Retirement Center

Catholic Presbyterian Apartments the first complex of its kind in Baton Rouge

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

In 1969, St. Joseph Cathedral and First Presbyterian Church formed what was then an unusual alliance. These two diverse congregations came together to build the Catholic Presbyterian Apartments, an independent living facility for seniors of moderate income. "That was unique at that time," said Thomas Benton, who with Carlos Spahli served as attorney for the project. "There was a 'circle-the-wagon' attitude between the Protestant churches and the Catholic church at that time."

"It was the first complex of its kind in Baton Rouge," said John Hernandez, a member of the board of directors.

Benton said the driving force behind the project was Vernon J. Broussard. "He was a man with a mission, to build a retirement center, not just another housing unit," he said. "He managed to put together something with a spiritual concept. This was his heart and soul."

Broussard became the center's first manager and served on its original board.

Desmond, Miremont, Burks and Associates were the architects for the 195-unit, 14-story complex at the corner of North and North 7th streets, within walking distance of the two founding churches. Milton Womack was the contractor for the $3.3-million project.

An initial grant of $162,345 came from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in August 1970. Under an agreement with HUD, the center would receive annual payments toward a 40-year loan on the complex.

On Feb. 29, 1971, ground was broken for the new building. Participating in the ceremonies were Eugene H. Owen, president of the board of directors; Donald M. McAndrew, secretary-treasurer; Womack; and Mrs. J.C. Potts, one of the first applicants for an apartment. Serving on the founding board of directors were Paul F. Drury, Evena Fontenot, J. Clifford Ourso, Rene V. Williamson, Lloyd W. Gravine, Eugene F. Tims, Grace Utter, Benjamin D. Harrison, Owen and Broussard.

Initially, tenants had to be over the age of 62 with incomes in the range of $3,000 to $6,000 per year.

The complex was built with 65 one-bedroom units and 130 efficiencies. Monthly rents ranged from $73 for first-floor efficiencies to $119 for one-bedroom apartments on the top floor; all with utilities included. Each apartment had its own modern kitchen and bathroom. The roomy units had central heating and air conditioning and nice closets.

"We had some of the most archeic ideas about housing then," Benton said. "You could have apartments without closets."

The apartments were ready for occupancy in May 1972 and formally dedicated Oct. 1 in the presence of John B. Martin, U.S. commissioner on aging. "The kind of living that is being developed here will help assure..."
amazing things about the complex is the way wings of each floor became "communities." We heard floor captains," said Gordon McDowell, an architect who has served as director of the apartment complex since 1986. "Everybody takes care of everybody."

In the beginning, it was a very homogeneous group," Benton said. There was a balance of men and women. The complex frequently had parties. "One lady told me, 'We were having so much fun, but you know, all the men died.'" Over the years, the complex has had its share of characters.

Elise Forbes walked on her walk down the middle of North Street to St. Joseph Cathedral every day. "We'd get calls from people all down the street telling us that one of our residents was walking down the middle," said Diane Perkins, a certified occupational specialist at the complex.

Msgr. Carlos Sanchez, a refugee priest from Guatemala, moved into the building the day it opened. "Clifford Ours and I hand-picked his apartment," Benton said.

Sanchez, an artist and architect, had studied or taught at eight universities in the United States and Germany. He studied art in Mexico with Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco and assisted with the giant murals that hang in the President's Palace in Mexico City and the Palace of Cortez in Cuernavaca.

Sanchez was the first Fellow in Art at Dartmouth University and later started that university's fine arts college.

All of this was before he was ordained a priest in 1950 at the age of 52. After serving in Guatemala, Sanchez moved to Baton Rouge and St. Aloysius Catholic Church.

For the many years he has lived in the apartment complex, he celebrated Mass in his apartment and spoke at the Guatemalan altar given to him by architect A. Hayes Town.

The most modern techniques in building were used in the complex. However, one day in 1990, a 10-foot section of a stucco exterior wall extending nine stories came apart from the building and slipped down. Water had invaded the stucco and rusted out the metal ties and plates that once anchored the wall. It was acceptable construction at the time the building was built," McDowell said. But the construction did not hold up. In January 1991, the city-parish gave the board 30 days to make the needed repairs or the building would be shut down. The residents decided to renovate.

"I'm not worried about being in here, but I'm worried about going outside," said 81-year-old Ginny Bates. "There's no way I'm moving out of here."

In February 1991, city-parish officials shut down three blocks of North Street to be sure that his aunt had the section of North 7th fearing that the loose wall might fall on a passerby.

"We would be homeless. We'd have no place to go," said 71-year-old Ginny Bates. "There's no way I'm moving out of here."

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ABOVE: Diane Perkins, Jane Boyce, Frances Halligan and John Hernandez, seated from left, and Thomas Benton, Gordon McDowell and Jim Toups, standing from left, have been involved with the Catholic Presbyterian Apartments for years. They are pictured in the courtyard at the back of the building.

LEFT: Downtown neighbors followed the progress of the construction as shown in this photo from Sept. 24, 1971.