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ALERT TOP STORY

## House of Tomorrow getting rehabbed, will be turned into short-term rental

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**B**EVERLY SHORES — The iconic glass panes have been stripped from the retro-futuristic House of Tomorrow — at least temporarily.

Construction crews have been restoring 12-sided glass house the prominent Chicago architect George Fred Keck designed as an optimistic vision of future progress the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. The U.S. Department of Interior is funding the \$4 million renovation of "America's First Glass House," a pioneering design that debuted central air conditioning and is credited for helping inspire Philip Johnson's Glass House and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House.

Plans call for transforming the experimental three-story house overlooking Lake Michigan in the Century of Progress District of the Indiana Dunes National Park into a short-term rental people will be able to stay in.

"George Fred Keck envisioned a world where there was going to be a lot more glass used in homes," Indiana Landmarks volunteer Tom Rosenbaum said. "Where there should be walls there's currently air. Indiana Landmarks is currently working on a \$2.5 million-plus exterior renovation to restore the structure and the exterior of the home."

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The Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund also is furnishing another \$1.5 million for interior renovations.

"Right now, you can see all the way through to the center support of the house, the column in the middle that looks like a wedding gate," he said. "That's the main support structure through which all of your utilities were run. That's where everything you needed to run from the top to the bottom of the house was going. The

top floor was a solarium-type space, the second floor housed your kitchen, your two bedrooms and a combination living room/dining room area. Your bottom floor primarily was George Keck's vision of the future was everyone was going to have their own private aircraft. This very rectangular wall on this very round house was the side the hangar door was on. You could throw the doors open and back your airplane into your house. I don't think anything is taking off from this road."

Keck's vision of airplane garages never took flight outside of a few residential airparks. But he did attain many firsts, including an open floor plan, a floor-to-ceiling glass walls that provided solar heating, an electric door opener for an attached garage, the first-ever General Electric dishwasher, an iceless refrigerator when ice boxes were still the norm, a photoelectric sensor that automatically opened and shut the kitchen door and an electric eye that anticipated today's video doorbells.

The house was seen by more than million visitors at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair and then ferried across Lake Michigan by the developer Robert Bartlett who was looking to capitalize off the World's Fair's popularity and give Chicagoans a reason to come out to see the resort community he was building along the Lake Michigan shoreline in Porter County.

It was a model home that was never meant to be lived in but that has now been preserved for more than 90 years.

The House of Tomorrow was privately owned until it was acquired by the National Park Service that was developing the then-Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore in the 1960s and 1970s, modeling it after the Cape Cod National Lakeshore in Massachusetts. The National Park Service and Indiana Landmarks teamed up when the houses started to deteriorate by offering long-term subleases to tenants who agreed to fix them up.

The house has sat empty for 25 years due in part to the high cost of renovating it. All the other Century of Progress Homes were leased out to private residents, who put up the capital to restore and maintain them in exchange for a long-term, basically lifetime lease.

The House of Tomorrow, which has been declared a National Treasure by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, fell into disrepair. The roof rotted out to the point that rain left puddles in the drafty basement.

"The bottom floor is going to be completely renovated," Rosenbaum said. "The future plans for this house are to turn it into a short-term rental situation to allow more people to come in and be able to stay in and enjoy the park... I see it as a great opportunity to allow more access to a wonderful National Park here on the Indiana lakeshore but also to give someone a taste of what the future was thought to be in 1933, from the avant-garde design choices to just the overall architecture of the house. I have a hard time imagining anyone would complain waking up on a summer vacation overlooking Lake Michigan with the view this house is going to offer when all is said and done."

The 12-room steel-and-glass house reflected Keck's vision for how new technology would alter domestic life, such as by harnessing solar power for heating.

"On the second floor, they were really pushing for using advanced materials," he said. "In the kitchen and the main dining area the flooring was provided by the Goodyear Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio. Unfortunately, those records were disposed of sometime in the 1970s, so they have no record even though on the blueprint it's calling out that the flooring is from the Goodyear Rubber Company. In the living and master bedroom spaces, the flooring was this beautiful 2-inch-by-2-inch square wood block flooring that ran throughout the space. In the master bedroom it ran up the wall so hopefully that will be restored as well on the interior side of things."

Lead architecture firm bKL Architecture came up with the renovation design that aims to preserve Keck's original blueprint with modernizations like triple-glazed windows that will not overpower the air conditioning system the way the original windows did.

"They are currently working with an architecture specialist out of Chicago that specializes in skyscrapers," Rosenbaum said. "The plan is to restore the original exterior featuring all glass, only instead of using the single-paned glass George Keck had available to him in 1933, which burned out the 1933 air conditioning unit at the Chicago World's Fair in no time. Now we have things like triple-paned glass that evens out temperature a lot better than anything they would have had in that time period."

National Park Service Ranger Christy Gerlach said steel beams hold the glass house up.

"When George Fred Keck designed this modernistic structure, he was going to make a house of steel," he said. "It was all about different construction materials, innovative ideas. Back in the 1930s, new stuff was a little bit cuckoo. It was kind of pushing the envelope a little bit. All these houses were about materials, newfangled materials."

All of the Century of Progress Homes were innovative. But the House of Tomorrow was the most innovative, Gerlach said.

"When you look at the House of Tomorrow, you are literally looking at hope," he said. "In some ways, this is the star."

At the 1933 World's Fair visitors had to pay an additional fee to see the House of Tomorrow.

"They made a \$1 million. That's huge because it was 10 cents," she said.

Indiana Landmarks Northern Regional Office Director Todd Zeiger said the details of the short-term rental plans are being worked out but that it likely would be managed by a private operator.

"We're a couple years away from that because the interior has to be done yet," he said.

The House of Tomorrow will be turned into a short-term rental due to a lack of lodging at one of the busiest National Parks in the country.

"There's no other places to stay in the Dunes. There's no lodging available within the Dunes itself," he said. "It seemed like a good fit for the house."

The Red Lantern Inn in the then-Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore in Beverly Shores used to offer lodging, events space and a supper club where people could dine while waves crashed on the rocks below the windows until it washed into Lake Michigan.

Zeiger said the National Park was looking for more lodging options. It isn't yet clear what the demand will be.

"The market will determine. We'll find out," he said. "It's a good use for the house. This just makes a good fit."

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