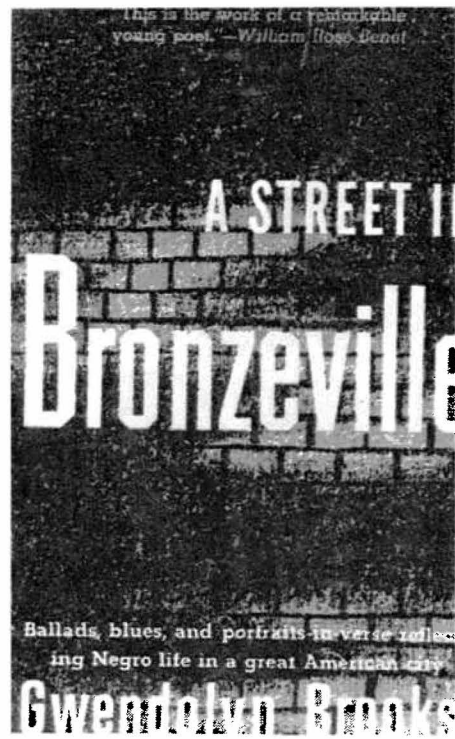
A photographer, Parks taught at the Center during the early 1940s and set up its first darkroom facilities, using a former laundry room in the basement. Parks went on to become a pre-eminent journalistic photographer for *Life*, working from 1948 to 1960 as a regular contributor, and as an occasional contributor to that magazine until 1970.

Named "Photographer of the Year" by the American Society of Magazine Photographers in 1960, Parks has since been the recipient of ten honorary doctoral degrees and was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the NAACP in 1984. His work is found in the permanent collections of the Library of Congress, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Parks has published a number of books on photographic technique and he was the cinematographer for a number of films made during the 1970s, the most famous of which was *Shaft*, released in 1971.

One of the founding members of the South Side Community Art Center, and one of its most famous instructors from the its beginnings through the 1960s, was **Margaret Goss Burroughs** (1917- ), who taught painting and graphics. Burroughs graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago and has had a noteworthy career as a painter, sculptor, and printmaker. Her dedication to the history and heritage of African-Americans also led her to found Chicago's DuSable Museum of African-American Culture, which she started in her own home in 1961. Burroughs' work has been featured in a large number of major international exhibitions.

Burroughs has continued her association with the South Side Community Art Center throughout her career, having served as its director in the early 1950s, and having been featured in at least four solo exhibitions at the Center gallery. She was also one of the essential contributors to the commemorative book, *South Side Community Art Center: 50th Anniversary, 1941-1991*.

Another instructor at the Center was the poet **Gwendolyn Brooks** (1917- ), a co-founder of its creative writing forum. The granddaughter of a field slave turned Union Civil War soldier, Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, but has spent most of her life in Chicago. Brooks first gained widespread recognition for her literary efforts as the winner of the Midwest Writers'



Cover of poet Gwendolyn Brooks' first book. She was co-founder of the Center's creative writing forum.

Conference Poetry Prizes for 1943, '44 and '45. When her first collection of verse, *A Street in Bronzeville*, was published in 1945, the Center was the site of an autograph reception. *Annie Allen*, a compendium of verse, won Brooks the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950. Since that time she has published numerous collections of her work, worked as a critic and book reviewer, and produced such educational books as the *Young Poet's Primer* and the *Primer for Blacks*. She was named Poet Laureate of Illinois by Governor James Thompson in 1986.

There were a number of prominent South Side artists who have given exhibitions at the Center over the years. Many of these were residents of Hyde Park, such as *Miyoko Ito* (1918-1983), who exhibited here in 1955. Ito's brightly colored, ethereal abstract paintings brought her work considerable attention, eventually leading to regular exhibitions in New York and Chicago galleries. Another was *Gertrude Abercrombie* (1909-1977), a painter who worked in a surrealist vein and who was active in the Hyde Park Arts Center. She made her home a social center for local artists and visitors to Chicago, and hosted gatherings that often included members of the South Side Community Art Center.

In addition to the members of its faculty and guest exhibitors of significant reputation, the educational programs sponsored by the Center have provided guidance for many aspiring young artists who have gone on to enjoy significant careers of their own. *Jerry Cogbill* was an early student of photography at the Center who worked under Gordon Parks and served as his assistant for a number of years, following him to *Life*. Cogbill became a prominent photojournalist in his own right, eventually becoming the photographic editor of *Ebony* magazine.

Also prominent among the former students of the Center has been sculptor *Richard Hunt* (1935- ). He received his first artistic instruction at the Center as a child and participated in his first group shows there during the 1940s. During his senior year at Englewood High School, Hunt was given his first solo exhibit of works on paper in the Center gallery. Hunt established his reputation as a sculptor working in welded steel as a student at the School of the Art Institute. In 1957, when he graduated, one of his pieces, *Arachne*, was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Later landmarks in Hunt's career have included his first solo exhibition at the Alan Gallery in New York in 1958 and a retrospective at the Milwaukee Art Center in 1967. His work has been exhibited in at least 25 states and seven foreign countries on four continents. Since the middle of the 1970s, his work has included many large scale outdoor commissions, such as the *Eagle Columns* of 1989, a tribute to Governor John Peter Altgeld, who pardoned those convicted in the Haymarket Incident of 1886.

### The Art Center after the WPA (1945-1990)

With the withdrawal of federal support for art instructors and facilities directors, who were paid through



"Eagle Columns" (cast bronze, 1989) by Richard Hunt, a former student at the Center. The sculpture is located in Altgeld Park on Chicago's north lakefront.

the Works Projects Administration until 1943, most of the community art centers around the country failed for lack of funding. The vast majority closed their doors before 1950. Of the approximately 110 community art centers established throughout the United States under the auspices of the WPA's Federal Arts Project, the South Side Community Art Center of Chicago is the only continuously operating survivor.

Although exhibitions based on works borrowed from such outside collections as the Art Institute have dwindled, the Center's educational programs have continued uninterrupted. In addition to instruction in the plastic arts, programs in music, literature, and dance were also presented at the center. The Kuumba Theater Company and the Darlene Blackburn Dance Troupe both got their start at the Center and used its facilities for a number of years. Musical recitals by prominent African-American performers working in classical and jazz idioms were started in 1942, and later programs included concerts by local children and adults.



A c.1950 board of directors meeting in the gallery. From left: Mrs. George White; Ald. Earl B. Dickerson; Frazier Lane of the Chicago Urban League; Edith S. Sampson; and Robert E. Lewis.

In common with other cultural institutions, the Center suffered during the 1950s due to the "Red Scare" of McCarthyism. Internal conflicts and financial difficulties, along with charges that the Center had been infiltrated by Communists, contributed to a situation where the association was forced to mortgage the property in order to maintain its educational programs. Three women who were dedicated to the ideals of the Center, Wilhelmina Blanks, Fern Gayden, and Grace Thompson Leaming, gave generously of their time and personal resources to ensure that the Center survived through this troubled period.

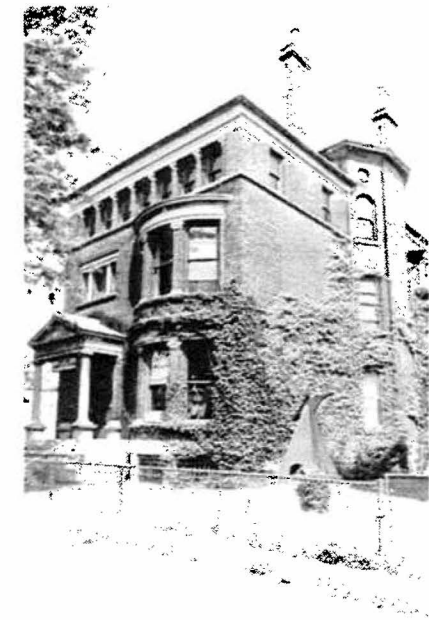
Since the early 1960s, auctions and sales of donated artworks have been used to support the Center, which also experienced a revival due, in part, to the civil rights movement. A 1968 exhibit, "Black Heritage," borrowed from the collections of the Art Institute, the African-American Museum of History (now the DuSable Museum), the permanent collection of the Center, and from private collectors. With the resurgence of interest in the Center at this time, it was once again free of debt by the late 1970s. In 1990, the Center reintroduced the Artists and Models Ball and, in 1991, it held a 50th anniversary celebration.

Since its opening, the South Side Community Art Center has presented over 550 exhibits, the vast majority of which have featured contemporary African-American artists. In 1982, the Center received the Governor's Award for the Arts in Illinois for having demonstrated "the best our state has to offer for its continuing contribution to the arts." These contributions were further recognized in a commemorative exhibition held at the State of Illinois Gallery in early 1993.

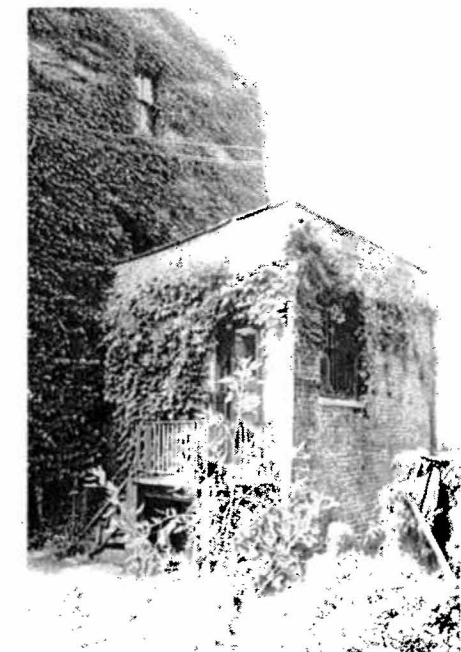
### The Original Architecture

The South Side Community Art Center is a building that, on its exterior, largely retains its original character as a private residence. It is a three-and-a-half story brick structure trimmed in Bedford limestone, crowned with a hip roof with dormers. The formality of its design and references to classical architecture are characteristic of Georgian architecture.

The building has bands of limestone on its base, topped with a molding wrapping around the porch



The exteriors of the main house (above) and coachhouse (below) are virtually unchanged from their 1892 appearance.



retaining wall, incorporating it into the foundation design. The porch has a limestone Ionic temple front canopy.

The only significant alterations that have occurred to the building exterior have been the replacement of the original doors and the removal of the pressed metal cornice.

The coachhouse is largely in its original design, and complements the main building in materials and scale. It is now used as the caretaker's residence.

The architect of the house was **Lawrence Gustav Hallberg** (1844-1915), a native of Wenersnas, Sweden. After completing his education in architecture and engineering at the Chalmers Polytechnic Institute in Gothenburg, Sweden, Hallberg traveled extensively in Europe before emigrating to the United States in 1877, settling in Chicago about a year later.

The Seaverns house is exemplary of the buildings Hallberg designed in the early years of his career, when he gained a reputation as a designer of residences for prominent businessmen. The permit for the house was



Interior of the South Side Community Art Center, taken in 1993. The plan, interior finishes, and uses of the various spaces are almost wholly unchanged from the conversion of 1940.

issued on May 19, 1892, for a three-story dwelling to cost \$25,000. For its time, the house was extremely expensive, reflecting the quality of its appointments.

Among Hallberg's early works, still standing, are the Calumet Flats (53-55 W. Erie; 1882), the Mentone Apartments (648 N. Dearborn; 1882), and the Jevne House (1614 N. LaSalle; 1883). Among the other structures he designed during 1892 was the original building for Augustana Hospital at Cleveland and Lincoln avenues, which was demolished and replaced in the 1920s.

In later life, Hallberg gained fame for his innovative applications of reinforced concrete in the design of large-scale industrial and commercial buildings. Beginning in 1904, he designed and realized a number of structures that used reinforced concrete on a scale previously unprecedented, successfully demonstrating the strength and viability of that material.

Among these early steel and concrete structures, all in Chicago, were the Dearborn Chemical Company Building, built in 1904 (demolished), and the John Moir Trust Building of 1911-12, now the Helene Curtis Building, located on the north side of the Chicago River at 325 N. Wells St.

### The Architecture of the Art Center

The 1940 conversion of the Seaverns House into the South Side Community Art Center gave the building a dual, yet compatible, identity in the neighborhood. No major changes were made to the building's exterior during the conversion, thereby retaining its image as part of the residential streetscape of Michigan Avenue. Beyond the front doors, however, much of the original interior gives way to forms and details that looked ahead to progressive attitudes of art and architecture.

The interior was remodeled by **Hin Bredendieck** and **Nathan Lerner**, two prominent figures associated with the New Bauhaus, a school which was founded in Chicago in 1937. The remodeling adheres to all of the design tenets of this school and is one of the few extant examples of this important design movement.

The original Bauhaus was founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany. Its mission was to integrate high aesthetic standards into every facet of society and to

The building's 1940s interior is a rare example of the New Bauhaus style in Chicago.



The Center's staircase, which was remodeled in 1940, is indicative of the New Bauhaus' design approach.

introduce new design that was free of historical conventions. The innovation of its design curriculum, together with the reputation of its faculty, made the school the most influential design institution of its day.

One of the principal instructors of the Bauhaus was Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, a noted painter, photographer, graphic designer, and sculptor. In 1937, four years after the original Bauhaus was closed due to pressure from the Nazi party, Moholy-Nagy was invited to Chicago by a group of local businessmen and professionals to set up a design school along the programmatic and philosophical lines of the original Bauhaus.

The remodeling of the South Side Community Art Center brought into sharp focus the differences between traditional design and the New Bauhaus approach. Its interior conveys a sense of simplicity and abstraction of form within the context of the original house.

The first floor was extensively altered at that time. By removing the walls separating the original living room, library, and dining room, the entire south half of the first floor has been opened into a single gallery.

The walls are covered with unstained vertical pine planks with beveled corners, creating a distinctive yet adaptable surface for displays. The paneling has never been painted or stained, giving it a handsome aged patina. Windows opening to the south are simply covered with hinged panels matching the pine paneling. This allows the flexibility of opening or closing the panels, depending on the required light and wall space. An acoustical tile ceiling with an innovative concealed cove lighting system was installed as part of the 1940 remodeling (see photo, page 9). Unfortunately, this ceiling and lighting were replaced by a dropped ceiling around 1980.

The focal point of the gallery is the fireplace on the east wall. The original, elaborate mantelpiece and built-in china hutch were removed in 1940 and replaced with a simple marble facing and shelf.

The original foyer continues to function as a reception area. It is also finished with pine paneling and has been fitted with a pair of large, unfinished pine, double doors leading to the gallery.

The angular treatment of the main staircase, in its altered form, is an artistic expression in itself. The original oak, spindle staircase has been replaced by railings which are intersecting planes of solid drywall, with curved bentwood caps.

The original second floor plan is largely intact, although the former bedrooms have been converted for office and classroom use. Many of the original doors, trim, and original ceiling coves still exist. A new staircase, leading to the former third floor ballroom was added to the front room.

The ballroom, which is now used for lectures, performances, and events, has been made smaller to allow for the addition of a kitchen and storage area. Except for these areas, the ballroom largely retains its original 1892 materials.

The basement was converted for use as a ceramics studio and includes a large kiln.

### Conclusion

The South Side Community Art Center has provided a venue for exhibitions, lectures, presentations, and instruction for over 50 years. Its facilities have seen, through exhibition and personal participation, the work of many of the most prominent African-American artists of the twentieth century.

Its outreach to various forms of cultural expression beyond the visual arts--including literary, musical, and theatrical productions--has provided a nucleus for community activity, education, and the broadest type of exposure to the arts.

The Center has continued to accumulate a collection of the works of the prominent individuals who have been associated with it, providing the public with access to the rich past and significant achievements of those who have been associated with it. Through the work of its teachers, students, and programs, the South Side Community Art Center has become an integral element of the cultural activity and artistic life of the city and the region.

## Criteria for Designation

Designation of the South Side Art Community Art Center is recommended because it meets three of the criteria for landmark designation set forth in Section 2-210-620 of the Chicago Municipal Code.

### CRITERION 1

*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

The South Side Community Art Center exemplifies the efforts and contributions of the artistic community of the South Side to provide a cultural and educational institution for African-Americans of all ages. The lone continuously operating survivor of over 100 community art centers established under the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, it has provided instruction for generations of youth and the opportunity for its audience to see exhibitions of the works of the most prominent African-American artists of the twentieth century. Its outreach to forms beyond the visual arts has included musical, theatrical, and literary forms of expression, providing a comprehensive curriculum of arts education.

Through its teachers, its students, its ambitious exhibition schedule, and its permanent collection, the South Side Community Art Center has made important past achievements and significant contemporary works accessible to the public. In all of these ways this art center has become an integral element of the cultural activity of its community and of the City.

### CRITERION 3

*Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

The majority of significant individuals associated with this building were active as teachers, students, and members of the South Side Community Art Center. Included in the list of important artists who have taught, performed and exhibited here have been: photographers Gordon Rogers Parks and Jerry Cogbill; sculptors Raymond Barthe and Richard Hunt; poet Gwendolyn Brooks; actor Harry Belafonte; and painters Margaret Goss Bur

roughs, Miyoko Ito, Gertrude Abercrombie, and Archibald Motley, Jr. The contributions of these artists, individually and collectively through the South Side Community Art Center, have had a significant and lasting impact on the artistic, cultural, and educational development of the South Side for over 50 years.

The original owner of the house, George Seaverns, Jr., was a prominent figure in Chicago's business community from the 1890s through the 1920s. At one time an officer of the Board of Trade, Seaverns commissioned the house to be built and lived here for 13 years.

## CRITERION 5

*Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.*

The remodeling of the interior to convert the house into an art center was designed by Hin Bredendieck and Nathan Lerner, two prominent figures associated with the New Bauhaus. Founded in Chicago in 1937 and organized under the direction of internationally prominent artist Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, the curriculum of the New Bauhaus was based on that of its famed namesake in Weimar, Germany, which espoused the integration of a high esthetic standard into every facet of society.

The interior remodeling of the Art Center interior is a rare surviving example of the architectural principles of the New Bauhaus. It brings into focus the differences between traditional design and the New Bauhaus approach. The interior conveys a sense of simplicity and abstraction of form within the context of the original house.

The original architect of 3831 S. Michigan Ave. was L. Gustav Hallberg, a native of Sweden who emigrated to the United States as a young man and established a prominent practice in Chicago. His early designs were predominantly residential and were executed for affluent customers in the elite neighborhoods of the city. These were high-style residences that included stylistic references to historic European architecture, as demonstrated by the Ionic portico that forms the porch of 3831 S. Michigan Ave. Later in his career Hallberg made significant contributions to the design of reinforced concrete structural systems for large-scale commercial and industrial buildings.

## Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Based on its evaluation of the South Side Community Art Center, the staff recommends that all aspects, exterior and interior, of the house and coachhouse be identified as significant historical and architectural features.

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Additional material used in the preparation of this report is on file and available to the public in the offices of the Landmarks Division of the Department of Planning and Development.

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### Illustrations

- Cover, top left; page 10: *The Art of Archibald J. Motley, Jr.*, Plate 50; Chicago Historical Society, 1991.
- Cover, bottom: George J. Mavigliano collection; *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935-1943*, Southern Illinois University, 1990.
- Page 2: *Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922; Birth of a Metropolis*, Prestel-Verlag, Munich, 1987.
- Pages 3, 17, 19, 20, 22: Commission on Chicago Landmarks.
- Pages 7, 11, 18: Unknown; South Side Community Art Center collection.
- Pages 8, 9: Pheshner and Gilloon.
- Page 12: Chicago Public Library, Special Collections Division.
- Page 14: *The Photographs of Gordon Parks*, Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, 1983.

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