

M E M O R A N D U M**PLANNING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
CITY OF SANTA MONICA
PLANNING DIVISION**

DATE: February 12, 2018
TO: The Honorable Landmarks Commission
FROM: Planning Staff
SUBJECT: **1413 Michigan Avenue, 17ENT-0285**

Public Hearing to consider Landmark Designation Application 17ENT-0285 to determine whether the property consisting of a one-story Mid-Century Modern style building (Santa Monica Nikkei community hall), in whole or in part, should be designated as a City Landmark.

PROPERTY OWNER: Atlantic Microscope, LLC
APPLICANT: City of Santa Monica Landmarks Commission

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

On November 13, 2017, the Commission considered a demolition permit application for a one-story, Mid-Century Modern style building (community hall) known as the Santa Monica Nikkei Hall located at the subject property. The Commission requested a preliminary historic assessment to determine whether there was enough credible evidence in the record to warrant filing an application for designation.

On December 11, 2017, the Commission was presented with a preliminary assessment, prepared by the City's historic consultant, Historic Resources Group (HRG), concluding that the potential significance of the property's historic association with the Japanese American community utilized as a community center and meeting hall between 1957-2017 would warrant further evaluation. Following public testimony and discussion, the Commission subsequently filed a Landmark designation application for the subject property.

A Landmark Assessment report was prepared for the subject building by HRG (Attachment B). Based on the findings as provided in the report, the consultant finds that the property is eligible for Landmark designation under the City of Santa Monica Landmark criteria 9.56.100(A)(1).

Historic Resources Inventory Status

The 1957 residence/social hall at 1413 Michigan Avenue has not been previously identified or evaluated for historical significance during any of the City's previous surveys, and therefore not included in the City's Historic Resources Inventory (HRI).

PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

Notice of this hearing was provided as required by Section 9.56.170(c) of the Landmarks Ordinance, with notice sent to all owners and occupants within a 300-foot radius and a newspaper notice published in the Santa Monica Daily Press at least 10 consecutive calendar days prior to the hearing. A copy of the notice is included as Attachment A.

ANALYSIS

Property Information and Architectural Description

The subject property consists of approximately 18,000 square feet and is located on the northeast corner of 14th Street and Michigan Avenue in the NC Neighborhood Commercial district. The adjacent property to the north consists of an ambulance dispatch center and the property to the east across the rear alley is developed with a religious institution (church). The subject building is located at the southeast corner of the parcel (14th Court & Michigan Avenue). The majority of the site includes a surface parking lot. A storage shed is located at the northeast corner of the parcel.

The one-story Santa Monica Nikkei Hall building was constructed in 1957 for use as a residence and social hall, and is a modest example of a Mid-Century Modern institutional building. The building has horizontal massing and a later addition gives the building an asymmetrical composition. Exterior siding material consists of textured cement plaster and the flat roof consists of built-up roofing material. Fenestration consists primarily of wood-sash awning and double-hung windows, and vinyl horizontal-sliding windows. The primary façade and building entrance is located along Michigan Avenue and consists of a pair of flush wood entry doors below a flat canopy with metal pipe supports, with a concrete entry path. The building has several secondary entrances on the north and east facades, consisting of wood doors accessed by concrete stairs and stoops.

The subject building has undergone few alterations since its original construction. All building alterations occurred during the period that the building served the community group. The period of significance is identified in the consultant's report as between 1957 when the building was constructed, until 2017 when the remaining members of the Nikkei Jin Kai sold the property. In 1969, a 23' x 26' addition to enlarge the meeting room was constructed to the west side of the building to accommodate the growing membership. A few original windows have been replaced throughout the years. Overall, the Santa Monica Nikkei Hall retains much of its original design, including its overall scale and horizontal massing, simple geometric forms, and a flat roof. The Commission should discuss the features of the front building elevation visible from Michigan Avenue that contribute to the integrity of the property, which may include the projecting horizontal frame, horizontal wood sash awning windows, and projecting entry canopy with metal pipe supports.

Historic Context

As further detailed in Attachment B, Santa Monica's Nikkei (Japanese immigrants) population "enjoyed a higher level of integration" and experienced less racial intolerance than other minorities in Santa Monica prior to World War II. Unlike other minorities, the Nikkei population was not relegated to the Pico neighborhood, but instead resided throughout the central area of the City, in the Ocean Park neighborhood, and attended Santa Monica schools. As a result of their integration into Santa Monica schools, Nikkei children lacked instruction in Japanese language and culture.

Santa Monica Nikkei pioneer Katsuzo Matsumura began the first Japanese language school (Gakuen) in his living room in 1924 with eight students. As more children began to attend the Gakuen, a larger, central school was constructed (1824 16th Street, demolished). Though primarily utilized as a Japanese language school, the Gauken also served as the nucleus of Santa Monica's prewar Nikkei community. It brought families together with traditional cultural events (i.e. Obon festival), picnics, parties, plays, reading and writing contests, and other social events. The Gakuen operated until the beginning of World War II.

Following the military events of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Executive Order 9066 issued on February 19, 1942 officially ordered the incarceration of persons of Japanese ancestry residing along the west coast. Japanese incarceration during World War II effectively eliminated Santa Monica's Japanese community, as the Nikkei were directed to the Manzanar camp located in the Owens Valley, while some opted to voluntarily relocate to avoid incarceration. When the detention order was lifted on January 2, 1945, many Nikkei moved to the Midwest or east coast, a trend encouraged by the federal government.

Few families returned to Santa Monica upon release, though some returned after briefly relocating eastward. By April 1945, fewer than 1,300 Japanese Americans had returned to California and by 1946, approximately 161 Japanese Americans had returned to Santa Monica.

Santa Monica Nikkei Hall (Nikkei Jin Kai)

By 1950, Santa Monica's Japanese population had grown to 254 people, 0.4% of the City's total population. The immediate postwar problems of readjustment and resettlement were no longer as acute, and the Nisei began to focus on rebuilding and unifying the dismantled Japanese American community. At this time, the Santa Monica Nikkei started meeting as a community, often in community members' homes. In 1951, Issei (first generation Japanese American immigrants) community leaders formed the Santa Monica Nikkei Hall, Inc., and purchased the property at 1413 Michigan Avenue.

The modest one-story residence and social hall, designed by Y. Tom Makino, was constructed in 1957. The rear portion of the building was constructed as a residential apartment to generate income for the property. By 1960, many Nikkei resided around Michigan and Delaware Avenues, and 12th, 18th, and 19th Streets. The Nikkei Hall was a convenient neighborhood meeting place for the Japanese community during the latter

half of the 20th century. At its inception, the Nikkei Hall accommodated between 75 and 100 members, primarily Issei and Nisei (second generation Japanese American immigrants) couples living in the City.

The Nikkei Hall served as a place for families to gather and socialize. The group hosted monthly meetings, raised funds to build a monument in Woodlawn Cemetery to honor Issei pioneers and Nisei soldiers who died in World War II and the Korean War, planned picnics, assisted families in the event of illnesses or deaths, and organized holiday and traditional Japanese New Year celebrations. In 1969, a 23' x 26' addition to enlarge the meeting room was constructed to the west side of the building to accommodate the growing membership. Through the years however, younger generations of the Nikkei community assimilated further into American society and by 2000, the Nikkei Hall was primarily utilized by senior citizens. As membership declined, the group increasingly met in restaurants as opposed to the community hall. In 2017, the group consisted of four members.

Landmarks Ordinance/Findings

The Landmarks Ordinance requires the Commission to review the building's eligibility as a landmark based on the six criteria discussed below. The Commission may designate a property as a Landmark if it meets one or more of these criteria.

Based on the findings as provided in the Landmark Assessment Report, the consultant finds that the property appears eligible as a landmark under the City of Santa Monica Landmark criteria 9.56.100(A)(1). Based on the research and evaluation of 1413 Michigan Avenue, staff agrees with the consultant's findings that the property satisfies Landmark Designation Criterion 1. The following draft findings are made to support this conclusion:

(1) It exemplifies, symbolizes, or manifests elements of the cultural, social, economic, political or architectural history of the City.

The property symbolizes elements of the cultural and social history of the City of Santa Monica. Returning to Santa Monica after their incarceration following World War II, many Nisei (second generation Japanese American immigrants) focused on personal and family survival, and felt American society discouraged them from engaging in traditional cultural activities. However, by the early 1950s, the Nisei began to rebuild their community. In 1951, the Santa Monica Nikkei Hall, Inc. purchased the subject property and later constructed the Nikkei Hall community center in 1957. This preceded the widespread creation of a network of Japanese American Community Centers around Los Angeles in the 1960s.

Constructed by the Nikkei Kai as their community center in 1957, the Santa Monica Nikkei Hall is significant for its association with Santa Monica's Japanese American community for approximately 60 years. The subject property served as a place for Nikkei families to gather and socialize, and to connect to their Japanese heritage. In efforts to accommodate the growing membership, an addition was constructed in 1969 and the Nikkei Hall became the focus of the postwar Japanese community in Santa Monica.

Extant resources associated with the Japanese American community in Santa Monica are rare. Based on its location in the neighborhood occupied by many of Santa Monica's postwar Japanese population and its unifying role within the Nikkei community, the Santa Monica Nikkei Hall symbolizes elements of the City's cultural and social history and therefore satisfies this criterion. Character-defining features include the building's horizontal massing, simple geometric forms, and front building elevation features including the projecting horizontal frame, horizontal wood sash awning windows, and projecting entry canopy with metal pipe supports. The period of significance under this criterion is from 1957, when the building was constructed, until 2017 when the remaining members of the Nikkei Jin Kai sold the property.

(2) It has aesthetic or artistic interest or value, or other noteworthy interest or value.

As a modest example of Mid-Century Modern institutional architecture, the subject building's aesthetic or artistic value is not highly significant, unusual, or noteworthy. Therefore, the subject property does not satisfy this criterion.

(3) It is identified with historic personages or with important events in local, state or national history.

The subject property is not identified with historic personages or with important events in local, state, or national history. Although the property is associated with the postwar Japanese community in Santa Monica, it appears that no specific important events in local, state or national history occurred at the site. The Issei community leaders who formed the Santa Monica Nikkei (Yoshio Ando, Katsuzo Matsumura, and Ichisuke Fukuhara) played an important role in the establishment of Japanese community organizations after World War II. Although the establishment of the Nikkei Jin Kai was a significant event for the Santa Monica Japanese community, the property is not significant for an association with persons of notable or elevated importance. Therefore, the subject property does not satisfy this criterion.

(4) It embodies distinguishing architectural characteristics valuable to a study of a period, style, method of construction, or the use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship, or is a unique or rare example of an architectural design, detail or historical type valuable to such a study.

The subject building is a modest example of Mid-Century Modern institutional architecture. Relatively simple in design, the building does not exemplify distinguishing architectural features or characteristics valuable to a study of the postwar era or the Mid-Century Modern style as applied to institutional buildings. In addition, alterations to the building including an addition and the replacement of original windows have diminished its historic integrity as it relates to the original architectural design. Based on extant Mid-Century Modern buildings prevalent in the City, the subject building is not a unique or rare example of its architectural design or historical type. Therefore, the subject property does not satisfy this criterion.

(5) It is a significant or a representative example of the work or product of a notable builder, designer or architect.

The subject building is a modest example of Mid-Century Modern institutional architecture. Though Y. Tom Makino was a popular architect among the Japanese community in the Los Angeles area, he was not prolific, and 1413 Michigan Avenue is neither an early or excellent example of Makino's work. Therefore, it is not a significant or representative example of the work of a notable architect and therefore does not satisfy this criterion.

(6) It has a unique location, a singular physical characteristic, or is an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City.

The subject property is not located in a unique location in the City and does not consist of a unique singular physical characteristic. As a modest example of Mid-century Modern architecture, the building is not an established and familiar visual feature of the Pico neighborhood. Therefore, the subject property does not satisfy this criterion.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Commission designate the property located at 1413 Michigan Avenue as a City Landmark and the land on which it is sited as a Landmark Parcel based on the draft findings of designation Criteria 1 contained herein.

Pursuant to SMMC 9.36.180, the Landmarks Commission's determination regarding this application may be appealed to the City Council if the appeal is filed with the City Planning Division within ten (10) consecutive days commencing from the date that the decision is made by the Landmarks Commission.

Attachments:

- A. Public Notice
- B. Landmark Assessment Report, Historic Resource Group, January 2018