



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

Report to the Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: March 11, 2021 REPORT NO. HRB-21-020

HEARING DATE: March 25, 2021

SUBJECT: **ITEM #4 – Sim Bruce Richards House I**

RESOURCE INFO: [California Historical Resources Inventory Database \(CHRID\) link](#)

APPLICANT: Stanley T. Wilson represented by Heritage Architecture & Planning

LOCATION: 977 Albion Street, Peninsula Community, Council District 2
APN 531-601-01-00

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the Sim Bruce Richards House I located at 977 Albion Street as a historical resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate the Sim Bruce Richards House I located at 977 Albion Street as a historical resource with a period of significance of 1948-1958 under HRB Criterion D as a notable work of Master Architect Sim Bruce Richards. The designation excludes the 124-square-foot front addition built in 1980. This recommendation is based on the following finding:

The resource is representative of a notable work of Master Architect Sim Bruce Richards and retains integrity as it relates to the original design. Specifically, the resource is a notable example of Richards' work because it is the first house he designed for himself, is among his first designs when he began working as an independent architect, and is an early example of his work in his preferred architectural style, the Organic Geometric style.

BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with the owner's desire to have the site designated as a historical resource. The resource is a single-family house with an attached garage. It is located on the southeast corner of the intersection of Albion and Talbot Streets in the Peninsula Community.

The property has not been identified in any historic surveys, as the subject area has not been previously surveyed.

The historic name of the resource, the Sim Bruce Richards House I, has been identified consistent with the Board's adopted naming policy and reflects the name of Sim Bruce Richards, a Master Architect who

constructed the house as his personal residence. It was the first house that Richards designed as his personal residence.

ANALYSIS

A Historical Resource Research Report was prepared by Heritage Architecture and Planning, which concludes that the resource is significant under HRB Criteria B, C, and D. Staff concurs that the site is a significant historical resource under HRB Criterion D but not HRB Criterion B and C. This determination is consistent with the *Guidelines for the Application of Historical Resources Board Designation Criteria*, as follows.

CRITERION B - Is identified with persons or events significant in local, state or national history.

The Historical Resource Research Report proposes designation of the subject property under HRB Criterion B for being Sim Bruce Richards' place of work from 1949, when he started his independent architectural practice, to 1951. While Richards is a historically significant individual, there is not enough information to determine that 977 Albion Street is the property best identified with his significance, since he also had several other offices during his multi-decade career. It appears that his office at 1298 ¼ Prospect Street was demolished. He also had an office at 2377 Linwood Street for at least 5 years, which is extant but does not reflect his Modernist style. *ModernSanDiego.com* also mentions offices on Pearl Street and La Jolla Boulevard, but staff could not determine their addresses. Because he only used 977 Albion Street as his office for two years and the significance of his other extant offices is unclear, there is currently not enough information to determine that 977 Albion Street is the best property to represent him under HRB Criterion B. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion B.

CRITERION C - Embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period or method of construction or is a valuable example of the use of natural materials or craftsmanship.

The subject property was constructed in 1948 as a one-story, single-family residence designed in the Organic Geometric style. Sim Bruce Richards designed the original building as his own house in 1948 and was hired by the subsequent owners to design the additions that were built in 1958. The house is clad in both vertical and horizontal board and batten siding. There is also a perimeter fence clad in horizontal board and batten. The building features shed and low-pitched gable roof forms, all clad in composition shingles. Some areas have deep eaves and exposed rafters or beams. The main entrance is on the west façade and is recessed. The main entrance door and a secondary door on the north elevation are wood Dutch doors. The windows are primarily wood. The east elevation features a series of floor-to-ceiling fiberglass panels separated by sections of vertical board and batten. There is also one fiberglass panel on the north elevation.

The property has undergone several modifications since its 1948-1958 period of significance. The originally exposed wood siding and perimeter fences were painted at an unknown date. A deck was added at the front entry in 1977. In 1980, an addition for a study was constructed on the primary (west) façade, south of the main entry. Two original awning windows that would have been demolished or covered up by this addition were relocated to its west elevation. The addition is clad in horizontal board and batten to match the original building. Another original awning window, just south of the main entry, was reglazed with textured glass. The house also has two vinyl windows, one on each side of the northeast corner of the north bedroom.

There are also some discrepancies between Richards' plans and existing conditions. First, the two vinyl windows mentioned above are currently each paired with a fiberglass panel that does not reach all the way

to ground but otherwise matches the other panels. The 1958 plans show a single wood casement window on each side of that corner. The 1959 plans also propose to relocate two original windows to a new portion of the house. The plans show these windows side by side on the north elevation of the proposed storage area/workshop. However, in their existing conditions, the windows flank a larger center window. Additionally, there is currently a stained-glass wood window on the south-facing wall next to the main entrance. No window is shown at this location on the 1958 plans, although its sill matches those of other windows on the house. Finally, the 1958 plans show a single casement window on the south elevation of the proposed master bedroom wing, where there is currently a metal sliding door.

Organic Geometric architecture is a philosophy of design which promotes a harmonious relationship between buildings and nature. Organic Geometric designers used natural building materials such as wood and stone. Like their Post and Beam Modern contemporaries, Organic Geometric architects also used glass to minimize the separation between the interior and the exterior and encourage indoor/outdoor living. Buildings were carefully sited to take advantage of views and other site features. Designs emphasize rectilinear geometry, asymmetrical facades, unusual rooflines, and angular shapes. Primary character-defining features of the Organic Geometric style are: exposed structure and materials; polygon design motifs including squares and diamonds; and natural materials. Secondary features are: sharp angular massing, asymmetrical facades, complex roof forms, and site-specific design.

Although the house retains many of the character defining features of Organic Geometric style, such as natural materials, sharp angular massing, asymmetrical façade, and complex roof forms, the modifications have resulted in a loss of integrity to the 1948-1958 period of significance. The construction of the undifferentiated front addition is not consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and is in a highly visible location. One of the original awning windows on the façade has been reglazed with decorative textured glass. Additionally, the painting over of the originally exposed wood siding and fences significantly detract from the "organic" aspect of the Organic Geometric style. These modifications significantly impair integrity of design, materials, workmanship and feeling as it relates to Criterion C. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under Criterion C.

CRITERION D - Is representative of a notable work of a master builder, designer, architect, engineer, landscape architect, interior designer, artist or craftsman.

The subject property is a known work of Master Architect Sim Bruce Richards. In 1930, Richards began studying architecture at UC Berkeley but soon switched to art. He excelled in weaving fabrics and rugs with abstract designs. His weaving caught the attention of Frank Lloyd Wright, who personally invited him to study architecture at Taliesin. Richards left Berkeley in 1934 and studied at Taliesin until 1936.

Richards moved to San Diego around 1938 and initially worked as a civilian architect for the US Navy. He also worked in the architectural offices of William Templeton Johnson and Harold Abrams before opening his own practice around 1949. He focused on residential design, although he also designed several public and commercial structures. Reflecting his training in organic design at Taliesin, Richards' body of work is characterized by unpainted wood and often rough or unfinished appearances, as well as complex roof forms, angular massing, and site-specific design. Richards often collaborated with friends who were artists and craftsmen, incorporating their crafts such as metalworking, tilework, and masonry in his home designs.

Seven of Richard's works have been designated as historical resources by the Historical Resources Board. They include the Richard Olney / Sim Bruce Richards House (HRB #615) and the Edward and Iris Bascomb/Sim Bruce Richards House (HRB #1310). The designation of the Fine Medical Building /Sim Bruce

Richards Building (formerly HRB #544) established him as a Master Architect by the HRB in 2002, but this designation was later overturned.

As discussed above, due to modifications to the property outside of its period of significance, the property does not retain integrity of design, materials and feeling as it relates to Criterion C. However, it does retain integrity as a notable example of Richards' work in the Organic Geometric style and an early example of his independent architectural work.

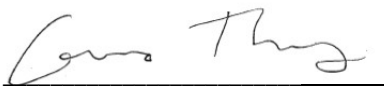
Significance Statement: The subject resource retains integrity and continues to reflect Richards' original design, intent and aesthetic. Specifically, the resource is a notable example of Richards' work because it is the first house he designed for himself, is among his first designs when he began working as an independent architect, and is an early example of his work in his preferred architectural style, the Organic Geometric style. Therefore, staff recommends designation under HRB Criterion D.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

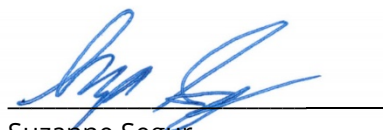
Designation brings with it the responsibility of maintaining the building in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. The benefits of designation include the availability of the Mills Act Program for reduced property tax; the use of the more flexible Historical Building Code; flexibility in the application of other regulatory requirements; the use of the Historical Conditional Use Permit which allows flexibility of use; and other programs which vary depending on the specific site conditions and owner objectives. If the property is designated by the HRB, conditions related to restoration or rehabilitation of the resource may be identified by staff during the Mills Act application process, and included in any future Mills Act contract.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff's field check, it is recommended that the Sim Bruce Richards House I located at 977 Albion Street be designated with a period of significance of 1948-1958 under HRB Criterion D as a notable work of Master Architect Sim Bruce Richards. The designation excludes the 124-square-foot front addition built in 1980.



Gemma Tierney
Associate Planner



Suzanne Segur
Senior Planner/ HRB Liaison
Development Services Department

GT/ss

Attachment(s):

1. Draft Resolution
2. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover

RESOLUTION NUMBER N/A
ADOPTED ON 3/25/2021

WHEREAS, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego held a noticed public hearing on 3/25/2021, to consider the historical designation of the Sim Bruce Richards House I (owned by Tiemann/Wilson Trust 10-23-03, 977 Albion Street, San Diego, CA 92106) located at **977 Albion Street, San Diego, CA 92106**, APN: **531-601-01-00**, further described as BLK 12 LOT 28 LOT 27 & /EXC ST OP/ in the City of San Diego, County of San Diego, State of California; and

WHEREAS, in arriving at their decision, the Historical Resources Board considered the historical resources report prepared by the applicant, the staff report and recommendation, all other materials submitted prior to and at the public hearing, inspected the subject property and heard public testimony presented at the hearing; and

WHEREAS, the property would be added to the Register of Designated Historical Resources as **Site No. ,** and

WHEREAS, designated historical resources located within the City of San Diego are regulated by the Municipal Code (Chapter 14, Article 3, Division 2) as such any exterior modifications (or interior if any interior is designated) shall be approved by the City, this includes but is not limited to modifications to any windows or doors, removal or replacement of any exterior surfaces (i.e. paint, stucco, wood siding, brick), any alterations to the roof or roofing material, alterations to any exterior ornamentation and any additions or significant changes to the landscape/ site.

NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED, the Historical Resources Board based its designation of the Sim Bruce Richards House I on the following findings:

(1) The property is historically significant under CRITERION D as a notable work of Master Architect Sim Bruce Richards and retains integrity as it relates to the original design. Specifically, the resource is a notable example of Richards' work because it is the first house he designed for himself, is among his first designs when he began working as an independent architect, and is an early example of his work in his preferred architectural style, the Organic Geometric style. This finding is further supported by the staff report, the historical research report, and written and oral evidence presented at the designation hearing.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, in light of the foregoing, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego hereby approves the historical designation of the above named property. The designation includes the parcel and exterior of the building as Designated Historical Resource **Site No. .**

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the designation shall exclude the 124-square-foot front addition built in 1980.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Secretary to the Historical Resources Board shall cause this resolution to be recorded in the office of the San Diego County Recorder at no fee, for the benefit of the City of San Diego, and with no documentary tax due.

Vote:

BY: _____
DAVID MCCULLOUGH, Chair
Historical Resources Board

APPROVED: MARA W. ELLIOTT,
CITY ATTORNEY

BY: _____
LINDSEY SEBASTIAN,
Deputy City Attorney