

The Washington Afro-American
Obituaries July 12, 1986

Hilyard R. Robinson, 87, noted District architect

By J.L. Langhorne

Hilyard R. Robinson, a noted district architect, died June 29, 1986, at Howard University Hospital. He was born in Washington, D.C., in 1899.

He was graduated from the local M Street High School in 1916. He then entered the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts in Philadelphia, but left there to volunteer in the World War I Negro Officers' Training School.

Mr. Robinson was discharged in 1919 after serving in France in the 350th U.S. field Artillery as a 2nd Lieutenant. Following his discharge he earned two degrees in architecture at Columbia University ... B.A. in 1924, and the M.S. in 1931.

This distinguished designer married Josephine Helena Rooks in 1931, and she survives him. From 1924 to 1930 he was instructor and later Chairman of the Department of Architecture at Howard University.

Prior to establishing his professional practice, Mr. Robinson spent more than a year traveling in Europe in the study of mass housing concepts. In 1934 he opened an office in D.C. for private practice which we maintained until his death. After 1975, Robinson's practice was limited to consulting work. His active practice covered an area of eight states as well as the District of Columbia.

His first major work in his hometown was Langston Terrace Dwellings on Benning Road, which famed architectural critic, Sir Lewis Mumford, wrote that his project reminded him of some of the best European post-War I housing executed. This was the first of several housing projects in D.C. which Robinson designed, and was the first public housing project in this city. He was the in-

sightful person who brought back to Washington the concept of public housing which he studied at the Bauhaus in Germany. On his return to the States, he sold the idea in 1934 to U.S. Government officials for subsequent action under the Department of Interior.

Other break-throughs that Mr. Robinson initiated include the design of a site plan of an airfield for training the famed 99th Pursuit Squadron at Chehaw, Alabama, near Tuskegee Institute, in World War II.

The symbolic architecture and systematic planning for the Republic Of Liberia in preparation of that country's Centennial Celebration in 1947 was performed in Robinson's office. He was a member of the Board of Directors of the National Urban League during Lester Grainger's directorship.

Perhaps Robinson's reputation as a pioneering, exceptional planner is best remembered in D.C. because of the ten Howard University buildings which he designed, including the celebrated Fine Arts complex with its Cramton Auditorium and Ira Aldridge Theater, which is rated as an Architect's electronic dream. Other buildings he conceived include the School of Engineering and Architecture, the Dental School, the Schools of Home Economics and Pharmacology, the Biology-Greenhouse building, and four dormitories.

Mr. Robinson also designed three buildings at Hampton University, including a Communications Center and two dormitories, one of which ... Harkness Hall ... was rated by the Architectural Forum in 1951 as one of the best designed dormitories in the U.S. in that year.

Among the distinguished

honors he received were: The appointment by President Truman to the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, 1949-55; appointment by the D.C. Commissioners and Registrars of Architects, 1962; a citation of Merit as one of the foremost pioneering Architects by the National Organization of Minority Architects; a Board of Trade Diploma of Merit for the superior design of Howard University's Engineering-Architecture building; and special Merit Awards from the U.S. Naval Academy for dormitory room furnishings design and from the prestigious New York City illuminating Engineering Society for lighting design.

Mr. Robinson was a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. He remained a loyal member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, after having been initiated in 1921 at the University of Pennsylvania, assisted by Alpha brother, actor Paul Robeson. He was one of the special honorees at a D.C. Alpha ceremony in 1984.

By virtue of his wide education, supported by a distinctive verbal memory and a remarkable power of expression, Mr. Robinson was admirably fitted to excel as a true artist in Architecture. By his contacts with leading professional minds in various countries, by habitual observation of developments in his field, and especially through mental independence, this creative pioneer disciplined and enriched his powers and intellect in every sphere of design. He was the stimulus for the development and superior performance of his employees. The superb buildings he designed will perpetuate his memory and will be regarded as monumental in the countless years to come.

Robinson, Hilyard R.

D.C. 2 THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 1986

THE WASHINGTON POST

Historians' Projects To Honor Architect

By Amy DePaul
Special to the Washington Post

Experts on black history and architecture are studying the life and works of **Hilyard R. Robinson**, a District-born architect who died this summer at age 87.

A Howard University historian is unpacking boxes and sorting through papers to document Robinson's achievements for the university library's special collections.

And a local architectural historian is making a film about the highly acclaimed public housing complex in Northeast Washington that Robinson designed, Langston Terrace.

The impact of Robinson's work was evident last August when more than a hundred former Langston residents gathered for a "family" reunion, where they reminisced about living at Langston and mourned Robinson's passing.

Robinson's life and career tell a story of a man who scaled a race barrier to leave an indelible imprint on the architecture of public housing.

His life "reflects that when given the opportunities, individuals can and will excel," said Dr. Thomas Battle, director of Howard's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

"Black architects have had fewer opportunities to design residences. They did schools, churches, hospitals and contract work for the government. Also, Howard gave Robinson the opportunity to practice his craft. And he was able to carve out a niche for himself."

Robinson was commissioned by the Department of the Interior to build Langston in 1936 as part of a federal effort to relieve the poverty

and homelessness sweeping the country during the Depression.

He designed Langston to be everything that public housing often has turned out not to be: elegant architecture and landscape, state-of-the-art amenities, meticulous upkeep, lively architecture and warm, community living.

"Langston was a close-knit community. There were hundreds of youngsters and we all knew each other. There were two recreation centers. There was a co-op store. They had speaker forums on Sunday. If you asked any one of the people at the reunion, you would hear them say it was a utopia," said Samuel Washington, a resident from 1938 to the early '50s.

Besides Langston, Robinson designed many Howard University buildings and served as dean of the architectural school there. Much of his career was spent in private practice in the District; his projects included government, university, hospital and church buildings for primarily black clients around the country.

Robinson was born in 1899 and raised by his seamstress mother. Late in life he recalled that as a child he tried to learn from conversations among the congress members who were customers of his grandfather's Capitol Hill shoeshine parlor.

He graduated from the last class of the prestigious M Street High School, D.C.'s first school for blacks. High school was followed by service in World War I and travel in Europe, where mass housing efforts inspired him. He graduated from Columbia University with an architecture degree in 1924.

"At the time, you could count the black architects on one hand and



Hilyard R. Robinson was dean of the Howard University architectural school.

have some fingers left over," said Elsie Mitchell, Robinson's secretary for more than 40 years.

After working for the federal government, Robinson taught at Howard in the late '20s and early '30s.

In 1935 Robinson began designing Langston, the District's first federally subsidized housing facility. One of its most remarkable features was a dramatic sculpture stretching across the front of the building that depicted blacks migrating from the rural south to urban centers in the north.

Langston was recognized as an architectural achievement. The New Yorker magazine commended the complex in 1938 for its "use of sculpture against the flat walls of the building From the photographs, it looks better than the best modern work in Hamburg or Vienna"

"Robinson was a pioneer. He brought back the Bauhaus [German] conceptions of public housing to this area," said J. Leon Langhorne, a former Howard professor.

Between 1940 and the early '70s, Robinson practiced privately. At Howard his work on Cramton Hall, the Ira Aldridge Theater, the School of Engineering, the Home Economics Building (now called the School of Human Ecology), Locke Hall and others testify to his preference for functional modern design.

Robinson is survived by his wife Helena Rooks.

Mitchell described her boss as a creative man, given to writing down stories and humorous anecdotes, but very serious about his career. He once wrote, "Architecture is one of the, if not the, greatest profession."

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Lloyd Wright once described terra cotta as a material that "was in the hands of the architect what wax was in the hands of the sculptor. The exhibit also traces the history of the use of this flexible and colorful material in American buildings from the mid-19th century to its re-discovery today. It continues at the museum through Dec. 1.

■ "America's Master Metalworker: Samuel B. Yellin, 1885-1940" is there through July 1987.

The National Building Museum is located in the Pension Building at Judiciary Square, NW. Exhibition hours are: 10a.m.-4p.m. Monday-Friday and noon-4p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Tours are given at 11a.m., Tuesday; 12:15p.m., Thursday, and 1p.m. Saturday.

Architect dies

Hilyard R. Robinson, noted architect of the city's first Public Works Administration housing project died recently. He was 86. After studies at Columbia University, Robinson examined European

housing in the early 1930s from his temporary headquarters in Berlin. He was involved in various New Deal projects and later did 10 buildings at Howard University. His work, which was within the realm of the International Style, received praise from Lewis Mumford and local critics. For years he was Washington's most successful black architect, taking on a vast range of commissions and frequently serving as consultant to others. His extensive papers and collections have been left to Howard University.

Deco deals

For sale: Deco dinnerware. Modern tone, cobalt blue, 100 pieces. \$1,000. Call J. Yokum at 564-0414.

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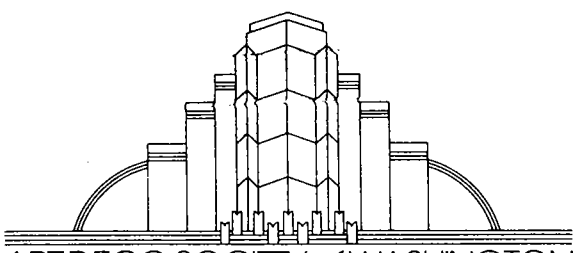
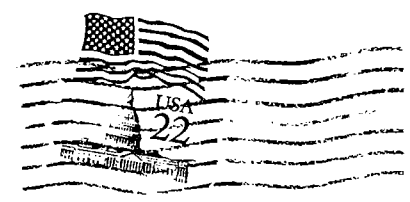
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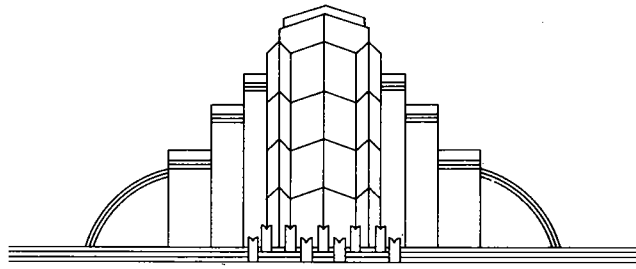
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Robinson, Hilyard

Hilyard Robinson, Architect

The Capitol Hill townhouse where Hilyard Robinson was born in 1899 still stands today. As a young man in Washington he attended the city's sole high school for blacks and prepared for entry to the school of industrial design in Philadelphia, for training in fine and industrial arts. After serving in World War I in France, Robinson explored Paris and was impressed by the respect the French accorded their architects and the pride they took in their rich architectural heritage. When he returned home, he began studies toward a career in architecture.

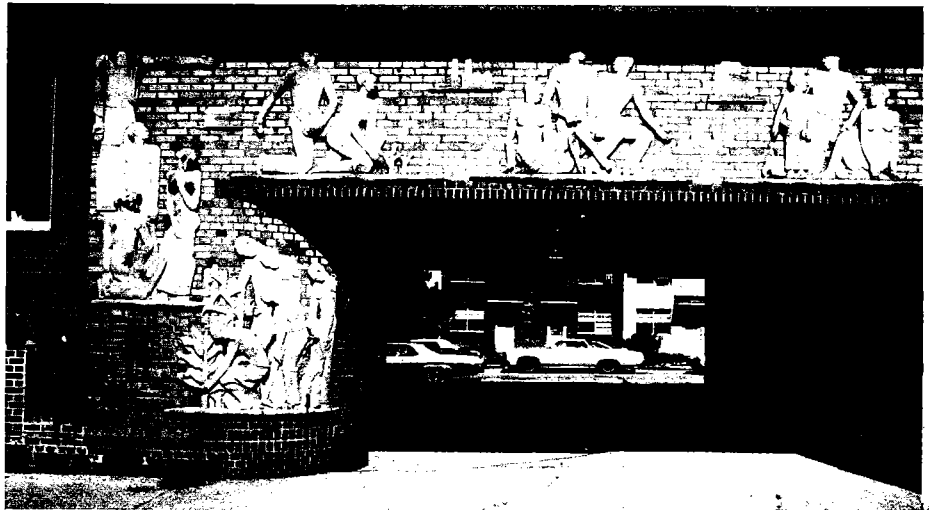
While at Columbia University, Robinson apprenticed to New York City architects, taught at Howard University here in Washington, and completed a thesis on the housing problems of the poor. He earned his M.A. from Columbia in 1931.

Because there was little public housing activity in the U.S., Robinson spent nearly two years abroad, where he visited and photographed numerous projects in Europe, Scandinavia, and Russia. He briefly studied at the University of Berlin and became acquainted with several Bauhaus architects, notably Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Erich Mendelsohn. It was Breuer who encouraged him to visit the new public housing in Holland, an experience which would heavily influence Robinson's later work.

His long career as an architect in Washington began during the depression. He was employed by the federal government to survey the housing needs of Washington's poor and to plan an experimental urban community which served as the conceptual model for the Langston Terrace Dwellings project of 1934-38. That and several other commissions enabled Robinson to remain continually employed during the depression.

(continued on page 9)

The Langston Terrace Dwellings



"The Progress of the Negro Race" by sculptor Dan Olney at the entrance of Langston Terrace.

by Glen B. Leiner

The Langston Terrace Dwellings in Northeast Washington (near 21st St. and Benning Rd.) stand today as a significant but little-known local landmark of the New Deal era. The architect, Hilyard Robinson, was inspired by the achievements made in European public housing, which he visited in the early 1930s. State housing projects abroad provided a range of solutions to the housing shortages after World War I throughout Europe and Russia. Subsequently Robinson returned to Washington, where he became an early pioneer for improving the inadequate housing conditions of the city's poor.

The slums and alley dwellings of Washington had long been a target of reform leaders and politicians whose solutions were limited to the condemnation and demolition of the substandard

housing located in nearly every neighborhood, even within the shadow of the Capitol. Robinson's conception of the Langston Terrace project for the newly

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About Our Title

Trans-Lux was a method of projecting newsreels in the daytime. It became the name of a movie theatre chain, including the 14th and New York Ave. Trans-Lux in Washington, D.C. designed by Thomas Lamb and built in 1937. The theatre swept down the block like an ocean liner, with a prismatic mirror tower on one end and an RCA radio transmitter with thunderbolt script on the other. This landmark was torn down in 1975. We dedicate our newsletter to the spirit of the Trans-Lux and our determination to prevent any further loss of Art Deco monuments in Washington.

and reflecting, polished surfaces. The lobby of Scholz's General Scott is composed of semi-circular columns, rounded-off corners and a large recessed circle for the indirect cove lighting so typical of many other Deco lobbies. The materials employed were costly: veneer marquetry wall panels, inlaid marble floor, and large wall mirrors." In refurbishing the lobby, Gary Lovejoy, ASID, successfully built upon the feeling of the original space in restoring and refurbishing it.

On the basis of his study of Washington apartment buildings in preparation for a book he is writing on that subject, James M. Goode, Curator of the Smithsonian Castle, concludes,

"The General Scott is one of the best preserved Art Deco apartment houses of today. It still has its innovative floor plan with typically small but well-designed units featuring sun porches with glass doors and partitions, handsome bathroom features such as Servidors (clothes hampers) . . . The lobby elevator doors of a classic Art Deco design are somewhat different from the elevator doors for the upper floors which feature a General Scott logo." The building also has a circular bay at the corner of Sixteenth Street and Rhode Island Avenue, and there is vitrolite detailing below some of the sun porch window bays.

When the General Scott was offered for sale in 1980 by Scholz's heirs, a tenants association was formed under the successive leadership of Peg Stone, Emerald VanBuskirk, and Robert E. Wood, assisted by a hard-working board of directors and floor captains to effect the conversion to condominium. As the prospectus for The General Scott Condominium announced, the understated Art Deco design was being faithfully maintained throughout because, as future owners of General Scott apartments, the tenant-developers took special care to ensure that the renovation reflected their desire to live in an attractive, functional, and well-maintained residence. The details of the purchase, conversion, and renovation of the building were extensive. The General Scott Tenants Association was ably served by developers Hoskinson & Davis, Inc., with David Kunhardt as project manager and by Alan Dranitzke of Garfinkle & Dranitzke for legal services. Ann Lunow of Weaver Bros., Inc., is property manager for the condominium.

The General Scott Tenants Association has been recognized by both the D.C. Housing Industry Corporation—for providing affordable housing and preventing displacement of moderate-income households, while modernizing and adding energy improvements—and

by the Art Deco Society of Washington for their contribution to the preservation of the fine building at One Scott Circle.

"The General Scott," notes James Goode, "should serve as an example for the proper conversion and conservation of many of the other Art Deco apartment houses on Sixteenth Street, Connecticut Avenue, and even outlying areas of Washington."

This article was based in part on Washington Deco by Hans Wirz and Richard Striner (Smithsonian Institution Press, in press, November 1984); Capital Losses by James M. Goode (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979); Best Addresses: A Century of Washington's Distinguished Apartment Houses, 1880-1980, by James M. Goode (in preparation); the original (1941-42) advertising brochure condominium and condominium for The General Scott; and interviews with Lillian Bowen and Ann Lunow (Weaver Brothers, Inc.), David Kunhardt (Hoskinson & Davis, Inc.), Gary Lovejoy (ASID). I also interviewed Christine Messer, Resident Manager for The General Scott; and Emerald VanBuskirk, The General Scott Tenants Association.

(Allen J. Sprow is a member of ADSW.)

Langston Terrace (continued)

formed U.S. Housing Authority (USHA) and its completion in 1938 represented the first constructive solution to the problem.

Robinson's plans for the project reflected not only goals of the USHA, but his own desire to use his skills as an architect to create an atmosphere of decency and hope for needy black families during the depression years. The idea of subsidized housing, however, was relatively unknown in the U.S. and except for a few earlier projects in other cities had been mainly associated with the ideologies of the Russian and European governments. Because of its foreign origins, opponents of public housing in the U.S. often made allusions to communism and socialism in their arguments. However, the local press remained sympathetic, hailing Langston Terrace as a "planned utopia" and a "model community for the reclamation of human lives."

The two, three, and four story dwellings of Langston Terrace were

Early Langston Terrace residents.



designed about a central common which contained play areas, gardens, and several large animal sculptures. The buildings were two shades of brick with clean, straightforward lines, and details were precise and graceful. Iron railings at the doorways had a circular motif and entry overhangs integrated lighting and house numbers in cast concrete manufactured by John J. Earley. Attention to order and safety resulted in the placement of low density units in a well-landscaped setting approached by a surrounding circuit road and footpaths.

After nearly 50 years the project has survived in remarkably good condition. Aside from unharmonious replacement of the original casement windows and graffiti, the buildings are unaltered and retain much of their architectural character. Within the realm of the Art Moderne style, Langston Terrace Dwellings may be fully understood and appreciated as a unique development in the social history of the city and warrant renewed attention from students of architecture history in Washington.

(Glen B. Leiner is a graduate student in historic preservation at George Washington University.)

Hilyard Robinson (continued)

sion and New Deal years. This was especially significant for a black architect, as that period was a difficult one for the profession as a whole.

Robinson's architecture is characterized by the relationship of his buildings to their purpose. Later works included major campus buildings at Howard University and other campuses, respectful of their surroundings while exhibiting innovative style and space planning.

His affiliation with Howard has included not only his buildings and teaching, but serving as chairman of the Architecture School as well. As a member of several committees, Robinson has contributed to the founding of the National Capital Advisory Committee, the Southwest redevelopment, and Lincoln Park. His practice, housed in the 11th St. building he designed in the early 1930s, has also given training to many architects, including Hugh Newell Jacobson.

Now retired, Robinson maintains his office and spends much time with old friends and a storehouse of the treasures accumulated over the years. His architectural contributions are not widely known. What is extraordinary is the fact that he was virtually alone with the skills needed to successfully create a large inventory of significant buildings.

—Glen B. Leiner

(Glen B. Leiner is planning to report on Art Deco sculptures in a future issue of Trans-Lux.)