

Ralph J. Bunche House
1510 Jackson Street, N.E.
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-360

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. DC-360

RALPH J. BUNCHE HOUSE

Location: 1510 Jackson Street N.E. Washington, D.C.

USGS Washington East Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.328010.4310690.

Present Owner: Charles K. and E. S. Brown.

Present Use: Residence.

Significance: The house is notable as the home of Dr. Ralph J. Bunche (1904-1971) who had a distinguished career as an educator, political scientist, and United Nations official.

The house is also representative of the period, the late 1930s, when some members of Washington's sizeable black professional class began to turn to architects to design custom homes. (The traditional practice had been to buy houses previously owned by whites, such as those in LeDroit Park.) In this instance Hilyard Robinson, a talented black architect, designed one of the few International Style-inspired houses in Washington.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1941.
2. Architect: Hilyard R. Robinson. Born in Washington in 1899, Robinson was a 1916 graduate of the scholarly M Street High School. Following study at Philadelphia's School of Industrial Design, Robinson served as an artillery officer in France in World War I. After travel through parts of France, in 1919 he entered the University of Pennsylvania architecture program. Summers were spent working in the New York City office of a talented black architect, Vertner W. Tandy. In 1922 he transferred to Columbia University. In 1924, after receiving his Bachelor of Architecture, he came to teach in the newly expanded architecture program at Howard University where he soon became department chairman. Meanwhile, he received a Master of Architecture degree from Columbia University.

While travelling in Europe in the summer of 1925 and in 1931 and 1932, he concentrated on visits to locations of public housing in Holland, Austria and Germany as well as visiting with Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Mies van der Rohe.

Hoping to put his observations of European public housing to practical use here, Robinson devised a plan for "Howard City," the proposed rejuvenation of a twelve-acre area south of Howard University. Although the plan never materialized, it brought Robinson to the attention of Robert D. Kohn, the first Director of Public Housing for the Public Works Administration. Robinson's dream for improved housing for Washington's poor finally materialized in 1937 when Langston Terrace Housing was built. This was the first federally funded low-cost housing in the District. Louis Mumford, who saw a model of Langston Terrace at the Architectural League show at New York's Museum of Modern Art, wrote in the New Yorker that "the P. W. A. apartments in Washington . . . set a high standard of exterior design." (New Yorker, April 30, 1938, p. 50.)

Over the years Robinson designed seven more housing projects in Washington, Baltimore, and Ypsilanti, Michigan. From the 1930s through the 1960s his was the most successful of Washington's black architectural firms. Notable commissions have included several buildings at Howard University (particularly Cook Hall dormitory, the Architecture and Engineering Building, the Fine Arts Complex, Crampton Auditorium, and the Home Economics Building), the World War II Pilot's Training School and Airfield near Tuskegee, Alabama, and various buildings at Hampton Institute, Livingstone College, N.C., and Jarvis College, Texas. In 1968, in a joint venture with Robert F. Hastings, ex-president of the A. I. A., he designed Baltimore's Provident Hospital.

The Ralph Bunch House was one of Robinson's few residential designs. Robinson has stated that he was given a relatively free hand in designing this house. He took into account the lack of pretension of the family, however, by designing a house more acclimated to family life than to entertainment of guests.

From 1947-48 Robinson was Technical Director for the Centennial Victory Exposition of the Republic of Liberia. He was one of the first of Washington's black architects to be given public and organizational responsibilities as a result of the post-World War II changing racial attitudes. Notable was his membership on the National Capital Planning Commission, 1950-1955.

3. Original and subsequent owners:

April 20, 1939
(Liber 7338
Folio 463)

Eva H. Fraser Deeded
Lots 11 & 12 in Square
4013 to Ralph J. Bunche

Dec. 10, 1947
(Liber 8640
Folio 267)

Ralph J. Bunche et ux
Deeded Property to
Charles K. Brown et ux
(Property is now Designated
as Square 4013, Lot 815)

4. Builder: Froe Brothers.

5. Original plans and construction: The original plans are still in the possession of the architect; photocopies are attached. The house apparently has undergone very little alteration.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure: The house was built for Dr. and Mrs. Bunche while he was on the political science faculty of Howard University. Born in 1904, Dr. Bunche came to Howard in 1928. In 1944 he joined the State Department, thus beginning a distinguished governmental career that was capped by his selection as the 1949 Nobel Peace Prize recipient and his appointment in 1950 as an undersecretary of the United Nations.

Dr. Bunche was the chief assistant to Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist, whose American Dilemma is a classic study of the Afro-American. Myrdal was often a guest in the house.

The present owner, Charles K. Brown Jr., has had a long career as a Washington lawyer.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Hilyard R. Robinson, the architect, has interior and exterior views taken just after completion.

2. Floor plans: The original plans are in the possession of Hilyard R. Robinson.

3. Bibliography:

Ethridge, Harrison M. "The Black Architects of Washington, D.C., 1900-Present." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1979. Pp. 59-67 and 76-78.

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The modest and restrained exterior belies a surprisingly large interior. The exterior was influenced by some of the characteristics of the International Style.
2. Condition of fabric: The house has been well maintained.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 28' wide (not including the side entrance porch) by 42'-6" deep.

Located on a narrow and deep, sloping lot, the house has a two-story street facade. The basement is above ground on the rear, making the house three stories in appearance.

The front facade has an irregular window arrangement. On the ground floor are three windows that are grouped together by a projected row of surrounding bricks laid in soldier-style; two windows on the second floor are individually similarly treated. On the first floor there is also a large round window. Brick walls, flush with the front facade, extend out on both sides, thereby creating more of a sense of horizontality to the otherwise basically square front portion of the house. Both walls have a stylized gate and are topped with a ledge of bricks that continue the sill of the first floor group of windows.

The west side, or entrance side, of the house is distinguished by a grouping of five windows with a surrounding band of projected bricks. A simple flat roofed porch marks the principal entrance. Steps lead down from beside the entrance porch to a ground floor flag stone terrace on the west side of the house.

2. Foundation: Brick and cinder block.
3. Wall construction and finish: Red brick laid in common bond covers all of the exterior walls, except the north wall of the upper sun deck which is covered with 8 1/2" weatherboard.
4. Structural System: Brick and cinder block load bearing walls with wood framing.
5. Chimney: Midway on the north wall is one large chimney that serves two fireplaces and the furnace.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways: The main entrance is on the west side of the house. Steps, beside which is a brick flower box, lead up to the porch with a concrete slab floor and flat roof. The front door has three panels.

A kitchen door opens to an uncovered concrete slab. The basement has two doors: one, beneath the main entrance, opens from a semi-enclosed brick area, and the other is a furnace room door on the north side.

A door with one large glass panel opens onto the third-floor sun deck.

- b. Windows: All of the windows are double-hung with one-over-one sash, with the exception of the round kitchen window on the front facade and some single pane basement windows.

7. Roof: The low hipped roof, covered in asphalt shingles, has wide eaves.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: This is divided into a recreation room, about 13' by 30', with corner fireplace, and a laundry/furnace room. There is also a lavatory.
- b. First floor: To the left of the entrance hall is the L-shaped living room, approximately 13'-9" by 23'-9", and dining room, approximately 10'-6" by 12'-11". A study, 12'-11" by 13'-3", opens off the living room.

On the front of the house is a maid's room, bathroom, and kitchen. A breakfast room is between the kitchen and the dining room.

- c. Second floor: On the north side is a large master bedroom (that opens onto the sundeck) and dressing room. Two bedrooms are on the front of the house. A bathroom can be reached from either the master bedroom or the hallway.
2. Stairways: A single-run stairway with two balusters per tread leads to the second floor. A single-run stairway, leading from the breakfast room to the basement, has only a simple handrail.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings are plaster over rocklath, except in the basement where the walls were exposed brick and the ceilings were covered with 4' by 8' sheets of plywood.
4. Flooring: Random width flooring was used on the first floor principal rooms. The basement floor is concrete, and all the bathroom floors were covered with linoleum.
5. Doorways and doors: Interior doors are all flush doors.
6. Decorative features: The angled living room fireplace and adjoining wood cupboard is surrounded by an ogee molding. Above the mantel shelf was a large photographic mural that was lit by a ceiling light directed towards the mural.

The study walls were surrounded by built-in shelves. Two of the corners of the dining room had custom-designed cupboards. In the entrance hall was a small recessed niche to hold a piece of sculpture.

- D. General Setting and Orientation: The house faces due south, and sits in the southern portion of the lot, which is approximately 50' by 175'.

The Bunche House is located in Brookland, a delightful neighborhood that was known as the "Chevy Chase" for Negroes in the segregated days of the 1930s. In this area lived many of Washington's prosperous middle-class black professionals.

Hilyard Robinson, architect of the Bunche House, designed two other houses in the immediate vicinity. Howard H. Mackey, an architecture professor at Howard University (and later its first Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning) designed several homes for clients in the Brookland neighborhood in the 1930s and 1940s.

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