

The Lives of Tremont and the Lincoln Park Baths

By Chris Roy

Buildings—like people—are evolving entities. They are born, they mature, they atrophy, they die. With a little plastic surgery, some even get a second chance. Buildings also are context-dependent. Their role and persona are dictated by time, their place, and the people and things that inhabit or visit them. Lastly, buildings are reference tools. They inform us about the past, track how the past has melded into the present, and even give us a sense of the future. They are books with doors.

The Lincoln Park Baths is each of these things—a dynamic organism, a changing figure in a changing neighborhood, a patchwork of contrasts, and a vehicle for understanding people, neighborhoods, cities and societies. What’s more, the facility resides in Tremont, a neighborhood that, like the Baths, has lived many lives, assumed many identities and taken on multiple personalities. Even its name has metamorphosed: Cleveland Heights, University Heights, Lincoln Heights, and finally “Tremont.”

Like the Baths, Tremont is a highly complex being: It is old (68 percent of Tremont homes were constructed before 1900¹); it is new (hundreds of townhouses have been built along the district’s eastern edge); it is rich (the renovated “Lincoln Park Condominiums” sell for more than \$250,000 per unit); and it is poor (in 1990, nearly 75 percent of the Tremont’s homes were valued at under \$30,000, compared to 25 percent in Cleveland as a whole²). At any given time, Tremont also is plain and fancy; esoteric and pedestrian; cherished and neglected. Both Tremont and the Lincoln Park Baths have rich life histories filled with change, color and contrast.

A Sense of Tremont

Tremont is a neighborhood of many faces. And no single face adequately communicates all that Tremont is—or was. This characteristic is what gives places (and structures) their personality—their humanity. Tremont’s northern face, for example, is dignified yet tired. Exiting the freeway onto West 14th Street (originally called Jennings Road), visitors encounter a tree-festooned

¹ Owner-Occupancy Fact Sheet, courtesy Tremont West Development Corp.

² City of Cleveland Neighborhood Fact Sheet, courtesy Tremont West Development Corp

parkway lined with Victorian homes. However most of those structures are dilapidated or boarded up. Further ahead is Lincoln Park, Tremont's "Public Square." Lincoln Park formerly was the private property of Ms. Thirza Pelton, whose brainchild was the short-lived Cleveland University. To the north of the park stands the Pelton Place Apartments, a dilapidated tribute to the park's original owner. Clearly, Tremont's northern face looks wistfully back to a brighter and more affluent era (Figure 1).

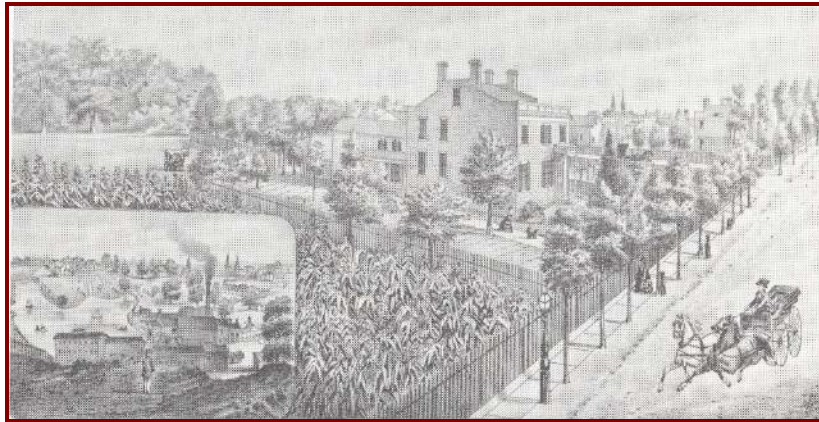


Figure 1: View of the residence of Alfred Kellogg on Scranton Road, one block west of West 14th Street.³

Tremont's eastern face (down Jefferson Avenue or Literary Road into the Flats) is that of a different being. More patchy and less aristocratic, it is the visage of a community whose growth was supported by the large industries. Most of the homes that line the hill are small, somewhat rundown and almost temporal in appearance—the kind that one would expect to see in a company town, where industrialists acted upon the need to create inexpensive, accessible housing for their many employees. Slightly further north, however, is a sea of new condominiums, townhouses and apartments—clearly the hub of gentrification in Tremont. In net, Tremont gazes east toward a grimy past *and* a well-scrubbed future.

Looking west—underneath the freeway overpass along Willey Avenue from Scranton Road and Trane Avenue—Tremont recalls how drastically it has been eviscerated by the expressway, and why there truly is an "East Tremont" and "West Tremont." West of the underpass, broken sidewalks, cheap stores and non-descript manufacturing businesses predominate. The area is unaesthetic, unimproved and unremarkable. At least for the time being, Tremont's western persona has given up.

³ Board of County Commissioners, "The People Are the City: Three Cleveland Neighborhoods, 1796 – 1980," © 1980. Photo originally from the Western Reserve Historical Society.

Looking south along West 14th Street toward Clark Avenue, Tremont reminds us that it once was part of the city. This direction, in fact, is the only view that shows visitors any connection with Cleveland, albeit across a sort of drawbridge spanning Interstate 71. This end of West 14th Street also is Tremont's most concentrated business segment, with small businesses, stores, galleries and a cluster of restaurants. In effect, it says "Once, I was part of something bigger than myself. And perhaps I will be again."

All in all, Tremont's many faces tell us that this is a living, evolving place that has experienced immense change; and will continue to do so.

Before the Baths

During the last quarter of the 19th century, Tremont was a bustling Cleveland neighborhood (annexed to Cleveland in 1867), marked by the contrasting variety of lives and lifestyles that often comprise a young community. However, it was hardly less eclectic than now: immigrants from many countries (but primarily Germany and Ireland) lived along, or close to, the hill overlooking the Flats and the Cuyahoga River, where they worked for manufacturers such as Lamson & Sessions and Ferry Cap and Set Screw. At the other end of the district—a slight distance from their "unwashed" employees—lived the gentry: Olney, Pelton, Kellogg and next-door neighbors Lamson and Sessions (Figure 2).

Despite its vitality, Tremont was still somewhat isolated—a district close the heart of the city but exceptionally difficult to access. This dichotomy of "near versus far" is another of Tremont's many contrasts. The "distance" was minimized, somewhat, when the 1088-foot Central Viaduct, spanning the Flats and Cuyahoga River, opened in 1888, but the gap widened again when Interstate 71 barricaded Tremont from Cleveland in the 1960s.



Figure 2: One of Tremont’s many stark contrasts: Descending into the Flats from Tremont, 1939 (left) and Isaac Lamson and Samuel Session homes on Jennings Ave (right).^{4,5}

Most of Tremont had been platted by the 1870s, including the future location of the Lincoln Park Baths. That site on the south side of Starkweather Avenue—roughly midway between Jennings Avenue and Merchant Avenue (now West 11th Street)—occupied three lots. The easternmost two were purchased in the 1870s by Andrew and Maria Kays. Two homes were built and maintained by the Kays until they were sold to the City of Cleveland in 1920. A third lot was developed by a Mr.(?) Metzen and turned over at least half a dozen times between the 1870s and 1920 when it was sold by Mr. Frank Schlick to the City (Figure 3).

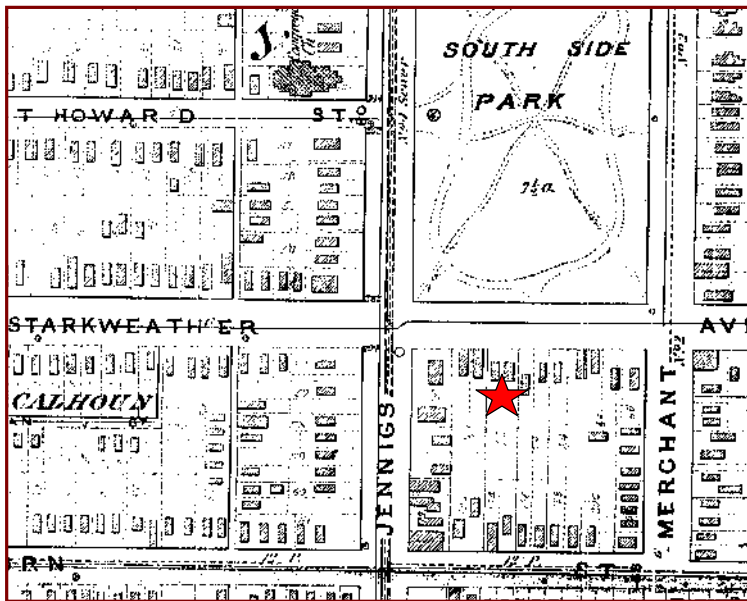


Figure 3: Plat map of the Tremont neighborhood from the Atlas of Cuyahoga County (1892) by the George F. Cram Company, Plate 56. Note that the park had not yet been christened Lincoln Park.

⁴ Board of County Commissioners, “The People Are the City: Three Cleveland Neighborhoods, 1796 – 1980,” © 1980. Photo originally from the Western Reserve Historical Society.

⁵ Source: Cleveland State University, Cleveland Press Collection.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, no public bath houses existed in Cleveland despite the fact that, according to an 1899 survey, only one bathtub existed for every 600 homes.⁶ Most homes, in fact, had no running water at all. And a majority of those that *did* featured only cold water. However, the Golden Age of the Bath House was about to begin—a clear, civic response to the previous decades’ influx of poor and working-class people. Between 1904 and 1921, eight public bath houses were opened and run by the City of Cleveland.

By 1900, the country’s industrial workforce comprised one third of the population; and one out of every three laborers was an immigrant. Moreover, about 40 percent of working-class citizens lived below the poverty line of \$500 per year.⁷ This was the population for whom the public bathhouses were erected. First was the Orange Avenue Bath House, located in what was then a Jewish immigrant neighborhood. The Lincoln Park Baths (the last to be constructed) opened in 1921. In between, bath houses were constructed on Broadway, Central, Clark, Portland, St. Clair and Woodland Avenues. Interestingly, the term “bath house” is a misnomer, since few (and eventually, *none*) of the houses contained bathtubs. They did, however, have dozens of showers—generally separate stalls on the main floor for men and women, and open children’s shower rooms in the basement, separated by gender. Virtually all the bath houses had separate outside entrances for each sex. A typical policy was free use of the facility (and its water) and a fee ranging from a penny to a nickel for a towel and small bar of soap.

A Brief “First Life”

In 1921, the Lincoln Park Baths opened its doors to an enthusiastic, “unwashed” community. The next few years, however, would be the facility’s busiest, since—true to Tremont’s somewhat “disconnected” nature—the use of public bath facilities already was beginning to wane. The first decade of the new century actually had been the heyday of the Cleveland bathhouse. On June 20, 1908, a record 2,236 people availed themselves of the Orange Avenue Bathhouse facilities—an average of 186 people per hour, assuming the building was open for 12 hours.⁸ And in 1909, the Clark, Broadway and Orange Avenue Bath Houses played host to a combined 441,109 showers—

⁶ Platt, Gordon, “Cleveland Bathhouses Were a Way of Life,” Cleveland Press, July 25, 1970.

⁷ “Documenting the Other Half,” The Social Reform Photography of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine (Photography and Social Reform) <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Davis/photography/reform/gildedage.html> (viewed 3/21/04)

⁸ Public Bathing: All Washed up, Cleveland Magazine, July 1974.

an average of 402 showers per facility per day.⁹ You could say that the Lincoln Park Baths “missed the boat” to some degree; by the 1920s indoor plumbing was becoming more common, and families that could afford to retrofit their homes eagerly did so. Clearly, the Baths served an important purpose, but the need was not as urgent as it had been 20 to 30 years previous.

Perhaps the Lincoln Park Baths’ most dramatic contrast is the elegance of the building itself compared to the exceptionally “earthy” nature of its mission and clientele. Like many government buildings built in the early 20th Century, elegance, style and a sense of power, durability and stability were central. The Baths was an exceptional example of the “exalted status” that City Governments often sought to infuse into their structures. LCB’s terra cotta tile roof and round-arched clerestory (an upper portion of a wall containing windows for supplying natural light to a building) clearly were meant to emulate an elite Roman bath house.¹⁰ The building’s surface is raised/textured stucco, framed by Doric columns and ornamented with three carved, raised fish murals: one on either side of the door and one over it (Figure 4). Other ornamental touches include smaller, sculpted, nautilus shell murals; “egg and dart” molding below the roofline; and a highly inviting central walkway connecting the front and back. All of the elements—stucco, stone, brick-and-tile walkway, and wrought iron fencing—work together to create a strong sense of strength and permanence.



Figure 4: The Baths after their conversion to condominiums in 1996. Note the open clerestory and elaborate molding.

⁹ Miller, Jay, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 20, 1977.

¹⁰ The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

Throughout its “lives”—both as a bath house and recreation center—LCB willingly served the salt of the Earth. We know, for example, that most of the male population of Tremont made its living in typical blue-collar fashion: the grimy, industrial environments of the Flats (in 1905, nearly 14,000 Clevelanders were employed in iron and steel production alone, and virtually all such work was performed in the Flats). For these people, the shower must have been a highly welcome opportunity to cleanse and rejuvenate.

It also is likely that children comprised a greater percentage of the Baths’ user base than they represented in the overall Tremont population. There are several reasons for this. In the 1920s, for example, more than a million children between the ages of 10 and 15 worked full time (often 12-14 hours per day). In Cleveland—one of the nation’s top industrial centers—it is reasonable to assume that at least several hundred children were Tremont residents *and* employees at one of the many industrial works in the adjacent Flats. At the end of a long workday, the Lincoln Park bathing facilities would represent a highly coveted combination of hygiene and recreation for this belabored group. An elderly interviewee for a 1977 *Plain Dealer* article recalls that “There might be a dozen of us kids. We’d head for the bathhouse and we’d shower in the basement. There were showers all around the walls and the kids would shower and wrestle”¹¹ Children’s hygiene also was encouraged by their elders. Queried as part of a CSU oral history project, Eugene Bahniuk explains that “It was a poor neighborhood and not everybody could afford to have showers and baths in their houses. So I think it was every Friday, the teacher would ask anybody who wants to take a shower could go take one.”¹²

All in all, this glamorous and sturdily built facility clearly was patronized mostly by the community’s least-advantaged people and families. This should not imply that those with lesser means do not deserve “classy surroundings”—only that amenities of dignity and class were rarely available to them. A related contrast is LCB’s neo-Roman architecture, since Greeks were the least-represented of all immigrant populations in Tremont during the 1920s (less than 1 percent). By contrast, nearly 61 percent of Tremont’s population was Polish, followed by Russians (14 percent) and Czechs (11 percent).¹³

¹¹ Miller, Jay, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 20, 1977.

¹² Cleveland State Tremont Oral History Project: Eugene Bahniuk interviewed by Molly Nieser on November 5, 2003.

¹³ Application: National Register of historic Places, courtesy, Cleveland Landmarks Commission.

A Robust and Lengthy Second Life

After reaching an all-time high in 1920 (36,686), Tremont’s population began to decline in the 1930s.¹⁴ Concurrently, employment in the Flats had been bolstered by the opening of the Upson Nut and Bolt Company in 1909 and Republic Steel in 1930. The net effect was that, while the area was losing inhabitants, the remaining citizens had less need for a public bath house and more economic wherewithal to purchase bathing fixtures. The community’s greater need now was for expanded recreation facilities.

So it was that, after barely a decade’s service as a true bath house, the Lincoln Park Baths began a new life as a community recreation center—a clear reflection of the surrounding community’s changing needs, population and wherewithal. Shower facilities were kept in the building’s basement. But by the late 1930s, plumbing had been removed from the upper floors, replaced by open space for meetings, ping pong, pocket billiards, basketball, boxing, medical dispensaries, boy scout meetings, dances, drama and orchestra rehearsals. Oral history interviewee Eddie Bugala recalls that “there were many talented people teaching the kids how to tap-dance, ballet, drama, woodcraft, arts, crafts and you name it” (Figure 5).¹⁵ Bugala also managed the facility for nearly 30 years. Robert Ceccaralli, who grew up in the Tremont neighborhood in the late 1950s, adds that “they used to have Halloween parties there. They would have you parade in your costume. You’d parade around the area and they would have people that would pull you out of line if they thought your costume was really good; and then they’d have prizes and stuff like that. It was basically just like for little kids” (Figure 6).



*Figure 5: Mothers’ tap dancing lessons at the Lincoln Park Recreation Center (1940)*¹⁶.

¹⁴ Cleveland Planning Commission, City of Cleveland Neighborhood Fact Sheet, Courtesy, Tremont West Development Corp.

¹⁵ Cleveland State Tremont Oral History Project: Eddie Bugala interviewed by Charles McCandlish on February 22, 2003.

¹⁶ Source: Cleveland State University, Cleveland Press Collection.

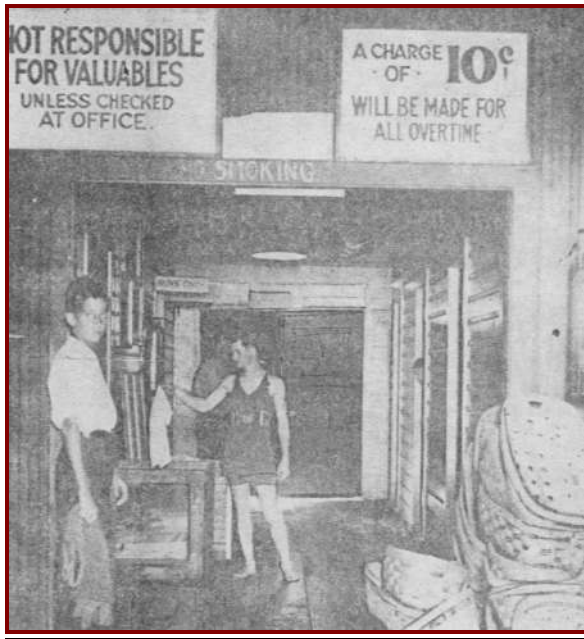


Figure 6: Contrasting the Lincoln Park Baths’ original use with its “reinvention” as a recreation center. The left photo actually is an interior scene at the Gordon Park Bathhouse around 1925. At right is a photo of Halloween preparations at the Lincoln Recreation Center, c., 1950.¹⁷

On the Outside

The outside of the Lincoln Recreation Center became as important as the inside. Recalling his childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, Eugene Bahniuk notes that “lots of the kids who ended up being on high school varsity learned their skills back there playing basketball at night or evenings.”¹⁸ Volleyball and handball also were popular sports in the Baths’ backyard, while community football teams organized through the Center were played across the street at Lincoln Park or at Clark Field in the Flats. During the winters, the Center’s backyard courts were intentionally flooded, making it possible for Molly Barber Alstatt (roughly 12 years old in 1930) to ice skate with her friends. “When we were in high school—junior high, maybe—we used to go to the bath house to do our ice skating. They would freeze over that area behind it.”¹⁹

During the 1940s, the Center’s backyard even had military significance: Eddie Bugala recalls that during World War II, “they had what they called air raid warnings. We’d meet over in back

¹⁷ *Cleveland Press*, July 25, 1970.

¹⁸ Cleveland State Tremont Oral History Project: Eugene Bahniuk interviewed by Molly Nieser on November 5, 2003.

¹⁹ Cleveland State Tremont Oral History Project: Molly Barber Alstatt interviewed by Shelly Brewer on March 1, 2003.

of the Lincoln Recreation Center . . . close to a hundred guys that signed up from the neighborhood. We had our little uniforms; you had your helmet, like in every war.”²⁰

Robert Ceccaralli remembers that “once a year when I was a kid, they brought in a huge band wagon with a small stage on it; and they would have amateur shows. They used to set it up behind the building where the basketball courts are.”²¹

Decline of the Structure and its Environs

The various uses found for the Lincoln Park Recreation Center remained more or less constant from the 1930s through the 1960s. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the rest of Tremont changed dramatically. By that time, the district already had been depleted by residents’ mass exodus to the suburbs. That rush was exacerbated by Interstate 71, which crashed through Tremont just west of West 14th Street, dividing the community in two and further isolating the neighborhood from the rest of the city. Later in the decade, employment in the local steel mills fell dramatically, accelerating the area’s economic decline. Cultural patterns also changed: Appalachians, Hispanics and African Americans moved in, displacing many of the Irish, German, Polish, Slavic, Ukrainian, Russian, Greek and Syrian inhabitants. Valley View Estates at West 7th Street and Starkweather Avenue—a public housing complex erected in 1940 (with the support of much of Tremont)—also may have contributed to the exodus, as more low-income and government-assisted residents came to occupy the facility.

By 1970, Tremont’s population was 16,393, less than half of what it had been in 1930. In percentage terms this population loss was more than double that of the city of Cleveland as a whole.²² In fact, Tremont had the lowest population per square mile (6,054 people) of any district in Cleveland, except for downtown, the Industrial Valley and the Riverside community on Cleveland’s far west side. Moreover, by the early 1970s, Tremont’s percentage of owner-occupied units had dropped to 27.1 percent, compared to 33 percent just a generation earlier.²³

²⁰ Cleveland State Tremont Oral History Project: Eddie Bugala interviewed by Charles McCandlish on February 22, 2003.

²¹ Cleveland State Tremont Oral History Project: Robert Ceccaralli interviewed by Brian Detrow on March 20, 2003.

²² Cleveland Planning Commission, City of Cleveland Neighborhood Fact Sheet, Courtesy, Tremont West Development Corp.

²³ Owner Occupancy Tremont, courtesy Tremont West Development Corp.

Through it all, the Lincoln Park Recreation Center remained open—vividly reflecting the neighborhood’s marked decline, but concurrently struggling to keep its elegant head high. Unfortunately, the area’s deterioration was accompanied by a gradual loss of support by the City, which also set out to (once again) change the facility’s mission. In 1970, City Council passed a resolution that community services would be offered jointly by the Lincoln Recreation Center and Merrick House. The resolution called for about \$40,000 in renovation to the Lincoln Facility, which henceforth would be used primarily (and ironically) for showering and bathing.²⁴

Death and Reincarnation

By the early 1980s, the Lincoln Recreation Center’s condition was such that “an estimated \$600,000 would have been required for plumbing, wiring, masonry, window replacement, and to reduce hazards of asbestos insulation and repair a leaking roof.”²⁵ In addition, Paul Volpe, commissioner, Division of Architecture, observed that “there are a number of safety hazards (open stairwells and sharp surfaces) [but that] the most serious deficiency in the Lincoln Center is its inadequacy as a recreation center.”²⁶

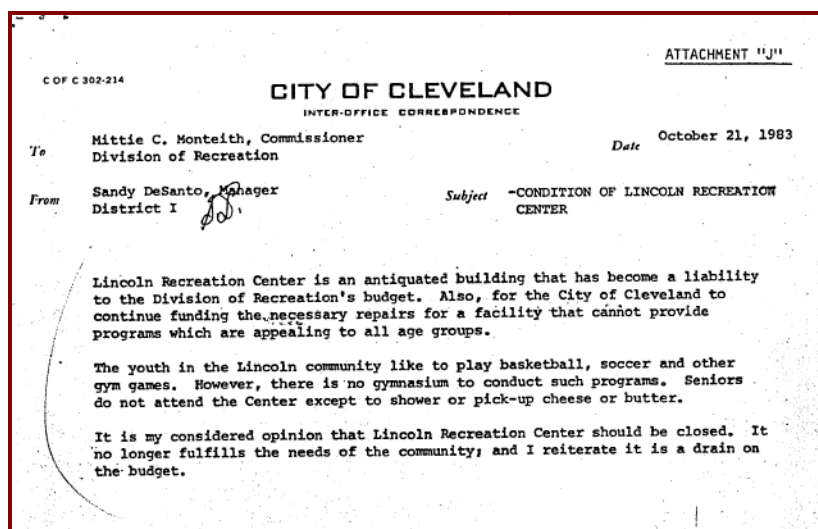


Figure 7: Interoffice memo (October 21, 1983) recommending the closing of the Lincoln Park Baths.²⁷

The inevitable occurred on Friday March 2, 1984, when the Lincoln Recreation Center closed (Figure 8). Resident response was emotional and mildly militant, but the general consensus was that the building simply had slipped too far and that, regardless of condition, its structural

²⁴ Cleveland Press, February 10, 1970, courtesy of the Tremont West Development Corp.

²⁵ “Lincoln Rec Center shut; too expensive,” *The Plain Dealer*, March 3, 1984.

²⁶ City of Cleveland Interoffice Correspondence, December 12, 1983, courtesy, Tremont West Development Corp.

²⁷ City of Cleveland Interoffice Correspondence, December 12, 1983, courtesy, Tremont West Development Corp.

shortcomings made it insufficiently relevant to the community's current needs. Despite its high profile, the Center succumbed quietly.

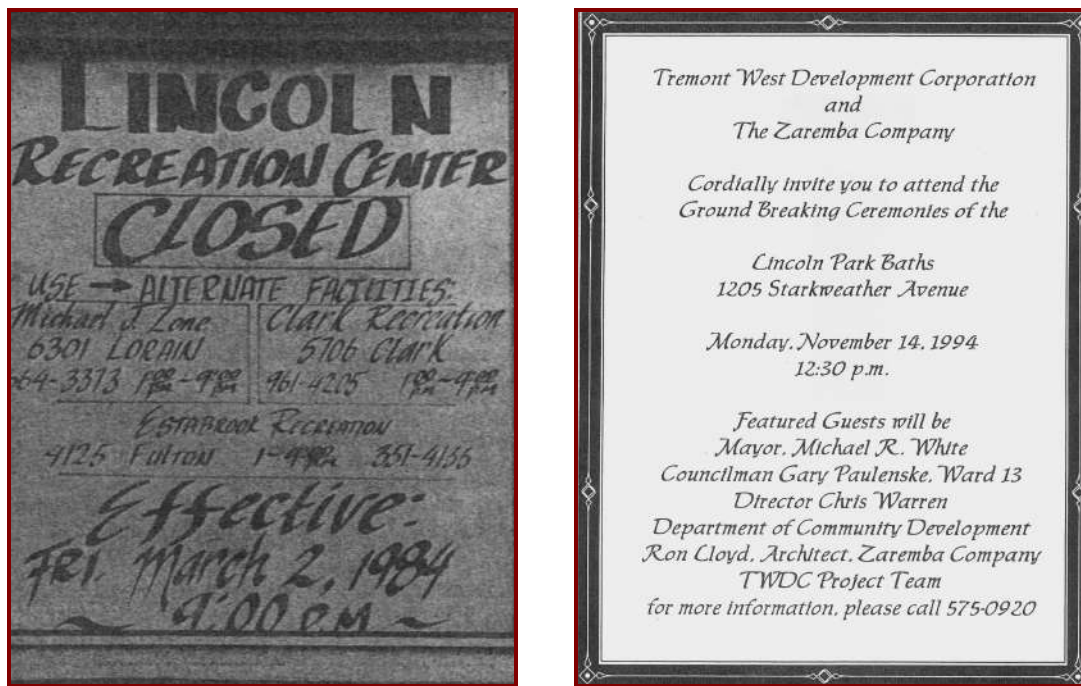


Figure 8: Contrasting signs: closing in 1984; reopening in 1994.²⁸

The Center's repose was only two years old when the City put forth an offer for developers to purchase and renovate it, suggesting that the facility could begin another life as a restaurant, offices, florist, youth center, educational facility, residential building, museum, or art gallery/studio. Residential application ultimately won out, when Westlake-based Zaremba Company bought the building with intentions to make it the anchor of an imaginative and aggressive plan that also included "six free-standing townhouses and a duplex" (Figure 9)²⁹ The reincarnation was underway.

²⁸ Left photo source *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 1985 (exact date not available); right photo: Zaremba & Associates

²⁹ Chatman, Angela, "Professional's home inspired architect," *The Plain Dealer*, October 22, 1994.

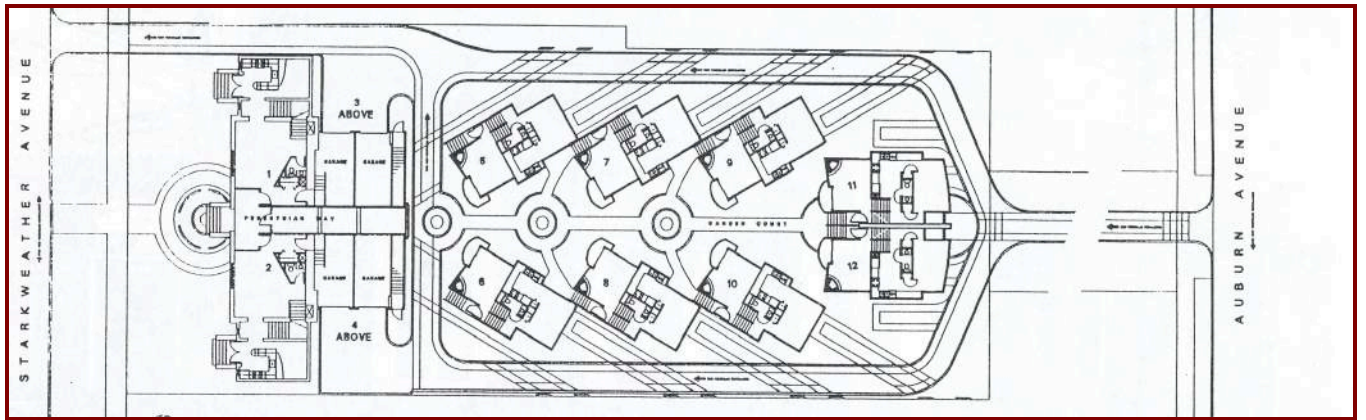


Figure 9: Master Lincoln Park Baths development plan devised by Zaremba Company.

In 1996, redevelopment was complete and the Lincoln Park Baths/Recreation Center was now the Lincoln Park Condominiums. Three floors consisting of four units were available: two three-story units totaling 2065 square feet and two single-story units of 1094 square feet each (Figure 10).

Four years later, one of the larger units sold for \$269,000—roughly ten times the median price of a typical Tremont residence, and precisely ten times as much as the entire appraised value of the facility prior to its renovation.³⁰ Although only about half of the free-standing units were built, the renovation looks complete. Standing in stark contrast, not only to much of the surrounding neighborhood but to its former self, the new “Lincoln Park Condominiums” lives again (Figure 10).

³⁰ Property Face Sheet, courtesy, Tremont West Development Corp.

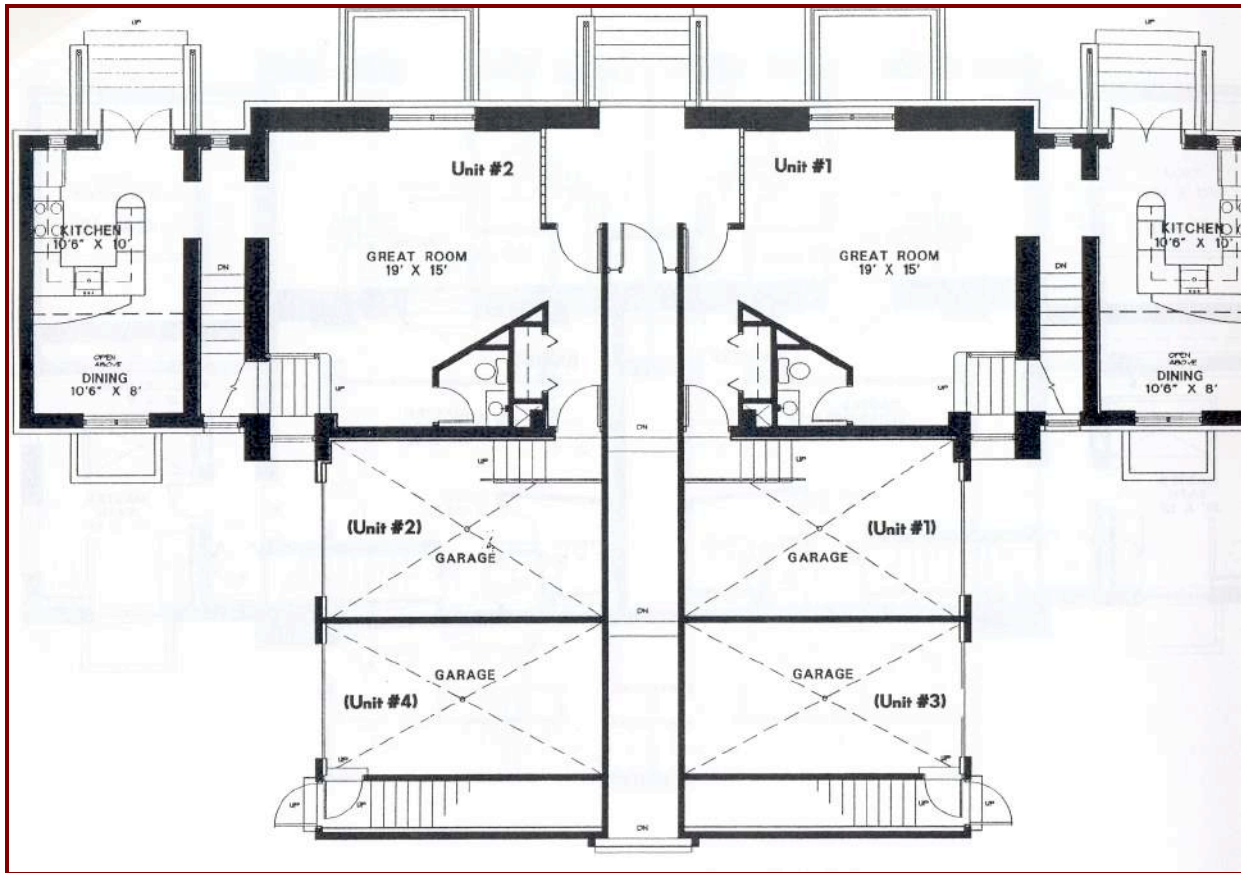


Figure 10: Current layout of the Baths' main floor. Separate entrances for men and women were originally built at opposite ends of the building (facing north off the kitchens). The garage facilities are new construction.
 Source: Zaremba & Associates.



Figure 10: The ultimate contrast: Lincoln Park Baths in 1979, and post renovation.³¹

So it was that the Lincoln Park Baths completed its metaphorical “full circle”: going from a Johnny-come-lately solution to a public health concern all the way to an ahead-of-the-times,

³¹ Former photo courtesy of Cleveland Landmarks Commission.

cutting-edge symbol of the rebirth and gentrification of an inner-city neighborhood. In between, the Lincoln Park Baths ran apace of Tremont's changes—filling its need for badly needed recreation services, falling into neglect and disrepair as the neighborhood did the same, and like many people, hitting bottom shortly before a stunning comeback. With people and buildings, the darkest hour is often just before the dawn.

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