

ROSEWOOD COURTS HISTORIC DISTRICT

Travis County, TX

National Register of Historic Places - Return Comments:

The documentation is being returned for substantive reasons. While the current nomination presents a credible case for the National Register eligibility of the Austin public housing project, there are a number of outstanding issues regarding the selection of appropriate criteria and the nomination narrative that will need to be addressed before we can proceed with consideration for listing.

Description

The current narrative description for the housing project and its individual buildings is fairly limited. The current narrative focuses almost solely on the housing project from a macro level discussing overall project layout, the general scale of the buildings, their basic materials, and building orientation. The nomination would be strengthened by providing a more focused discussion of the physical character of the constituent buildings, mentioning such features as basic fenestration patterns, shared entry stoops, rear service closets, exposed foundation water tables and belt courses, for example. Given the repetitive nature of the building types, this need not represent a building by building discussion, but could be limited to a select sampling of contributing resources.

If the intention of the nomination is to support National Register significance under Criterion C, there is an expectation that additional descriptive materials would be provided to address elements such as the physical character of at least one or two sample units (perhaps 1 typical one-story unit and 1 two-story unit). The relative condition of interiors should also be noted—are they original, minimally altered, or substantially renovated?

In several locations the nomination makes note of the unique landscape design efforts that accompanied the construction of the project, but nowhere in the documentation are those elements clearly identified. Elements such as the open, common lawn areas, the distinctive stone/concrete retaining walls separating grade changes and fronting on several streets, and the general plantings should be described briefly as they define the distinctive character of the housing complex

More importantly, the current narrative overplays certain aspects of the character of the nominated property. Statements such as “...making Santa Rita and Rosewood Courts the first public housing units in America to begin construction,” “Rosewood Courts is a paradigmatic example of International Style.....retains an excellent degree of integrity,” and “The housing development’s location, setting, design, workmanship, feeling, and association all remain unaffected,” if not patently incorrect, are at least misleading. The description section need not overstate facts regarding the physical condition of the property. Rather than conveying the impression that the individual buildings have had few if any structural alterations or unsympathetic additions, the nomination should acknowledge that the reconfigurations of the original flat roofs to low hips, and the replacement of window units were major alterations that dramatically impacted the character of the original designs and the “International Style” composition of the project buildings.

Such changes in some housing projects might be considered adverse considerations regarding National Register eligibility. In the case of the Rosewood Courts, the fact that the complex retains the unique overall character of the USHA-period design standards and superblock patterning mitigates those significant losses to a considerable degree, albeit probably at the cost of eligibility under National Register Criterion C.

The ability to restore missing or lost features is not really germane to the discussion, as the nomination must deal directly with the buildings as currently configured. In revising the nomination it would be worthwhile looking at the documentation for the previously listed Santa Rita Courts housing complex in Austin, in which for instance, statements regarding the property's status as the nation's first public housing units are tempered by acknowledging the specific programs under which those statements are valid. The USHA was not the first "public housing" program initiated by the government, even if its predecessors were varied in format and operation. The NR significance of Rosewood Courts is still important nationally as an early example of the USHA's programmatic activities, regardless of the existence of earlier programs; but clarification is essential.

The Santa Rita Courts nomination also appears to have taken a more moderate stance with regards to that project's reflection of Zeilenbau and International Style principals. The superblock and orderly standards promoted for American public housing programs, while influenced strongly by European precedents, were clearly of a character all their own, modified by similar Garden City planning ideals and restrictive funding mechanisms. Public housing units built in large urban areas of the United States often came closest to the true German Zeilenbau model with row upon row of tall slender towers set apart from neighboring housing, but the majority of the more modest housing projects built across the country were modulated interpretations of the European concepts. Conveying the idea that Rosewood Courts is a nationally significant example of Zeilenbau construction is simply an over statement of significance, not necessary to justify National Register eligibility.

The discussion on page 7 regarding the history of zoning changes and patterns in the city really belongs in Section 8 [Significance] rather than Section 7. Section 7 should be focused on the physical character of extant resources. Incorporated into Section 8, the history of zoning narrative would help directly support the themes of Community Planning and Development. The housing project is a clear reflection of the city's concerted efforts to redefine the physical and social aspects of Austin housing and development in the early twentieth century.

Significance

It is unclear why the Statement of Significance starts out with a discussion of "Modern Housing," rather than a clear summary statement, similar to the excellent example found in the Santa Rita nomination. Lifting the entire statement from the Santa Rita nomination, with minor edits to acknowledge Rosewood's connections to African American history, would greatly strengthen the documentation (and meet current NR guidance standards).

With regard to the significance of Rosewood Courts, the current nomination adequately justifies significance at the national level under Criterion A and B, but not Criterion C. At best architectural significance under Criterion C would be at the local level as a local manifestation of public housing forms and standards promoted by the USHA. Any subsequent revisions directed at supporting this Criterion would need to directly address the issue of integrity as outlined in the Description comments above. At this point it is recommended by the National Register that Criterion C simply be dropped from the nomination. (See additional discussion below).

With regards to Criterion B, the nomination appears to justify the property's significance in association with Lyndon Johnson, but not to Nathan Straus, Oliver Winston, or Catherine Bauer. While Johnson's connection to Rosewood and Austin's public housing development efforts are clear, direct, and reflective of important later themes in the President's career, the connections of the other individuals to the Rosewood Courts property is much more tangential (see additional discussion below).

After a revised *Introduction*, the most logical place to start the contextual analysis would be with a discussion of the U. S. public housing programs of the early twentieth century, which really serve as the core of Rosewood's national NR significance. In documenting the *Overview of the 1937 Housing Act*, it

might be useful to add a brief mention of the earlier programs that tested the waters of government funded public housing. These programs not only set the stage for the huge efforts of the USHA, but also helped define the look of American public housing. Such statements would also better clarify the status of the Rosewood and Santa Rita projects as “first in their program,” versus “first in the country.”

Page 12. Nathan Straus’ attendance at the Rosewood dedication is cited as a pivotal event, however, it is unclear how many such similar trips he might have made during the life of the program, and whether the effect of the Austin visit had any real national ramifications, or was it simply a way of rallying local support and conveying federal presence to a young program. Normally justification of Criterion B, particularly at the national level, requires a clear understanding of the direct connection between the person and significant events in the context of a particular theme. Such justification asserts that the property in question was evaluated in context with other extant properties that might share similar connections, in this case at the national level. At this point, while Straus’ connections to Rosewood are worth noting, they do not appear to merit significance under Criterion B. They are however, supportive of the property’s overall significance under Criterion A, as a reflection of the various people, activities and events that coalesced in Austin during the 1930s to produce the resulting housing projects.

The same holds true for the significance of the property in association with Bauer and Winston. Catherine Bauer’s significant role in U.S. housing reform and public housing construction is undisputed. Her connections to Rosewood Courts were fleeting at best and at this point it is unclear if this property is the best reflection of her national contributions. Publication of Rosewood Courts in a book, while perhaps supportive of Criterion A, is not sufficient to justify Criterion B.

Page 15-16. Emancipation Park. While we have no issue with the inclusion of a (limited) discussion of Emancipation Park within the current nomination, there needs to be a clear recognition that this aspect of local history has no direct connection to the National Register eligibility of Rosewood Courts. The fact that the site is no longer extant and has no visible trace on the current landscape renders that aspect of the site’s history irrelevant to the current significance of the property under the context of public housing. At best, the city’s destruction of the beloved African American cultural site might be viewed as another reflection of the city’s lack of compassion for the local black community, as evidenced by their strident segregation and land use policies during the historic period. The current discussion of Emancipation Park may be viewed as a bit too long given the sites’ relevancy to the significance of the nomination property. It should be made clear that the information is provided as a component of background history only, not as grounds for listing. Without extant features to convey its historic role or significance, the former location of Emancipation Park is not eligible for listing in the National Register. These considerations will require revision of the Ethnic Heritage statements at the end of the section as well.

Page 16. Public Housing in Austin. The discussion would appear to be better placed before the discussion of the Site Selection and Design of Rosewood Courts (page 12).

Page 17. President Lyndon Baines Johnson. The first line of this section should be revised to drop “President” before the name of Lyndon Johnson, to clarify that Rosewood Courts is most directly linked to Johnson during his early career in Congress rather than as “President Johnson.” As currently written readers might mistake Johnson’s role in association with the development of the housing project. Once again the Santa Rita Courts nomination provides better wording clarifying the specific associations between Johnson and the local housing project. Rosewood Courts clearly represents a significant aspect of the young politician’s early career. And while those early actions may have directed his later work, when placed in the context of Johnson’s overall contributions to U.S. history as President of the United States the local Austin project is of much less significance. A statement such as “...its [Rosewood Courts] funding and construction stand as one of Johnson’s major achievements,” may be appropriate from the perspective of his contributions as a Congressman and his contributions in state/local affairs in Texas, but perhaps not from the perspective of his significant Presidential actions.

Page 20. Segregation in Austin. The subsection on segregation in Austin appears somewhat forced into the current narrative structure rather than part of the natural narrative flow. The section provides excellent material with which to understand the context for local history, but it could perhaps be better woven into the narrative when/if revised. Importantly, please note that it is National Register policy to reframe from including inflammatory or offensive terms in nominations whenever possible. We ask that any revisions prepared for this nomination remove the N-word. We understand the context for use of such terms, but in truth deletion of the offensive terms from the current narrative has little impact to the narrative. Rereading the sections with the terms removed changes nothing in the meaning of the section.

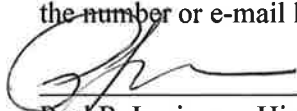
Page 23. Ethnic Heritage. (See discussion above under Emancipation Park) The discussion of Emancipation Park should be deleted as a basis for establishing National Register significance under Criterion A. With no extant features, the nominated property can no longer convey any aspect of this significance. The significance of the housing project under Ethnic Heritage is correctly attributed to the site's association with public housing development for the local African American community in the contexts of Austin's larger segregation activities and the national programs of the USHA.

Page 25. Community Planning and Development. The National Register eligibility of the Rosewood Courts under Criterion C (at the local level), if it can be developed, lies most directly in the statement at the top of the page characterizing the property as *"an important and exemplary [local] illustration of early large-scale housing development in which uniformity of design, low ground coverage, limited density, precise spatial planning, and traffic planning that emphasized pedestrians and the feeling of a park were combined to create a new environment for the urban poor that replaced the squalor and congestion of the slum."*

Rosewood Courts represented a new way of thinking about community planning, a new property type that incorporated various aspects of modern urban planning and design theory within the constraints of stringent federal cost guidelines. The current narrative that follows under the heading of Architecture in many cases simply reaches too far in attempting to make a case for the individual eligibility of the site as an exemplary model of International Style and Zeilenbau design; most of which are simply unsupported. The comparison of Rosewood Courts to Aluminum City Terrace, for example, is simply misplaced. The physical integrity of the Rosewood Courts buildings is of sufficient concern to bring into question the eligibility of the facility as a nationally significant example of International Style/Bauhaus design. In fact, the first three bullet points on page 26 all reference a local context rather than a national perspective. National level significance under Criterion C normally requires a much more robust comparative context with other resources and some representation of important precedent or impact on the field as presented in scholarly literature.

In light of these issues and the concerns over physical integrity, it is recommendation of the National Park Service that Criterion C simply be dropped and the discussion of the character of the design be folded into the supporting narrative for Criterion A.

The Rosewood Courts represent a place clearly deserving of federal recognition in the National Register. The nomination preparers should be commended for the extensive amount of research undertaken on behalf of this nomination. If you have questions regarding these comments, please contact me directly at the number or e-mail listed below.



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