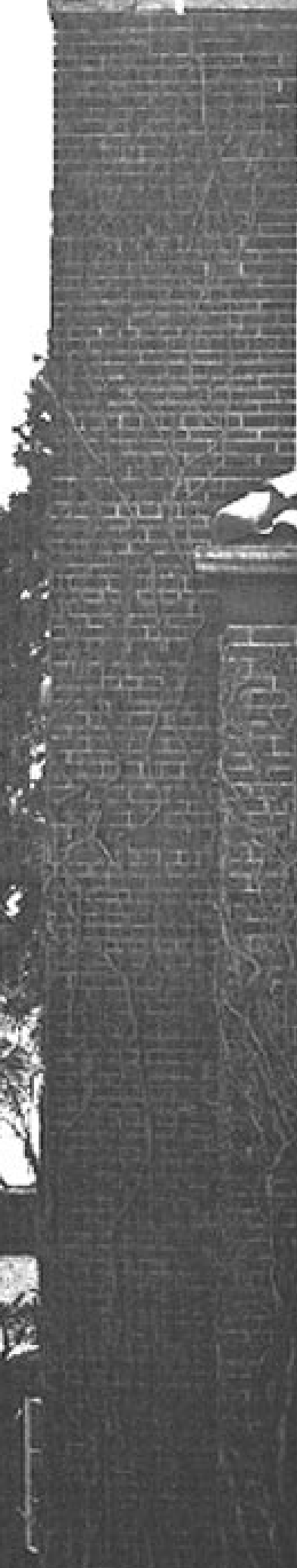
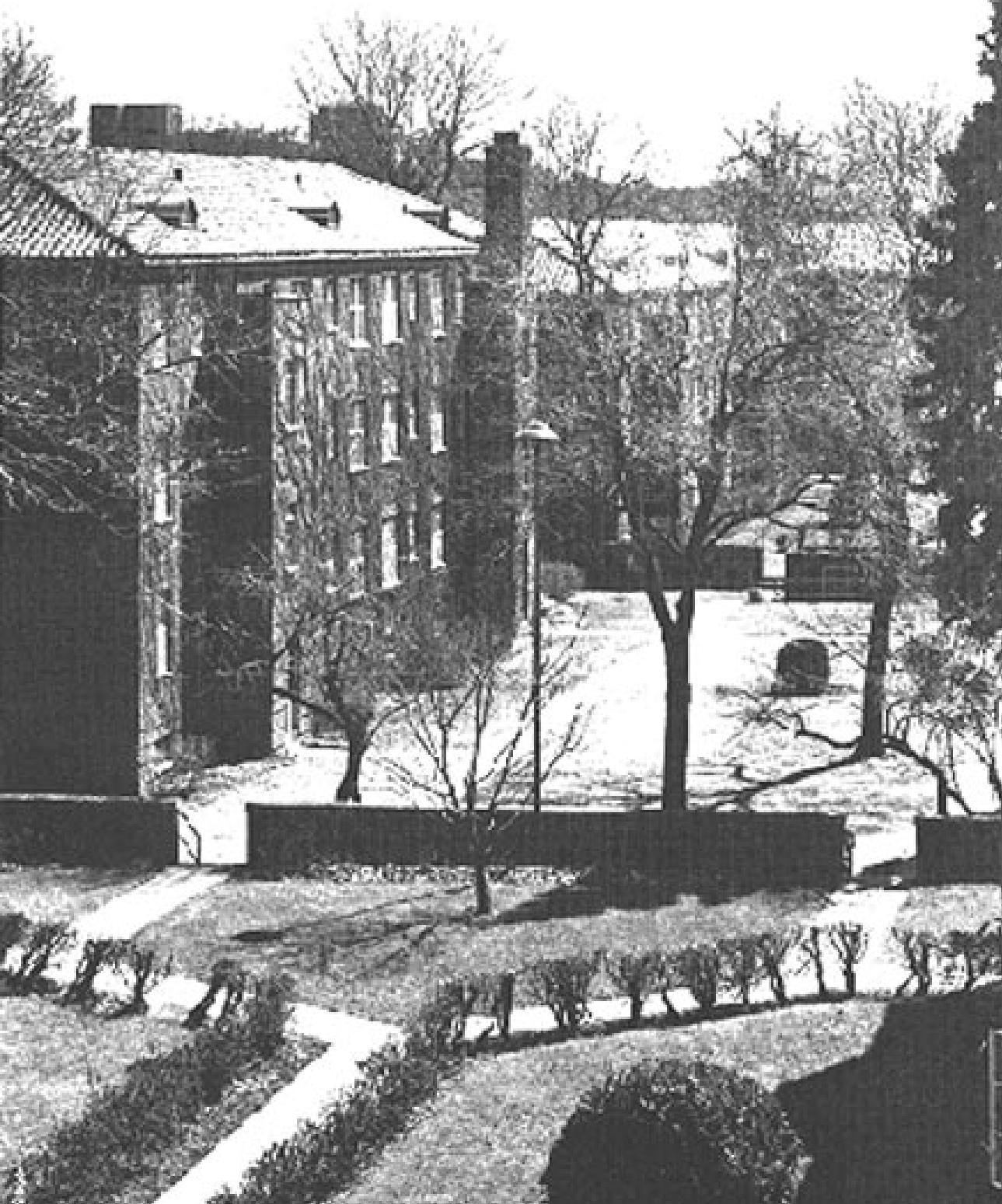


An apartment idyll

Five decades of light
and air at the Fair Oaks



By Bill Beyer

Any architect who has struggled with the design challenge of multi-family housing knows the taste of disappointment. The aesthetic, economic and marketing formulas of developers vary little, and the built results are uniformly unremarkable. Unit plans don't differ much – some are more clever than others. Exterior facades struggle to mitigate the inherent lack of interest of long, low rectangular forms. The more difficult challenge in such apartments has always been to arrange units and buildings on a site to create a place that people willingly call home.

Virtually all new apartment buildings rely on elevators and corridors for internal circulation. A different kind of building – the three-story walkup – isn't seen anymore, presumably because people no longer care to walk up (or anywhere else.)

The Twin Cities, however, have two classic examples of this genre, the Fair Oaks Apartments in Minneapolis and the Highland Village Apartments in Saint Paul. These projects, completed in 1930, were designed by Perry Crosier and show how simple strategies can result in exceptional living environments.

The Minneapolis Tribune of October 1, 1939 called the Fair Oaks, "a new conception of multiple dwelling construction. Foremost is the preservation of light and air." Across the street from the entrance to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Fair Oaks has celebrated light and air for almost five decades. Its 224 apartments are grouped around stair cores in clusters of six, two units per floor. Each unit, then, has exposures on both sides of the building.

The clusters are arranged in 6 "U" and "S" shaped buildings on a 3.75 acre site, creating private interior courtyards with parking garages tucked below and public entry courtyards facing the surrounding streets. The entry courts provide lovely and intimate arrival spaces. Views from apartments to the



interior courts are idyllic. The buildings are architecturally modest, clad in brick with red tile hip roofs, steel sash windows and vaguely colonial looking entryways. The mature and meticulously maintained landscaping enhances the feeling of serenity.

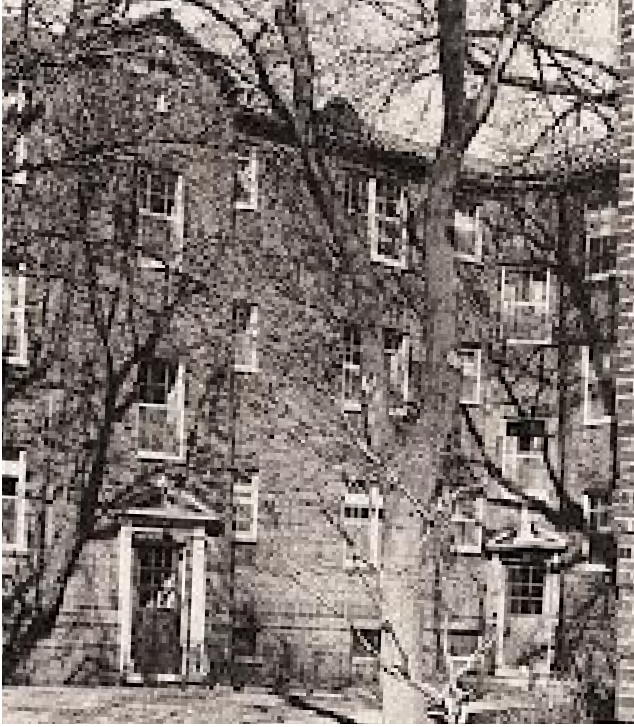
Becky Olson, manager of the complex, cites lots of windows, cross ventilation, hardwood floors and the lack of long corridors as factors that keep the residents happy – and keep others waiting in line for a chance at one of the rare vacancies. When she began in 1976, almost one-third of the residents had lived at Fair Oaks since its inception. Incredibly, a handful of the original tenants remain today.

Olson says that the interior courtyards (reminiscent of the private gardens of Chelsea and Kensington) are heavily used in good weather. Tenants putter in small flowerbeds, relax in the sun and carry on their business via cordless phones.

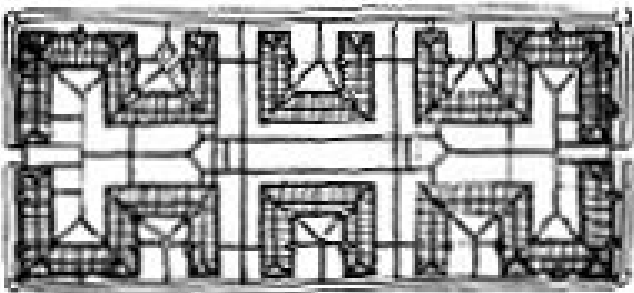
Miss Harriet Madigan, resident since 1943, recalls that the apartments were considered quite posh then.

The interior courtyards of the Fair Oaks Apartments in Minneapolis (opposite) provide an oasis of calm in a noisy city. Above, multiple entry courts face the Art Institute.

Pleasant courtyards instead of parking lots



The richness of brick and an intimate scale are apparent at a typical Fair Oaks entry courtyard (above). The site plan (below) shows how Crosier carved common outdoor spaces out of a tightly packed city block.



Garage attendants would wash and service your car, and maid service was available. Retired from teaching since 1967, she still enjoys the obvious amenities and convenient location close to the Metrodome where she has Gopher football season tickets. And although she enjoys reading her *Sports Illustrated* in the shady calm of the courtyards, she most appreciates the availability of “plenty of heat and hot water.”

The Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission has recognized the uniqueness of the Fair Oaks within the Washburn-Fair Oaks Historic District. They cite its “exceptional in its relationship to site and neighborhood”. At sixty dwelling units per acre, the project is perhaps the most livable high density housing in the city.

The 265-unit Highland Village Apartments in Saint Paul has not received historic designation, although it probably should. Similar in building and site planning techniques, the project is considerably less dense than the Fair Oaks, but equally idyllic in character.

Unfortunately, neither project could be duplicated precisely today. Acreating parking requirements dictate large surface parking lots that overwhelm the sequence of entry to a building. The dominance of the elevator/double-loaded corridor prototype eliminates most opportunity for through ventilation and guarantees dependence on ubiquitous through-the-wall air conditioners. The lessons of the site planning, however, will endure.

That Crosier designed and supervised construction of both these projects (a total of almost 500 units) in 1939 must have been the biggest coup of his architectural career. Crosier designed other apartment buildings before and after these, but nothing comparable in scale or quality. He was probably best known for the design of numerous Streamline Moderne movie theaters across the state, but the thousands of residents of Fair Oaks and Highland Village over the years would certainly thank him for remembering the basics of housing design – the importance of light and air.

Bill Beyer, a contributing editor to AM, is a partner with the Stageberg Partners and member of the MSAIA Publications Committee.



Highland Village in St. Paul (photos and drawing this page) is organized around vehicular cul-de-sacs (see partial site plan below). Unlike Fair Oaks, the three-story, hip-roof buildings contain only one-bedroom units, while attached two-story/two bedroom townhouses create "L"s that form more private interior yards.

