



MODERN LIVING:  
Lincoln Place's  
future is in doubt



# Lincoln Monument

HOW THE FIGHT TO TURN A VENICE APARTMENT COMPLEX INTO A LANDMARK IS SPARKING A NATIONAL DEBATE **BY ROBERT ITO**

**M**ANY YEARS AGO I WAS standing in a barracks in Pearl Harbor when a fellow marine pushed his hand about an inch and a half through the wall. Termites had eaten most of the wood behind the paint, he

told me, and a lot of the rest of the structure besides. Across the street from our building, which we shared with geckos, cockroaches, the aforementioned termites, and a colony of feral cats, was the beautiful, collegial-looking home of the base's guard company. We

might be living in a place like that, my friend explained, but our own crumbling two-story abode couldn't be torn down until a guy came by to take some photos of it, for posterity, because it was on some kind of "register of historic places." He said it like it was the most supremely stupid thing in the world. "That's why we're living in this shit hole," he told me. "Because it's historical."

Take that story and turn it completely upside down and you'll get some sense of what's



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happening at Lincoln Place, a complex of 696 garden apartments near Penmar Park in Venice. Unlike our Pearl Harbor home, Lincoln Place is still habitable—what's left of it—and unlike my bitter barracks mate, its residents, many of whom have lived there for several decades, want to stay. They believe it should be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, not demolished—bulldozed and replaced with luxury condos or some such, as they're sure their current landlord plans to do—because, well, it's historical. The sprawling development was conceived in 1949 by Ralph Vaughn, an African American architect who was a senior set designer for MGM and assisted Paul Williams in designing, among other places, the MCA building in Beverly Hills and the home of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in West Adams. Preservationists view Lincoln Place as a noteworthy example of modernist architecture that was influenced by the garden city movement, an idealistic crusade dating from the turn of the century that advocated planned communities with abundant green spaces and low-density housing. Spread over 35 acres, Lincoln Place was the largest development in California to be financed by Section 608 of the National Housing Act, a landmark piece of legislation created to spur the construction of rental units after World War II. Sure, Lincoln Place is historical. The question is, Is it historical enough? And just who gets to make that call?

The answer to the latter question is now being debated in Washington by the House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands, the group that oversees the National Register. Prompted by Robert Bisno, a former owner of Lincoln Place, the subcommittee is considering legislation that would amend the National Historic Preservation Act to require the owner's consent before a property could be determined eligible for inclusion on the register. If the act is amended, landlords and property owners—not historians, preservationists, or local governments—could decide whether a place should be considered for National Register protections. Preservationist groups fear the effect this might have on historic sites across the country. "If people are abusing the register, then let's find out," says Emily Wadhams,

vice president of public policy at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "Let's address it. But let's not just go in and change the law because of a couple of disgruntled property owners."

**T**O GET TO LINCOLN PLACE, head north along Lincoln Boulevard in Venice toward Rose Avenue, past the El Pollo Loco and the Rite Aid and the brown baggers hanging out by the Lake Street bus stop, then turn right at the Red Hot Video. The first thing you notice is the color. The bungalows and two-story apartment buildings are decked out in peaches and pinks and blues, rich maroons and sunflower yellows. Tall palms and banana plants stand next to trees loaded with avocados and loquats. Pathways snake past expansive gardens. A lot of care was put into every detail, from the Bauhaus-y geometrical patterns of the windows to the low-pitched roofs.

Cooks and home health aides live at Lincoln Place, alongside students, teachers, artists, and a healthy dose of retirees. The units include one-story bungalows and one- and two-bedroom apartments. Sheila Bernard, an adult-education teacher for the Los Angeles Unified School District and president of the Lincoln Place Tenants Association, moved here in 1988. "You talk to people when you go to your mailbox, or when you're folding your laundry," Bernard says. "It becomes home."

Stroll around the grounds and you'll likely meet at least a few of the tenants doing the same thing, since the shared gardens and pleasant walkways were designed for just that. Little by little, though, you notice how quiet it is. How the entrances to many buildings, even that charming blue one on the corner, are boarded up. Since 2003, Lincoln Place's current landlord, AIMCO—which is based in Denver and owns approximately 260,000 apartment units in 47 states and has assets totaling more than \$10 billion—has been slowly moving tenants out of the development with relocation offers and eviction notices. In March the remaining tenants were given 120 days to vacate the premises. Since July 18 many of them—the ones who were not granted extensions because of age or disability—have been illegally occupying Lincoln Place.



How did it come to this? When Lincoln Place was completed in 1951, its developers described it as “the perfect opportunity for gracious living,” with “built-in TV outlets” and private patios. “No effort has been spared,” read a 1951 brochure, “in making the Lincoln Place Apartment interiors the ultimate in exquisite beauty and smart, modern appearance.” The development was desperately needed in the apartment-poor

environment of postwar L.A. For decades Lincoln Place was one of the more desirable affordable-housing options on the Westside.

Robert Bisno, CEO of TransAction Financial Corporation, a Century City-based real estate development company, bought the property in 1986. By 1991, Lincoln Place—which had been trumpeted four decades earlier as a “completely planned \$8,000,000 community”—was worth four to seven times

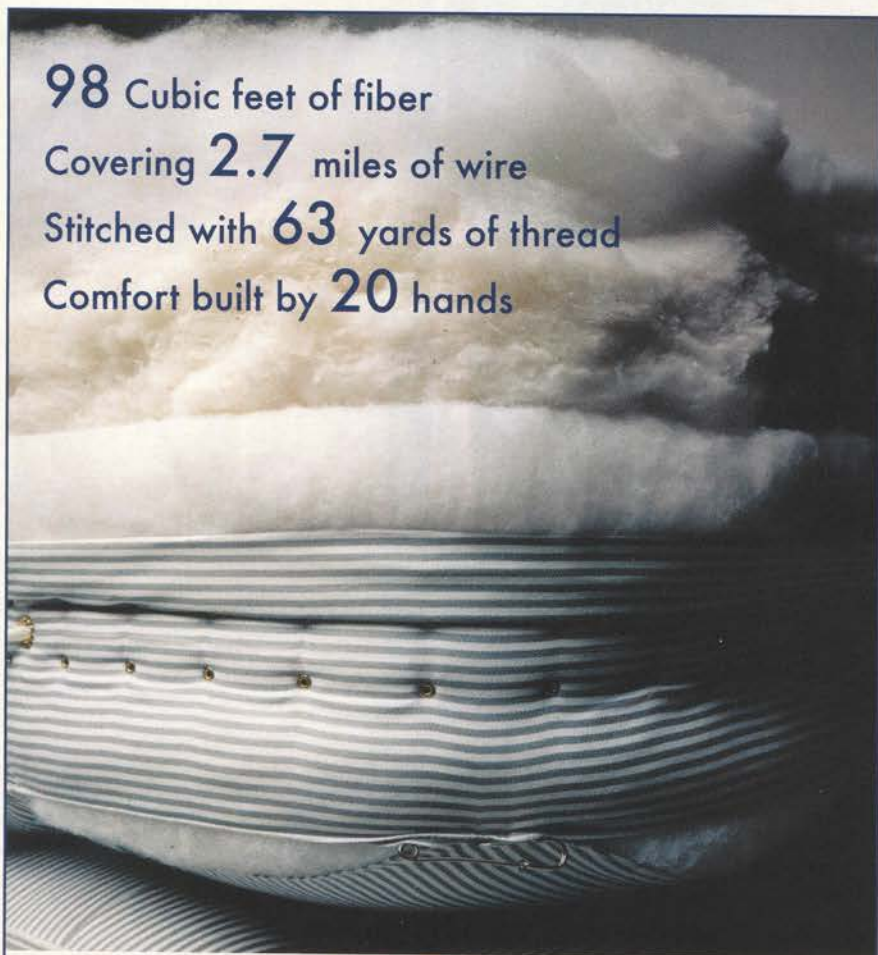
that much, thanks to a housing boom that transformed the spacious complex into an irresistible business opportunity. Bisno wanted to demolish the apartments and build condos and town homes in their stead. In 1995, the L.A. city planning commission approved his redevelopment plan.

Seven years of legal battles followed among Bisno, the Lincoln Place Tenants Association, the City of Los Angeles, the L.A. Conservancy, the ACLU, and a host of others. Many of the fights hinged on whether Bisno’s redevelopment plans would illegally remove affordable housing from the area. Others involved the landlord’s use of the Ellis Act, a provision that allows property owners to evict their tenants if they are going out of the rental business. Still other skirmishes involved relatively minor offenses—like Bisno’s suit against Sheila Bernard for holding twice-a-year yard sales. “Bisno is still garnishing my wages for that one,” she says.

In 2002, local preservationists began the process to get Lincoln Place on the National Register. A listing doesn’t necessarily stop demolition, but it can slow it considerably, forcing landlords to wait for completed environmental impact reports, for example. Amanda Seward, chair of the L.A. Conservancy Modern Committee’s Residential Council, drafted the initial application to the California Historical Resources Commission, which reviews the state nominations for the National Register. The application described, in page after spirited page, Lincoln Place’s architectural history, its design philosophies, and its ties to the post-World War II housing crisis.

Bisno was so incensed that he went to George P. Radanovich, a Republican congressman from Fresno and then-chair of the Subcommittee on National Parks, to plead his case. He owned the place, he argued, and in his opinion it wasn’t historical in the least. “These tenants are attempting to misuse the system to protect their rents,” Bisno says. “In none of these disputes have you ever seen the tenants say, ‘You know what? We really believe in the intent of historical preservation, and we’re willing to help shoulder the burden, so you can raise our rents to market, or closer to market.’”

In February 2003, the commission determined that Lincoln Place was eligible for inclusion. The commission forwarded the



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## URBAN AFFAIRS

nomination to the Keeper of the National Register, who returned the application, requesting more information. Historic preservation has not been a top priority for the Bush administration, so the ramifications of this nomination made many nervous. "What I kept hearing from the preservation community in Washington was, Please don't re-submit this, because there is a grave concern that the Republicans want to change this law, and we'll all be worse off," says Seward.

That June Bisno testified before the subcommittee. "I'm here today," he began, "because it's important that we protect the importance and integrity of the National Register process from those who are seeking to exploit it to promote their own self-serving agenda." The register, he told the subcommittee, was "trampling" on the rights of property owners. "If I want my property honored by the National Register," he said, "I will myself make the application."

This spring a "discussion draft" proposing changes to the National Historic Preservation Act went before the subcommittee. The "owner consent" section, inspired by Bisno's testimony, drew criticism from preservationist and architectural organizations across the country, from the American Institute of Architects to the Society for Historical Archaeology. In her testimony before the subcommittee, the National Trust's Wadhams described the proposed changes as a "needless and draconian remedy."

L.A. is chockablock with landmarks whose owners once fought mightily to alter or tear them down, from Saint Vibiana's Cathedral and the Margaret Herrick Library (previously the Beverly Hills Waterworks) to the Cinerama Dome and Bob's Big Boy in Toluca Lake. Local organizations like the L.A. Conservancy have pursued these battles for decades, bolstering their cases for preservation by fighting to have buildings listed on the state and national registers. Many fear what might happen if owners become arbiters of what merits historic status. "It would have a very significant impact on our ability to preserve Los Angeles County's rich architectural and historic resources," says Ken Bernstein, preservation director of the L.A. Conservancy. "Often we find ourselves having to argue that sites have overriding cultural and historic significance, even when an individual owner may disagree."



**A**IMCO, WHICH BOUGHT THE property for a reported \$120 million in 2003, claims there's nothing particularly historic about Lincoln Place. "There are more than 900 FHA housing projects in California, and many of them look very, very similar to Lincoln Place," says Patti Shwayder, AIMCO's senior vice president for government relations and communications. She points

to a letter from Stanley Buder, a CUNY-Baruch College history professor and the author of a book on the garden city movement. Buder, who was commissioned by AIMCO's attorneys to review the California Register application, called the site plan "cluttered and deficient in clarity and coherence" and wrote, "There is nothing distinctive or special to warrant official designation as a historic site." This July, following

a challenge to a 1993 environmental impact report, the L.A. County superior court agreed, stating that Lincoln Place was "not new or unique in concept" nor "designed by a notable architect."

"That's what they said about Schindler and Neutra," says Laura Burns, who did much of the historical research for the register applications. Burns has lived in Lincoln Place since 1996. The part-time film editor is sipping a home-brewed espresso at her kitchen table and poring over a fat scrapbook filled with Lincoln Place ephemera. She has the building permit and 1950s rental agreements. She has two of the original brochures and black-and-white photos of the architects.

The prizes of the collection, though, are the letters of support. There's one from Diane Favro, then-president of the Society of Architectural Historians. There are others from the L.A. chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architects, the president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, and the L.A. Conservancy.

Burns and the other remaining tenants are now in limbo, waiting to see how recent decisions—including the California Historical Resources Commission's determination in August that Lincoln Place is eligible for the California Register—will affect their evictions. AIMCO has not announced its ultimate plans for the property. In the meantime, the questions sparked by Bisno and the tenants of Lincoln Place continue to be debated in Congress.

Burns tells a story about a recent preservationists' conference she attended. An architect was asked to pick a period whose architecture was so awful, so irredeemably bad, that it would never be considered historic by future generations. The architect chose the 1970s. "But he said, the fact of it is, we may look 50 years down the road, and there may be something here that tells us so much about that time, about the attitudes of that time, about the architectural experiments of that time.

"And Lincoln Place is like that," says Burns as she leafs through her collection of photos and documents. "It tells something about what people thought the middle class and the lower middle class were worth." **LA**

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