



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO
Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: June 11, 2015 REPORT NO. HRB-15-014

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board
Agenda of June 25, 2015

SUBJECT: **ITEM #8 – The Luscomb Building**

APPLICANT: 1769 Las Fuentes LLC, represented by Jon Lacey and Joseph Holasek

LOCATION: 1797 San Diego Avenue, Uptown Community, Council District 3

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of The Luscomb Building located at 1797 San Diego Avenue as a historical resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate The Luscomb Building located at 1797 San Diego Avenue as a historical resource with a period of significance of 1927 under HRB Criterion A. The designation shall exclude the two-story building at the south end of the lot constructed in 1932 and addressed as 1769 San Diego Avenue. This recommendation is based on the following finding:

The resource is a special element of the City's historical, aesthetic and architectural development within the context of the highly distinctive Programmatic architecture which reached its creative and popular peak in the 1920s and 1930s; and retains integrity to the period of significance. Specifically, the resource is one of the few extant buildings in San Diego which exhibits a Programmatic architecture aesthetic; and is one of the few known Programmatic building with a castle motif, employing a flat roof and crenellated parapet; slight towers at the four ends of the building; and stucco walls scored to appear as stacked stone.

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 building is located on APN 451-726-17-00 and is a one story residential structure constructed in 1927 for an unknown use and purpose. The property was not identified in the Draft 2007 Uptown Survey, for unknown reasons. The property at 1769 San Diego Avenue was identified and given a Status Code of 7R, "Identified in Reconnaissance Level Survey: Not Evaluated."

The building was previously reviewed and designated by the Board in 2012. At that time, the item was brought before the HRB 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. A Historical Resource Research Report was prepared by the Office of Marie Burke Lia, which concluded that the building was not eligible for designation under any criteria (Attachment 2). Staff disagreed with the conclusions of the report and referred the property to the City's Historical Resources Board for a formal determination. The item was first docketed for review by the Board at a noticed public hearing on February 23, 2012; however, items on that agenda were trailed to the March meeting due to lack of a quorum. At a noticed public hearing on March 22, 2012 staff recommended designation of 1797 San Diego Avenue under HRB Criterion A within the context of the highly distinctive Programmatic architecture which reached its creative and popular peak in the 1920s and 1930s (Attachment 3). Following public testimony and Board discussion, the HRB moved to designate the building per the staff recommendation. After the motion was made, the applicant asked for a 30-day continuance pursuant to Municipal Code Section 123.0202(d). At the following noticed public hearing on April 26, 2012 staff continued to recommend designation of 1797 San Diego Avenue under HRB Criterion A. Following public testimony and Board discussion, the HRB moved to designate the building per the staff recommendation. That motion passed with a vote of 6 in favor, 4 opposed and 0 abstentions (Attachment 4).

On May 3, 2012 the owner filed an appeal of the designation with the City Clerk. Additional information in support of the appeal was filed in October 2012 (Attachment 5). The item was docketed before the City Council on January 29, 2013 at which time staff recommended that the City Council deny the appeal and uphold the designation (Attachment 6). The Council continued the meeting to March 12, 2013 for further review. At the March 12th meeting the City Council granted the appeal and overturned the designation by a vote of 6-2-0 based on the findings presented by the appellant. The grounds included information claiming that the building is not representative of Programmatic Architecture.

With the Council's action to overturn the designation, SDMC Section 123.0202(g) states that "Designation procedures may not be re-initiated within 5 years without owner consent, absent significant new information." Following the Council's action, the Save Our Heritage Organisation (SOHO) filed suit against the property owner and the City, which is still pending. To avoid the costs and delay of litigation, the Owner wishes to settle the pending litigation and consent to the designation, which is the impetus for this nomination.

The historic name of the resource, The Luscomb Building, has been identified consistent with the Board's adopted naming policy and reflects the name of the Luscomb family, who purchased the property in 1925, constructed the first building by 1927 and operated the property as a tourist camp beginning no later than 1932. It should be noted that while the Historic Resource Research Report dated December 2011 states that the site was originally constructed as a small motel complex, there are no directory listings for the site prior to 1932, and the use, if any, during the first five years cannot be confirmed.

ANALYSIS

In order to submit a nomination for historic designation, the property owner was directed by staff to provide an addendum to the 2011 Historical Resource Research Report addressing the context and designation criteria under which the owner was nominating the property. The property owner and their representatives endeavored to provide an addendum, which concludes that the resource is significant under HRB Criterion A within the context of Programmatic Architecture (Attachment 7). While the addendum is minimal in the information and analysis provided, the nomination is consistent with the prior staff analysis, recommendation and Board action, and staff concurs with the conclusion of the addendum. 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.

In addition to the information provided in the original staff report and the owner's addendum, the following information addresses the building's significance and eligibility under HRB Criterion A.

Resource Description

The subject property consists of two buildings constructed in 1927 and 1932. Set at what was once the corner of California and Sutherland Streets, the building built in 1927 is a tall, one story, "H"-shaped structure constructed of stucco over wood frame set on a concrete foundation. The generally flat roof is surrounded by a crenellated parapet. At each of the four ends of the "H" footprint, the building walls extend approximately three feet higher than the surrounding parapet, resulting in a slight tower effect. Square clay tile vents with six openings are present along the parapet. When constructed, the stucco walls were scored to replicate a stacked stone. The front wall along San Diego Avenue (formerly California Street) has since received a top coat of generally smooth stucco, which has obscured the scoring pattern that remains visible on the north, south and west facades. Based upon historic photo documentation dating to 1930, the building was originally constructed with tall, narrow windows set high on the wall. Based upon the historic photos and evidence remaining in the building framing and stucco, these windows were placed on each façade of the tower ends, with two windows on each façade connecting the towers. The resulting appearance was that of a small medieval castle, reflective of the eclectic and fanciful design aesthetic of the 1920s and 1930s.

Shortly after construction, the tall, narrow window openings were in-filled and replaced with smaller one-over-one double hung wood frame and sash windows with greater frequency at a more accessible level. The smaller windows were generally set in pairs, two on each façade of the tower ends, and four on the side facades connecting the towers. Wood and glass doors were also introduced; four along the east elevation, two along the north elevation, and three along the south elevation. Most of the doors have 15 lites, while a few on the north and south have one or no lites. These windows and doors can be seen in a historic photograph dating sometime between 1947 and 1952. Also present in this photograph are small shed and gabled clay tile roofs set on simple wood brackets over the doors on the north and east facades (then the street-facing

facades). These tiled roofs have since been removed. The majority of the windows seen in this photograph remain, with the exception of the windows along the rear, west façade, which are not visible in the photograph but have been framed down or otherwise altered, as evidenced by the stucco patchwork.

It is unknown when exactly the modifications that resulted in the appearance shown in the 1947-1952 historic photograph occurred. However, these alterations likely occurred in 1932, five years after the original construction of the building, when additional buildings were added to the site and the first directory listing for a tourist camp appeared. The modifications noted, specifically the window replacements, would have facilitated the tourist camp use, providing light, air and access to the rooms. Between the years 1932 and 1956 additional buildings were added to the site; however, only one of these later buildings remains today.

Context and Significance

The original 1927 building is uniquely distinct, employing a castle motif through the use of crenellated parapets, slightly raised towers and a smooth stucco exterior scored to appear as stacked stone. The subject building captures the whimsical, fanciful and eye-catching aesthetic of Programmatic architecture of the period. Also dubbed Mimetic, Roadside, or Novelty architecture, the term “Programmatic” architecture was coined by architectural historian David Gebhard in his introduction in the book, *California Crazy & Beyond: Roadside Vernacular Architecture* by Jim Heimann (2001, 1980).

Gebhard described Programmatic architecture as architectural borrowing “employing either elements of traditional architecture vocabulary or nontraditional forms to convey meaning by indirection.” He went on to state, “We are not being asked to respond to them [programmatic structures] in a straightforward fashion as examples of conventional architectural imagery; rather, their intent was to comment on the present and its relation to the past. In the twentieth century a hotel built as an Aztec temple, or an enlarged ice cream cone used to sell ice cream employ similar elements of indirect symbolism. While the English Picturesque Garden was limited in its audience to the gentry who could read its meaning, such was not the case with most nontraditional architectural imagery in the twentieth century.”

Gebhard states that Programmatic architecture could be direct (the structure as a sign of what it was selling), indirect (which held degrees of meaning), or without any apparent connection to its use. Gebhard identifies the heyday of California’s Programmatic buildings as the ten-year period from 1925 through 1934; and notes that twentieth century Programmatic architecture, like Programmatic architecture of the past, used “architectural imagery which was either exotic (the far-away or distant past), or was a perversion of some past European architectural mode. Forms which we would loosely label as “medieval” were a favorite imagery of the 1920s.”

The acceptance of Programmatic architecture as a valid and significant resource type is reflected in the National Register listing of the Bedford Coffee Pot in Pennsylvania and Wigwam Village No. 7 in San Bernadino County, which was recently recommended for listing by the State Historic Resource Commission, as well as many other properties listed as significant examples of

Programmatic, Roadside, Mimetic or Novelty architecture. Programmatic architecture is also discussed briefly in NPS Brief 46, “The Preservation and Reuse of Historic Gas Stations.”

Based upon available research, the subject property reflects the context of highly distinctive Programmatic architecture which reached its creative and popular peak in the 1920s and 1930s. Within this context, the subject property reflects special elements of the City’s historical, aesthetic and architectural development. In order for a property to be eligible for designation under Criterion A, the Criteria Guidelines state that a resource must be distinct among others of its kind or surpass the usual in significance. The resource is one of the few extant buildings in San Diego which exhibits a Programmatic architecture aesthetic, and is the only known Programmatic building with a castle motif. By virtue of its rarity within its context, the resource does surpass the usual in significance.

When evaluating integrity for a resource significant under Criterion A, the Guidelines state that, “The significant aspects of integrity for a property significant under Criterion A may vary depending upon the aspect of development for which the resource is significant.” The main 1927 building has been altered over time, as detailed earlier. Despite these alterations, the building retains much of its design and materials, including the original “H” shaped footprint; crenellated parapet with slight towers at the four corners; and stucco walls, three of four of which retain the original stacked block scoring pattern. Despite the alterations to the windows and the skim coat of stucco applied at the front façade, the building retains most of its original design features and materials, and continues convey the very distinct feeling of a small medieval castle reflective of the heyday of twentieth century Programmatic architecture.

Based upon the above context and development history of the property, an appropriate period of significance for the property is 1927, which reflects the construction of the original building that embodied the spirit of the Programmatic architecture of the 1920s and 1930s. Given that the remaining building from the 1932 period was constructed as a simple Streamline, rather than Programmatic, building; staff finds that it is not appropriate to extend the period of significance beyond 1927 or to include the 1932 building in the designation.

In regard to the information provided in the appeal materials presented to the City Council, all grounds for appeal were thoroughly addressed and refuted by staff in the Report to City Council provided in Attachment 6. Perhaps the most significant claim made in the appeal materials is that the building is not an example of Programmatic Architecture. To this point, the opinions of three historic preservation professionals, Jim Heimann, Bruce Judd and Wendy Tinsley-Becker were presented. From the Report to Council:

Heimann states that the building would be considered “Period Revival” and is “a standard 1920s structure.” “Period Revival” is a very general term that can apply to a wide range of styles. Additionally, to state that the building is a standard 1920s structure is not true based on the City’s existing stock of designated historic resources. The building is unlike any other designated resource, and at the time of designation was the only building known to display a castle motif. Since then, only two others have been identified as reflecting some degree of a castle motif. To characterize this building as a standard 1920s structure is not accurate.

Judd and Tinsley-Becker stated that Programmatic architecture is defined as a building that reflects the product sold inside, such as an orange juice stand shaped as an orange. However, this is only true of direct Programmatic architecture. Indirect Programmatic architecture, which was discussed in the staff report to the Board and at the Board hearing, is not a direct reflection of the product or service sold, but is rather a fanciful building meant to attract attention. An example of indirect Programmatic architecture, Lucy the Elephant, was provided in the Judd letter. This 65-foot tall building constructed in 1881 in the shape of an elephant was used to sell real estate.

Both Judd and Tinsley-Becker also incorrectly characterize the property as Spanish Eclectic Revival, and as part of a larger complex of buildings utilized as a motor court. When originally constructed in 1927, the building was designed with a castle motif and was used as a warehouse. The Spanish Eclectic Revival influences cited in the letters, primarily the projecting shed roof elements with Spanish tile and supporting brackets, were added to the building when it was converted to a motor court use circa 1932, and have since been removed. They were not part of the original Programmatic design. The building was designated as a 1927 Programmatic building with a castle motif, not as a 1932 motor court. Therefore, the characterization of this building as Spanish Eclectic Revival or as a motor court is incorrect.

Lastly, the Judd and Tinsley-Becker letters suggest that a more appropriate classification might be “Novelty architecture” or “Roadside architecture”. In literature reviewed, the terms Novelty architecture, Roadside architecture and Programmatic architecture are often used interchangeably to describe the highly fanciful architecture of the 1920s and 1930s which could take a number of forms, from objects, to food, to whimsical interpretations of exotic locations and periods of history. The interchangeable nature of these terms was addressed in the staff report to the Board.

The information presented as part of the appeal application is flawed, and staff finds no basis on which to modify the staff recommendation made in 2012. The original 1927 building on site retains integrity of location, design, materials and feeling sufficient to convey the building’s significance within its context of 1920s Programmatic architecture. Therefore, staff recommends designation of The Luscomb Building under HRB Criterion A as a significant aspect of San Diego’s historical, aesthetic and architectural development. The designation shall exclude the two-story building at the south end of the lot constructed in 1932.

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 Luscomb Building located at 1797 San Diego Avenue be designated with a period of significance of 1927 under HRB Criterion A as a resource that reflects a special element of the City's historical, aesthetic and architectural development within the context of the highly distinctive Programmatic architecture which reached its creative and popular peak in the 1920s and 1930s. The designation shall exclude the two-story building at the south end of the lot constructed in 1932. 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/HRB Liaison

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Attachments:

1. Draft Resolution
2. Original Historical Resource Research Report prepared by the Office of Marie Burke Lia, dated December 2011
3. Staff Report HRB-12-010, dated February 15, 2012 (without attachments)
4. Minutes of the HRB Meeting of April 26, 2012
5. Appellant's Appeal Materials (including only Exhibits 6-9)
6. Report to City Council No 13-02 dated December 14, 2013 (without attachments)
7. Applicant's Addendum

RESOLUTION NUMBER N/A
ADOPTED ON 6/25/2015

WHEREAS, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego held a noticed public hearing on 6/25/2015, to consider the historical designation of the **The Luscomb Building** (owned by 1769 Las Fuentes LLC, 1755 San Diego Avenue, San Diego, CA 92110) located at **1797 San Diego Avenue, San Diego, CA 92110**, APN: **451-726-17-00**, further described as BLK 187 LOTS 9 & 10 (EX ST) 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 The Luscomb Building on the following finding:

(1) The property is historically significant under CRITERION A as a special element of the City's historical, aesthetic and architectural development within the context of the highly distinctive Programmatic architecture which reached its creative and popular peak in the 1920s and 1930s; and retains integrity to its 1927 period of significance. Specifically, the resource is one of the few extant buildings in San Diego which exhibits a Programmatic architecture aesthetic; and is one of the few known Programmatic building with a castle motif, employing a flat roof and crenellated parapet; slight towers at the four ends of the building; and stucco walls scored to appear as stacked stone. 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 designation shall exclude the two-story building at the south end of the lot constructed in 1932 addressed as 1769 San Diego Avenue.

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: JAN I. GOLDSMITH,
CITY ATTORNEY

BY: _____
INGA LINTVEDT,
Deputy City Attorney