



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

## Report to the Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: November 3, 2016 REPORT NO. HRB-16-077

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board  
Agenda of November 17, 2016

SUBJECT: **ITEM #6 – 2535 Midway Drive**

APPLICANT: Steelwave, LLC represented by Scott A. Moomjian

OWNER: Rexford Industrial Realty LP

LOCATION: 2535 Midway Drive, Midway-Pacific Highway Community, Council District 2

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the property located at 2535 Midway Drive as a historical resource.

### STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Do not designate the property located at 2535 Midway Drive 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 resource is a large three-story former United States Postal Service facility built in 1972 in the Brutalist style on the north side of Barnett Avenue at Midway Drive, in portions of Pueblo Lots 236 and 237 of the Pueblo Lands of San Diego in the Midway-Pacific Highway Community.

The building is located on APN 450-480-12-00 (Parcel 2 of Parcel Map 21105). The property was identified in the Draft 2011 Midway Community Plan Area Historic Resources Reconnaissance Survey as an example of the Brutalism style and given a Status Code of 5S3, "Appears to be individually eligible for local listing or designation through survey evaluation."

The item was previously scheduled for hearing on October 27, 2016. The item was withdrawn at the request of the Development Services Department management. Upon completion of additional analysis of the Historical Research Report, a new HRB staff report is being issued due to a change in the staff recommendation.

## ANALYSIS

A Historical Resource Research Report was prepared by Brian F. Smith and Associates, Inc., which concludes that the resource is not significant under any HRB Criteria and staff concurs. 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.*

Research into the history of the property at 2535 Midway Drive did not reveal any information to indicate that the property exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's or Midway-Pacific Highway's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development. 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.*

Research into the owners and tenants of the property at 2535 Midway Drive did not reveal any individuals who could be considered historically significant in local, state or national history. Furthermore, no events of local, state or national significance are known to have occurred at the subject property. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion B.

*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 subject resource is a very large three-story commercial facility built in 1972 in the Brutalist style as a processing and distribution center for the United States Postal Service. The property consists of two structures identified in the applicant's report as the Midway Postal Service Processing and Distribution Center, which is the main post office building; and the Vehicle Maintenance Facility, which is a somewhat smaller accessory structure built at the rear corner of the property, northwest of the main building.

The main post office building is located immediately west of the intersection of Midway Drive and Barnett Avenue, with the primary elevation fronting northeast onto Midway Drive. It is an imposing structure of monumental scale and massing, presenting a blocky rectangular form with a flat roof. The building is constructed primarily of reinforced concrete, concrete block, and brick on a concrete foundation. The building's exterior finish is principally exposed concrete, alternating with areas of concrete block and spray on stucco as noted on the as-built elevation drawings. The main entrances are located on either side of a rectangular concrete tower element at the primary elevation, accessed from the two large stairways or the ramp leading to an elevated terrace. The concrete tower element introduces angular massing with the shed roofed extension at its base. This angular motif is repeated a few times elsewhere on the building at all four main elevations. The building's fenestration is concentrated at the primary façade, consisting of massive horizontal bands of metal framed windows. The building's secondary elevations are characterized by sprawling concrete

canopies sheltering various secondary entrances and loading areas, and expansive, near uninterrupted wall planes of concrete.

The main parking lot servicing the former post office is located to the southeast, along Midway Drive and Barnett Avenue. A smaller secondary parking lot is located to the northwest of the building's main entrances. Near the rear of the property is the vehicle maintenance building. This accessory structure is also a large rectangular building which repeats the same building materials as the main post office building.

Although not discussed in the applicant's report, the as-built drawings indicate that the landscape was designed by local Landscape Architects, Wimmer & Yamada. The extant landscape design is sparse, reflecting the stark nature of the building's design. Trees in the parking lot and planters near the main entrance are placed at regular intervals throughout, and single rows of trees or ground cover soften select areas of the building, primarily at or near the main entrances to the building and parking lot. The existing landscape does not appear to include any rare or unique plant species, and does not notably contribute to the impact of the main building or its significance as a Brutalist style resource. Therefore, staff does not recommend the inclusion of any elements of the landscaping as part of designation.

The main post office building and the vehicle maintenance building each have two additions. Sometime between 1985 and 1994, a small, L-shaped, single-story post office box room addition was placed at the base of the front elevation tower element on the elevated terrace. This addition does not appear to have resulted in the demolition of the front face of the tower's base. In 1985, a warehouse addition was placed at the far southeast corner of the main building. At either end of the long, rectangular vehicle maintenance building, single-story garage additions were built sometime prior to 1981. Finally, standing seam metal roofing material appears to have been added over the angled shed roofed portions on both buildings.

The applicant's report classifies the subject property as International style with Brutalism influence, while noting that its 1972 date of construction is well outside the International style's period of greatest popularity from circa 1935-1955, according to the San Diego Modernism Historic Context Statement. While the subject resource does exhibit some amount of ribbon windows and the overall rectilinear forms expected of the Modern International style of architecture, it does not present the light, almost weightless quality seen in many International style buildings. Rather, the subject building is more suitably classified as a Brutalist building with its monumental massing, heavy blockish appearance, and copious use of concrete.

The Modern style of Brutalism gets its name from the French term *béton brut* or "raw concrete." The Brutalism style first appeared as early as the 1950s, but was primarily seen in San Diego only from about 1965 to 1975. Inspired by Le Corbusier, buildings in the Brutalist style are strikingly blockish, geometric, and composed of repetitive shapes – all predominantly formed of concrete which is to be expressed as both the primary structural material and the finish. Buildings of this style are regularly described by critics as inhuman, stark, and out of place. In most cases, Brutalism style buildings in San Diego are associated with the work of a recognized master architect. The primary character defining features of Brutalism are listed in the Modernism Historic Context Statement as exposed and expressive structural system; monumental massing; angular and rectilinear forms; and exposed

concrete finish. The style is secondarily defined by repetitive patterns; and intentional avoidance of traditional elements or ornament.

The subject property, although monumental in scale and primarily of exposed concrete with an avoidance of traditional elements or ornament, does not truly exhibit all the primary and secondary character defining features of the Brutalism and is not considered a good example of the style. The property presents a very austere outer form and lacks a truly expressive structural system, which is a critical character defining feature of the style. Furthermore, the building lacks a certain rhythm and repetition of patterns normally seen in superior examples of the Brutalist style. Accordingly, the property does not embody the distinctive characteristics of the Brutalist style sufficient to convey the historic significance of that style. The building is not a valuable example of the use of indigenous materials, nor does it exemplify high craftsmanship and design. The building does not embody the distinctive characteristic of a rare or unique building type or method of construction. Finally, the building's age and physical features do not exemplify or reflect the era when its style, type or method of construction became popular. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation 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.*

#### *Master Architect*

According to the as-built drawings, the subject property was designed by architects Deems/Lewis & Partners. The plans also bear the stamp and signature of Ward Deems. Ward Deems and William Lewis, Jr. are identified in the Modernism Historic Context Statement as architects contributing to Modernism in San Diego. The Context Statement also identifies the subject property at 2535 Midway Drive among their known San Diego works.

The applicant's report names William Lewis, Jr. as the designer of the subject property. Architect William (Bill) Sperry Lewis, Jr. was active in A.C. Martin & Associates as well as the firm of Deems Lewis (of which he was a principal). Lewis' partner, Ward Deems, joined the Los Angeles firm of A.C. Martin in 1953 upon graduation from USC. Lewis, who graduated from USC's architecture program the same year, joined the firm shortly thereafter. In 1958-1959, Deems explored the potential of opening an office in San Diego, which was then considered to be a cheaper, slower-paced city which survived on tourism funds and military spending. In April 1959, a corporate agreement was signed to launch "Deems-Martin Associates" with Lewis included. In 1983, Lewis was inducted as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and has been well recognized and awarded for his large portfolio of distinctive commercial architecture.

Beyond the statements made in the applicant's report, Lewis' exact role as a designer of the subject property could not be substantiated by any primary source documentation. However, information in the applicant's report relating to a 2016 interview with the architect suggests that Lewis does not consider the subject work to be particularly innovative and may not feel it is an especially notable work of his.

Lewis' status as a Master Architect was established in January 2016 with the designation of the May Company/William Lewis, Jr. Building at 1702 Camino Del Rio North (HRB Site #1203); however this particular designation is currently on appeal. Staff still supports the establishment of Lewis as a

Master Architect as achieved with the designation of the May Company/William Lewis, Jr. Building; however, without clear support of the architect responsible for the design of the subject property, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion D as a notable work of Master Architect William Lewis, Jr.

#### *Master Landscape Architect*

The firm Wimmer & Yamada is an award-winning, local Landscape Architectural firm noted in the Modernism Historic Context Statement but not yet established as a Master Landscape Architecture firm. There is insufficient information to establish the firm as a master at this time. Furthermore, additional information and analysis relating to the integrity of the original landscape design and comparative analysis to other known works of the firm has not been provided. Nevertheless, the existing landscape functions to soften the massive structure and provide a small amount of shade, but the visual impact of the post office property has been ultimately defined more by the colossal building than by its landscape. Absent additional information on the firm of Wimmer & Yamada, and analysis on how the subject property fits into their overall body of work, staff does not recommend establishment of Wimmer & Yamada as a Master Landscape Architecture firm or designation of the subject property under HRB Criterion D for this association.

*CRITERION E - Is listed or has been determined eligible by the National Park Service for listing on the National Register of Historic Places or is listed or has been determined eligible by the State Historical Preservation Office for listing on the State Register of Historical Resources.*

The property at 2535 Midway Drive has not been listed on or determined eligible for listing on the State or National Registers. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion E.

*CRITERION F - Is a finite group of resources related to one another in a clearly distinguishable way or is a geographically definable area or neighborhood containing improvements which have a special character, historical interest or aesthetic value or which represent one or more architectural periods or styles in the history and development of the City.*

The property at 2535 Midway Drive is not located within a designated historic district. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion F.

#### 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 property located at 2535 Midway Drive not be designated under any HRB Criteria. 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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Attachments:

1. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover