



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

# Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: July 16, 2010 REPORT NO. HRB-10-031

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board  
Agenda of July 22, 2010

SUBJECT: **ITEM #6 – Esker and Lullah Cole House**

APPLICANT: Coffman Family Trust represented by Scott Moomjian

LOCATION: 6604 Muirlands Drive, La Jolla Community, Council District 1

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the Esker and Lullah Cole House located at 6604 Muirlands Drive as a historical resource.

## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate the Esker and Lullah Cole House located at 6604 Muirlands Drive as a historical resource with a period of significance of 1946 under HRB Criterion C. This recommendation is based on the following finding:

The resource embodies the distinctive characteristics through the retention of character defining features of the Custom Ranch style and retains a good level of architectural integrity from its period of significance. Specifically, the resource exhibits a low-to-moderately pitched hipped roof with wood shingles; deep overhanging eaves with long, thin, slightly spaced wood slats at the soffit; vertical wood tongue-and-groove and brick siding over wood frame construction; and large expanses of single pane wood frame and sash windows.



**City Planning & Community Investment**  
202 C Street, MS 5A • San Diego, CA 92101-3865  
Tel (619) 235-5200 Fax (619) 533-5951

## 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. The building is a one story single family residence located on a larger corner lot in a low-density single-family residential zone in the Muirlands Subdivision. The subject property is set back far from the street with a wide expanse of landscaping and is surrounded by residential uses.

The historic name of the resource, the Esker and Lullah Cole House, has been identified consistent with the Board's adopted naming policy and includes the name of Esker and Lullah Cole, who constructed the house as their personal residence.

## ANALYSIS

A historical resource technical report was prepared by Scott A. Moomjian, which concludes that the resource is not significant under any HRB Criteria. Staff disagrees with that conclusion, and recommends that the site be designated as a significant historical resource under HRB Criterion C. 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.*

There is no information that indicates that the property located at 6604 Muirlands Drive exemplifies or reflects a special element of any aspect of development outlined in Criterion A. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under this criterion.

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

The property located at 6604 Muirlands Drive was owned by a number of individuals following the ownership of the original owner/residents, Esker and Lullah Cole, as follows: Esker and Lullah Cole (1945-1963), Esker Cole (1963-1964), Esker and Grace Cole (1964-1965), James and Ann Pike (1965-1970), Lyle and Bonnie Upton (1970-1972), and others thereafter. There is no information that indicates that any of these individuals are significant in local, state or national history. 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 house located at 6604 Muirlands Drive is a one story single family home constructed in 1946 in the Custom Ranch style. The house features a rectangular shape configuration with a low-to-moderately pitched hipped roof clad in wood shingles. Two decorative dove-cotes with horizontal slats are located on the roof. The construction is vertical wood tongue-and-groove and brick siding over a wood frame on a reinforced concrete foundation. Deep eaves project beyond the building wall and the soffit is finished with long, thin, slightly spaced wood slats. At the main,

east elevation the entry is roughly centered and recessed several feet into the building plane. The entry door is wooden with four square glass panes set vertically along the left side of the door face. To the right of the recessed entry and progressing north along the façade is a projecting bay with a brick base below and single pane wood frame and sash windows; short black aluminum sliding windows set high on the wall in the original opening; a wood and glass door; and single pane wood frame and sash windows at and continuing around the corner. To the left of the recessed entry and progressing south along the façade is a wide brick chimney set perpendicularly to and through the building wall and tied into a large brick element immediately adjacent to the entry; a wide projecting bay with a brick base and three single pane wood frame windows; and large single pane floor-to-ceiling wood frame windows.

At the north end of the building, a low brick wall wraps round the building on three sides, even with the line of the eave above on the east and north sides, and defines a small patio area that is partially recessed under the northwest corner of the building. At the south elevation, a wide brick barbeque is set perpendicularly to and through the building wall flanked by pairs of large single lite French doors to the right and a small window opening and Ranch style wood door with diamond pattern lites. The west elevation at the rear of the house looks out over views to the ocean and contains a series of wood frame and sash windows over a brick base and a rounded projecting bay at the south end.

A detached garage with guest house is located at the south end of the property and exhibits the same character defining features as the main house, including the low-to-moderately pitched hipped roof with wood shingles; deep overhanging eaves with long, thin, slightly spaced wood slats at the soffit; vertical wood tongue-and-groove and brick siding over wood frame construction; and single pane wood frame and sash windows. The garage door is solid wood door with a concentric rectangle pattern and appears to be original.

Modifications to the property are limited and include the replacement of the original, small wood frame and sash window to the far right of the entry with a black aluminum frame and sash window in the original opening; the removal of a small window to the left of the barbeque on the south elevation (which was boarded over but not framed in); the addition of a swimming pool in 1974 (which was later filled-in), the addition of retaining walls in 1977 and the addition and apparent removal of a “canopy cover” in 1956. In all, the building retains a high degree of integrity.

According to the San Diego Modernism Historic Context, the Custom Ranch style “*was relatively popular in residential design and construction throughout San Diego... Custom Ranch homes are generally much more lavish than their tract counterparts; they frequently included a large landscaped property, with a deep street setback creating a generous front yard. These homes may also feature larger garages, motor courts, servant’s quarters, expanded kitchens, and generous living spaces... Many of these structures were associated with a recognized architect and most were designed for a specific client with individual programmatic needs and preferences. Therefore, this sub-style exhibits a high degree of individualization. Properties eligible for individual designation should retain character defining features historically present on the resource.*”

The custom-designed house at 6604 Muirlands Drive exhibits the primary and secondary character defining features of the Custom Ranch style as follows:

Primary Character Defining Features:

- Long rectangular floor plan set horizontally to Muirlands Drive.
- Single story configuration.
- Custom details consisting of long expanses of wood frame windows, some set floor-to-ceiling; shutters the guest house; and large, wide brick chimney and barbeque.
- Prominent, long, low-to-moderately pitched hipped roof with very deep overhangs and detailed soffits.

Secondary Character Defining Features:

- Sprawling floor plan (100 feet long) in a rectangular (not “L” or “U” shaped) configuration with patio areas at the north and south ends.
- Large detached garage.
- Extensive use of wood shingle roofing, vertical tongue and groove siding and brick throughout the house.

In addition to these primary and secondary character defining features, the house exhibits other features that the Modernism Context Statement note are indicative of Custom Ranch homes, including a deep setback and generous landscaped front yard; a motor court (circular drive leading to the garage); a guest house or servant’s quarters; and at 2,565 square feet, generous living spaces.

The house at 6604 Muirlands Drive exhibits the character defining features of the Custom Ranch style as identified in the San Diego Modernism Context Statement and retains a high degree of integrity from its 1946 date of construction. Therefore, staff recommends designation of the subject property 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.*

The subject property was designed by noted modernist designer William Kesling (also Kessling) for original owners and residents Esker and Lullah Cole. Kesling was a prolific designer/builder who began his career in the 1920’s in construction and drafting. Information on Kesling’s career and work has been provided both in the Moomjian report and in a packet of information prepared and submitted by Angeles Leira (Attachment 3). The Moomjian report characterizes Kesling largely as a designer of pre-fabricated and spec homes utilizing a modernist aesthetic that were generally common and in some cases designed for economy. The report concludes that Kesling has not and should not be regarded as a Master. The information provided by Leira includes a thorough review of Kesling’s work and how that body of work has come to be viewed by other modernist architects, scholars and enthusiasts. Leira concludes that Kesling should be regarded as a Master, and that the subject property should be designated as an example of his work.

It appears based on the information provided that Kesling was a prolific and talented designer of modernist buildings who has come to be respected by practicing modernist architects and enthusiasts of modernist architecture. While Kesling may be eligible for establishment as a Master Designer/Builder, there is insufficient evidence provided in the record to demonstrate that the subject property is a notable example of Kesling's work. The information provided by Leira suggests that the house may be notable in her discussion on page 6:

*“This house, more than others, is very important to the evolution of William Kesling as a California Modernist, in that it shows clearly the transition from the simple and modest California Modern of the Dowling Drive Houses to the grander custom designs of the later 1940's and 1950's and his work in Borrego Springs. It is still modest looking, but no longer the simple flat or low pitched gable roof of this earlier La Jolla homes (Dowling Drive).”*

However, there is little information or analysis to substantiate this statement. A photographic survey and analysis would be required to demonstrate this transition in design development and the significant or notable role that this house played in that development. Therefore, staff is unable to recommend designation under HRB Criterion D at this time.

*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 property located at 6604 Muirlands Drive has not been listed on or determined eligible by the National Park Service for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and has not been listed on or determined eligible for listing by the State Historic Preservation Office for listing on the State Register or Historic Resource and is therefore 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 property located at 6604 Muirlands Drive is not located within a designated historic district, and is therefore 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 recommended that the Esker and Lullah Cole House located at 6604 Muirlands Drive be designated with a period of significance of 1946 under HRB Criterion C as a resource that exhibits the character defining features of the Custom Ranch style and retains integrity to its date of construction. 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.



---

Kelley Stanco  
Senior Planner



---

Cathy Winterrowd  
Principal Planner/HRB Liaison

KS/cw

Attachment(s):

1. Draft Resolution
2. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover
3. Analysis of William Kesling provided by Angeles Leira

RESOLUTION NUMBER N/A  
ADOPTED ON 7/22/2010

WHEREAS, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego held a noticed public hearing on 7/22/2010, to consider the historical designation of the **ESKER AND LULLAH COLE HOUSE** (owned by Coffman Family Trust 09-22-08, c/o Coffman Specialties Inc., 9685 Via Excelencia #200, San Diego, CA 92126) located at **6604 Muirlands Drive, San Diego, CA 92037**, APN: **352-361-31-00**, further described as BLK 16 LOT 1 POR 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. 0**, 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 Esker and Lullah Cole House on the following findings:

(1) The property is historically significant under CRITERION C as a resource that embodies the distinctive characteristics through the retention of character defining features of the Custom Ranch style and retains a good level of architectural integrity from its 1946 period of significance. Specifically, the resource exhibits a low-to-moderately pitched hipped roof with wood shingles; deep overhanging eaves with long, thin, slightly spaced wood slats at the soffit; vertical wood tongue-and-groove and brick siding over wood frame construction; and large expanses of single pane wood frame and sash windows. 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. 0**.

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: N/A

BY: \_\_\_\_\_  
JOHN LEMMO, Chair  
Historical Resources Board

APPROVED AS TO FORM AND  
LEGALITY: JAN I. GOLDSMITH,  
CITY ATTORNEY

BY: \_\_\_\_\_  
NINA FAIN  
Deputy City Attorney

# Analysis of William Kesling

Provided by Angeles Leira

6/29/2010



William Kesling, Master Architect

The information that follows, is presented to assist in the analysis per HRB Criterion D (Work of a Master Architect) of the work of William Kesling and his involvement in the design and construction of the 6604 Muirlands Drive House (The Esker Martin and Lullan M. Cole/William Kesling House) built in 1946. The house in question is ***“A resource associated with the work of a master refers to the technical or aesthetic achievements of a builder, designer, architect, engineer, landscape architect, interior designer, artist or craftsman. A master is a figure of generally recognized greatness in a field, a known craftsman of consummate skill, or an anonymous craftsman whose work is distinguishable from others by its characteristic style and quality.”***

The work of a Master may be established by a combination of one or more of the following:

**1. The scope and excellence of their overall body of work, as it is understood.**

The 1920's establish the beginning of the Modernist Movement in California, although San Diego already sports a Modernist house circa 1915 in the Burlingame subdivision, designer unknown. Frank Lloyd Wright, Neutra, Schindler built in Los Angeles during the 1920's. In the 1930's Streamline Modern became very popular, specially with the Hollywood society, and William Kesling was right there with them.

Born in Brenham, Texas in 1899, his parents moved to Calexico, California in 1916. In 1920 Kesling moved to Los Angeles where he worked his way up from carpenter helper to contracting. During this period he is also said to have worked as Schindler's draftsman (see, [www.modernsandiego.com](http://www.modernsandiego.com)). Later he opened his own office and begun to build his own houses in the early 1930's. A number of his houses were published and Julius Shulman the famous architectural photographer took pictures of all the early Modernists, including Kesling. It could be possible to go to Shulman's archives at the Getty Museum, and find some of Kesling's work there. The book written by Patrick Pascal in 2002, *Kesling Modern Structures, Popularizing Modern Design in Southern California 1934-1962* uses some of Shulman's photos and states Kesling's significance best:

*“Few designers have achieved greatness without any formal training, Fewer still are those that reached the pinnacles of their careers during the depths of the Great Depression. William Kesling met both these challenges with designs that played a unique an important role in the development and acceptance of modern architecture in Southern California..... he brought modern design within reach of the everyday home buying public... “*

Kesling had a most successful career in Los Angeles building Streamline Moderne houses for the well to do such as Hollywood actor Wallace Beery, for whom he built two houses in 1935, one at Harper Avenue in West Hollywood and the other near the Goldwyn Studios. However Kesling decided to concentrate his business on the middle class clients for whom he built homes for \$2,500 to \$4,000 each, at \$2.55 per square foot, when other custom homes were going for \$10.00 per square foot. He truly was a Modernist who lived up to the “motto” of providing affordable quality housing for all. The Silverlake community in LA received many of his works. Even houses designed by Bauhaus architects for the explicit purpose of providing modest quality housing in Germany were not that modest in cost, and many were government subsidized.

In 1934 in Los Angeles, Kesling decided to build a model home. He bought a steep hillside lot in Silverlake for \$250.00 and with his own savings financed a house that he built for \$3,600. It was the first time that many of his tradesmen had worked with some of the new materials and methods of construction that he devised, including steel, chrome, very large glass panels, large wood and steel spans, and new insulating materials coming out of industry, such as Cemestos. The model house brought 35 clients. Kesling also negotiated a deal with Deardon's

to furnish his model home in return for their use of pictures taken to showcase their wares in their catalogue. His architectural success took him to construct houses beyond Silverlake and West Hollywood, in Sunset Plaza, San Fernando Valley, Pasadena, and Westwood. A very enterprising young man. However; the tremendous over-extensions of his business landed him in court, where he was charged with embezzlement. Although at first acquitted, the charges were brought back through a grand jury investigation and he pleaded guilty on one count (Count II) for the amount of \$24.00. As a note of curiosity, it is interesting to see the other counts, which included amounts of \$7.50 (Count I), \$24.00 (Count III), \$24.00 (Count IV), \$5.00 (Count V), \$7.50 (Count VI), \$15.00 (Count VII), and \$24.00 (Count VIII). Kesling accepted guilt in Count II, in exchange for freeing his wife of any liability, for which he was sentenced to two years on probation, and was forbidden from heading any contracting activities during the period. He spent those two years as a salesman, and working with other architects and contractors. According to Patrick Pascal:

*“Kesling wrote that he spent the years between 1937 and 1939 in Salinas, California, and then San Francisco where ‘he designed and built contemporary homes and apartments’. Under the terms of his probation, any such work could only be done as an employee of another contractor, so no record of his work at this time exists.”*

The Report submitted by the Applicant of 6604 Muirlands Drive, raises the issue of Kesling’s troubles with the Law, a review of the case’s Probation Officers Report (66213) dated February 18, 1937 is most interesting throughout, and particularly in its conclusions:

*“The defendant’s trouble appears to be that of one who has bitten off more than he could chew and as a result became so involved that he reverted to somewhat illegal tactics in order to keep his head above water.*

*The defendant also apparently used some shady means in trying to get his client to pay additional for extras in order to make up for some shortage in another place. This however appears to be the method of meeting competition in many lines of business.*

*Probation Officer cannot find where the defendant has profited by any of his activities; those persons for whom he built homes apparently got what they paid for and in some instances a great deal more. However, the Probation Officer cannot condone defendant’s methods of doing business, yet believes that the ends of justice will be subserved by the granting of the probation in the present case under certain conditions however. Therefore, after taking all the facts into consideration, the Probation Officer makes the following recommendation:*

*RECOMMENDATION: It is respectfully recommended that this application for probation be approved; that the period of probation be fixed for two years, and that the defendant refrain from carrying on a contracting business during the period of this probation; however, not to preclude the defendant from being employed by other contractors.”*

It was after this episode that Kesling decided to start a new life in San Diego, and in 1939, when his “probation” ended, Kesling decided to resume his career in La Jolla, where he established the Kesling Modern Structures, and built his office. In this manner, and with his enthusiasm and energy renewed, he launched a new episode in his professional evolution. One of his first major commissions was the Kaysar house, with a truly “New California Design”, gone were the Streamline steel and white stucco designs, in came the gorgeous Californian materials of natural wood, brick and warm colors. During this time Kesling became one of the first wave of Modernists in San Diego. He joined a selective group who practiced actively in San Diego during the years listed as follows: Rudolph Schindler ( 1923-1930 ), Harwell Hamilton Harris (1940-1942 ), Richard Wheeler (1947-1989), William Kessling

(1939-1962), Lloyd Ruocco ( 1937-1972 ), Sim Bruce Richards (1949-1983), John Lloyd Wright ( 1946-1972 ), Robert Mosher ( 1944-1990's).

World War II came upon us, and all energies were channeled towards the war effort, helping our allies, then surviving ourselves, first in the Pacific Theater, later everywhere. The military's strong presence in San Diego required lots of development and construction, and housing of personnel was a major objective. What better person than Kesling heading a mass housing project? He studied the problem and financing available, and in 1942 was awarded a contract by the US Government to design and build one hundred, 750 square-foot, prefabricated, demountable, single family dwellings for aircraft industry workers at 46<sup>th</sup> and Market. This was the "dream" of any Modernist worth his salt. Bauhaus architects had for years yearned to design and develop such mass housing that had the possibility to shelter large un-housed populations after World War I, with the flexibility to expand, contract or move, to effectively accommodate changes in family size, living conditions and moves to other locations. Prefabricated buildings were the ultimate in flexibility, design, and use of new materials, all important goals to Modernists. Bauhaus architects and designers never accomplished their much cherished goal of developing mass housing to the extent that Kesling did, at the time he did it, when Europe was practically homeless going through a terrible World War II. According to Patrick Pascal:

*"Kesling was proud of the construction method, noting, 'These were erected in less time and at a lower cost than any other prefabs constructed during the war in San Diego County'."*

*"...The windows were wood frame, not steel casement, and often centered rather than placed in a rooms corner. With neither parapets nor attics, the lightweight roofs gave the houses an almost gossamer feel. The fences surrounding the patios employed an unusual and original Kesling innovation. Rather than build his fences with standard upright posts and cross framing to support vertical planks, Kesling used 2x10 horizontal planks without cross framing at all, saving both labor and materials. The 4x8 foot prefabricated wall panels were anchored to slab floors. These panels consisted of 2x4 inch wood frames with three-quarter-inch sheets of Cemestos, a mixture of cement and asbestos, suspended between..."*

After the war ended, the dislocations caused by the war, returning military, new families, and extensive immigration created a severe housing crunch all over the world, and San Diego was no exception. Initially due to the war effort, materials for construction were in very short supply, and Kesling took advantage of his experience during the Depression years, and the knowledge he acquired during the war, to created affordable designs that could save materials, and bring affordable housing to market within a short period of time. In 1946, Kesling purchased 12 inexpensive lots on Dowling Drive in La Jolla, where working from a single basic floor plan Kesling designed many variations on the theme. His designs had larger rooms, heat, sliding doors, and carports, the full "California Dream". The houses established small patios and excellent indoor-outdoor spatial relationships, the prototype of California Modern design, in 1946!!! Kesling expanded these concepts to other La Jolla and San Diego locations. Similar efforts were also taking place in Los Angeles, lead by Modernists such as Gregory Ain, Joseph Johnson, Alfred Day and Garrett Eckbo in 1948 with their development of the Mar Vista Tract.

As the transition from a war footing progressed, demand for luxury homes came about, and Kesling began to construct modern custom homes for those clients in the "know". The 6604 Muirlands Drive House completed in 1946, must have been one of the first custom houses that Kesling built in La Jolla. We know of four more early ones, also completed in that period, the Gamson, Ingall, King and Everett Houses. The house at 6604 Muirlands Drive was not previously identified in any literature of Kesling, but announced as his "recently completed" work

via the *San Diego Union* newspaper on October 5, 1947 and confirmed by various related building records, is obviously a transitional design from his very modest Dowling Drive houses to the grander Custom Houses. This house offers an example of Kesling's "pre-fab" experience applied to the design of one of a kind, custom home. The five early custom houses employ the same basic wall and roof systems as the Dowling Drive houses, but at much larger scale. All have fire-places and extensive built-ins. Richard Neutra and other Modernists, including Frank Lloyd Wright, did this at a much higher price; the effect however, and the quality of workmanship supervision was very similar. The Kesling exteriors and interior design quality, even 60 and 70 years later and in spite of the modifications that they must have undergone, are quite beautiful in their simplicity and clean lines, and very well put together. With the King and Everett houses, Kesling's transition to post-war design was complete. These homes were much larger and not rectangular. So successful and admired were the houses of this period that they were published in *Life* and *Sunset* magazines.

In 1946, Walton McConnell commissioned Kesling to design and build a home in the bluffs of La Jolla Shores. This house represents another new approach to design; a triangular motif replaces the simple rectangular elements of his prefabricated and early Custom Houses, and the sinuous curves and stucco of his Streamline Period. In came a composition of rectangles and triangles, wood paneling, and very large wood frame windows, that make the house seem to soar towards the ocean below. Without the budget constraint of other projects, Kesling created a soaring 15 foot high living room almost completely surrounded by glass, giving the occupants a direct connection with the beach below and the ocean beyond. This extra volume also creates a loft space used for a bedroom that connects to the living room below and the scenery beyond. Luxury included all interior Costa Rican Mahogany, and extensive use of brick in pathways, patios, walls, and the grand fireplace in the living room. This was a creative way of designing for lateral earthquake forces.

Building both custom luxury homes and modest economic ones, Kesling's business grew beyond even his previous success. To more effectively and efficiently build, Kesling opened a lumber company next to his offices, buying directly from Oregon. For a while, Kesling build a great number of structures, not just homes but restaurants (Jamar, sited on La Jolla Blvd in Bird Rock), the medical office building at Torrey Pines and Girard (much modified since Kesling's times), the Summer House in La Jolla Shores (now demolished and replaced by a high-rise hotel), and other businesses and homes that will probably come to light as San Diegans recognize more and more of Kesling's quality work. Already the inventory of Kesling's buildings has grown considerably since 2000 when he was first recognized as being significant. It was in the early San Diego years that Kesling also focused on development in Borrego Springs, where he developed the Borrego Springs Desert Club, opened in 1949. "*A beautiful 5,000 square-foot facility offering an elaborate dining room and very large swimming pool set against the views of Anza-Borrego. The dining room was sided by nine, ten-by ten-foot glass panes looking out into the desert. The pool was twelve foot deep, thirty-by-sixty-foot ellipse looking out over a pristine desert canyon, Though the club failed after just a few years, it remains nearly intact.*" ([www.borregomodern.com](http://www.borregomodern.com))

At this point, in the 1950's, Kesling began to look at design problems beyond buildings. He reconditioned his Rambler automobile to meet his needs. He also reconditioned an army surplus truck as a van for hunting trips to Baja California, and a 110 foot yacht for his fishing trips. All this, and his booming business got him into economic over-extension once again, failing to contribute, or underpaying his worker's compensation. By 1962 Kesling constructed his last project, with his possessions gone, including the office, the lumberyard, the Rambler, the van, and the yacht. At 63 he found himself with nothing, and retreated to his house with his wife, finding sporadic work as a handyman. He died of Alzheimers in 1983. His demise was so bitter, that his wife who outlived him felt that there would never be any interest in his work, and destroyed all his papers. Little did she

know that a few years after her death, his designs would shine through, and everyone would ask “Who is that guy?”

## 2. **Quality of design and detailing excellence.**

Most important to Kesling’s design was his ability to learn from others, synthesize and create a new aesthetic design with sensible changes easy to manufacture and construct, and affordable to the middleclass buyer. He, like Frank Lloyd Wright and all early Modernists, stretched the structural abilities of materials to the maximum and understood structure first hand through practice. As stated earlier, during the decade of the 1930’s he concentrated his business in producing excellent Streamline designs, comparable in quality and daring to those of the Bauhaus of the same era in Europe. But he went one step further. He implemented Bauhaus’ architects and philosopher’s objective of building the high quality “Machines for Living” for the masses. Kesling accomplished that more effectively than others by producing houses that were constructed en-masse and affordable to the middle class with all the advantages of “modern living”. He was mentioned in the October 5, 1947 *San Diego Union* article, as ready to develop a complete subdivision at the shoreline in La Jolla. A few remnants of this effort remain in the southern portion of Bird Rock west of La Jolla Boulevard. Most by now, have been demolished. He was most successful, but his own success failed him twice. He was not the businessman he thought he was.

It is not difficult to identify Kesling’s Streamline homes. As Patrick Pascal states:

*“Two features usually visible from the street are common to every Kesling home: the decorative parapet band and, more importantly, the custom, horizontal casement windows. As a decorative feature, Kesling attached 2x10 lumber to the wood frame within the top eighteen inches of his parapets. Once the house was stuccoed, the resulting eleven-inch high, two-inch thick raised bands wrapping completely around the buildings accentuated its horizontal emphasis.... his bands were unique in their size, shape and ubiquity. On many of the homes these bands were set in relation to canopies, which made the bands themselves often appear to be planes slicing completely through buildings.....”*

*“ Kesling’s windows are definitive. Almost always placed at the corner of his rooms, the window panes always had more width than height. Those windows facing the street were opaque, usually placed high and used more sparingly for privacy, while the back of the house contained walls of glass framing a view, such as a garden. Though built to look machine-made and prefabricated, his windows were custom made on site. In a typical large bank of windows, ... it was common for every pane to be slightly different in size... galvanized sheet metal was attached along the top as flashing and extended out about two inches to act as a rain visor, and along the bottom of the window frame as a sill with the same two inch visor....”*

Kesling made sure that very large windows also were reinforced with steel structure T or L-bars that were part of the building’s structure in addition to holding up the windows, preventing its buckling from the weight of the glass, and spans. His window could be as large as seven uninterrupted panes seven feet by 18 feet each. The same piping used to hold the windows, was placed around the interior of the house, as railings that were kept low with minimum vertical and horizontal members. Piping was also used for overhangs, canopies, fireplace mantle supports, and other features. Built-ins such as bookcases, seating areas, and closets, were also featured, typical of both Streamline and Modernist design. Kesling made extensive use of plywood, and other inexpensive modern materials. His bathrooms featured large, built-on-site tiled baths, replacing the typical cast iron bathtubs of past times. His light fixtures were also carefully set and designed specifically for the house, or as variations on a basic theme.

Kesling's San Diego period, saw a totally different "look". Gone were the white Streamlined buildings, in came the California Modern with its open design, lots of large uninterrupted glass walls looking into scenic areas or any element of the site that provided a view. In came the natural wood exposed roof framework, the natural brick walls and chimneys, simple and very light roof structures, so typical of later San Diego modernists. His war time experience with mass produced housing is already described and has been written up in publications and books. These projects strengthened his philosophy of producing simple design with new materials and techniques. What remained of Kesling was his resourcefulness, his use of materials to their maximum capabilities, and his desire to build a decent modern house for every one. His changes were in the use of materials. His post-war designs in San Diego are remarkably well designed, most livable and very affordable. His buildings set on a poured concrete slabs, had walls framed by 2"x4" studs, or 4"x4" wood posts at 4 foot-on-center, and a simple plywood roof on 2"x6" runners. His homes were most livable due to layout and window placement and design. Although the designs were quite different from his Streamline period, the principles were the same, an open floor plan with multi-purpose rooms with large walls of windows. Most windows did not open and were simply constructed of large pane floor-to-ceiling glass with wood moldings used as stops. He devised "glass sliders" that would move sideways to allow access and ventilation. Buyers were attracted to their simplicity, ease of cleaning and care and visual appearance. His middle class and high end custom homes brought recognition by critics at the local and national levels and contributed to his financial success in the early period. His unique and trend-setting designs were written up in national and California publications. Today's architectural scholars and critics are impressed by his Modernist sensibilities, as they continue to investigate his interesting life and exceptional work.

The 6604 Muirlands Drive house, was unknown until very recently, and only identified by the keen eye of a member of the La Jolla Historical Society who recognized the photo from a 1947 *San Diego Union* newspaper article that was stashed away with other papers on Kesling, collected over the years. This house, more than others, is very important to the evolution of William Kesling as a California Modernist, in that it shows clearly the transition from the simple and modest California Modern of the Dowling Drive houses to the grander custom designs of the later 1940's and 1950's and his work in Borrego Springs. It is still modest looking, but no longer the simple flat roof or low pitched gable roof of his earlier La Jolla homes (Dowling Drive). The house although in need of maintenance, is quite original in its exterior appearance. It is larger, rectangular-L-shaped in plan, with a low pitched modified pyramidal roof line that has very deep overhangs and is covered with shingles. Wood slats cover the underside of the roof overhang, much like Prairie Houses do, so that the roof joists are not visible from below. The house recognizes that it has four individual sides, reflecting the corner lot layout and hilltop location, not the front-back layout of the small mid-block houses of Dowling Drive. Like the later houses, 6604 Muirlands Drive is partially surrounded by a brick wall, forming a semi-enclosed porch. These surrounding low brick walls give the perception of additional space to the house without adding to actual interior space and cost, thus creating a design prototype for Southern California's temperate climate. Like Prairie Houses (farm houses of the Middle West, just like Ranch Houses were for the West), 6604 Muirlands Drive sits low to the ground and hugs the apex of the site to blend with its landscape and environs, as California Modernists advocated to connect with the very special site topography and temperate climate of the region. This house is oriented to the outside, and takes advantage of the unimpaired views gained from the building's location at the top of a hillside rise. Large windows face outdoor settings for the various ambiances throughout the perimeter of the house. On the eastern elevation, large paned top windows look eastward to the top of the hill, while western views and the ocean, on the opposite side, are visible through the full height, large paned fixed and slider windows. Window

shapes and sizes vary throughout but with definite design rhythm also typical of many Prairie Houses. The house is elongated to take advantage of the elongated lot and the mountain and ocean views, from every room.

Due to the “sensitivity” of this project, it is not possible to get close to the house and view it up-close or view the interiors, so evaluation of the house is extremely limited and based on quick photos taken from the public right of way and the exterior. Also, the site is a complex of main house and guest house. Although there is visual evidence (the old 1947 Newspaper photo) that can be referred to evaluate the main house, there is no such evidence for the guest house other than building records that show it was built at the same time as the main house. Any evaluation of the guest house’s integrity would have to be done on site and access to the house has not been allowed. By the looks of the exterior of the main house, it is obvious that windows were carefully placed to frame exceptional views, as Kesling was known to do. Exterior walls are a combination of tongue-and-groove, brick and glass; all appear in their original condition based on careful review of current and that early fortuitous 1947 photograph. The house probably still has the original floors, built-in furniture, and special bathroom features, typical of Kesling’s work. The original brick chimney and long brick walls both full and partial height still exist, while roof vents, and even drapes (which Kesling would have specified for windows) can also be seen. Kesling probably had a hand on the original landscape, evident by the remnants of mature trees placed in critical locations to frame views to and from the house and to provide shade, much as Richard Neutra and his California Modernist contemporaries were also known to do. Garden walks are of slate throughout, and were probably also designed by Kesling, as some of the older photographs show. The entry is recessed and inconspicuous, as many of his houses are.

3. **The use of new or traditional materials in a new way resulting in a special or unique design expression.**

In his Streamline houses, Kesling used traditional materials of wood, stucco, brick and glass in new ways, combined with new stainless steel and other metals and aggregates, as has been described earlier. In his California Modern period in San Diego, Kesling used more readily available post-war materials of wood, brick, glass and slate, all traditional materials, in a new way that produced large interconnected spaces, with large structural spans and windows to take advantage of views and light. He applied plywood extensively in its early evolutionary years, using it for structural purposes, as well as for interior decoration and economy of cost.

His mass produced homes have already been described; but had they been more widely known, they would have been the envy of the Bauhaus designers and philosophers who wanted to build for the masses.

4. **Special attention to work while under construction, basing much of the design refinements on field work and experience.**

As stated before, his design although industrial-like and mass produced in appearance, was often really custom made throughout. He somehow knew that the building trades locally could not produce the precision of construction that was possible in other locations, so to make up for it, he custom produced a lot of his features on site. His large industrial type windows of the Streamline period, as well as his California Modern windows were constructed and fitted on site, but on first glance they look manufactured. A second look shows that they are all slightly different sizes made to fit in the space constructed with all its field measurement inaccuracies.

5. **Publication in trade journals and/or popular press.**

Kesling’s work was published in a number of trade journals and the popular press as described below:

The November 1942, issue of *California Arts+Architecture* featured this project commenting that “..in the 100 (houses) designed by Mr. Kesling, the emphasis was on modern architecture, and the result is pleasing... the architect attained simplification by elimination.”

*Los Angeles Times’ Home Magazine* referred to the new, circa 1946 Kesling homes as *Kesling’s Kozy Kowsheds*, a slight “put-down” to the very simple and early Modernistic design still much misunderstood in the early years of development in California where the “official” architectural style was the Spanish Revival introduced by the International Trade shows of 1915 and 1935 in San Diego itself.

Architectural Critic Ethel McCall Head stated “*One of the more interesting views we have found here (in La Jolla) is Dowling Drive, which I believe is the only place in the United States where an entire block of all-modern prefabricated homes can be found.*”

The November 1947 *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine, published a design by Kesling identified as Five Star Home #1711. The publication offered plans, detailed drawings, specs, material list and owner/contractor agreement, everything one would need to construct such a home. The package was available by mail for \$5.00, or could be purchased at Baker Brothers or similar stores across the country. The *Better Homes & Gardens* building editor, John Normile, AIA, commented: “*It is a small house, only 1,196 square feet, hardly larger than the conventional G.I job. Yet look at what, in the way of good living, it has.*”

In November 1947, *LIFE Magazine* published the McConnell House, in a article titled “Life Visits a Cliffside House”. The editors comment:

“*As a setting for his life he (McConnell) has built himself a dramatic, glassy \$40,000 home which hugs the edge of a 50-foot seaside cliff. Here the Pacific swishes around under the living room floor and occasionally splashes up soothingly over the huge windows.*”

Now, upon the entry into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Internet has numerous web pages expounding on various aspects of Kesling’s work. One of the most interesting is [www.borregomodern.com/the\\_design/william\\_kesling.php](http://www.borregomodern.com/the_design/william_kesling.php)

**6. Publication in scholarly journal articles or books.**

*Kesling Modern Structures, Popularizing Modern Design in Southern California 1934-1962*, by Patrick Pascal, was published in 2002 by Balcony Press in Los Angeles.

**7. Being the subject of a Master’s thesis or Doctoral dissertations.**

Mr. Pascal’s book, *Kesling Modern Structures, Popularizing Modern Design in Southern California 1934-1962*, was the result of his Master’s Thesis for the University of Southern California.

**8. Acknowledgement by design peers through formal awards and citations.**

Russell Forrester, a recognized Master Architect and Artist himself who practiced in La Jolla, and at one time worked for some of the great early Moderns, including Kesling, said:

“*...In La Jolla, there was a continuous battle with the city because they didn’t like flat roofs. You couldn’t build a carport. You couldn’t call it a carport, so you called it a breezeway, or you called it something else. We had all kinds of terms we used in order to get building permits on things that were illegal, or not really illegal, but frowned upon by the city.*” “*... he (Kesling) was one of the fighters who helped bring it about that we could have*



*contemporary (Modern) architecture in La Jolla.”(Quote from: Kesling Modern Structures, Popularizing Modern Design in Southern California 1939-1962 by Patrick Pascal)*

In 2000-2003, the La Jolla Historical Reconnaissance Survey prepared by Wayne Donaldson, FAIA, the present director of the California Office of Historic Preservation, recently appointed by President Obama to the Historic Preservation Advisory Board, identified the Dowling Drive homes as an important Modernist Historical District worthy of preservation. Because his Reconnaissance Level Survey had a very limited budget, he was not able research Kesling any further. This Survey also identified 6604 Muirlands Drive as a 1946 date construction, the date was taken from construction permit records. The Survey did not identify Kesling as the architect, but most sites are not identified in this manner due to lack of funds.

In 2003, a group of first generation San Diego Modernist architects was formed to identify the historical significance of Modernism and the work of their colleagues who practiced in San Diego, from the 1930’s through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The committee included some of the key architects of Modernism in San Diego, including: Homer Delawie, FAIA; Robert Mosher, FAIA; John Henderson, FAIA; Jack Carpenter, FAIA; Neil Larson, FAIA; Richard Bundy, FAIA; and, Michael Theilacker, ASLA, all first class modernists. Initially sponsored by the local AIA Chapter and later incorporated with the San Diego Architectural Foundation, the committee produced a report, titled *Modernist Architecture in San Diego, California*, that was delivered to the City of San Diego’s Mayor’s Office upon completion. The report included a definition of Modernism in San Diego and a listing of architects with some identified “Master Architects”. This is how noted San Diego Modernist architects describe William Kesling:

*“...The Great Depression and World war II nearly halted new construction. However, the La Jolla designer/contractor, William Kessling, built some **remarkable**, small wartime houses, all on a four-foot module and with a post- and- beam construction system. The structural frame was in-filled with a four- by- eight-foot panel material consisting of a one-inch fiberboard covered on each side with a layer of one-eighth of an inch asbestos board. These houses though small, were well planned, and utilized large panels of floor-to-ceiling glass which related the interior of the house to garden/terrace areas in a pleasant manner.*

*At the time Kessling was building, few paid attention to his work but in retrospect, **his designs demonstrate progressive thinking and were surely examples of Modernist thought far ahead of their time. Those few buildings that remain** (and which have not been poorly maintained or altered beyond recognition) **are prized by their owners and deserve to be preserved.**”*

The bold underlined phrases are added for emphasis. This is what today Kesling’s peers, all Master Architects themselves, highly recognized by their peers and society as a whole, think of William Kesling. He is without a doubt, a Master Architect.

In a 2005, Report to the Historical Resources Board (HRB-05-043) by Planning Department staff, related to another Kesling site, at 7972 La Jolla Shores Drive, staff to the Board recommended designation on the basis of Criterion C-Architecture, as an excellent example of Modern Design, and under Criterion D as the representative work of a notable master builder. At the time the Report stated:

*“As William Kesling (ne Kessling) has been identified by the American Institute of Architects as a Early Modernist/Contemporary style Master Architect, has been identified in draft surveys and by the San Diego Historical Society as a potential Master Architect, and has provided a consistent high quality body of work,*

*primarily of affordable Early Modern/Contemporary style architecture, staff recommends the designation of the William Parker/William Kesling House at 7972 La Jolla Shores Drive under Criterion D."*

**9. Favorable reviews by professional architectural critics.**

See Patrick Pascal's comments quoted, as well as the San Diego Modernists publication, and *LIFE* and *SUNSET* magazines articles, for insight into Kesling's work by his peers, and HRB staff, described in more detail in Section 8 above.

**The association with the Master must be substantiated through one or more of the following:**

Kesling is clearly associated with the 6604 Muirlands Drive site as previously described in this report, and per the references below.

**a. Construction drawing documentation**

6604 Muirlands Drive is identified in a newspaper article dated October 5, 1947, as the just completed work of William Kesling. Building documentation also so identifies this house and Guest House circa 1946. Drawings of the original house are not available from the city's microfiche construction archives that do not contain any projects prior to 1955. Kesling's wife unfortunately disposed of all his papers, prior to her death.

**b. Archival information.**

6604 Muirlands Drive is mentioned and photographed in the October 5, 1947 article in the *San Diego Union* newspaper. A careful review of that single photo and existing photos shows it to be the same house. The building is in its original condition based on the features that can be seen, although not maintained for some time, the features can be cleaned and restored, and the exterior of the house could be brought back to its original with little effort, compared to other sites that have undergone substantial changes over time. It is amazing that the house is in the condition it is after more than 60 years, it is obvious that prior owners maintained the building, and Kesling's design detailing was good enough to withstand the passing of 6-plus decades.

6604 Muirlands Drive is identified by Patricia Schaelchlin as his work in a listing she did on significant buildings and architects in La Jolla. This listing is available at the La Jolla Historical Society.

6604 Muirlands Drive was identified as a Kesling design by The La Jolla Historical Reconnaissance Survey DRAFT, prepared by Wayne Donaldson in 2000, is on file in the offices of the La Jolla Historical Society.

**CONCLUSION:**

It is the conclusion of this evaluation that William Kesling has been for the past decade a recognized Master Architect in his own right, he was creative, opened new paths for others to follow. The quality of Kesling's work is apart with other Masters. Even today, he is recognized as a Master Architect by some of the First Wave Modernists in San Diego, who started their practice during his times. The 6604 Muirlands Drive house is an important example of Kesling's transition from the mass produced Modern houses of war time and the Post-War to his grander Custom Homes. It is one of his first, if not his first custom home, where he experimented with California Ranch and Prairie traditions, inserting his own creative detailing of large paned windows, 4"x4" on center posts, and his brick elements. As is often the case with evaluations of many Master Architects, creative

human beings that they are, it is difficult to “pigeon-hole” him on a “style” and thus Modernism which rejected “stylistic methods” was his natural media. He was truly a Californian who sought to develop design solutions to fit site, client program, economy of means, and featured the beauty of simple materials complimenting the site’s own attributes. 6604 Muirlands Drive is in its “original” state. Although in need of maintenance, its elements are original and are still there, and it is amazing that it has weathered so well almost 70 years of existence. Previous owners obviously have cared well for it, and the house’s own design excellence has been instrumental in its survival to date.

#### **ATTACHMENTS:**

- a. 1947 San Diego Union photo and article.
- b. Recent exterior photos of 6604 Muirlands Drive
- c. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Architects Who Have Designed Buildings in San Diego, August 17, 2007 Draft.

#### **Bibliography**

1. Patrick Pascal; *Kesling Modern Structures, Popularizing Modern Design in Southern California 1934-1962*. Navigator Press, Monrovia, CA. 2002.
2. *Life Visits a Cliffside House, Bachelors Retreat Juts Over Surf*, LIFE MAGAZINE, November 3, 1947.
3. *Modernist Architecture in San Diego, California*, San Diego Architectural Foundation, 2009
4. *20<sup>th</sup> Century Architects Who Have Designed Buildings in San Diego*, San Diego Architectural Foundation 2007, unpublished, available in the Foundation’s WebPage.
5. *Historical Resource Technical Report for the 6604 Muirlands Drive Residence, La Jolla, CA*. Scott A. Moonjian, May 2010.
6. *People of the State of California vs. William P. Kesling*, Probation Officer’s Report, Superior Court of the County of Los Angeles, CA, February 18, 1937.
7. *Item #13 – William Parker/William Kesling House*, City of San Diego Historical Resources Board, Report No. HRB-05-043, September 8, 2005.
8. *La Jolla Construction Chronology*, Pat Schaelchlin, Late 1970’s.
9. *Modern Living Units*, California Arts + Architecture, November 1942.
10. *New Medical-Dental Building*, La Jolla Journal, April 12, 1951.
11. *William Kesling, rogue architect of streamline modern*, Ginger Moro, Echoes Magazine, 2000
12. *The Summer House in La Jolla*, Sunset Magazine, February-March 1951, and July-August 1953
13. *The Graceful Lines of Streamline Moderne*. Leon Whiteson, Los Angeles Times Archives, 1990.
14. *The Modern Structures of William Kessling*, La Jolla Historical Society, Winter 1999
15. *Million Dollar Project Planned Near Birdrock* (article and photo of 6604 Muirlands Drive). San Diego Union Newspaper, October 5, 1947.
16. *Prairie Style, Houses and Gardens by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School*. Dixie Legler, photos by Christian Korab, An Archetype Press Book 1999.
17. [www.modernsandiego.com](http://www.modernsandiego.com)
18. [www.marvistatract.org](http://www.marvistatract.org)
19. [www.psmocom.com](http://www.psmocom.com)
20. [www.boomerangbooks.com](http://www.boomerangbooks.com)
21. [www.borregomodern.com](http://www.borregomodern.com)