



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

Report to the Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: April 21, 2016 REPORT NO. HRB-16-026

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board
Agenda of April 28, 2016

SUBJECT: **ITEM #6 - The California Theatre Painted Wall Signs**

APPLICANT: Sloan Capital Partners LLC represented by AECOM

LOCATION: 1122 4th Avenue, 92101, Downtown Community, Council District 3

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the California Theatre Painted Wall Signs located at 1122 4th Avenue as a historical resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Do not designate the painted wall signs on the California Theatre located at 1122 4th Avenue under any adopted HRB Criteria.

BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with a proposed building modification or demolition of a structure of 45 years or more, consistent with San Diego Municipal Code Section 143.0212. While the California Theatre Building was designated on the local register in 1990 and determined eligible for the National Register, the painted wall signs were not addressed. The three signs were painted on the exterior of the building after the 1927 date of construction. This action seeks to address the significance of the signs only as objects and is not addressing the significance of the California Theatre which is a designated resource (HRB Site #291). The "In Spot" (sign #1) sign is located on the north façade, the "Agua Caliente" (sign #2) sign is located on the west façade, and the "Dog Racing" (sign #3) sign is south facade. The building is located on APN 533-521-04 and 533-521-05.

ANALYSIS

A Historical Resource Technical Report was prepared by AECOM, which concludes that the painted wall signs are not significant under any HRB Criteria and staff concurs. This determination is consistent with the *Guidelines for the Application of Historical Resources Board Designation Criteria*, as follows.

CRITERION A - Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's, a community's or a neighborhood's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development.

Sign #1 is located on the north façade of the building. The sign is associated with a business that was housed in the California Theatre with an entrance at the southeast corner of the building. The sign reads "Barbary Coast, San Diego's In Spot, Corner 4th and C." The Barbary Coast Tavern was in operation at this location from 1968 to 1976 outside of the period of significance for the California Theatre. It was during this time frame that the sign was painted on the north façade of the building.

Sign #2 and #3 advertise the Agua Caliente Racetrack. During Prohibition from 1919 to 1933, alcohol consumption was illegal in the United States and many in San Diego would cross the border to Tijuana to visit the local bars. In response to the growing number of visitors, several American investors developed the Agua Caliente casino and resort. The casino opened in 1928 with a dog racetrack followed shortly by a golf course. In December 1929, the Agua Caliente Jockey Club horse racetrack opened with much fanfare. Through the 1930s, these amenities attracted large crowds. After Prohibition, the resort suffered a decline in attendance and in September 1937 the resort closed and was seized by the Mexican government. While the racetrack continued to operate, the property was used as an aviation and industrial school and hospital. The racetrack regained some popularity in 1939 when horse racing was banned in California, but the level of attendance was low compared to the earlier years. The action by the Mexican government to seize the resort and spa was overturned in 1942, but due to the shortage of materials and labor during World War II, the property remained closed. Eventually, the resort and the casino were demolished. In 1947, John S. Alessio became the Assistant General Manager of the racetrack and worked to turn around the operation. Alessio expanded the track and developed innovative gambling strategies. To influence the San Diego market, a public relations office was opened on Broadway Street in the 1950s and 1960s. The Caliente Racetrack launched an advertising campaign that included two painted wall signs on the California Theatre during this time frame. The signs were purportedly completed by the Pacific Outdoor Advertisement Company. The signage features the logo of the ornated "C" in Caliente with roses and images of racehorses.

Research into the history of the painted wall signs did not reveal any information to indicate that the signs exemplify or reflect special elements of the City's or downtown's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development. The Barbary Coast Tavern is not considered a significant resource and the Agua Caliente wall signs were painted on well past the heyday of the resort, casino and the track. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion A.

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

Research into the signage at the California Theatre did not reveal associations with any individuals who could be considered historically significant in local, state or national history. Furthermore, no events of local, state or national significance are known to have occurred at the subject property. Therefore, the property is not eligible for 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 painted wall signs which were added in the 1950s and 1960s are unrelated to the 1927 Spanish Colonial Revival California Theatre building. The signs were hand painted most likely using “pounce patterns,” a typical sign painting practice employed after 1940, which involved the use of a perforated paper stencil and chalk to create temporary outlines that could be applied directly to the wall’s exterior. The paint application on the exterior walls of the building does not embody a distinctive style, type, period or method of construction, special material or craftsmanship. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion C.

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

Research into the painted wall sign at the California Theatre at 1122 4th Avenue failed to conclusively identify an artist or designer. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion D.

CRITERION E - *Is listed or has been determined eligible by the National Park Service for listing on the National Register of Historic Places or is listed or has been determined eligible by the State Historical Preservation Office for listing on the State Register of Historical Resources.*

The painted wall signs at the California Theatre were determined to not be eligible for listing on the State or National Registers. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion E.

CRITERION F - *Is a finite group of resources related to one another in a clearly distinguishable way or is a geographically definable area or neighborhood containing improvements which have a special character, historical interest or aesthetic value or which represent one or more architectural periods or styles in the history and development of the City.*

The painted wall signs on the California Theatre are not located within a designated historic district. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion F.

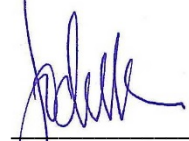
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

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 not recommended that the painted wall signs at the California Theatre located at 1122 4th Avenue be designated under any HRB Criteria. 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.



Jodie Brown, AICP
Senior Planner



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Senior Planner/HRB Liaison

JB/ks

Attachment:

1. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover