



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO  
**Historical Resources Board**

DATE ISSUED: February 15, 2012 REPORT NO. HRB-12-010

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board  
Agenda of February 23, 2012

SUBJECT: **ITEM #6 – The Luscomb Building**

APPLICANT: Owner represented by Marie Burke Lia

LOCATION: 1769 San Diego Avenue, Uptown Community, Council District 2

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of The Luscomb Building located at 1769 San Diego Avenue as a historical resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate The Luscomb Building located at 1769 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. 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 the only 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 a proposed building modification or demolition of a structure of 45 years or more, consistent with San Diego Municipal Code Section 143.0212.

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 applicant's report 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

A historical resource research report was prepared by Kathleen Crawford of the Office of Marie Burke Lia, which concludes that the resource is not significant under any HRB Criteria. Staff disagrees, and finds that the site is a significant historical resource under HRB Criterion A. 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.*

### 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.

In 1932 additional buildings were added to the site, including a small one-story building set at the south end of the lot immediately adjacent to San Diego Avenue, as well as two two-story buildings connected via a one-story element, all set immediately behind the small one-story building. A large single story garage structure was also constructed. These improvements can be seen in the 1940 Sanborn Map included in the applicant's report. These buildings were much simpler and modernistic in design than the 1927 building. Constructed with simple stucco walls; flat roofs and plain parapets; and paired four-lite casement windows, these more utilitarian buildings were designed to compliment, but not mimic the existing building.

The auto court complex was expanded again between 1940 and 1950 with the addition of a long, two-story motel building constructed at the south end of the lot fronting onto Moore Street; and yet again between 1950 and 1956 when a long, two-story motel building was constructed at the north end of the lot, also fronting onto Moore Street.

Of these later buildings added between 1932 and 1956, only one remains. One of the 1932 two-story buildings is largely intact, with the exception of non-historic wood windows which were placed in the original openings. Three of the four other 1932 buildings have been demolished, including the garage, which was removed during the 1950s; the rear-most two-story building; and the one story building along San Diego Avenue. The land on which the one-story building stood has since become additional public right-of-way. The two-story motel buildings constructed between 1940 and 1956 were also demolished. With the exception of the garage, these buildings were all demolished between 1960 and 1965 for the construction of Interstate 5.

### Context and Significance

#### *Tourist Camps*

The Draft Old San Diego Context Statement currently under development for the Community Plan update discusses early tourism in Old Town and the tourist camps which developed along key access routes through the community. The subject property is located in Uptown one-half mile to the south of Old Town State Park, where California Street meets San Diego Avenue, a key historical southern access point to Old Town. The Draft Uptown Context does not address early tourism and tourist camps; however, the information provided in the Draft Old San Diego Context relates directly to the historical development of the subject property. A portion of the Draft Old San Diego Context is excerpted below:

*In the early 1900s, the popularity of the automobile had led to auto touring as a recreational activity... San Diego's Chamber of Commerce, Boulevard Committee put together an expansive plan for 200 miles of new roadways to link downtown with further outlying areas of the county... Following the completion of the Committee's plan, San Diego became a primary automobile-touring destination. And new life was given to Old Town as a unique and ancient place for tourists to experience...*

*By 1919, the roads to San Diego had been greatly improved and during the 1920s auto touring reached new heights... businesses catering specifically to motorists began to emerge. In Old Town, motels, auto courts, gas stations, and garages all began to be constructed in increasing numbers. Tourist camps and auto courts started to line San Diego Avenue, and Taylor, Chestnut, and Congress Streets near some of Old Town's most popular attractions.*

As noted in the Background section of this report, it is not known what, if any, use occurred at the site between 1927 and 1932. However, it is clear based on Directory research that the property was used as a tourist camp beginning in 1932. Tourist camps, as they were listed in City Directories and Sanborn Maps, were precursors to later motels, and typically featured cottages or small rooms with available parking and minor amenities. Review of the 1932 City Directory reveals 36 tourist camps within what is now the City of San Diego, 16 of which were within roughly a one mile radius of Old San Diego, illustrating their popularity and underscoring the connection between Old San Diego, tourism, and tourist camps during this period. Of the 16 only two remain today, the subject property and the property located at 2360 San Diego Avenue (formerly 2364 La Jolla). An additional extant tourist camp, the Casa de Pico Auto Court, is located within the State Park and dates to 1939.

As detailed in the earlier description of the resource, three of the four buildings constructed in 1932 when the site was first used as a tourist camp have since been demolished to accommodate additional right-of-way and the construction of Interstate 8. In addition, the street configuration immediately surrounding the property has been altered, eliminating the street corner. Historical vehicle access points to the site and landscape features have also been lost. Given that only one building from the 1932 period remains, the site does not convey sufficient integrity to reflect a tourist camp and therefore staff does not recommend designation related to this context.

#### *Programmatic Architecture*

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, Mimetric 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.

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 1769 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.



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Kelley Stanco  
Senior Planner



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Cathy Winterrowd  
Principal Planner/HRB Liaison

KS/cw

- Attachments: 1. Draft Resolution  
2. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover

RESOLUTION NUMBER N/A  
ADOPTED ON 2/23/2012

WHEREAS, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego held a noticed public hearing on 2/23/2012, to consider the historical designation of the **The Luscomb Building** located at **1769 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 findings:

(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 the only 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**. The designation shall exclude the two-story building at the south end of the lot constructed in 1932.

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: \_\_\_\_\_  
KEITH BAUERLE  
Deputy City Attorney