

Agenda Report

November 9, 2020

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council
FROM: Planning & Community Development Department
SUBJECT: DESIGNATION OF THE HOUSE AT 989 SOUTH EL MOLINO AVENUE AS A LANDMARK

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the City Council:

1. Find that the designation of a historic resource is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 15308 Class 8 of the CEQA Guidelines pertaining to Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment and that there are no features that distinguish this project from others in the exempt class; therefore, there are no unusual circumstances;
2. Find that main residence, detached garage and site features at 989 South El Molino Avenue meet landmark designation Criterion C in Pasadena Municipal Code (P.M.C) Section 17.62.040(C)(2)(c) because they embody the distinctive characteristics of a locally significant property type, architectural style and period. The building and accessory structures are a locally significant, intact examples of a single-family residence property type built in the Craftsman style, and retain integrity;
3. Adopt the attached resolution approving a Declaration of Landmark Designation for 989 South El Molino Avenue, Pasadena, California;
4. Authorize the Mayor to execute the attached Declaration of Landmark Designation for 989 South El Molino Avenue, Pasadena, California; and
5. Direct the City Clerk to record the declaration with the Los Angeles County Recorder.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION:

At its regular meeting of August 28, 2020, the Historic Preservation Commission recommended that the City Council approve the designation of the house, garage and

site features at 989 El Molino Avenue as a Landmark under Criterion “C” of PMC Section 17.62.040.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The house, garage and site features at 989 South El Molino Avenue qualify for designation as a Landmark under Criterion “C” because they embody the distinctive characteristics of a locally significant property type, architectural style and period. The building and accessory structures are locally significant, intact examples of a single-family property type built in the Craftsman style, designed by locally significant architect William F. Thompson, and retains integrity.

BACKGROUND:

On June 3, 2020, property owners Thomas and Joan Barrera submitted an application to designate 989 South El Molino Avenue as a Landmark. City staff evaluated the property according to the criteria in Title 17 of the P.M.C. and determined that the building qualifies for designation as a landmark.

Property Data

- Address: 989 South El Molino Avenue, Pasadena
- Location: West side of South El Molino Avenue, south of Alpine Street
- Date of Construction Completion: 1908 (source: Original Building Permit)
- Original Architect: William F. Thompson (source: Original Building Permit)
- Original Builder: S.W. Upton (Source: Original Building Permit)
- Original / Present Use: Single-family residence
- Property size: 12,569 square-feet (source: County Assessor)
- Building size: 3,511 square-feet (source: County Assessor)

Site

The property is located on a generally rectangular shaped, flat 12,569 square-foot lot on the west side of South El Molino Avenue, south of Alpine Street. The site includes the main house, a garage, and designed landscape features such as a freestanding pergola made of brick and wood. The property is located on a tree-lined street in the Madison Heights neighborhood, and is among several other exemplary Arts and Crafts period residences, including other designated Landmarks.

Exterior Features of the Building

In a report prepared by Vanessa Withers of Heritage Preservation Partners, the house is described as follows:

“The house has an L-shaped plan, low-pitched side-gabled roof of multiple planes with deep overhanging eaves, exposed roof rafters, piers of brick continuing to ground level

without break at level of porch floor, front porch, and an exterior clad with irregular width wood shingles/shake. The home features many hallmark characteristics of the style, including: multi-level low-pitched and gabled roofs, bands of leaded glass casement windows, covered porches and balconies, wood elements, decorative iron sconces.

A short set of brick stairs at the sidewalk connect to the front walkway, which leads to the front porch. The front porch is an important and robust character-defining feature; the porch occupies the bulk of the front elevation with a second story and balcony above, the short leg of the “L” of the building’s plan stretches in a single-story to the north – given its own architectural importance by a band of leaded glass casement windows and a clinker brick chimney at the end. The porch’s features include hefty brick piers that are connected to a low wall on the first story and then extend up through the roof line to form the corners of the balcony above; the balcony above has a wide wood slat balustrade as a connection between the brick piers. The property is entered through a wide paneled oak door with three vertical recessed panels and a horizontal glass lite at the top. The residence’s L-shaped plan is executed so that the bulk of the building extends back from the southern front porch portion and then the single-story wing extends lightly to the north. The crook of this L is separated from the rest of the lot as a designed landscape area that is defined by brick walls, a pergola structure, and a pool sheltered by the brick enclosure.”

The full property description is included in this report as part of Attachment B.

Documented Changes to the Property:

The property has undergone few major exterior changes since it was originally built in 1908. In March of 1935, a sleeping porch at the rear of the second floor was converted into two bathrooms and a small sun porch, and an addition was made to the garage; these alterations are early alterations to secondary elevations and an accessory building and are consistent with the original architectural style. In 1957, sliding glass doors were added to the living room, which is on a secondary elevation. These doors are not consistent with overall architectural style, but are not publicly visible and the alteration can be reversed.

Current Conditions, Use, and Proposed Plans:

The exterior of the building is currently in good condition and it is used as a single-family residence. The property has also been identified as a contributor to the Eligible Madison Heights Landmark District. No significant changes to the property are proposed at this time. However, the owner has also concurrently applied for a Mills Act Historic Property Contract, which includes a future work program with an extensive list of rehabilitation and maintenance projects.

Historical Overview

History of the Neighborhood & Site

As described in a 1997 Pasadena Heritage Walking Tour script, the property was originally part of the Rancho San Pasqual. The early history of Pasadena is concerned mainly with two large tracts of land, one of which included the Indiana Colony west of Fair Oaks Avenue and Don Benito Wilson's Lake Vineyard Ranch, east from Fair Oaks to about Wilson Avenue. Wilson decided to subdivide his ranch in 1876 and he laid out the streets, one of which he named El Molino for the mill of the San Gabriel Mission. The Madison Avenue Heights tract, as it was originally called, was not surveyed into lots until 1905. By 1907, although 63 lots had been sold, only one house had been built. When this house was built in 1908, there was still a lot of open land around it. It was between about 1910 and 1916 that the neighborhood really became built-up. There are a few later homes but the majority of building took place in a relatively short period of time. In a number of cases, several homes were built by the same owner or same firm. These were generally family homes of professional people. Interestingly, a number of the architects and contractors who worked in this neighborhood also lived here, at least for a period of time. The neighborhood is full of wonderful examples of the works of master architects. At one time all the houses in the neighborhood had stones at the foot of their driveways inscribed with the house number. The stone for this house survives, but it has been moved up next to the front path.

The Arts & Crafts Period

The Arts & Crafts movement began in England around the year 1860 as a response to industrialization and mass production of goods. Its focus was one of promoting manual craftsmanship rather than machine production, which was believed to result in a harmonious society where producers and consumers could take pride in their work and, thereby, enhance their lives. Works were simple and designed to show evidence of construction methods. William Morris is widely cited as being the movement's primary proponent in England, with his Red House being one of the earliest pieces of English Arts & Crafts architecture. The movement included many other forms of craft including printmaking, decorative objects, wallpaper, textiles, furniture and stained glass.

In America, Elbert Hubbard and Gustav Stickley, who both organized Arts & Crafts guilds, were the movement's primary proponents. Stickley's magazine 'The Craftsman' was influential in spreading the ideals of the movement throughout the country. The American Arts & Crafts architectural movement was centered in three primary locations: Oak Park, Illinois, Berkeley and Pasadena, each drawing on local materials. In Pasadena, the primary architectural tenet of the movement was to enhance the connection between house and landscape. This was achieved through large roofed front porches, use of wood exterior cladding materials and other locally available materials such as stones from the Arroyo Seco, elimination of ornament, and planning of the house around natural features of the site (contours, trees, etc.). Architectural details were frequently handcrafted by local artisans.

Character-Defining Features

The Craftsman style Arts and Crafts period house has the following character-defining features, as described in “Residential Architecture of Pasadena, CA 1895-1918: The Influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement” (1998):

- Irregularly shaped plan
- Larger than one story, or one-and-one-half-story bungalow
- Horizontal lines
- Low-pitched gabled roofs with wood or composition shingles and deep overhangs
- Walls are covered with over-all wooden shingles
- Wide eaves with exposed rafters
- Large single-gable or shed dormers may break the street oriented roof plane
- Full-width front porches, sometimes limited to entry area only, supported by battered or straight-sided stone or wooden columns or piers
- Entrance porch may be recessed or may project from the dwelling
- Foundations, chimneys and retaining walls of Arroyo stone
- Painted or stained brown or dark green

Character-defining features are those visual aspects and physical features or elements constructed during the property’s period of significance that give the building its character. In general, a property that retains its character-defining features continues to convey its significance and therefore retains integrity as an historic resource. Removal or alteration of just one character-defining feature does not necessarily alter the integrity of an historic resource. Impacts to historic integrity can result from a single major change or from many incremental changes over time.

William F. Thompson (1858-1948)

The house at 989 South El Molino Avenue was designed by William F. Thompson, who moved to Southern California from St. Paul, Minnesota in 1905. He was active in L.A. from 1905-1922 and designed several significant houses in Pasadena, including four mansions for the Merritt family on and around South Orange Grove Boulevard in 1905 as well as the individually Landmarked house at 969 South Madison Avenue (1909). Records indicate that Thompson may have moved to the area specifically to serve as the Merritt family architect. A biography submitted with the application states:

“William Thompson exhibited great architectural skill in all the projects he undertook. His flexibility in style is evident in the Merritt mansions, which ranged from classic Italian to rustic Craftsman. Mr. Thompson’s designs actively attempted to integrate the interior of the home with the beauty of the area’s natural surroundings. His designs often included pergolas, verandas with exterior fireplaces, sleeping porches and roof gardens--what we would call a “total design concept” today. The idea of creating exterior elements which invited outdoor

entertainment or living characterized his work and no doubt appealed to his clients, many of whom had lived in the cold regions of the east.”

A complete biography, prepared by Tim Gregory, can be found in Attachment B.

S.W. Upton (1874-1914)

Samuel Warren Upton was a prolific local builder responsible for a significant number of residential buildings in Pasadena, many of which have been designated as individual Landmarks or are contributors to eligible and designated Landmark and Historic Districts. A brief biography for S.W. Upton, prepared by Tim Gregory, may also be found in Attachment B.

ANALYSIS:

The building at 989 South El Molino Avenue is eligible for designation as a landmark under Criterion C of PMC Section 17.62.040.C.2, which states:

[The property] embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, architectural style, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose work is of significance to the City or, to the region or possesses artistic values of significance to the City or to the region.

Generally, in order to qualify under Criterion C, a property type would display most of the character-defining features of its style. It must retain high integrity of design, materials and workmanship that convey its period of construction. While most buildings undergo alteration over time, these alterations should not significantly change the historic appearance of the building.

The registration requirements in the City’s 1998 study of the Arts & Crafts period state:

There are many Arts and Crafts period dwellings in Pasadena, to qualify [for designation] under Criterion C, the eligible property must exemplify the values of design, craftsmanship, and materials, which embody the philosophy, and practice of the Arts and Crafts movement. The property should comprise the distinguishing features of the associated property type which includes the...California Arts & Crafts Period House...They must also have a high degree of integrity of design, materials, workmanship and setting.

Under Criterion C, the building at 989 South El Molino is significant because it is a locally significant, intact example of a one and a half story Craftsman style house, designed by William F. Thompson. At over 3,000 square feet in size, the house is not a bungalow and can comfortably be described as a strong example of a one-and-half-story Arts & Crafts period house. It embodies all of the values of the movement and has all of the distinguishing features of the property type, as cited in the Historical Overview of the Arts & Crafts period beginning on page four of this report. Influence of the Arts &

Crafts movement is evident in the detailing of the house, including the wood-shingle exterior cladding, front porch, double gabled design and extensive use of clinker brick. It has architectural integrity (its ability to demonstrate why it is significant) through its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and feeling, as follows:

- **Location**: The building and other site features are in their original locations.
- **Design**: The building retains the majority of its form, plan, space, structure, and style, including its massing, clinker brick, original fenestration and exterior materials, roof form, entryway interior woodwork.
- **Setting**: The high style residential neighborhood of this block of El Molino Avenue is intact.
- **Materials**: The building retains a majority of its original exterior materials.
- **Workmanship**: The building retains the majority of its exterior materials and features that reflect the craftsmanship of the Arts & Crafts period, and therefore retains integrity of workmanship.
- **Feeling**: The property clearly expresses the characteristics of the Arts & Crafts period.
- **Association**: The property at 989 South El Molino Avenue retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and feeling, and therefore continues to convey its association with the Arts & Crafts Period.

Based on the above, the property retains sufficient integrity to qualify for designation as a landmark under Criterion C. The building retains all of its original character-defining features, building height, massing, fenestration, exterior materials and extensive clinker brick. All alterations to the building have been to non-primary elevations and, except for the sliding doors, are compatible with the architectural style.

Contributing features to this designation include the main house, detached garage, pergola, brick walls and wooden gates.

COUNCIL POLICY CONSIDERATION:

The General Plan Land Use Element – Guiding Principle 2: “Pasadena’s historic resources will be preserved. Citywide, new development will be in harmony with and enhance Pasadena’s unique character and sense of place. New construction that could affect the integrity of historic resources will be compatible with, and differentiated from, the existing resource;” and Goal 8: “Preservation and enhancement of Pasadena’s cultural and historic buildings, landscapes, streets and districts as valued assets and important representations of its past and a source of community identity, and social, ecological, and economic vitality.”

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

The proposed designation qualifies for a categorical exemption pursuant to Section 15308, Class 8 of the CEQA Guidelines. Class 8 exemptions 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 the protection of the environment.

FISCAL IMPACT:

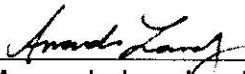
In some instances, owners of designated historic properties may apply to the City for a Historic Property Contract (Mills Act), which allows an alternative and often lower property tax assessment. The City Council reviewed the projected loss of property tax revenue from this program in 2002 when it adopted the local Mills Act ordinance. As a result of this program, the reduced property tax amount which comes out of the City's local share amount from the State, is a small fraction of the City's overall property tax revenue.

Respectfully submitted,



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STEVE MERMELL
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Attachments (4):

- A. Vicinity Map
- B. Application & Historical Documentation (Building Description Blank; Sanborn Map)
- C. Current Photographs
- D. Effects of Historic Designation