

# A Proposal to Revive the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center: An Architectural Approach

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## ABSTRACT

This research dives into the historical roots and proposed revitalization of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center, located in downtown Detroit with a focus on the city's progress and the preservation of its heritage. Almost all previous renovation plans for the city of Detroit have come to a halt due to the lasting effects of COVID-19. However, as the pandemic has come to an end, Detroit has been making huge leaps in its revitalization efforts. The paper's main objective is to contribute to the city of Detroit and have applications to the real world. The proposal presents a pitched roof design that shows remnants of the building's historicalness and highlights its novelty, creating a balanced blend between the two. The proposal also takes advantage of the expansive surrounding land to position the recreation center as a central community hub by including sports fields and a historical museum inside the building. The museum would serve as the history of the building's evolution and notable figures from its humble beginnings as a library in 1917 to its present state.

## **The Architectural and Historical Evolution of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center**

When people hear the word, Detroit, the first thing that comes to mind usually has to do with poverty, slums, or crime. This can be considered as an old outlook on Detroit because various renovation and development plans are currently underway especially after the pandemic. An old iconic building known for its cultural and historical significance, the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center, has been brought up several times as the subject of renovation but actual renovation has still yet to be done. Important architectural and cultural factors should be taken into consideration based on its history when renovating this building.

### **The Ginsberg Library: A Start**

The Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center has gone through many phases from prospering to struggling before becoming what it is today. Its history starts with the construction of the Bernard Ginsberg Library. The Ginsberg Library is a single-story structure with a brick veneer, initially built in 1917 and situated on a raised concrete foundation. Its rectangular shape features a roof that was originally covered with green Ludowici tile but has since been replaced with asphalt shingles. The front facade has five bays, with the five at the rear being two bays deep. The main entrance is highlighted by stone pilasters and an arched stone elliptical hood with a dentelate cornice. A stone porch supported by two pillars extends from the facade. A secondary entrance is located at the back, and an exterior chimney used to stand on the northwest corner but no longer exists. The brickwork uses an English cross-bond pattern, with alternating headers and stretchers. A stone water table separates the basement from the first floor. Windows were originally one-over-one sashes, with an arched fanlight above and smaller sashes on the sides. The narrow side windows had four-over-four sashes, all framed with

decorative brick and stone arches. Now, however, the windows are all blocked off, and the original skylight on the roof is enclosed.

### The Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center: A Change

In 1927, attendance at the library began to plummet because the area around the neighborhood was beginning to transition from residential to industrial, but the area adjacent to the library remained residential. This project was then handed over to the Recreation Department because they realized that the community lacked any real recreation center. The Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center was opened in 1929 in the City of Detroit as the Central Community Center. The building was an addition connected and placed right next to the library. The 1929 two-story brick veneer building, in an Art Deco and Jacobethan style, features stone details and sits on a raised stone foundation. It's asymmetrical and has ten-bay-wide front and rear elevations. The front entrance, adorned with stone carvings, is off-center, while larger window openings are on the higher northeast side. The exterior brickwork uses an American bond pattern, and above the windows brick strings and stone string courses add detailing. Many original windows have been removed or boarded up, with larger ones having divided lights and steel frames. The building has a significant presence on its site with no landscaping. The recreation center included lots of recreational activities such as a pool, gymnasium, and clubhouse rooms and offered tap dancing, boxing, swimming, and drama classes. Also, the interior of the library was converted into an auditorium for music. On Thanksgiving Day, 1932, the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team played their first tour game at the center against the "Detroit AA" — a team assembled by Leon Wheeler, the man who ran the recreation center.

### Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects: Rise and Fall

On the site near the recreation center there was a 14-acre lot of slums, called the 'Black Bottom'. In the 1930s, the slum housing was demolished to make way for the first federally funded housing projects for African-American residents. This became known as the Brewster-Douglass Housing project. Due to these projects, The Central Community Center was renamed the Brewster Community Center, and in 1969, the building was renamed for the final time to the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center in honor of Leon Wheeler. On September 7th, 1935, first Lady Eleanor Roosevelt attended the ceremony for Brewster Homes. Situated in proximity to Brush Park — an urban neighborhood that was primarily residential at the time — the Brewster Projects would open with 701 units in 1938, and by the end of 1941, there were 941 units. In 1942, two six-story apartment buildings were built and in 1951, there were row houses and six 14-story towers that were home to over 10,000 residents at their peak. However, in the neighborhood during the 1960s and 1970s, there was an abundance of drugs and crime causing people to leave these homes. The Detroit riot of 1967 took place during this time and showed the racial tensions that had been brewing for years. There was widespread destruction of property of residences, stores, and commercial buildings leading to a strain on resources in general. The riot intensified racial tensions and divisions within the city leading to a loss of trust in Detroit's capability to ensure the safety and stability of its denizens. Individuals from diverse racial backgrounds, including both African Americans and whites, experienced feelings of uncertainty concerning the city's future, resulting in a significant migration of residents from Detroit to the surrounding suburbs. In the 1960s, public institutions struggled to provide funds for public buildings during this time due to the decline in population. The recreation center helped kids stay out of trouble during these tough times as it kept them busy. For example, Edmoun Spears, 35, recalled going to the center as a child and having to complete his homework before enjoying the amenities, which included a gym and swimming pool. It's where he learned to play baseball. His parents never taught him, so he gained a memorable experience at the recreation center.

In a last attempt to stop the decline of the Brewster Homes, the original low-rise Brewster Homes were replaced by 250 townhouses in 1991. However, these efforts were futile. The Brewster Homes, like two of the high-rise homes, were starting to be demolished in the early 2000s and were half-empty in the mid-2000s. In 2013, Mayor Dave Bing initiated a comprehensive plan to demolish 10,000 vacant homes and businesses in an effort to improve community safety in the area. As part of this endeavor, he focused on the demolition of the Brewster Homes. The significance of this project was emphasized by the presence of U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan, who joined Mayor Bing in a news conference to mark the start of the Brewster-Douglass demolition. They decided to tear down these empty buildings because the vacant areas became such a haven for crime. Then they were demolished in 2014.

Many famous people grew up in these Brewster Homes, which allows us to speculate on the positive value and sentiment of these homes. For example, Mary Wilson from the Supremes said, "Moving into the projects as a child was like moving into a wonderland for me." The Brewster Homes were the hotbed for many people that would later become important in African American culture. Many people lived and achieved great things here, including the aforementioned Mary Wilson. Diana Ross and Florence Ballard along with Mary Wilson formed the Supremes here. Little Stevie Wonder and Smokey Robinson also found their way to Hitsville USA from the Brewster Homes. Actress Lily Tomlin, champion boxer Joe Louis, comedian Loni Love, and singer Etterlene DeBarge all resided here. This shows that not only disadvantaged people lived here, but also others who would become successful later in life or were already successful by the time they moved to the Brewster Homes lived here.

## Renovation Attempts

The Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center continued to receive funding for many years from people such as NBA star Chris Webber. However, the government cut their funds because people who lived around the recreation center, mainly the Brewster Homes, started leaving, which meant fewer people would need the recreation center. This led to the permanent closing of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center. The building was completely looted and vandalized. For example, the windows were broken, almost the entirety of the inside of the center was covered in graffiti, and there was trash along the floors. Instead of having a sense of grandeur like before, the facade now is dilapidated and worn. The recreation center was slated for demolition in 2014, but the Duggan administration, of Mayor Mike Duggan, said it could be saved if the right developers came forward. A group that included KC Crain, president and CEO of Detroit-based media company Crain Communications, ultimately stepped up. Their plan, announced in spring 2015, was to redevelop the two-story building as an event space and a restaurant with a rooftop beer garden. However, construction has yet to begin, and the building remains empty to this day.

Recently, in June 2023, MHT Housing Inc. stated the intention to acquire a 6-acre plot in Detroit's Brush Park. The company's development vision involves constructing over 200 apartments on the premises, with a specific focus on creating supportive housing for individuals who have transitioned out of the foster care system. Additionally, there are plans to renovate the historic Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center on the property, restoring it to its original community-oriented purpose, which carries historical significance. The estimated cost of this renovation project falls between \$90 million to \$100 million. This revitalization effort effectively resurrects the prior redevelopment plan for the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Building in 2015, although it remains to be seen whether the resurrection in fact comes to fruition. The Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center has truly left its legacy as an important building in the hearts of many Detroiters and was a hub for community enrichment programs allowing for the success of many notable people.

## Insights and Analysis of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center

The rich history of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center provides valuable insights into the community and life surrounding the building. By examining the different phases of the recreation center and the various events that shaped it, we can draw several important conclusions and lessons about the center's history.

As stated previously, the Detroit riot of 1967 destroyed a significant amount of property, led to a strain on resources, increased racial tensions, and led to migration away from Detroit. All these interconnected factors played a heavy role in the permanent closing of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center. However, it's important to consider that its decline was not just directly caused by the 1967 Detroit riot, but also the result of many other issues derived from the riot, such as a decline in population, reduced funding for public works, and shifting social dynamics in Detroit such as a marked increase in racism. The aftermath of the riot brought about a convoluted period that significantly influenced the city's future for an extended duration. As a result of the 1967 Detroit riot, this city found itself in a state of disarray for a long time after and continues to suffer the impact of those events in a number of important ways.

One crucial insight from the history of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center is the importance of adaptability in community spaces. Initially designed as a library, the building was later repurposed to meet the changing requirements of the neighborhood. With the surrounding area shifting from residential to industrial, the decision to transform it into a recreation center became essential, fulfilling the community's demand for leisure and recreational activities. This adaptability enabled the building to remain relevant over the years, delivering a varied range of recreational programs for the residents. This suggests that the capacity for adaptability demonstrated by the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center could offer valuable lessons applicable to other buildings and architectural structures elsewhere, where their ability to evolve and respond to changing needs and demands may lead to similar successes.

The former Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center was closely tied to its surroundings, particularly, the Brewster/Douglass Homes. These homes played a crucial role in the development of the center as it was mainly the residents of these Brewster/Douglass Homes that used the center. As the housing project thrived, the center became a vibrant hub for recreational activities, fostering a strong sense of community. However, as the housing project faced challenges and residents left, the center's attendance and funding declined. This highlights the importance of community support and sustainable urban planning, which involves designing communities in ways that balance environmental, social, and economic needs to ensure long-term well-being.

Surrounding the building for the former Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center, there is a diverse array of significant landmarks and institutions, including the Brewster Homes, the Ford Field (a football stadium), Comerica Park (a baseball stadium), Children's Hospital of Michigan, the Lexus Velodrome (an indoor 1/10th mile cycling track), Great Shiloh Baptist Church, Little Caesars Arena (a hockey rink), as well as educational institutions such as the Mike Ilitch School of Business and Cass Technical High School. The Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center primarily used to serve as a hub for sports enthusiasts, offering them the chance to engage in athletic activities and connect with like-minded individuals. Similarly, the presence of neighboring sports facilities in the vicinity fostered a community geared towards those who share a passion for sports.

The former recreation center is strategically situated near highway I-75 and Downtown Detroit, which currently stands as the most developed area in the city. Downtown Detroit has had extensive renovation efforts, and major sports stadiums and landmarks add to its appeal. The cluster of sports-related facilities and educational institutions in close proximity to the recreation center seems to suggest that it should remain a recreation center in the future since the purpose of this function aligns very appropriately with that cluster.

## Renovation Proposal: Preserving Legacy

### Structural Elements: Roof Design and Window Features

I would advocate that the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center be renovated while maintaining its function as a recreation center, and I would propose the following design gestures. Firstly, I would consider replacing the existing roof structure with a continuous, unitary roof consisting of two parts: a flat portion over the west volume and a pitched segment that slopes up towards the east facade over the remaining two volumes toward the east. The west volume started out as a library and then became an auditorium. Relative to the function of housing sports-related activities, the historical significance of the library drastically differs from that of the other two volumes. The latter focused on athletics, which explains the various roof segments. The newly proposed roof would create a sense that the three volumes have become one single building. Secondly, the higher east facade would feature high glass windows. This orientation allows for the introduction of the qualities of the morning sun into the interior. The rising sun provides a joyful atmosphere and ensures that the abundant natural light enhances the building's ambiance. On the other hand, positioning windows on the west side, where the sun sets, can result in overpowering brightness, limiting visibility indoors and potentially diminishing the overall comfort.

### Exterior Space

In terms of outdoor spaces, there is a large amount of land around the building, with the land in front of the south facade having dimensions of 460 ft x 190 ft and the land further south and across the street having dimensions of 550 ft x 460 ft. The former lot can be used for a soccer field and the latter can be used for a baseball field. The south side of the building has a much more welcoming and beautiful touch to it than the north side of the building. The north side has “nothing”, so a patio by this side and a playground by the library directly facing the patio would be a nice addition. The parking lot that connects to the adjacent road is notably compact, so introducing an additional parking lot on the opposite side would provide the option for those entering to turn either left or right for parking.

### Signage

The northeast side of the building faces Highway I-75 and includes the name “Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center” and a logo for “Detroit Recreation Department”. Because there is a high volume of traffic on I-75, the name and logo need to stand out to be more noticeable. This can be done by switching the font to an Art Deco style, emphasizing and popping out the letters to enhance the logo's visibility. This approach will complement the building's Art Deco aesthetic. There is also a white line on the upper part of the building wall that goes all along the front of the building but stops at the northeast side (logo) even though there is still space for the line to wrap the building. In addition, the northeast side includes the name and logo, while the main side of the building, the entrance on the east side, does not. Therefore, the same logo in a larger size with popped-out letters is recommended to be added to the front of the building as well as the side. Furthermore, a pylon sign around 30 feet tall with the letters “BWRC” would be added on the southeast corner of the plot of land as it stands for Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center. This way, the pylon sign wouldn't overshadow the Brewster Homes, as the sign wouldn't be placed near them. The acronym “BWRC” retains a link to the former name of the building while giving it a different identity that corresponds to the renovation that the building has undergone.

## Asymmetry of the Three Volumes

There are three volumes to the building: the central volume is the principal body, then there are two wings, one on either side: a library and a larger volume. The latter, which is taller, protects the rest of the building from the noises of the highway through its size. Each of the three volumes has its own window shape, with the library having arches, the central volume having squares, and the largest volume having rectangles. Given this volumetric composition, the building looks asymmetrical when perceived from either the north or the south side.

The entrance to the library looks like the main entrance even though it isn't because it is the most decorated. It includes columns, an arch, and a portico and looks like the only welcoming entrance, meaning that people would probably go through it more often than the central and right entrances. This may lead to confusion and false expectations because the library is an auditorium, not a recreation center, yet the word "Recreation Center" is clearly seen in the name "Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center". Therefore, the ornamentation of the library's entrance should be toned down and at the same time, the central entrance should be decorated more than the toned-down library entrance and built off of its casing, as it has a beautiful, unique pattern. The right entrance, on the other hand, needs to be equivalent to the newly proposed library entrance in terms of lavishness and eye-catching design. At any rate, the entrances should still look like they are part of the building so that they don't compete with the rest of the facade. The roof of the building goes from a tall to a slightly shorter height, giving rise to the above-mentioned asymmetry, which might compromise the reading of the main entrance to the central volume as the main entrance.

## Consistency Across the Three Volumes

The library and the 1929 extension feature clear stylistic divergences due to differences in terms of roof style and size, among other things. While the more conventional approach would have the history of the building take priority over the volumetric composition, my proposition is to do the exact opposite. The library should be demolished so that it can be integrated with the rest of the volumes into one coherent whole to give the feel that the new recreation center is one building rather than split pieces of additions. The front and back facades along with the entrance would be demolished and new facades and a new entrance would be created that would line up with the existing front and back facades of the 1929 extension. This way, the front and back facades can be flush with the other volumes and the central entrance can match the entrance closest to the highway. The building should strike a balance between historical aspects and modernization, avoiding an overly one-sided design that completely preserves every detail of the historical facade.

## Historical Heritage and Modernization

To avoid kitsch architecture and keep a sense of unity throughout the building, the library would include a simplification of the Art Deco style of the other two volumes. Finding this middle ground is essential as it would ensure that, while we respect its historical heritage, contemporary elements are incorporated to meet modern needs and aesthetics. For example, the new recreation center can maintain its historical Art Deco style with some touches of modernization while having its interior completely renovated and modernized to meet contemporary functional requirements. This approach preserves the external appearance and historical charm while allowing the building's interior to serve modern purposes efficiently. Also, the windows are arched in the library while the rest of the center has rectangular windows. To fix these asymmetries, the whole building should look like just one building by having the same type of windows throughout, such as arches or rectangular windows, and an overall symmetrical shape without direct separations in the facade like the present condition, because that is what gives the appearance of three separate volumes.



These changes will contribute to the building's traditional Art Deco style. The library can be changed completely unlike the rest of the recreation center because the library wasn't what left a legacy, but it was rather an exterior of the building. I would suggest removing the chimney as not only a practical decision but also an aesthetic one. The verticality of the chimney competes with the horizontality of the roof, thereby compromising the unitary reading of the three volumes together. As the facility is modernized, the need for a fireplace and its accompanying chimney becomes obsolete. By eliminating the chimney, additional space is created within the building while simultaneously preventing energy loss associated with heating and cooling systems. The recreation center's 1920s and 1930s Art Deco style and parts of the Jacobethan style should be kept as they represent Detroit, preserve the legacy of the building, and help emphasize the importance of the building to people. However, the suggested changes should be made for modernity, functionality, and beauty.

### Interior Space: Addition of Historical Museum

To further preserve the building's legacy, a historical museum should be added to showcase photographs and descriptions of the building's history. This would include the journey of the building from its beginnings as a library in 1917 to its current state and also include notable figures like Joe Louis and Leon Wheeler, who have been associated with the building. The ideal location for this historical museum would be on the east side of the building, benefiting from sunlight through the high window. This positioning would create a cheerful, vibrant, and airy atmosphere for visitors, which aligns adequately with a museum setting.

### Methods

In this study, a qualitative approach was used in gathering the information needed to write about the history, insights, and proposal of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center. The main source of information was used from trustworthy websites and articles on the internet. Additionally, resources from Harvard's on campus library and the Cambridge Centre for International Research Academy were consulted. To fully verify the accuracy of the sources, all the sources were cross checked to make sure that the gathered information was consistent. Architectural perspectives for the proposal were mainly acquired through meetings with the professor. During the regular meetings, a collaborative effort in analyzing pictures and content took part to gain ideas for the proposal. Also, debates with the professor further helped explore different viewpoints. In looking for blueprints and undisclosed information, a city clerk of Detroit was interviewed. Lastly, an in-person visit to the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center provided an onsite understanding of the building's status and surroundings. The mockup of the proposal was created based on a combination of the information gathered, consultations, and the onsite visit.

## Results



**Figure 1.** Mockup Model of Proposal



**Figure 2.** A Birds Eye View of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center (This figure captured from Google Earth directly matches the photo on the top left side of Figure 1.)



The modern renovation of the building and its surrounding landscape have been envisioned in Fig 1. The historical integrity of the structure has been merged with modern design elements to create a space that not only honors its past but also serves as a hub for the community's present and future needs.

The renovation mainly involves a flat section of the roof, complemented by a pitched portion, with the higher side oriented towards the east. With the sun rising from the east, the east-facing wall has been amplified with expansive windows, ensuring that the interior would be bathed in warm sunlight, creating a vibrant and inviting ambiance.

The landscaping was carefully designed to have a harmonious blend of sports and recreation, taking advantage of the expansive land surrounding the building. Because the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center is intended to be a vibrant community hub, sports fields such as soccer and baseball fields, along with a park-style resting area have been added. That way, the community can engage in a variety of recreational activities while immersing themselves in the rich history of the area.

## Discussion

While writing this paper, a new plan for the renovation of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center was proposed by MHT Housing Inc., who intends to build residential buildings and a renovated indoor recreation center. For this paper to be applicable to the real world, reaching out to MHT Housing Inc. will be required, so that they may consider the proposal. This renovation plan, however, is encountering backlash from residents in Brush Park because of the increasing crime in the area such as vehicle vandalism. To finalize any proposed renovation plan for the recreation center whether it be from MHT Housing Inc. or elsewhere, obtaining agreement from the residents would be critical. This is especially important in order to see the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center truly make a comeback.

## Conclusion

The center was not only a building but a hallmark of history in the African American community. It was a gathering place for community members to engage in recreational activities and socialize, and this center was mainly known as Joe Louis' training grounds. This meant that the building included a cultural representation of African Americans. It went through many phases with the good being the building's opening and the bad being its closing. Still, it had many historical events such as the Harlem Globetrotters playing their first game in the center, and Joe Louis training here. The center has left its legacy as a truly influential building, which is why something should be done to reactivate it. The "permanent closing" should become a "temporary closing".

## Limitations

The Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department of the City of Detroit was contacted in an effort to obtain floor plans or additional information regarding the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center. However, the City of Detroit only had floor plans and information on buildings built in 1990 or later. Having floor plans could have made a meaningful impact on the paper, but unfortunately, it wasn't feasible. Therefore, an in-person site visit to the recreation center took place, but the building was fenced off and the windows were boarded off. Due to this restriction, there was no access to the interior of the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center other than pictures on the internet, which prevented the piecing together of the overall interior structure of the building.

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