

HYDE PARK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

2015 MARIAN AND LEON DESPRES PRESERVATION AWARD

5735 South Harper Avenue

Owners: Lauren Moltz and John Clement

Architect: Charles Fill Architects, LLC/AIA

Contractor: Two Weeks, LLC

Original Architect: Robert Rae, Jr.

Date of Construction: 1888

For their restoration and rehabilitation project

The stretch of Harper Avenue from 57th to 59th Street was Hyde Park's first planned community. When developed by Rosalie Buckingham after 1883, there was no elevated railroad embankment. The cottages had a view of Lake Michigan to the east, and residents walked through the open prairie to swim, fish and even to get fresh drinking water. For many in Rosalie Villas, their house was a summer home.

Eventually there were 42 houses, a music hall, a club house, and fancy gates at either end of the street. An urban neighborhood eventually surrounded them. The music hall, club house and gates are gone, but little else has been lost. One house was demolished, termites having done most of the damage before the wreckers showed up, and was replaced by a modern house. Several houses on the east side of the street faced demolition by the University of Chicago to make way for their steam plant. The neighborhood put a stop to that. So far – fingers crossed – no house torn down for a McMansion and no tasteless exterior 'upgrades'. The Villas remain a remarkably intact group of fine Queen Anne style houses.

Credit for this preservation success goes to the Rosalie Villas residents themselves – both past and present. A landmark district is often the only thing standing in the way of the destruction of an historic street like this. The many and very visible hands of the 'market' are always a threat. But from the beginning, the residents have established a tradition of respect for their properties and for their neighbors. While many of the exteriors have been modified over the years, generally the owners have made great efforts to retain their houses' original style. Recently there has been a surge of quality work on Harper Avenue. The Moltz/Clement project at 5735 sets a particularly high standard for future historic restorations in the Rosalie Villas District. Bad things can happen to the nicest of streets. But thanks to the care, pride and restraint of generations of Rosalie Villas residents, the future of their street has never looked brighter.

