Affordable housing at an iconic Frank Lloyd Wright tower? Federal grant aims to make it happen

A few lucky Oklahomans may soon get to live in the world's only Frank Lloyd Wright tower at affordable housing prices.

As first reported by the Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is in the process of deciding whether to create four affordable apartments in Bartlesville's Price Tower, the only Wright-designed tower ever to be developed. The building currently houses a hotel, restaurant and arts center.

Earlier this week, the Bartlesville Redevelopment Trust Authority (BRTA) announced it had requested HUD approval to use a federal grant of $500,000 once allocated for redevelopment of a local hospital to make affordable apartments available in the tower.

"The project will take three of the original two-level apartments on six floors and rehabilitate them into new rental apartments," Chris Wilson, executive director of BRTA, told the *Examiner-Enterprise*, adding that another apartment would be made to comply with American Disability Act standards. "They will be restored in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright."

Despite the high asking prices of some of Wright's iconic designs today, the architect was a strong believer in creating good housing for all people — he once agreed to design an affordable home after Madison newspaperman Herbert Jacobs, a Wright acquaintance, challenged the architect to design and build a home for $5,000 (equivalent to $87,141 in 2018).

The Price Tower is a 19-story building, opened in 1956, that Wright once described as "the tree that escaped the crowded forest," according to Curbed. After plans to restore the former Memorial Hospital fell through, BRTA could receive permission to create affordable housing in the tower.

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While the grant money needs to be used by 2022, BRTA did not reveal when the project could go forward or how much an apartment in the Price Tower would cost. According to Wilson, challenges that come with the project include making the kitchens and bathrooms functional and installing modern heating and air conditioning.

“Because of the difficulty with moving furniture up and down in the elevators all apartments will be furnished,” Wilson added.

That said, Wilson feels confident that the building project will go through — he said that the HUD has been enthusiastic about the plan.

“They said, ‘We normally deal with square boxes,’” Wilson said. “This is far from that.”

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