



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO  
**MANAGER'S REPORT**

DATE ISSUED: July 31, 2002 REPORT NO. 02-182

ATTENTION: Honorable Mayor and City Council  
Docket of August 5, 2002

SUBJECT: Appeal of the Historical Resources Board designation of the Seton Arms  
Apartments Building Facade

APPELLANT: Western Pacific Housing on behalf of the owner Irv Okovita, Seton  
Holdings, Inc.

REFERENCE: Historical Resources Board Agenda of July 26, 2001, Item #6

SUMMARY

Issue - Should the City Council approve or deny the appeal to the Historical Resources Board action to designate the Seton Arms Apartments Building Facade as a City of San Diego Historical Resource Site?

Staff Recommendation - Deny the appeal and uphold the decision of the Historical Resources Board to designate the Seton Arms Apartments Building Facade as a City of San Diego Historical Resource Site under HRB CRITERION C (Architecture).

Historical Resources Board Recommendation - Designate the original Seton Arms Apartments Building Facade as a Historical Resource Site under HRB CRITERION C (Architecture).

Other Recommendations - None.

Fiscal Impact - None.

## BACKGROUND

This item is before the City Council as an appeal of the Historical Resources Board (HRB) decision of July 26, 2001, to designate the Seton Arms Apartments Building Facade fronting Tenth Avenue as a City of San Diego Historical Resource Site (See Attachment 2). The appeal has been submitted by the developer of the proposed project, Western Pacific Housing. The property is located at 1240-44 Tenth Avenue, in the Centre City Community, Council District 2 (See Attachment 1).

### The Historical Resources Board (HRB) Review

The Seton Arms Apartments came to the Historical Resources Board (HRB) attention through the property owner's submittal in conjunction with the requirements of the Centre City Planned District Ordinance, Section 103.1904 - F-2 of the City Municipal Code. Section 103.1904 requires that a previously identified potential historical site be reviewed by the City's Historical Resources Board (HRB) prior to development approval. To date HRB staff is not aware of a specific permit proposal undergoing review for this site. The owner requested that the site not be designated and a detailed historical report dated June 2001, was provided to that effect. The site was originally identified as significant Spanish Colonial Revival Style by the "Historic Site Inventory" for the Core Subarea, prepared in 1989 for the Centre City Development Agency. The Study was prepared by the consulting Team of Marie Burke Lia/Ray Brandes, and was dated May 1989 (See Attachment 3).

At the Historical Resources Board (HRB) hearing held on July 26, 2001, the Seton Arms Apartments Site was designated as a Historical Resource Site by a vote of eight (8) votes in favor (Furlong, Iseman, McNeely, Christenson, Bishop, Riley, Sewell and Burnet ) and five (5) opposed (Sykes, Ahern, Percival, Schwartz and Sherr), based on the following factual information:

1. The owner/applicant's historical report dated June, 2001.
2. The staff report dated July 10, 2001 (Attachment 2).
3. A field check of the property by HRB members.
4. Photographs submitted by both staff and the owner/developer's historical consultant.
5. Public testimony by the owner, his consultant, architect, and developer.

## SD Municipal Code Appeal Requirements

The City of San Diego Land Development Code Section 123.0203 provides for appeals to an HRB decision to designate a site historical within ten (10) business days following the HRB decision. Said decision may be appealed by an applicant, owner or interested person. The Code requires that appeal be in writing, specifying wherein there was error in the decision of the HRB. The City Council may reject historical site designation based on:

- Factual errors in materials of information presented to the HRB
- Violations of bylaws or hearing procedures
- Presentation of new information.

Based on the Council's evaluation under the above criteria, the City Council may by resolution affirm, reverse, or modify the determination of the HRB and make written findings in support of its decision.

## Appellant Request

The appellant to the historical site designation of the Set on Arms Apartments Building Facade has submitted an appeal claiming "Factual errors in materials of information presented to the HRB," as follows:

1. *The HRB improperly designated the Seton Arms Apartments on the basis of Criterion C (Architecture).*
2. *The HRB did not properly consider the Historic Site Core Inventory Form that was prepared for this property.*
3. *HRB designated 1/4 of the building as alleged to possess the California version of Spanish Colonial Revival Architecture.*
4. *HRB erred in its designation of the building when it relied upon assertions made in the HRB Staff Report.*

## DISCUSSION

The discussion that follows addresses two key issues related to this appeal: the appellant reasons for the appeal, and the Historical Resources Board (HRB) hearing procedure per City of

San Diego Land Development Code Section 123-0203.

Appellant Reasons for Appeal

The appeal document claims that there have been "Factual errors in materials information presented to HRB" based on: A) a mistaken interpretation of the 1989 historical study; B) the facade designation no longer constituting a proper identification of the 1920's Spanish Colonial Revival Architecture; and, C) a mistaken identification of architectural style.

- A. The 1989 Historical Study (*The HRB did not properly consider the Historic Site Core Inventory Form that was prepared for this property*).

In the 1989 Historic Site Inventory of the Core area, prepared for the Centre City Development Corporation (CCDC) the Seton Arms Apartments Building/site is identified with the following historical significance description: "*Demonstrating many elements of the Spanish Colonial Revival style, this apartment building is considered historically significant*". The 1989 study was prepared by the Office of Marie B. Lia/Ray Brandes Team and listed the main theme of the historical resource to be "Architecture" as a Spanish Colonial Revival structure of the 1920's. (See Attachment 3). A subsequent historical report commissioned by the present owner and dated June 2001, was also prepared by Dr. Ray Brandes. In this more recent report the conclusion is reached that the Seton Arms is not historically or architecturally significant. HRB disagreed with the later 2001 study which identified the site as not significant, and instead agreed with the 1989 study that identified the same building as a significant Spanish Colonial Revival Style historical resource.

- B. The Facade Designation (*HRB designated 1/4 of the building as alleged to possess the California version of Spanish Colonial Revival Architecture*)

The appellant notes that HRB's effort to limit the extent of its designation to only that portion of the building that exhibits the best features of the Spanish Colonial Revival, invalidates the designation by not preserving the whole building as is.

The Seton Arms was built in 1928 as an apartment building by the

American Building and Investment Corporation which started in San Diego in 1926. Advertisements announce this firm's specialization in "Buildings, Financing, Designing, Insurance, Real Estate and Investments." The Building has been operating as an apartment house since its construction. A number of minor modifications have been made over the years, but the building maintains much of its original fabric and feeling.

The key architectural fabric reflective of the California version of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture is the building's front facade facing Tenth Avenue. Behind the first 20 feet of the facade, the building has no architectural features of special note, being rather plain and "functional" looking. During deliberations, HRB concluded that it could be possible for the Tenth Avenue front facade to be integrated onto the much larger new building complex desired by the applicant. By doing this, a win-win option could be achieved, maintaining the special features of the original Tenth Avenue facade and building behind and around it. Based on this analysis, HRB specifically designated a 50 x 20 foot section of the Tenth Avenue Facade by a vote of 8-5-0.

The HRB majority were convinced that a project with a large number of units was achievable while preserving the Tenth Avenue Facade's critical historic fabric. Staff and the HRB-Policy and Design Assistance Subcommittees have offered to work with the applicant to achieve this win/win solution, but there has been no response from the applicant. The HRB has used this integrated historic/new design approach on a number of projects. Sites such as the Oxley-Neutra House, the Monteiro Residence, The Gustafson Building, the Park Boulevard Cleaners and the Carey Crest House are a few examples of sites preserving historic fabric while accommodating a new development. HRB believes that the same solution is possible on the Seton Arms property, with the belief that if the HRB designation is upheld, the extent of economic impact on the owner/applicant will be limited to minimal structural costs.

C. The Architectural Style (*HRB erred in its designation of the building when it relied upon assertions made in the HRB Staff Report*).

The appellant identified the Seton Arms as an example of Eclectic Revival Architecture. Eclectic Revival is a term that applies to

all revival architecture that is inspired on historical styles of the past. There are Tudor, Spanish Colonial, 'American' Colonial, Mission Revival and other Revival styles. All of these styles are "eclectic" in that they are not the pure styles of the epoch and often introduce other design elements in vogue at the time of construction. These eclectic styles also adapt to the use of new materials, for example, the 1920's Spanish Colonial Revival buildings are not constructed of stone or adobe brick, they use wood framing and stucco. Historically, starting in the Renaissance period, architectural revival styles have been eclectic, borrowing from many different influences. The true Spanish Colonial architecture itself borrowed from ethnic Native American, various Regional Spanish architectural styles, Renaissance-Classic Revival, and Moslem architecture existing prior to, and during Spain's colonial period. This is what the HRB staff report described. Few architectural styles can be labeled "pure." The early Modern Movement with its "form follows function" approach that broke with all prior conventions can be considered a 'pure' style, as are the 'Gothic,' "Romanesque" and "Craftsman" styles, to name a few examples. As these styles evolved, their later expressions borrowed elements from other styles and vogues of the time to become more eclectic. That is why in 1920's California we find Spanish Colonial Revival buildings with Renaissance, Moorish, Turkish, Scotist, French, Italian and German details and influences.

After a lengthy discussion of this stylistic issue during the HRB hearing, the Board agreed with the earlier 1989 Consulting Team's assessment that the building is a good example of California-Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, as applied to a medium size apartment building. There are a number of such buildings in California, but few remain in San Diego, specifically in the Central Core of the City, which until the 1960's remained the major shopping and high density development area in San Diego (city and region). With its 24 apartments the Seton Arms building included 24 underground parking spaces, a roof terrace and solarium, and many modern conveniences, some of which are no longer in operation.

#### HRB Hearing Procedure

The Board followed established hearing procedures. Upon staff receipt of the June 2001 Consultant Report, staff reviewed this and other pertinent information, including the 1989 study, and a Staff Report was prepared. A notice of public hearing was issued

ten (10) working days prior to the HRB hearing as required by Code. The Boardmembers were issued the applicant's and staff report two weeks prior to the scheduled hearing, with access directions to the site for field checking by each Boardmember, as required. At the hearing all members of the public were provided time to address the HRB.

At the HRB public hearing the major concern of architectural significance was discussed at length. The Board (8-5-0) vote reflective (5) votes in opposition reflected Boardmember's concerns that the building would not be worth preserving in its present state, and the fact that a historic designation hearing should not address site disposition.

The appeal submitted has not identified any additional information not available at the HRB hearing of July 26, 2001.

#### CONCLUSION

It is staff's conclusion that the Seton Arms Apartments is an architecturally significant structure under HRB CRITERION C (Architecture). In particular the front facade of the building is reflective of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century California version of the Spanish Colonial Revival architecture. It provides a visual and timely link to the Spanish Colonial Revival buildings of Balboa Park (just up the hill), buildings constructed in 1915, that inspired the Spanish Colonial Revival Style of 1920's California architecture, and the 1928 Seton Arms Apartments design.

If the historic designation is upheld the owner may still proceed with a new project on the site that could include preservation of all or part of the building's fabric, use of the Historic Building Code, and design flexibility to meet the requirements of U. S. Secretary of Interior's Standards. HRB has been very effective in working with applicants to assist in the preservation of historically designated structures, and if the HRB designation prevails, HRB and its staff will ably assist the owner in developing an outstanding "win-win" project.

Finally, in reviewing the appeal information submitted by the developer, staff has not identified any new information which could be now considered by the City Council and would warrant a reversal of the HRB designation.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Approve the appeal, overturn the Historical Resources Board action and require that a Historic Building Documentation Project be prepared by the applicant. This alternative would result in the destruction of an important architectural resource, but the preparation of the Historic Building Documentation in the form of photos, plans, elevations and sections of the existing building, would allow the City to preserve the memory of the building and make it available to future generations of San Diegans and others, to study.
2. Approve the appeal and overturn the Historical Resources Board action. This alternative would result in the destruction of an important architectural resource for the City of San Diego, and the loss of its memory.

Respectfully Submitted,

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S. Gail Goldberg, AICP  
Planning Director

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Approved: P. Lamont Ewell  
Assistant City  
Manager

GOLDBERG/ALA

Note: The attachments are not available in electronic format. A copy is available for review in the Office of the City Clerk.

Attachments: 1. Location Map  
2. Site Photos  
3. 1989 Centre City Core Subarea Seton Arms inventory and NPS rating  
4. HRB Staff Report  
5. Applicant's June 2001 Consultant Report included separately.