

CITY OF SAN DIEGO  
M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: March 12, 2010

TO: Historical Resources Board

FROM: Kelley Saunders, Senior Planner, Historical Resources

SUBJECT: Item #5 – 2901 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue

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*Background*

This item was continued at the July 26, 2007 HRB hearing at the request of the property owner and again at the April 24, 2008 HRB hearing at the request of the Banker’s Hill/ Park West Community Association and the property owner for an indefinite period of time. The property owner requested that the item be docketed for consideration by the Board at the November 20, 2009 hearing. At the November 20<sup>th</sup> hearing, public testimony and Board discussion centered primarily around the building type and method of construction; and the question as to whether or not the building was designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM). The Board continued the item, with specific direction to the applicant to provide greater discussion and analysis in the report regarding the building type and method of construction; and to ascertain whether or not the building was designed by SOM.

A Historical Resource Research Report Addendum dated February 2010 has been prepared by Scott Moomjian for the Office of Marie Burke Lia and submitted for review. The Addendum provides additional discussion and analysis of the building type and method of construction and has confirmed that the building was designed by SOM; and concludes that the building is not significant under any adopted HRB Criteria. Staff agrees with this conclusion, consistent with the prior staff recommendation in the memo dated November 6, 2010 and staff report HRB-08-028, as follows:

*Criterion C – Building Type and Method of Construction*

Post and Beam architecture as a sub-style of Modernism is at once a style and a method of construction. Structural framing consists of load bearing beams supported by columns rather than solid bearing walls. According to the San Diego Modernism Context Statement, “*This method has been used for centuries in wood-frame and heavy timber construction. In Modern Design, post-and-beam construction was used as a means of limiting the need for solid bearing walls, which allowed for expansive use of glass along the perimeter of the building where one would normally find an opaque wall... entire walls of floor-to-ceiling glass is a primary characteristic of this style.*”

As an adaptation of a long-established method of construction, Modernist Post and Beam architecture is an inextricable combination of construction method and materials. The integrity of both elements is critical to conveying the style. The method of construction in and of itself does not convey Modernist Post and Beam architecture without the expression of the primary character defining features which make it a Modernist resource, including: direct expression of the structural system through wood or steel frames, horizontal massing, flat or shallow roofs with deep overhangs, and floor-to-ceiling glass. As originally designed, the subject property exhibited all of these primary character defining features. However, subsequent modifications have cumulatively and adversely impacted the building's integrity as it relates to design, materials and feeling. The modifications are listed below and illustrated in Attachment 1. For descriptive purposes, the façade is broken up into quadrants from left to right:

South Façade (all ground floor):

- Likely replacement of the window system surrounding the entry door at the first quadrant (as evidenced by the lack of single pane fixed windows over smaller single pane hopper windows, which repeat across both facades of the building at the upper and lower floors).
- Addition of a "pop-out" at the second quadrant in 1966 which disrupts the plane of the building and the fenestration pattern and eliminates the "sunken" effect of the façade at this location.
- Non-historic door at the fourth quadrant
- Glazing removed from two hopper windows at the fourth quadrant

North Façade (upper floor):

- Removal of one awning transom window at the first quadrant
- Replacement of four hopper windows with fixed panes at the first quadrant

North Façade (lower floor):

- Replacement of four awning transom windows with fixed panes at the first quadrant
- Replacement of four hopper windows with fixed panes at the first quadrant
- Removal of one awning transom window replaced by venting at the second quadrant
- Glazing removed from four hopper windows at the second quadrant
- Addition of a "pop-out" at the third quadrant in 1966 which disrupts the plane of the building and eliminates the "sunken" effect of the façade at this location.
- Glazing removed from one awning transom window at the third quadrant
- Non-historic door at the third quadrant
- Glazing removed from four hopper windows at the fourth quadrant

In addition to these direct impacts to original materials and design, other panes of glass have been replaced or coated with an opaque material which eliminates visibility through the building. Lastly, close examination of the brick reveals only a very thin layer of paint which does not appear especially weathered given the building's age. Staff questions whether or not the brick at the end walls were originally painted, especially given the Modernist ethic of honest expression of materials. Regardless, the modifications noted, while not perhaps singularly significant, have the cumulative effect of impairing the building's ability to express its original design as a Post and Beam Modernist structure. Specifically, the removal and/or obstruction of glazing (a critical

primary character defining feature); the construction of “pop-outs” at both facades which disrupt the plane of the building and the fenestration pattern and eliminates the “sunken” effect of the façade; and the alteration and/or elimination of original elements such as the awning and hopper windows adversely impact the building’s integrity as it relates to design, materials and feeling. The building is no longer a good example of the Post and Beam style and method of construction, and therefore staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion C.

*Criterion D – Skidmore, Owings and Merrill*

The Addendum has confirmed through the SOM office in San Francisco that the subject building was designed by SOM for Guardian Life in 1955. No other information or original plans could be located. The Addendum’s assessment concludes that the building, while designed by SOM (a firm not yet established by the HRB as a Master but eligible for such a distinction) is not reflective of the firm’s larger-scale projects and therefore is not a notable example of their work. Staff disagrees that the building’s scale precludes designation under Criterion D. The building, while not as large as some of the other projects, reflects an overall body of work that extended beyond high-rise development. However, the building has undergone numerous modifications, as described in detail above and illustrated in Attachment 1, which significantly compromise the original SOM design and execution of the Post and Beam style and method of construction. Therefore, staff recommends that the property not be designated under HRB Criterion D for an association with SOM due to a lack of integrity related to design, materials and feeling.

*Recommendation*

At this time, the staff recommendation from the staff memo dated November 6, 2010 and staff report HRB-08-028 remains unchanged. Staff recommends that the Board not designate the property at 2901 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue under any HRB Criteria due to a lack of integrity.



Kelley Saunders  
Senior Planner

- Attachments:
1. Photo Exhibit of north and south facades illustrating modifications
  2. Staff Memo Dated November 6, 2009
  3. HRB-08-028
  4. HRB-07-042
  5. Historical Resource Research Report Addendum dated February 2010 and prepared by Scott Moomjian for the Office of Marie Burke Lia

# South Elevation



Paint at Brick End Walls is Very Thin, Suggesting Brick May Not Have Been Painted Originally



Non-Historic Door Glazing Removed From Hopper Windows

“Pop-Out” Constructed 1966 (Disrupts Fenestration Pattern of Fixed Pane Over Hopper)

Window System Surrounding Door Likely Replaced (Does Not Continue Pattern of Fixed Pane Over Hopper)

# North Elevation

Glazing Removed From  
Awning Transom Over  
Door

Non-Historic Door

Awning Transom  
Replaced with Venting

Hopper Windows  
Replaced with Fixed Panes

Awning Transom  
Removed

Awning Transoms  
Replaced with Fixed  
Panes

Hopper Windows  
Replaced with Fixed Panes

Glazing Removed  
From Hopper  
Windows

“Pop-Out” Constructed 1966  
(Continues Fenestration Pattern,  
But Glazing Has Been Removed  
At Awning & Hopper Windows)

Glazing Removed From  
Hopper Windows



CITY OF SAN DIEGO  
M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: November 6, 2009

TO: Historical Resources Board

FROM: Kelley Saunders, Senior Planner, Historical Resources

SUBJECT: ITEM 5 – 2901 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue

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*Background*

This item was continued at the July 26, 2007 HRB hearing at the request of the property owner and again at the April 24, 2008 HRB hearing at the request of the Hill/ Park West Community Association and the property owner for an indefinite period of time. The property owner has requested that the item be docketed at this time for consideration by the Board.

At the July 26, 2007 hearing staff recommended in staff report HRB-07-042 (Attachment 2) that the property be designated under HRB Criterion C as a structure which embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Modern style of architecture, and under HRB Criterion D for its association with the Master Architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. This recommendation was based on the information provided in the historical resource research report prepared by Heritage Architecture and Planning.

Following the continuance, a second research report prepared by the Office of Marie Burke Lia was submitted by the property owner. Staff reviewed the report, conducted a second site visit and determined that the building was not eligible for designation under any criteria due to significant modifications. These modifications consist of the addition of non-historic entry doors, modifications to the window wall, and most significantly, first floor “pop-out” expansions of a single central office space at the north and south elevation (front and rear). These modifications, as well as the staff recommendation to not designate the property, are discussed in greater detail in staff report HRB-08-028 (Attachment 1).

*Recommendation*

At this time, the staff recommendation from staff report HRB-08-028 remains unchanged, and staff recommends that the Board not designate the property at 2901 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue under any HRB Criteria due to a lack of integrity.



Kelley Saunders  
Senior Planner

- Attachments: 1. HRB-08-028  
2. HRB-07-042  
3. Historical resource research report prepared the Office of Marie Burke Lia  
4. Historical resource research report prepared by Heritage Architecture & Planning



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

# Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: April 10, 2008 REPORT NO. HRB-08-028

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board  
Agenda of April 24, 2008

SUBJECT: **ITEM #12 – Guardian Life Insurance/Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Office Building**

APPLICANT: CHEL Holdings, Ltd.

LOCATION: 2901 Fifth Avenue, Uptown Community, Council District 2

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the Guardian Life Insurance/Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Office Building at 2901 Fifth Avenue as a historical resource.

## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Do not designate the Guardian Life Insurance/Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Office Building at 2901 Fifth Avenue as a historical resource under any HRB Criteria.

## BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with the owner's constraints assessment for a project at this location involving one or more buildings of 45 years or more, under San Diego Municipal Code Section 143.0212. The item was originally scheduled for the July 26, 2007 Historical Resources Board meeting but continued at the request of the property owner.



Located at 2901 Fifth Avenue in Banker's Hill, the two story office structure is a Modern style building constructed in 1956 for Guardian Life Insurance Company and designed by the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and rests on a concrete foundation.

## ANALYSIS

A historical resource research report was originally prepared by Eileen Magno of Heritage Architecture and evaluated by HRB staff, Michael Tudury, for the July 26, 2007 Historical Resources Board meeting. Heritage Architecture and HRB staff concurred that the resource was eligible under Criterion C and HRB staff recommended that the building was also significant under Criterion D. At the request of the property owner, the item was continued to further investigate the historicity of the resource. A second consultant's report by Kathleen Crawford in conjunction with Marie Burke Lia was submitted and concluded that the property was not historically significant under any Criteria. After reviewing the submitted historical report and conducting a site visit, Staff concludes that the site is not a significant historical resource under HRB Criterion C or Criterion D, as follows:

*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 Heritage Architecture consultant's report states that the building was designed by the Chicago-based architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), the subject two-story branch office structure was built by Ries Construction Company for New York-based Guardian Life Insurance Company of America in 1956. Guardian Life Insurance Company occupied the building until 1969. The building was purchased in 1969 by the well-known San Diego architectural firm of Deems, Lewis, Martin & Associates who utilized the structure as their offices until 1975.

The Guardian Life/SOM Office Building embodies many characteristics of the mid-century Modern style of architecture. Among these characteristics are simplicity of form, design, detailing and an ethic of "form follows function." The two-story flat roof rectangular building utilizes solid unadorned rectangular painted brick walls on the east and west sides, and a simple deeply recessed window wall system on the north and south elevations that is composed of fixed windows above operable hopper windows on both floors. The hopper windows at the ground floor have been changed to fixed solid panels. The entry doors occur in two places on the south façade and in a single location on the north façade.

The structural system consists of the brick load-bearing end walls, coupled with a simple post and beam reinforced concrete structure. The post and beam structure is visible at the exterior by virtue of the exposed beam ends. This structural system allows for the freestanding expansive glass window wall that is characteristic of the style as well as a flexible plan configuration at the interior.

There have been several modifications to the exterior of the building that negatively impact the simplistic nature of the modern design. These changes consist of the addition of non-historic

entry doors, modifications to the window wall, and most significantly, first floor “pop-out” expansions of a single central office space at the north and south elevation (front and rear). The existing entry doors were originally teak-framed glass with top, middle and bottom pivot hinges, which are not standard hinges. The remaining example of this historic door is located at the southwest quadrant of the building. The hopper windows on the ground floor window wall have been eliminated on the building. The hopper windows allowed for cross ventilation of the building on both floors. The windows have been replaced with solid painted panels. The north east corner of the building also has obscured glass on both the upper and lower level of the building changing the “pass-through” feel of the building. At the southwest corner of the building the window door configuration also appears to have been altered as evidenced by the lack of hopper or fixed hopper panels. The most significant change to the building has been the pop-out additions on the north and south elevations. The pop-out extends approximately 3ft. to 4ft. with fixed windows and reflective glass. The addition extends to the edge of the overhang and masks the original lines of the building.

Given the numerous alterations of the building, staff feels that the original simplistic design of the building has been compromised and it should not be designated 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 Heritage Architecture report notes that the building was designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) whose firm is known internationally for Modern Contemporary design. The firm was established in Chicago in 1936 by Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings. In 1939, John Merrill joined the firm as a senior partner. SOM is widely recognized as the architectural firm that popularized the modern design glass façade skyscraper. Today, SOM is one of the world’s largest architectural firms. There is apparently two other local SOM designed buildings in San Diego—the Bank of America Building and the Symphony Tower, both located on B Street.

The Heritage Architecture report states that “...the building does not express a particular phase in the development of the firm and does not rise above the level of workmanship of other SOM commercial projects.” Staff agrees that it does not express a particular phase in the development of the firm. Staff further believes that the original design intent has diminished significantly due to the numerous alterations. Finally, outside of an email from Ward Deems of Deems, Lewis, Martin & Associates whose firm purchased the property in 1969, there is no paperwork to substantiate that SOM actually designed the building. The small scale and limited use of the Modern design does not appear to be representative of their work.

Given the question of the building being SOM-designed and the numerous alterations to the building which substantially alter the architect’s original design intent, staff believes that the building should not be designated under HRB Criterion D.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff's field check, it is recommended that 2901 Fifth Avenue not be designated under any HRB Criteria. If the property is designated, it brings 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 Historic Conditional Use Permit which allows flexibility of use; and other programs which vary depending on specific site conditions and owner objectives.



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Jodie Brown  
Senior Planner



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Cathy Winterrowd  
Senior Planner/Program Coordinator

jb/cw

Attachment(s):      Heritage Architecture Report  
                              July 12, 2007 HRB staff report  
                              Kathleen Crawford Report



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

# Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: July 12, 2007 REPORT NO. HRB-07-042

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board  
Agenda of July 26, 2007

SUBJECT: **ITEM # 11 – Guardian Life/Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Office Building**

APPLICANT: CHEL Holdings Ltd, owner (referral from Development Services)

LOCATION: 2901 Fifth Avenue, Uptown Community, Council District 2

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the Guardian Life/ Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Office Building located at 2901 Fifth Avenue as a historic resource.

## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate the Guardian Life/Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Office Building located at 2901 Fifth Avenue as a historical resource under HRB Criterion C as the structure embodies distinctive characteristics of the Modern style of architecture including simplicity of form, function, detailing and materials and under HRB Criterion D for its association with the Master Architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.



### Planning Department

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## BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with the owner's constraints assessment for a project at this location involving one or more buildings of 45 years or more, under San Diego Municipal Code Section 143.0212. Located at 2901 Fifth Avenue in Bankers Hill, the two-story office structure is a Modern style building constructed in 1956, for the Guardian Life Insurance Company of America and designed by the Master Architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and rests on a concrete foundation.

## ANALYSIS

A historical resource research report was prepared by historian Eileen Magno of Heritage Architecture which concludes the resource is significant under HRB Criterion C. Staff concurs that the site is a significant historical resource under HRB Criterion C and believes that the site is also a significant resource under HRB Criterion D, as follows.

*CRITERION C - Embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period or method of construction or is a valuable example of the use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship.*

Designed by the Chicago-based architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), the subject two-story branch office structure was built by Ries Construction Company for New York-based Guardian Life Insurance Company of America in 1956. Guardian Life Insurance Company occupied the building until 1969. The building was purchased in 1969 by the well-known San Diego architectural firm of Deems, Lewis, Martin & Associates who utilized the structure as their offices until 1975.

The Guardian Life/SOM Office Building embodies many characteristics of the mid-century Modern style of architecture. Among these characteristics are simplicity of form, design, detailing, and an ethic of "form follows function". The two-story flat-roof rectangular (in plan) building utilizes solid unadorned rectangular painted brick walls on the east and west sides, and a simple deeply recessed window wall system on the north and south elevations that is composed of fixed windows above operable hopper windows throughout both floors. The hopper windows at the ground floor have been changed to fixed solid painted panels. The entry doors occur in two places on the south façade and in a single location on the north facade.

The structural system consists of the brick load-bearing end walls, coupled with a simple post-and-beam reinforced concrete structure. The post-and-beam structure is visible at the exterior by virtue of the exposed beam ends. This structural system allows for the freestanding expansive glass window wall that is characteristic of the style as well as an flexible plan configuration at the interior.

There have been several modifications to the exterior of the structure that occurred in 1966 that staff believes are minor and reversible. These changes consist of the addition of non-historic entry doors and lighting, modifications to the ground floor window wall to eliminate the operable hoppers, exposed wiring and electrical panels, and most significantly, first floor "pop-out" expansions of a single central office space at the front/south elevation and the rear/north

elevation. The existing entry doors were originally teak-framed glass with top, intermediate and bottom pivot hinges, not standard hinges. The remaining example of this historic door (in poor condition) is located at the southwestern quadrant of the building. Staff believes that these modifications do not significantly detract from the evident character-defining form of the structure.

As the subject structure embodies distinctive characteristics of the Modern style of architecture including simplicity of form, function, detailing and materials and, as the building's primary characteristics are intact, staff recommends designation of the Guardian Life/SOM Office Building 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 structure was designed by an architectural firm that rises to the level of master architects. The architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill is the nationally and internationally-acknowledged "Gold Standard" for Modern Contemporary design throughout the world. SOM was formed in Chicago in 1936 by Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings. In 1939, John Merrill joined the firm as a senior partner. In 1937, they opened a branch office in New York. Although headquartered in Chicago, the New York office is equally important today. The firm Skidmore Owings and Merrill is widely recognized as the architectural firm that popularized the modern design glass façade skyscraper. Today, SOM is one of the largest architectural firms in the world. This structure is the only known building designed by SOM in this neighborhood. Staff is aware of two other SOM-designed structures in San Diego, the Bank of America Building and the Symphony Tower, both located on B Street in downtown.

The historical report states that "the building does not express a particular phase in the development of the firm and does not rise above the level of workmanship of other SOM commercial projects." Staff agrees that it does not express a particular phase in the development of the firm, but believes that the structure represents a continuum of design philosophy, evidenced at a small scale. Further, staff believes that, as originally designed, the building is a good example of the workmanship and detailing prowess of SOM. Although some of this detailing has been changed, staff believes that a sufficient portion of the original building exists to warrant designation based on this HRB Criterion.

As the architectural firm that designed the subject structure, SOM, is a world-renowned design firm, staff recommends designation of the Guardian Life/SOM Office Building based on HRB Criterion D, Master Architect.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff's field check, it is recommended that the Guardian Life/SOM Office Building be designated under HRB Criteria C and D. 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.



Michael Tudury  
Senior Planner/Architect



Cathy Winterrowd  
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Attachment: Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover