



Thursday, May 21, 2020

KNICKERBOCKER APARTMENTS

Statement from Historic Kansas City

After years of sitting vacant, the far eastern section of the KNICKERBOCKER APARTMENTS at 501 Knickerbocker Place in Midtown Kansas City, was damaged by fire this morning. The building complex is currently vacant and there have emerged no viable rehabilitation options according to the owner Kansas City Life. Over these many decades, the Valentine Neighborhood Association has made significant efforts to engage and work with the owner.

Listed on Historic Kansas City's "Most Endangered List" since 2011, the Knickerbocker Apartments represent an important subtype of the Kansas City Colonnaded apartment, a departure from the typical apartment complex of the period. With their prominent porches and a wide expanse of front lawn, they remained the largest apartment group in Kansas City until around 1921. The building is a representative and rare surviving example of the work of L. G. Middaugh. Built in 1906 in the Century Revival style for developer James A. Rose, the Knickerbocker Apartments are located on what remained as one of Kansas City's few private streets until it was deeded to the city in 1958. The elegance and prestige of the Knickerbocker were highly expressed in its design features and its private street status.

In 1966 Knickerbocker Place was purchased from the Charles F. Curry family by Kansas City Life Insurance for future expansion of their facilities. In 1981 an attempt to protect Knickerbocker Place from demolition was made by the Valentine Neighborhood Association and the Landmarks Commission of Kansas City. The owner stated that the cost of saving the buildings would place undue hardship on Kansas City Life and that the addition of a new Computer Center to the company's facilities at Broadway and 36th Street outweighed the issue of preserving the Knickerbocker apartments. In 1982, the north building (500-530 Knickerbocker Place) was demolished. One-half of the complex still remains.

Although listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2003, the National Register provides limited protection. If there is no federal funding, license, or permit involved in a demolition or any proposed new construction on the site, the owner has absolutely no obligation to confer with local officials. As owners' consent is a matter of City Council custom and practice, an attempt failed to designate the property in 1981 to the Kansas City Register of Historic Places. The Knickerbocker Apartments is a unique and rare surviving example of the Kansas City Colonnaded apartment. Successful models for renovation of historic Midtown apartment properties can be found up and down Armour quite nearby Knickerbocker.

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