



Image Credit:
Brad Angelini

Sun Terrace Apartments

404 North Thayer Street

ARCHITECT:

James Livingston, 1960

Christian Mueller

A splash of Los Angeles sunshine in perpetually cloudy Ann Arbor, James Livingston's 404 N. Thayer Street apartments successfully transplant

a bit of cheery Southern California modernism to this infill site in a leafy neighborhood of frame houses. The name of the development, "Sun Terrace,"

is emblazoned on the façade in breezy script lettering, a midcentury flourish Angelenos would recognize from that city's many "dingbat apartments," so called for the colorful typography that embellishes each structure with themes evocative of ascent to the good life.

Characterized by a crisp horizontality, decadent expanses of glass, and an American-century confidence expressed in impossibly slender steel structures, postwar California modernism was impressed into the national consciousness in the 1950s by the widely publicized Case Study Houses, a series of taste-making modern homes constructed mostly in L.A. and designed by rising modern architects like Charles and Ray Eames, Craig Ellwood, and Michigan's own Eero Saarinen. The style left a cultural impression beyond its geographic origins, reproduced in the dreamy photographs of Julius Shulman, showcased in popular film and television, and experienced by travelers such as Livingston (1922-1975) and design-minded local developer John C. Stegeman (1923-2011), who visited the west coast together to benchmark notable projects. Examples of Californian influence can be found in many of Ann Arbor's fine mid-century homes.

At Sun Terrace, the street-facing western façade features floor-to-ceiling glass, with smaller operable windows set in a handsomely proportioned grid. The pattern is reprised in stucco panel joints on the comparatively mute north, south, and east faces, while gold-anodized screens shade an open, split-level stair from the not-exactly baking rays of Michigan sun. The ensemble is framed by an exposed steel armature, structurally enabling the broad expanses of glass that could be so casually deployed in an era of cheap energy. Primary levels each contain a pair of roommate-friendly three-bedroom apartments, while down-market one- and two-bedroom units are tucked

in the half-story recessed below grade, bypassed both by the eponymous sun and the flanged *pilotis* that support grander quarters upstairs.

It was perhaps the partnership with Stegeman that accounts for the higher level of ambition and detail at Sun Terrace compared to the many other low-slung apartments Livingston's firm designed in Ann Arbor over the years. It is also better preserved. The two would collaborate again on the later, larger Maynard House (1962; also described in this issue), as well as on the prow-like Charter House (1961), headquarters to Stegeman's firm, constructed on a flatiron site at the corner of Washtenaw and South University Avenues.

Livingston's broad practice included a respectable portfolio of hospitality architecture, notably Weber's Restaurant in Ann Arbor and several projects at Boyne Mountain Resort near Petoskey. He was also well-traveled in his role as chief consulting architect for Inn America Motels, a nationwide chain. It was characteristic of Livingston to synthesize contemporary influences from other regions and building types, pragmatically integrating branding and signage into the composition, while elevating a humble development brief into something more aspirational and timeless. ●