

WILLIAM MELLENTHIN BIRDHOUSE APARTMENTS

5922 – 5930 N. Buffalo

CHC-2024-6156-HCM

ENV-2024-6157-CE

FINDINGS

- The William Mellenthin Birdhouse Apartments "embodies the distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period, or method of construction," and "represents a notable work of a master designer, builder, or architect whose individual genius influenced his or her age" as a rare and excellent example of a Mid-century, one-story court in the Traditional Ranch architectural style designed and constructed by master builder William Mellenthin.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The William Mellenthin Birdhouse Apartments meets one of the Historic-Cultural Monument criteria.

The subject property "embodies the distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period, or method of construction," and "represents a notable work of a master designer, builder, or architect whose individual genius influenced his or her age" as a rare and excellent example of a Mid-century, onestory court in the Traditional Ranch architectural style designed and constructed by master builder William Mellenthin.

Stemming from the design of bungalow courts in Southern California, courtyard apartments were first built in the 1910s and continued to evolve in form and style through the 1960s. The 1950s and 1960s marked a significant shift in the development of courtyard housing complexes. This postwar period witnessed a new boom in apartment construction and land values typically dictated higher densities, with buildings sometimes reaching three stories in height, and frequently developed on two or more residential lots. However, at this same time another type of courtyard housing emerged– the Midcentury, one-story court–which, as exemplified by the subject property, offered a more modest, lowerdensity alternative to the typical courtyard housing developments. As demonstrated by the subject property, the one-story courts have a single-story configuration and a limited number of units, typically three to five attached units per building arranged in a linear or L-shaped plan. Mid-century, one-story courts, like the subject property, are composed of a pair of residential buildings facing each other, creating a minimal common space between the two structures that may be landscaped or paved, or accommodate a driveway leading to detached garages at the rear of the site. This configuration also provides each unit direct access to the outdoors not found in high-density multi-family housing types. As exemplified by the subject property, one-story courts were designed in modest versions of popular residential architectural styles of the period, including Streamline Moderne, Minimal Traditional, and Traditional/California Ranch and were mostly builder designed, not employing an architect. Midcentury, one-story courts never experienced widespread popularity as a stand-alone residential development type; however, they were a critical component of early planned, postwar, suburban developments in Los Angeles.

SurveyLA, Los Angeles's citywide historic resources survey, established eligibility standards and integrity considerations for evaluating Mid-century, one-story courts in Los Angeles as follow:

Eligibility Standards

- One story in height
- An excellent example of the type
- Was constructed during the period of significance
- Represents an intact court plan from the period of construction

Integrity Considerations

- Should retain integrity of Location, Design, Materials, Setting (must retain the relationship between the units and the common area), and Feeling
- Some original materials may have been altered or removed
- Replacement of some windows may be acceptable if the openings have not been changed or resized
- Security bars may have been added
- Original landscaping may have been altered or removed
- Surrounding buildings and land uses may have changed
- Mid-century one-story courts are relatively rare, therefore a greater degree of alteration or fewer character-defining features may be acceptable
- Where this property type is associated with an adjacent single-family residential neighborhood, it may also be significant under the Postwar Suburbanization theme; indicators include several examples in a row situated along a major arterial street
- Where this property type is situated within a grouping of multi-family residences, it may also be significant as a contributor to a multi-family residential district. A grouping may be composed of a single property type or a variety of types

There are only approximately 15 Mid-century, one-story courts across the city that were identified as eligible for designation in SurveyLA, none of which are designed in the Traditional Ranch architectural style.

According to the National Register Bulletin, "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation" published by the National Park Service, for evaluating a property's significance under Criterion C ("Properties may be eligible for the National Register if they...represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction"), the term "master" is defined as: "a figure of generally recognized greatness in a field, a known craftsman of consummate skill, or an anonymous craftsman whose work is distinguishable from others by its characteristic style and quality." Based on this definition, William Mellenthin is a master builder.

Mellenthin is recognized for the proliferation and quality of residential buildings he constructed in the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles and surrounding communities in the Traditional Ranch architectural style with his distinctive birdhouse and dovecote designs. He is also known for being very influential in the postwar residential development of Sherman Oaks. As demand for his signature birdhouse cupolas increased, other builders imitated Mellenthin's Traditional Ranch architectural style and approach, which can be seen throughout the San Fernando Valley and across Southern California. In addition to custom built residences, William Mellenthin developed large residential subdivisions, some of which were identified as potential historic districts within SurveyLA, including the Ethel Avenue-Otsego Street Residential Historic District; the Hidden Woods Residential Historic District; the Longridge Avenue-Atoll Avenue Residential Historic District; and the Wortser Avenue-Ethel Avenue Residential Historic District. These potential historic districts were identified as being significant as intact 1950s subdivisions developed by notable Valley developer William Mellenthin.

The guidelines in the above-referenced National Register Bulletin for applying National Register Criterion C (significance as the work of a master) notes that, “The property must express a particular phase in the development of the master’s career, an aspect of his or her work, or a particular idea or theme in his or her craft.”

While Mellenthin constructed over 3,000 known buildings –primarily single-family and some multifamily–across the Los Angeles area, the subject property is the only known extant example of a courtyard apartment complex designed by Mellenthin featuring his distinctive Traditional Ranch style design with dovescotes.

Although the subject property has experienced some exterior and interior alterations, the subject property retains a high level of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association to convey its significance.

CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT (“CEQA”) FINDINGS

State of California CEQA Guidelines, Article 19, Section 15308, Class 8 *“consists of actions taken by regulatory agencies, as authorized by state or local ordinance, to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of the environment where the regulatory process involves procedures for protection of the environment.”*

State of California CEQA Guidelines Article 19, Section 15331, Class 31 *“consists of projects limited to maintenance, repair, stabilization, rehabilitation, restoration, preservation, conservation or reconstruction of historical resources in a manner consistent with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing Historic buildings.”*

The designation of the William Mellenthin Birdhouse Apartments as an Historic-Cultural Monument in accordance with Chapter 9, Article 1, of The City of Los Angeles Administrative Code (“LAAC”) will ensure that future construction activities involving the subject property are regulated in accordance with Section 22.171.14 of the LAAC. The purpose of the designation is to prevent significant impacts to an Historic-Cultural Monument through the application of the standards set forth in the LAAC. Without the regulation imposed by way of the pending designation, the historic significance and integrity of the subject property could be lost through incompatible alterations and new construction and the demolition of an irreplaceable historic site/open space. The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation are expressly incorporated into the LAAC and provide standards concerning the historically appropriate construction activities which will ensure the continued preservation of the subject property.

The City of Los Angeles has determined based on the whole of the administrative record, that substantial evidence supports that the Project is exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section Article 19, Section 15308, Class 8 and Class 31, and none of the exceptions to a categorical exemption pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2 applies. The project was found to be exempt based on the following:

The use of Categorical Exemption Class 8 in connection with the proposed designation is consistent with the goals of maintaining, restoring, enhancing, and protecting the environment through the imposition of regulations designed to prevent the degradation of Historic-Cultural Monuments.

The use of Categorical Exemption Class 31 in connection with the proposed designation is consistent with the goals relating to the preservation, rehabilitation, restoration and reconstruction of historic buildings and sites in a manner consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

Categorical Exemption ENV-2024-6157-CE was prepared on November 15, 2024.