



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

# Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: January 15, 2009 REPORT NO. HRB-09-007

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board  
Agenda of January 22, 2009

SUBJECT: **ITEM #9 – C. Arnholt Smith/Ralph L. Frank House**

APPLICANT: Pollack Family Trust, owners; represented by IS Architecture

LOCATION: 2293 San Juan Road, Uptown Community, Council District 2

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the C. Arnholt Smith/Ralph L. Frank House located at 2293 San Juan Road as a historical resource.

## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate the C. Arnholt Smith/Ralph L. Frank House located at 2293 San Juan Road as a historical resource with a period of significance of 1936-1967 under Criteria B, C and D. Any modifications completed after 1967 shall be excluded from the designation. This recommendation is based on the following findings:

1. The resource is identified with C. Arnholt Smith, a historically significant person who resided in the house from its construction in 1936 through 1967, and retains integrity for that association.
2. The resource embodies the distinctive characteristics through the retention of character defining features of Monterey style and retains a good level of architectural integrity from its 1936-1967 period of significance.
3. The resource is representative of a notable work of Master Architect Ralph L. Frank and retains integrity as it relates to the original 1936 design and c.1955 additions, both designed by Frank.



## 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 subject property is a Monterey style house built in 1936 in a residential neighborhood at the western edge of Mission Hills.

The historic name of the resource, the C. Arnholt Smith/Ralph L. Frank House, has been identified consistent with the Board's adopted naming policy and includes the name of C. Arnholt Smith, who is a historically significant individual and the name of Ralph L. Frank, a Master Architect.

## ANALYSIS

A historical resource research report was prepared by IS Architecture, which concludes that the resource is significant under HRB Criteria A, B, C and D. Staff concurs that the site is a significant historical resource under HRB Criteria B, C and D, but not HRB Criterion A 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.*

The applicant's report states that the property at 2293 San Juan Road is significant under HRB Criterion A as a contributor to San Diego's cultural landscape that reflects several important aspects of San Diego's social, economic, aesthetic, landscaping and architectural development. The discussion of Criterion A focuses primarily on two areas; the property's association with C. Arnholt Smith and the property's location within the Mission Hills community. In regard to the former, Smith built the subject as his personal residence in the center of the lots he purchased in Block 536 of Old San Diego. The surrounding lots fronting on to San Juan Road were sold, some with spec houses commissioned by Smith and designed by Ralph L. Frank. While Smith is largely responsible for the development of the enclave along San Juan Road, there is little evidence to support the contention that this area is significant to San Diego's development. In addition, although Smith may be considered a historically significant individual (as discussed below), any significance derived from this association would be better reflected with a designation under HRB Criterion B. As to the property's location in Mission Hills, while it has been established through the designation of the Mission Hills and Fort Stockton Line districts that the Mission Hills subdivision is historically significant for many of the reasons stated in the applicant's report, no evidence has been provided to demonstrate that the subject property (which is not located in the original Mission Hills Subdivision and was not constructed until nearly 30 years later) is significant to the Mission Hills community or the City as a whole. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion A.

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

The house at 2293 San Juan Road was built by C. Arnholt Smith in 1936 as his personal residence. Smith was a significant figure in San Diego history and contributed substantially to San Diego's development and economy prior to his downfall in the late 1960's and 1970's.

Smith moved to San Diego with his family in 1899 at age seven. He attended University Heights School, Florence Grammar School and San Diego High School before dropping out at age 16 in anticipation of being drafted into military service. After a short stint in the army prior to the end of World War I, Smith got a job keeping books at Merchants National Bank where he worked his way up to Chief Clerk. In 1917 he met his wife Lois Seaver, whom he married in 1922.

In 1923-24 the Merchants National bank was taken over by the Bank of Italy, the future Bank of America. Smith was retained by the Bank of Italy to manage the consolidation of several other recently acquired bank companies. Within a couple of years he was promoted to Head of the Commercial Banking Department and was forced to temporarily leave San Diego and work in Los Angeles. During this time he became friends with future president Richard Nixon, whose father was acquainted with Smith's father following his parents' move to La Habra.

Based on what he had learned about the commercial banking world while working for the Bank of Italy, Smith decided to purchase the single-branch United States National Bank (USNB) in San Diego, then located at Broadway and Second Street. When he purchased the USNB in the late 1920's it was worth \$800,000. By soliciting deposits from some of the biggest businessmen in the city, he was able to expand the USNB to 62 branches throughout Southern California. By the late 1960's, the bank's assets totaled \$932 million dollars. Using his stock from the bank, Smith bought national Iron Works and Pacific Beach's Crystal Pier. He formed a separate corporation to manage these holdings and replaced the failing Crystal Pier and ballroom with a shorter pier featuring 15-20 vacation rental cabins, some of which are still extant and operational. From there, Smith's financial holdings and interests, as well as his involvement in San Diego politics and civics, would grow exponentially.

Smith purchased National Steel, which went on to build the Convair buildings along Pacific Coast Highway, as well as structures on North Island and in Long Beach. During World War II National Steel transitioned into shipbuilding and repair, and after the War modernized the tuna fishing industry with the introduction of steel tuna boats. Smith branched out into the seafood industry, buying and operating canneries when outside interest in purchasing the tuna boats was low. The name Westgate, which Smith would use for future holdings, came from the Westgate Seafood Plant, which he purchased at this time. In 1955 Smith purchased the then Minor League San Diego Padres to prevent them from being sold to a city upstate. In 1958 he built Westgate Park Stadium in Mission Valley to house his team.

As Chairman of Westgate-California Corporation and President of the USNB, Smith financed two major local companies, Ryan Aeronautical and Solar Aircraft. In the early 1960's Smith sold National Steel and Shipbuilding to focus on Westgate-California's other interests, which by this time included not only tuna canneries, but taxi companies, airlines, ranches, hotels, a baseball team and skyscrapers. He earned the title of "Mr. San Diego" in 1961. He would go on to build the United States Bank tower at Second and Broadway in 1966, and the Westgate Plaza across the street in the early 1970's.

Despite his significant contributions to San Diego's history, Smith would live out his final years without money and admiration, following the collapse of USNB in 1973 (at the time the largest bank collapse in U.S. history) and subsequent charges and convictions for grand theft and tax

evasion. Regardless of any wrongdoings, Smith unquestionably contributed significantly to San Diego's history and development, and is a historically significant individual. Therefore, staff recommends designation under HRB Criterion B, with a period of significance from 1936, when Smith built the house through 1967 when he divorced his wife Lois and moved to another property.

*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 property at 2293 San Juan Road was built in 1936 in the Monterey style for C. Arnholt Smith and was designed by Master Architect Ralph L. Frank. The house is located on a sloping lot and is two stories from the front elevation with a walk-out basement at the rear elevation. The house features a broad, low-pitch hipped roof; asphalt shingles; a shallow roof overhang with open eaves and cornice molding; smooth stucco walls over most of the house with brick and weeping mortar at the entry; and a concrete foundation. From the main frontage, a second story balcony stretches across the left half of the façade and is accented with decorative wrought iron railings and columns with a scrolling grape motif. Multi-lite steel casement windows with decorative shutters are present along the balcony. To the right of the balcony are several more steel casement windows with the same decorative shutters. Below the balcony is the main entrance of the house which features the only exposed brick found on the home. The brick originally featured weeping mortar, which was heavily damaged by stucco work in the 1980's. The original wood door with brass hardware is surrounded by two wood side panels and cornice molding. Similar cornice molding is found on the steel casement windows to the left of the entry door. To the right of the entry door are additional steel windows with decorative shutters.

The original garage was converted to a maid's quarters by Smith in 1955. The former garage projects forward of the house to the left and features a hipped roof and a 16-lite steel frame bay window. A second story addition was added above and behind the garage, adjacent to the balcony, at the same time. A larger garage was built in 1955 on the adjacent lot which was purchased by the Smiths. The garage is connected to the southeast end of the residence by a gated breezeway, and also has a low-pitch hipped roof, stucco siding and steel frame windows.

On both sides of the house, the grade drops to reveal a walk-out basement on the backside of the house. Balconies at the two levels above the basement feature similar decorative wrought iron railings. Fixed and sliding glass panels are present along the rear elevation.

Modifications include an early addition to the northwest corner of the house c. 1945; construction of a swimming pool and glass wall c. 1947; conversion of the original garage to a maid's quarters, construction of a second story addition behind and above the maid's quarters, the construction of a new two car garage, and a new brick garden wall c. 1955; construction of a covered terrace and flagstone pavers c. 1961; and addition of window surrounds, stucco applied over brick at the entryway, landscaping remodel of rear portion of the property, new swimming pool, and new brick walkways c. 1985. The modifications which occurred prior to 1967 did not significantly impact the architectural integrity of the Monterey design, and were commissioned by Smith, the historically significant individual associated with the site, during his ownership and occupancy of the house. The 1985 additions and modifications had a much greater impact on the integrity of the building. However, the most significant of these modifications, namely the

addition of window surrounds and the application of stucco over the brick entry, have been reversed by the current owner. The owner is still in the final stages of removing the stucco, which severely damaged the weeping mortar, and will be treating and painting the brick as part of the restoration. The remaining 1985 modifications do not significantly impact the resource.

As a very good example of the Monterey style retaining a good degree of integrity from its 1936-1967 period of significance, staff recommends designation under HRB Criterion C. Any modifications completed after 1967 shall be excluded from the designation.

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

A notice of completion dated February 20, 1936 notes that the property at 2293 San Juan Road was built by contractor Hurlburt, Frank & Slaughter, Inc. to the plans and specifications prepared by Ralph L. Frank. Frank was established as a Master Architect by the Historical Resources Board in July of 2005.

Ralph Loren Frank was born in Kansas in 1898. He moved to San Diego in 1920 after serving in World War I. As early as 1923 he was designing houses and working with Ralph E. Hurlburt. In 1925, he was referenced as a designer working for Hurlburt and Tifal, a well-known design-build firm. At the same time he was also designing buildings independent of Hurlburt and Tifal. By the mid-1930s he was a partner with the firm Hurlburt, Frank and Slaughter. Frank was the firm's primary architectural designer. The firm designed and built several houses throughout San Diego for high-end clients including Rueben H. Fleet, Percy J. Benbough, mayor of San Diego from 1935-1942 and C. Arnholt Smith. They were also responsible for planning of the Wonder House of Stone (HRB #464), though credit was given to Hurlburt. While with Hurlburt, Frank and Slaughter, Frank was responsible for the design of the five houses in the small subdivision of Brookes Terrace in Marston Hills. He was equally as creative with interior design, planning the interiors on a number of Hurlburt, Frank and Slaughter houses. He also designed 20 Southern California branches of the U.S. National Bank in partnership with Grant King.

It is well documented that Ralph Frank worked in many neighborhoods including Uptown, Mission Hills, Point Loma, La Playa and La Jolla, and in various architectural styles during the 1930's. Properties designated by the HRB for their association with Ralph Frank as a Master Architect include HRB # 718 (The Strawn House), HRB #722 (The Philip and Helen Gildred/Ralph Frank House), and HRB #881 (The Ralph Loren and Alice Mae Frank House). Now that homes built during the 1940's, 1950's and even 1960's are gaining historical significance it is being discovered that Ralph Frank worked as an architect into his later years and designed quality homes for his clients in styles more common during the mid-century. Frank died, at age 66, in April of 1964.

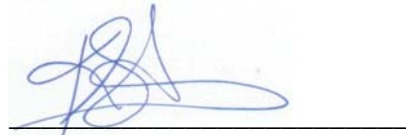
The subject property at 2293 San Juan Road is a very good and example of Frank's work and retains integrity to its 1936-1967 period of significance, exclusive of the modifications completed after that period. Therefore, staff recommends designation under HRB Criterion D as the work of Master Architect Ralph L. Frank.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

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 C. Arnholt Smith/Ralph L. Frank House located at 2293 San Juan Road be designated under HRB Criterion B for its association with C. Arnholt Smith; Criterion C as a very good example of Monterey architecture; and Criterion D as the work of Master Architect Ralph L. Frank. The period of significance shall date from 1936-1967. Any modifications completed after 1967 shall be excluded from the designation. 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.



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Attachment(s):        Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover