

21 May 2025

To: Historical Resources Board

From: Bruce Coughran

RE: Agenda for May 22, 2025, Agenda Item #1 Rose Vollmer/Richard Lareau House - 4101 Lomaland Drive

Dear Hon. Board Members,

I would like to comment in favor of Historical Status for 4101 Lomaland #1; the last remaining example of Adult Housing at the Lomaland Community, as explained below.

BACKGROUND OF SUBMITTING PARTY

My name is Bruce Coughran. In the 1990's I engaged in a research project focusing on the initial building of the Theosophical Society Community on Point Loma ("Lomaland") as a part of a graduate program in history at Cal State University at Dominguez Hills that resulted in a Thesis that was delivered in June 1995 (referenced below). (As a side note, I grew up in a house directly adjacent to the subject property, at 747 Stafford Place, and have been familiar with the site since the early 1960's.)

After the hearing on 27 March 2025, I provided a copy of this thesis to the staff, and to Heritage as a consulting party, after this board asked for a re-evaluation. They have incorporated the information therein, and considered it during their preparation of Technical Report dated 30 April 2025. (Historical Resource Technical Report – 4101 Lomaland Drive #1-4, San Diego, CA 92106 April 30, 2025.)

COMMENTS ON CONSIDERATION OF HISTORICAL DESIGNATION FOR 4101 LOMALAND DR #1

I have reviewed the Heritage Report and it's recommendation to not declare 4101 Lomaland #1 as a historical resource, and their reasoning. I would like to offer a few comments and ask reconsideration of Heritage's conclusions based on a couple of factors that were not considered (see below).

The thorough analysis of Heritage's staff seems, to me, to include the bulk of the historical information that might be available for this building. They established that 1) the original building was constructed during the height of the Theosophical Society's activities at the Point Loma site (1910 to late 1920's); 2) that the building is the last remaining building of it's type (housing units used by virtually all adult "students" or members of the community); and that, 3) the later additions to the structure have obscured (but not totally altered) the underlying original simple "room", probably built as early as 1910.

I would like to offer comments on three points: 1) the nature of the historical value of the site in general (Lomaland's significance to the history of San Diego, and Point Loma in particular); 2) the significance of the additions to 4101 Lomaland #1 to its current historical value; and 3) the implications of the uniqueness of the ownership of the property in question (being on city-owned property).

1) Historical Value of Lomaland, and particularly the unit in question (4101 Lomaland #1)

It is worth taking note of the historical significance of the Lomaland Community on the history of San Diego. After the “boom of the 80’s”, when the population of San Diego reached one 35,000, the subsequent crash and quiet of the ’90’s left San Diego with a population of maybe 19,000 by the late 1890’s. Point Loma had maybe a half dozen farms (restricted by lack of water), small villages in Roseville and La Playa, a few houses in Ocean Beach, but no housing developments, paved roads or utilities, electricity, or any trees to speak of. It was a barren plot of ground for the most part.

The extensive lands and activities of the Lomaland community (see Greenwalt for a description) left not only a level of Intellectual, artistic, and cultural activity not really seen before in the small town of San Diego, but also forests, gardens, fruit orchards, magnificent glass dome-ed buildings, etc.; but also the seeds of the development of Loma Portal (first development in Point Loma), the Sunset Cliffs area, the “wooded area”, and central Point Loma after only a few years.

it might not be an overstatement to say this was the turning point in the development of Point Loma, and a significant contribution to what the City of San Diego would become in the later decades.

The historical significance of the Lomaland Community has been recognized by the emphasis on maintaining historical features remaining, in negotiated agreements between the City and subsequent owners (George Wood, Cal Western/USIU, and Point Loma Nazarene University) over many decades.

Of the remaining structures on the former Theosophical property, the most significant are the Spaulding Home, North House, the Headquarters building (also called the “Tingely Home”, or Cabrillo Hall) and the Greek Theater. By agreement with the city, these structures, along with a few more (most notable for this context, Casa Rosa, which is on City/Park property adjacent to the subject Unit#1) were agreed to be saved by PLNU. At the same time the “Tingely Home”, and another building, were to be moved and restored, and used for historical tours highlighting the contributions of the Theosophists.

As I argued in my previous testimony (on 27 March); if one were to visit the site today, and assess the community from the basis of remaining structures and photographs, etc., one would come to the impression that the community lived in large, victorian-era, comfort, as exemplified by the Spaulding House North House, and the “Tingely Home”. But, in fact, these are the ONLY buildings that ever served as housing units that were large and opulent. Virtually the entire adult community living at the site were housed in small, simple, modest quarters resembling the original 4101 Lomaland #1 unit (referred to as ‘Room’143 in the Heritage Report.)

So I would argue that the core attribute of this community, the thing that makes it UNIQUE, was that the fact that the vast accomplishments (in scholarship, art, literature, music, drama, etc.) CONTRASTS so starkly with the humble nature of the living situations of virtually all of the adult members. I think this IS the reason why 4101 Lomaland #1 should be preserved. Because it so easily demonstrates this point, and is the last example of this Adult Housing remaining.

2) Significance of additions to 4101 Lomaland #1 to its current Historical Value

The Heritage Technical Report confirms that they view that the existing structure (at least the original part of it, "Room 143") qualifies as a Rare Resource as "the last representative of the Theosophical Society's only remaining adult-student boarding rooms." It also notes, quoting the National Register Bulletin, that rare resources "...must have the essential physical features that enable it to convey its historic character or information." And "The rarity...may justify accepting a greater degree of alteration...provided that enough of the property survives for it to be a significant recourse." (page 8 of Heritage Technical Historical Technical Report - 4101 Lomaland #1-4, San Diego, CA 92106 April 30, 2025)

Heritage then offers its professional opinion that "the building, in its current state, no longer emulates the single-room boarding facility utilized for adult students." It goes on to state that the current structure, with the later additions, does not now convey the qualities of the original structure (as it was used), and would not be recognizable to a contemporary "in its current form." (Heritage obsit. page 9)

There is no question the structure has been altered, with additions added that obscure the original structure. But I do not see any evidence presented in this report that the original structure has been altered to the degree it is unrecognizable (over and above the later additions.)

It is worth noting here, that the "Tingley Home" (or Headquarters Building) which was so prominently preserved by previous agreements between the city and the University, also had extensive modifications and additions. As here, the essential original structure had not been unrecognizably altered, but only obscured by later additions. (When the building was moved and renovated, the later additions were removed.) (see Coughran thesis, pg.44)

The point of historic preservation is to retain the features that made the structure of historical significance in the first place. In this case, as discussed above, the simplicity of the structure IS the physical feature that conveys the historic character or information of importance. So the later additions may obscure, but do not nullify the historic value of the structure, and should not become a reason to destroy the structure.

3) Implications of the ownership of 4101 Lomaland #1

I think it is also important to mention the responsibility of the city for preserving the important features of the Lomaland Community. Over and above, the overall considerations of maintaining all Historical sites, this particular site has particular significance to the period in question (for ALL of San Diego), and is currently owned by the city of San Diego, meaning that the stewardship responsibilities are less impacted by private interests.

But in addition to these factors, it is worth noting that the very existence of Sunset Cliffs Natural Park, indeed the whole nature of the surrounding area, is only "the way it is" because of the existence and activities of the Theosophists. The city acquired the property from transactions starting with the theosophists, and the land was kept in its "natural" state because of the existence of Lomaland, and its current "natural" state (including the addition of what was once thousands of trees) came from the activities of the Theosophists.

So, in a very real and direct sense, the existing Sunset Cliffs Natural Park owes its entire existence to this history. The competing interests are far fewer and less significant than if this site were on private, or newly developed property. And the preservation of a significant piece of history baring on both San Diego and Point Loma's course of development, is especially worthy of a sense of responsibility by the current owners (the City.)

In Conclusion:

I have tried to develop for the Board that the structure at 4101 Lomaland Dr #1 is:

- 1) undoubtedly a rare example of an important feature of the Theosophical Community at Lomaland and should be designated on that criteria:
- 2) That the development of Lomaland did, indeed, have a profound impact on the development of Point Loma and greater San Diego in the period in question;
- 3) The alterations and additions to the original structure obscure, but do not change, the historical importance of the structure (just as they didn't for the "Tingley Home");
- 4) The fact that this last remaining structure is on land owned and managed by the City of San Diego makes its preservation more possible, and it is the responsible role for the City as steward of the property in question.

References

- 1) "White City on the Hill: The Building of the Theosophical Society Community on Point Loma, California, 1897-1942." Master's Thesis, CSU Dominguez Hills, December, 1994 UMI: 1374834
- 2) Greenwalt, Emmitt A, California Utopia: Point Loma 1897-1942, Point Loma Publications, 1978