

Memorandum

To: Stephanie Reich, City of Santa Monica Date: 10/05/2020
From: Jan Ostashay, Principal OAC
Re: PEER REVIEW ASSESSMENT: 621 San Vicente Boulevard – Designation Application
(Landmark)

Overview

At the request of the City of Santa Monica Planning & Community Development Department, City Planning Division, Ostashay & Associates Consulting (OAC) conducted a peer review of the City Landmark designation application assessment prepared by GPA Consulting¹ for the property located at 621 San Vicente Boulevard, Santa Monica. The following information is provided to you for your information and use.

This peer review addresses the adequacy of the GPA prepared landmark application for the subject property. Our review in performing the peer review included an assessment of the designation application and conclusionary findings; site visit of the property; and additional data collection and research of building permits, Sanborn fire insurance maps, historic aerial photographs, prior survey assessments of the site and area, and the collection and review of other primary and secondary sources. A review for accuracy, clarity and understanding, and validity of the information provided in the application narrative was also conducted as part of the peer review.

Introduction

Generally, peer reviews of historic resources assessment reports are conducted to reassure lead agencies requesting the assessments that the identification and evaluation efforts performed are adequate, that the eligibility determinations made are logical and well supported, and that the document will, if necessary, facilitate environmental compliance under the provisions of CEQA. Review of historic resources documents for quality control is an essential part of the environmental planning process.

As a primer, historic resources fall within the jurisdiction of several levels of government. Federal laws provide the framework for the identification, evaluation, designation, and in certain instances, protection of historic resources. States and local jurisdictions play active roles in the identification, recordation, landmarking, and protection of such resources within their communities.

¹ Audrey von Ahrens, GPA Consulting. "City of Santa Monica – City Planning Division, Designation Application (Landmark), 621 San Vicente Boulevard, Santa Monica, CA 90402," submittal date April 27, 2020.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, promulgated standardized practices and guidelines for identifying, evaluating, and documenting historic properties (Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines [Preservation Planning, Identification, and Evaluation]). The State Office of Historic Preservation (OHP) and most local government agencies in California, particularly those agencies qualified as Certified Local Governments (CLG), recognize these practices and guidelines and recommend their use in order to maintain objectivity and consistency in the preparation of historic preservation documents and survey assessments.

Peer Review Assessment

OAC has peer reviewed the GPA prepared landmark application related to the property located at 621 San Vicente Boulevard for overall adequacy and the property’s potential local landmark eligibility. General comments on the application and assessment findings are as follows:

Designation Application (Landmark)

The City designation application completed for the subject property is in support of formally listing the apartment building a Santa Monica Landmark. The submitted application narrative provides responses to the specific statement questions listed in the “Background Information” section of the application in the form of “attachments.” Hence, this application is not a full historic landmark assessment report and should not be considered or reviewed as such. Nonetheless, the responses provided in the application should be well-researched, factual and accurate, and based on relatable contextual themes to justly support consideration of the property as an eligible Santa Monica Landmark. The following peer review comments align with the narrative responses given to the specific statement questions listed in the “Background Information” section of the submitted application form.

- *Description of site or structure, note any major alterations and dates of alterations*

The response to this statement is presented as Attachment A of the GPA application. In reviewing Attachment A, the provided descriptive narrative of the structure is basically adequate though there are some misstated, omitted, or unclarified statements (i.e. are there 25 or 29 units, what was the valued construction cost, how many families were initially accommodated, how many parking spaces were initially provided, etc.).

The discussion regarding prior alterations made to the property is limited and presented as listed facts. In consideration of the damage sustained from the 1994 Northridge earthquake and the associated repairs conducted following the earthquake and City emergency assessment of the property deferring the reader to the building permits provided in the application as Attachment E is insufficient. As part of the alteration history a narrative should be crafted that clearly identifies and explains what changes have been made to the building over the years and how this work did or did not affect its architectural character and qualities of historical integrity (was the work in-kind, etc.). In addition, work completed under the early permits was not included in the alteration narrative. Reference that the building is in overall good condition is also not clarified or differentiated in terms of integrity or physical condition. Much information about the prior alterations made to property can be gleaned from reading and understanding the permit history (interpreting the permit history), particularly as it refers to the damage and work associated with the Northridge earthquake. In addition, more research and/or physical investigation into the provenance of the sculptural

ornamentation affixed to the front façade should also be conducted to determine, at a minimum, if it dates to the building’s construction period (period of significance) or later.

In general, it is recommended that the description narrative, particularly the alteration history, be reviewed and verified; thoroughly researched; clarified and corrected, as necessary; and further expanded and explained as part of the narrative for this portion of the application.

- *Statement of architectural significance*

The response to the “statement of architectural significance” is presented as Attachment B in the application. In reviewing Attachment B, the narrative provides biographical information on architect Kenneth N. Lind, a summary of his education and experience, and discussion of his known work in Southern California, including Santa Monica. The assessment concludes that the subject property is eligible for City landmark listing under Criterion 5, as a representative work of notable architect Kenneth N. Lind (SMMC 9.56.100(A)(5)).

Besides having some misstated, erroneous statements in the narrative, the primary questionable point of consideration is whether the subject property is a significant or representative example of work by notable architect Kenneth N. Lind. OAC concurs that Lind was a recognized, prominent practitioner of the Mid-Century Modern style in the Los Angeles region, particularly in the late 1940s and 1950s. However, upon conducting additional research on the architect and his body of work as part of the peer review process, the 621 San Vicente Boulevard property appears to lack the full integrated realization of the style associated with Lind’s well-known professional portfolio. The subject building exhibits the character-defining features of the Stucco Box Apartment, a popular building form of the late 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, with its multi-story monolithic rectangular form, flat stucco walls, aluminum framed sliders, open balconies with sliding glass doors, and integrated parking but with Mid-Century Modern ornamentation applied only to the front (south) façade. It is an example of a highly common property type along San Vicente Boulevard and elsewhere in the City. These large apartment buildings that filled the full depth of the lot were inexpensive to construct, expedient to erect, and were popular to build by developers and investors who specialized in high-density housing projects of the post-World War II era.

Architect Kenneth N. Lind’s known multi-family residential work in Santa Monica includes, as mentioned in the Attachment B narrative, 717 9th Street (1947), 130 Alta Avenue (1955), and 633 Ocean Avenue (1956). These properties are highly representative of Lind’s Mid-Century Modern work and were previously identified under prior city-sponsored survey assessments as individually eligible for local landmark listing (OHP status code 5S3). The paragraph discussing Lind’s other known residential work in Santa Monica does not discuss in sufficient detail the architectural design aspects of those properties in comparison to the subject property or which properties, if any, best represent Lind’s overall theory of Modern design. Much of the paragraph is confusing in content and explanation, and should be reviewed and rewritten for clarity and accuracy.

In another paragraph in Attachment B, the principle work (according to Lind himself in his 1970 AIA American Architect Directory biographical paragraph) listed as the Penthouse Apartment Project at 101 Ocean Avenue is actually located in Los Angeles (Santa Monica did not approve the project as it would block views of the ocean from Inspiration Point). In the following paragraph it briefly discusses this project and that it was developed by Lind with Sarah Jane Lapin. Of interesting note here, is that Lapin and Lind were married years later in 1973.

The subject property was first identified in the ICF completed 2010 citywide historic resources inventory update and was assigned an OHP status code rating of 6L (determined ineligible for local listing or designation, may warrant special consideration in local planning). In 2015, as part of the survey work completed for the San Vicente Courtyard Apartments Historic District assessment, the property was incorrectly listed as being previously surveyed and evaluated with a 5D3 OHP status code assigned.² It was also identified as a non-contributor to the district because of non-related context and themes and built outside the district's period of significance (1937-1956), but was ultimately removed from the district when its boundaries were redrawn and reduced in the final phase of the survey assessment work. Nonetheless, the final version of the San Vicente Courtyard Apartments Historic District assessment identified the subject property and recommended that that "it appears eligible against Santa Monica Landmark criteria as an excellent example of the Mid-Century Modern style."³ Under the most recent survey update work from 2018, the 621 San Vicente Boulevard property was not identified, recorded, or evaluated for historical significance. The scope of work for the 2018 survey update included assessing all of the properties within the entire city boundary. Properties assessed under the survey update were recorded in spreadsheets that were identified as either individual resources or district resources. Because of cost constraints and schedule, typical inventory forms (DPR 523 forms) were not completed for any of the properties assessed under this survey effort. With the recommendation for eligibility in the 2015 San Vicente Courtyard Apartments Historic District Assessment and the prior evaluation conclusions of ineligibility from 2010 and 2018, there appears to be a conflict of significance findings.

The current assessment narrative provided as Attachment B in the landmark application does not adequately place the property in proper context and does not evaluate it accordingly to determine if it should be considered a significant or representative example of work either based on its own architectural merit or by notable architect Kenneth N. Lind. Therefore, at this time with the information provided in the submitted landmark application, it is inconclusive to determine if the property is eligible for City Landmark designation. From reviewing the submitted landmark application and the counter-evidence collected and reviewed on the architect and subject property conducted during the peer review process the 621 San Vicente Boulevard property does not currently appear to satisfy the City's Landmark Criterion 5 for being a significant or representative example of the work of a notable builder, designer, or architect.

Some of the misstated statements that should be addressed in the Attachment B narrative include the reference to Kenneth N. Lind having been a designer at Production Line Structures in 1943. Lind was actually vice president of the company and in charge of production, which was located adjacent his architectural office on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles. His partner in the prefabricated house business was C. Henning Vagtberg, a commercial and residential building contractor who acted as president of the business and the purchasing agent. The design award Lind received in 1947 was for his prefabricated, modular house design, which he called the California Cabin. Reference to the award and the prefabricated ranch style house design was not only in *Life* magazine, but also in *Progressive Architecture* (1947), *The Architectural Forum* (1947), and *Everyday Art Quarterly* (1947), among other publications. Interestingly, the production plant for the prefab houses was located at 1620 14th Street in Santa Monica.

² *Architectural Resources Group, Inc. San Vicente Courtyard Apartments Historic District Assessment, Santa Monica, CA 90402 (Santa Monica, CA: City of Santa Monica Planning & Community Development Department, October 20, 2015), p. 3.; previously surveyed and evaluated under the 2010 citywide historic resources inventory update completed by ICF.*

³ *Ibid*, p. 25.

As the property currently appears ineligible for listing as a Santa Monica Landmark the identification of character-defining features itemized in the application become irrelevant.

- *Statement of historic importance*

The statement of historic importance field is identified as not applicable (N/A) in the landmark application. Therefore, a peer review of this section of the application was not conducted.

- *Person(s) of historic importance*

The person(s) of historic importance statement field is noted as not applicable (N/A) in the landmark application. Therefore, a peer review of this section of the application was not conducted.

- *Statement of other significance*

The statement of other significance field was identified as not applicable (N/A) in the landmark application. Therefore, a peer review of this section of the application was not conducted.

- *Bibliography*

The bibliography information is presented as Attachment C in the application. The citation of references and supporting documents included in the GPA prepared landmark application are very limited. The application also includes photographs of the subject property (Attachment D) and all of the property's building permits (Attachment E). The application does not include any supporting historical references, newspaper or magazine articles, historical photographs or aerial pictures, or other relevant primary and secondary sources to further support the historical narrative and fully justify the significance finding of the property under Santa Monica Landmark *Criterion 5* (a significant or a representative example of the work or product of a notable builder, designer, or architect).

Conclusion

In reviewing the GPA prepared landmark application the material presented lacks sufficient evidence and clear persuasive arguments to currently support the landmark designation of the 621 San Vicente Boulevard property. Because of inadequate evidence, lack of thorough research, and erroneously cited information provided in the landmark application as well as from counter-evidence discovered during the peer review process, the subject property does not appear to be a significant or representative example of work completed by a notable architect or designer. At this time, the property does not clearly satisfy Santa Monica Landmark Criterion 5 (SMMC 9.56.100(A) for which it is currently under consideration.

ATTACHMENT A:

*“City of Santa Monica – City Planning Division, Designation Application (Landmark)
621 San Vicente Boulevard, Santa Monica, CA 90402
(prepared by GPA Consulting, submitted date April 27, 2020)”*

[UNDER SEPARATE COVER]