



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: June 9, 2011 REPORT NO. HRB-11-034

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board
Agenda of June 23, 2011

SUBJECT: **ITEM #6 – 2137 Pacific Highway**

APPLICANT: Frank Fat Properties LP represented by Marie Burke Lia

LOCATION: 2137 Pacific Highway, 92101, Centre City Community, Council District 2

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the 2137 Pacific Highway as a historical resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Do not designate the property located at 2137 Pacific Highway under any adopted HRB Criteria.

BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with a preliminary review application to determine whether or not the building is historically significant as part of a constraints analysis for future development. The property is a one and two story structure located on the corner of Pacific Highway and Hawthorne Street in the Streamline Moderne style constructed ca. 1941.



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

ANALYSIS

A historical resource research was prepared by Marie Burke Lia which concludes that the resource is not significant under any HRB Criteria. Staff concurs that the site is not a significant historical resource under HRB Criteria. 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.

When the property was constructed in 1941 in the Streamline Moderne architectural style, it was designed to attract restaurant, nightclub patrons, and travelers. The chosen style of the main building was related to the popularity of the style at the time based on the government funded New Deal projects, such as the 1936-38 San Diego Civic Center. The style was in stark contrast to the lavishly ornamented Art Deco and Period Revival buildings of the pre-Depression era. The restaurant and motel complex became known for presenting quality, live entertainment in an upscale setting. Prominent local, regional, and national entertainers performed in the nightclub/restaurant portion of the premises.

The buildings were sited at the only north/south highway through San Diego at the time. It is possible that the highly designed drive-in portion of the building was developed to take advantage of the traffic and the popularity of the 1940s drive-in style eatery. Pacific Highway was the main road serving San Diego when World War II military and defense activities were drawing thousands of new residents and military personnel to the area. The development of restaurants and motels to serve transient visitors and new permanent residents was common, particularly at locations on what was to be the only through highway for the next two decades.

Given that the property was designed and sited to attract people traveling on Pacific Highway for entertainment and sleeping accommodations, the number of modifications to the site and the elimination of the numerous features (discussed in detail under Criterion C) that drew the crowds has left the current configuration that does not convey the prominence of its original role in San Diego's history. While the site may have contributed to a special element of San Diego's social and entertainment development, it no longer retains integrity as it relates to architecture of the site with the removal of the drive-in restaurant, motel units, or live entertainment aspects. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under Criterion A.

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

The consultant's report also looked at the ownership of the property to determine if anyone significant in San Diego's history was associated with the property. Two people were identified for their association with the building, Yale Kahn and Tom Fat.

Between 1952 and 1978, the property was owned by Texas Liquor Stores, Inc. Yale Kahn was an officer of the corporation and instrumental in booking entertainment acts up until 1956, which included Nat "King" Cole, Shelley Winters, Nelson Eddy, Don Ameche and Susan Hayward.

Kahn is associated with a number of night spots in San Diego and was not exclusive to Top's Restaurant. Additionally, Kahn's role in promoting entertainment acts was prior to the numerous modifications that took place starting in 1978 that essentially altered the dynamics of the site. The unique architecture of the site and the entertainment aspects available that attracted patrons to the site were removed forcing the role of the complex to change in San Diego's social development. After the modifications to the site, the complex was more associated with solely an indoor dining experience and lacked the multifaceted appeal of the original design and intent. Kahn's association with the building is limited and developed during the early years of the site when it played a pivotal role, however with the numerous alterations, the site no longer conveys the intent. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under Criterion B for its association with Yale Kahn.

Tom Fat managed the property from 1978, when Frank Fat Properties acquired the building, until 2007. Born in 1941, Fat arrived in San Diego in 1976 to look for opportunities for Frank Fat Properties. By 1979, he had opened China Camp and Fat City Bar & Café in the 2137 Pacific Highway building. During his time in San Diego, Fat was known to actively participate as a community and business leader even helping to found the Asian Business Association. While he was an active member of the community, the site was not used for community or business activities and there was no direct link between Fat's prominence in San Diego to this property. While it is clear that Fat managed the property, his association with other buildings in San Diego was not fully evaluated to determine if there is another site that better represents the role he played in San Diego's community and business activities. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under Criterion B for its association with Tom Fat.

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.

Originally constructed ca. 1941 in the Streamline Moderne style for Tops Restaurant, the site featured the extant building surrounded by 8 buildings used as motel units. Based on the ca. 1941 graphic and the 1940s photo provided in the report, the building was rectangular in shape with an asymmetrical, multi-level façade. The main entrance was located at the southwest corner and placed at a diagonal. The wall was curved with the lower portion featuring two pairs of double doors and the upper portion featuring four sections of glass block. In between the lower and the upper portion was a rounded roof with free-standing letters that said "Dine-Dance." The glass block was flanked by rectangular columns with inset grooves on each side. The area above the glass block and columns had three tiers leading to a square (possibly triangular) tower projection. Each façade of the tower had a vertical "Top's" sign. The peak of the tower had a colorfully lit top.

The south side featured a flat two story wall with three curved projecting wall elements. The largest middle element had a "Top's" sign and was flanked by two slightly shorter curved wall sections which appeared to have a steel window on each plane.

The west elevation, just to the left of the main entrance, had a lower portion covered with a shed roof and an upper portion with a flat surface parapet which was curved at the north end. The upper portion (parapet) had a neon sign with "It's Top's for Delicious Food." The lower portion had a solid wall on the bottom with horizontal line of windows just below the shed roof.

The northwest elevation had the drive-in portion of the restaurant. A large curved roof element extended over the storefront area and provided cover for car patrons. The storefront had a combination of solid wall surfaces and glass with at least one door for the wait staff. The area above the roof had a flat surface set back from the curved roof. In the middle of the curved roof there was an intersecting wall plane with a neon on sign that said "Top's for Car Service." The peak of the projection had a colorfully lit top, similar to the one used on the main tower entrance.

In the years 1963 through 1975, Top's became Miyako Sukiyaki Café. In a photo dated October 1974, the main Top's tower had been replaced by a tower in the shape of a pagoda. The area below the tower appeared to be the original configuration from previous years. To the left of the main entrance, where there had once been a horizontal line of windows, was enclosed with a signboard. A 1976 photo shows that the signboard and the pagoda tower had been removed. By 1978, the building was vacant and for sale. The horizontal line of windows had been replaced with fixed single light windows, the tower was gone along with the neon, the "Dine Dance" sign had been removed and the building was boarded up. Frank Fat Properties purchased the building in 1978.

Sometime between 1976 and 1980, the Top's Motel units that surrounded the main building were all removed with the exception of a building on the north side that is still extant. Based on the directory search Top's Motel was last listed in 1976.

After purchase of the property, Frank Fat Properties made several changes in 1978. The rounded roof element for the drive-in facilities was removed during this remodel along with the curved storefront area and was replaced with a long flat-front, single story addition and a new secondary entrance. Four new pairs of windows were installed north of the new entrance and three similar pairs were installed south of it. A new parapet was also installed across the entire length of the addition along with planters and a handicap ramp.

At the southwest corner, the entry was widened and the central stair was replaced with a "C" shaped stair that allowed access from the west and south. A new fountain and planter was added between the two stair entrances. The entrance doors were replaced at this time and missing tower was replaced with a flagpole. The curved glass block remained in place and the parapet was reframed.

The south elevation was also altered to enlarge the curved center section by adding square footage and windows to the projection and eliminating windows on the smaller curved walls flanking the center one.

The east elevation was also altered at this time to accommodate the China Camp Restaurant. A number of new openings and wood elements were added to project the mining camp atmosphere as well as service yard fencing.

The north façade was modified to provide more service facilities for the restaurants including a new entry.

From 1979 to 1985, several fences were added to the property to enclose areas for patio dining. Fencing was added to the south and east elevations. It also appears that a “Fat City” sign was added to the glass block area above the main entrance.

During 1993 and 1994, the west elevation was modified to add a new two story plus tower element to expand the office space. The two story addition was punctuated with large fixed windows on the north and west sides. The central parapet on the west façade was also modified at some point to create a stepped look for the Denny’s Restaurant entrance.

In 1997, a new tower was reconstructed at the site of the original tower location. The new tower had neon signage that said “China Camp.” Kanji characters were added to the base of the tower and a Denny’s sign was added above the glass block.

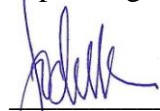
Given the number of alterations to the site and the building, the resource no longer retains integrity for designation. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation as a Streamline Moderne under Criterion C.

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 property at 2137 Pacific Highway be designated under any HRB Criteria due to lack of association with anyone significant in San Diego’s history and a lack of integrity. 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



Cathy Winterrowd
Principal Planner/HRB Liaison

jb/cw

Attachment(s):

Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover