

# Agenda Report

April 12, 2010

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Council  
**FROM:** Planning & Development Department  
**SUBJECT: DESIGNATION OF 275 ROBINCROFT DRIVE AS A LANDMARK**

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

It is recommended that the City Council:

1. Acknowledge that the designation of a historic resource is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA Guidelines §15308: Class 8 - Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment);
2. Find that the property at 275 Robincroft Drive is significant under Criterion "C" for designation as a landmark (P.M.C. §17.52.40) because it is a locally significant example of a castellated Gothic-Revival villa from the turn of the twentieth century;
3. Approve the designation of the property at 275 Robincroft Drive as a landmark;
4. Adopt the attached resolution approving a Declaration of Landmark Designation for 275 Robincroft Drive, Pasadena, California;
5. Authorize the Mayor to execute the attached Declaration of Landmark Designation for 275 Robincroft Drive, Pasadena, California; and
6. Direct the City Clerk to record the declaration with the Los Angeles County Recorder.

## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION:**

On Tuesday, February 15, 2010, the Historic Preservation Commission recommended that the City Council approve the designation of 275 Robincroft Drive as a landmark under criterion C of PMC §17.62.040.

## **COUNCIL POLICY CONSIDERATION:**

The General Plan – Objective 6: Promote preservation of historically and architecturally significant buildings and revitalization of traditional neighborhoods and commercial areas.

**BACKGROUND:**

On October 8, 2009, five local residents, who are not the property owners, submitted an application for designation of 275 Robincroft Drive as a landmark. The staff notified the property owner (Renato and Felicidad Ferrer), evaluated the property according to the landmark criteria in Title 17 of the P.M.C., and determined that it qualifies for designation. To date, the owners have not communicated a position in favor or in opposition to the landmark designation.

**Description:**

Built in 1903,<sup>1</sup> Robincroft is an exotic, two-story, 7,030 square-foot mansion on the north side of Robincroft Drive, between Castile Lane and N. Garfield Avenue. An irregular rectangle in plan, the building has a three-story octagonal tower at its east end connected to the main house by a second-story deck and third-story bridge. It is constructed of reinforced concrete (according to Sanborn map, assessor's records, and early newspaper accounts) with a granite foundation and has an exterior coating of cement plaster. It is at the crest of a hill, where, to the north, it has impressive views of the San Gabriel Mountains, and, to the south, it aligns on axis with the dome of City Hall. The front elevation is set back 70 feet from a parking lot and 130 feet from the street. The grounds have several mature trees. The property has been used in recent years for social gatherings and fundraisers.

The mansion is the only example in Pasadena—and one of a small number in California—of a castellated Gothic-Revival villa, a rarity in Southern California. Among its distinctive architectural features are the pointed-arch windows in the tower, the octagonal form of the tower, two half-octagonal front bays, and the flat overhanging roof supported by knee braces.

The Pasadena Star publication for New Year's Day in 1910 describes "Pasadena's famous castle" as a "magnificent home," which "can be seen for many miles in all directions as it stands upon the highest point within the city limits [at that time]." It further describes the "beautiful towers...[that are] one of the sights which first attract visitors upon approaching the city by train or other vehicle....In the beautiful garden...are contained over a hundred varieties of rare and beautiful shrubs and trees...surrounded on all sides by fine streets...and a splendid grove of...California oranges."<sup>2</sup>

This house was constructed for William S. Fletcher (1857-1913), known as the "Bee King" (or "Honey King") of southern California for his cultivation of bees.

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<sup>1</sup> Pasadena Star, Feb. 18, 1903; Pasadena News, Feb. 27, 1903; Pasadena Daily News, Jan. 25, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> Pasadena Star, Jan. 1, 1910.

Fletcher acquired an 11-acre site, known as Harrison Heights, from the estate of W. W. Harrison. He commissioned construction of an “octagonal shaped castle” and expanded the “highly cultivated grounds” to 22 acres, when he sold the property in 1907.<sup>1</sup> Newspaper accounts record that the design of the “medieval” “palatial dwelling” stemmed from Fletcher’s imagination and from an unidentified “old castle” in Spain. They also refer to an unspecified architect. At the time of the 1907 sale, the Pasadena Daily News reported that the grounds “contain some of the rarest and most beautiful botanical specimens known to the Southern California landscape” and an “artificial lake.”<sup>2</sup> By 1913, however, the property had been exchanged in “several large realty deals” and had been vacant “for years.”<sup>3</sup> Later that year, the Pasadena Star described the “neglected” condition of the property and how “mischievous boys... [were] demolishing the once superbly planned and planted grounds.” Nearby residents also asked that the City acquire the site as a library and social center.<sup>4</sup> In 1920, when the Robinson family acquired the site, the Pasadena Evening Post described the mansion as a “long neglected show place” that was being “cleaned of weeds and rank growth.”<sup>5</sup>

The Robinson family donated the house to the Methodist Episcopal Church for use as a retirement home for Methodist clergy and missionaries. With this new use, the mansion underwent a rehabilitation to reverse 13 years of decline. Over time, cottages, group homes, apartments for people with disabilities, and an infirmary occupied the surroundings of the mansion, and the property acquired the campus-like appearance that it has today.

The mansion appears to have been used as a single-family house for a short period of time, possibly as little as three years. Curiously, too, there is conflicting information about its early history. Some recent histories (including local tour guides, brochures, and historic resource surveys) incorrectly attribute the design of the mansion to Pasadena-based architect Joseph J. Blick and cite Harrison as the original owner. These attributions rely on one newspaper source<sup>6</sup> which reported that Harrison in 1899 had intended to build a “Spanish style” house designed by Blick on the site. There is no evidence, though, that Harrison built a “Spanish style house” or the “castle,” But multiple newspaper sources identify the date of construction—1903—and the original owner—the “Bee King” William S. Fletcher. Even more confusing is the identity of the original owner, William S.

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<sup>1</sup> Pasadena Star, Feb. 18, 1903; Pasadena Daily News, Jan. 26, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> Pasadena Daily News, Jan. 25, 1907.

<sup>3</sup> Pasadena Daily News, May 27, 1913.

<sup>4</sup> Pasadena Star, July 5, 1913.

<sup>5</sup> Pasadena Evening Post, August 31, 1920.

<sup>6</sup> Pasadena News, March 30, 1899

Fletcher. Two obituaries for him—with different death dates and different life stories—appeared in local newspapers; both obituaries ascribe construction of the “castle” to the decedent.<sup>1</sup>

### **Major Exterior Alterations:**

The mansion has had major alterations including removal of the original wooden crenellations on the roofline. The crenellations were a significant character-defining feature of the mansion and imparted a Gothic/medieval appearance.<sup>2</sup> Other changes include: a small second-story addition over the porte cochere; a one-story passageway connecting the tower to the house; a small rear addition; and full restuccoing of the exterior house in what appears to be a coarser texture than the original finish. This surface treatment also covers the balcony corbels, window lintels, cornices, and the wooden knee braces supporting the overhanging roof. The perimeter fencing and gates (in ornamental steel), changes to lawn and site features, and significant reduction of original acreage are other changes to the property. The original, wood double-hung window sashes have also been replaced with colored aluminum-framed sashes. In some windows, the original transoms with horned rails were attached as a fixed grille overlaying the replacement window assemblies. The original paint scheme also highlighted ornamental features at the roofline in a darker color than the main portion of the mansion. The original entryway with an oak door and sidelights remains unchanged.

### **Analysis:**

The property at 275 Robincroft Drive is eligible for landmark designation under Criterion “C”, (§17.62.040 PMC):

(The property) embodies the distinctive characteristics of a historic resource property type, period, architectural style or method of construction, or represents the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose work is significant to the City or to the region, or that possesses high artistic values that are significant to the City or to the region.

The Gothic Revival style was most popular during the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century as part of the Romantic Movement and a fascination in literature and the arts with the medieval period. In the 1830s, architects, first in England and then in the U.S., produced ecclesiastical and residential works adapted from European architecture from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century to the 15th century. “Carpenter’s Gothic”

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<sup>1</sup> Pasadena Daily News, March 5, 1910; Pasadena Star, July 10, 1913 and July 14, 1913. The life story of the Fletcher in the 1913 obituary—e.g., “Bee King,” collector of pheasants and other birds who committed suicide--corresponds better with details in other newspaper accounts than the Fletcher in the 1910 obituary.

<sup>2</sup> Photo in Pasadena Evening Post, August 31, 1920, shows crenellations only remaining on the bridges connecting the main house to the octagonal tower.

cottages, many designed by Alexander Jackson Davis and published in pattern books, popularized the style in the United States. The only other Gothic-Revival dwelling in Pasadena is at 714 N. Mentor Avenue (1888) in Bungalow Heaven. With its construction date of 1903, Fletcher's Castle is an unusually late example of domestic Gothic-Revival design.

Robincroft retains its original hilltop location. It also retains its setting, though the open space surrounding the house has diminished over time. Over the years, other residential buildings (now used as group homes for people with disabilities and for assisted living) have encroached on the original open setting. Yet because the front lawn and mature trees on the property remain, the house retains its panoramic view of the city and mountains. The setting in combination with the design gives the property the feeling of a "castle."

Although extensively altered, the house retains sufficient architectural integrity (its ability to demonstrate why it is significant) through its design, materials, and workmanship. The distinctive arches, the two half-octagonal front bays and octagonal tower and the flat roof with bracketed cornice evoke the Gothic Revival style. The removal of the wooden crenellations at the roofline, the aluminum replacement windows, and the resurfacing the plaster diminish the integrity of design, but overall the house still has integrity because it is recognizable as a Gothic-Revival villa.

**ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

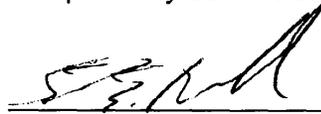
Class 8 exemptions consists of actions taken by regulatory agencies, as authorized by state or local ordinance, to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of the environment where the regulatory process involves procedures for the protection of the environment.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

Designation of this property does not affect revenues to the City. In some instances, though, owners of designated properties may apply to the City for Historic Property Contract, 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 a local Historic Property Contract (Mills Act) ordinance.

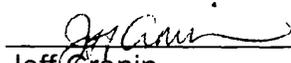
Respectfully submitted,



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STEVE MERMELL  
Assistant City Manager

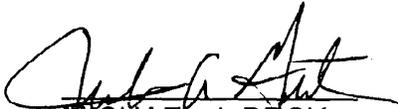
Prepared by:



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Jeff Cronin  
Principal Planner

Approved by:

  
for MICHAEL J. BECK  
City Manager

#### ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A – Map & Site Map  
Attachment B – Photograph