

Black History Month Series

For the month of February, we will be sharing insight into the historic buildings of South LA where CRCD has invested in preserving their cultural heritage and nurturing the future.

For African Americans in LA during the 1920s and 30s, jazz music was not only a creative outlet but also a way to share ideas and connect with the community. The Dunbar Hotel, located on Central Avenue, served as a major hub for African American jazz artists to not only perform but also stay during the time of a still very segregated country. However, it was more than a place to lay one's head down, The Dunbar was the epicenter for the African American culture in South Los Angeles.

The Dunbar Hotel



The hotel was built in 1928 by Dr. John and Vada Sommerville and was home to the first west coast convention of the NAACP, in which they were heavily involved. More importantly, it was built as a place where black visitors could receive elite accommodations and first-class treatment. Dr. John was the first black man to attend dental school at the University of Southern California, and his wife Dr. Vada was the first black woman to graduate from USC's dental school. Originally from Jamaica, the husband and wife duo were professional intellectuals who were treated with the utmost admiration and respect from the black community, however, they were still met with opposition from whites. This fueled their desire to open The Dunbar, originally called Hotel Somerville, which became an instant landmark.



Taking out a substantial loan of \$250,000, the Somerville's sought out a property located on Central Avenue where not only other black-owned professional businesses were located, but where the middle to upper-class African American community lived and frequented. At its grand opening in June 1928, there were 2,000 guests in attendance. The Dunbar set itself apart from the other black-owned hotels on Central Avenue from the beginning. It was a modern hotel with more than 100 rooms, an art deco lobby, custom furniture, a café, a restaurant, a beauty parlor, a flower shop, and stenographers' offices



The stock market crash of 1929 rocked the stability of the hotel and though the Somervilles remained successful with other business ventures, they had to sell their dream establishment.

Lucious Lomax became its new owner in 1930 and introduced not only the new name "The Dunbar" - after the literary great Paul Laurence Dunbar, Lomax also introduced a new element to the hotel which put jazz music at the forefront. A new nightclub re-established the hotel and put it at the center of the Central Ave jazz scene.

Legendary entertainers like Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Lena Horne all graced The Dunbar with their presence. In addition to the main nightclub, former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson opened his Showboat nightclub. The Dunbar was touted as the heart of Saturday night Los Angeles and a West Coast mixture of the Waldorf-Astoria and the Cotton Club.

As segregation lessened there seemed to be less need for establishments like The Dunbar that catered to African Americans who did not have options for fine accommodations. By 1974, the doors to the Dunbar hotel were closed. The building remained vacant through the 1980s and declined drastically, as transients began using it for shelter, and its art deco facade suffered from graffiti, broken windows, and litter.

In 2008, Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD) along with Thomas Safran & Associates (TSA) worked to return the building to its former state. The property was converted to affordable housing for senior citizens and is the center of Dunbar Village which includes the Sommerville Apartments to the north and south of the main building. Many of its residents can recall when The Dunbar was at its peak and were very much a part of its influence.



Dunbar Village Groundbreaking Ceremony
Monday, December 12, 2011
10:00 A.M.



83 Affordable Rental Apartments for Seniors & Families in Los Angeles
8,000 Square Feet of Retail Space



The Dunbar Hotel remains an iconic landmark for the Annual Central Avenue Jazz Festival. CRCD partners with the local Councilman's office, Councilman Current Price, to produce the two-day jazz festival every year, and many of the young people associated with CRCD receive their first paid job experience working at the Jazz Festival. Even after all of these years, the original purpose of The Dunbar hotel, building up the community through culture and opportunities, continues.

