



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO
Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: April 10, 2014 REPORT NO. HRB-14-031

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board
Agenda of April 24, 2014

SUBJECT: **ITEM #9 – Cliff May House**

APPLICANT: Dampier Family Trust represented by Marie Burke Lia

LOCATION: 4338 Adams Avenue, Kensington-Talmadge Community, Council District 9

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the Cliff May House located at 4338 Adams Avenue as a historical resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate the Cliff May House located at 4338 Adams Avenue as a historical resource with a period of significance of 1935 under HRB Criteria A, C and D. The designation excludes the 691 square foot second story addition constructed in 1967. This recommendation is based on the following findings:

1. The resource is a special element of the City's architectural and aesthetic development and retains integrity. Specifically, the resource, designed by Master Architect Cliff May as his personal residence, is one of his seminal designs in which he explored his personal Hispanic heritage and its influence on his design philosophy. Through experimenting in the design of his own home, he developed his California Rancheria style and marketed the subject property as the embodiment of this new style that blended the romance and charm of early California design with modern living in an affordable package.
2. The resource embodies the distinctive characteristics through the retention of character defining features of the California Rancheria style and retains a good level of architectural integrity from its period of significance. Specifically, the resource continues to convey the historic significance of Cliff May's California Rancheria style by embodying the historic characteristics associated with the style; including a (generally) one-story, one-room deep structure in a U-shaped configuration around a central courtyard; a shingle roof; overhanging eaves and rafter tails; a mixture of stucco and vertical board-and-batten siding over wood frame construction; a front door with rough-

hewn lintel leading to a covered walkway and courtyard; crude wood window grilles; and fenestration consisting of paired 3-lite and 4-lite wood frame and sash casement windows, as well as distinctive 16-lite fixed windows.

3. The resource is representative of a notable work of Master Architect Cliff May and retains integrity as it relates to the original design. Specifically, the resource was constructed in 1935 by May as his personal residence, and was the first residential building he constructed in his California Rancheria style, which had evolved from the Hacienda style and would later evolve into the Western Ranch style, the prototype of the Modern Ranch house that would become the standard of suburban living in the United States in the post-World War II period. The subject property located at 4338 Adams Avenue, which was designed and built by May for his family in his newly emerging California Rancheria style, is representative of the notable work of this established Master Architect.

BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with the owner's desire to have the site designated as a historical resource. The one and two story house was originally constructed as a one story home in the residential subdivision of Talmadge Park.

The building is located on APN 465-323-08-00. The property was located within the boundary of the 1996 Mid-City Survey, but was not identified in the survey for unknown reasons.

The historic name of the resource, the Cliff May House, has been identified consistent with the Board's adopted naming policy and reflects the name of established Master Architect Cliff May, who constructed the house as his personal residence.

ANALYSIS

A historical resource research report was prepared by Kathleen Crawford of the Office of Marie Burke Lia, which concludes that the resource is significant under HRB Criteria A, C and D, and staff concurs. This determination is consistent with the *Guidelines for the Application of Historical Resources Board Designation Criteria*, as follows.

CRITERION A - Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's, a community's or a neighborhood's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development.

The applicant's report concludes that the property is significant under HRB Criterion A as a special element of Kensington-Talmadge's historical, cultural, economic, aesthetic or architectural development. The report states that the subject property "was built by Master Architect Cliff May, and is one of his seminal designs as he explored his personal Hispanic heritage and its influence on his design philosophy. As the residence was his personal home, he was free to embrace his ideas in the design and construction of the home and explore their viability and potential for use in future designs. During the 1930s, as the Kensington-Talmadge area was under development, the majority of the homes were designed by local architects and

many innovative and creative examples of San Diego's 1930's architectural heritage are still present. The subject property is in keeping with this trend of Kensington-Talmadge architectural development.” Staff concurs that the property is eligible for designation under HRB Criterion A; however, not within the context of the development of Kensington-Talmadge.

Significance Statement: The subject property located at 4338 Adams Avenue, designed by Master Architect Cliff May as his personal residence, is one of his seminal designs in which he explored his personal Hispanic heritage and its influence on his design philosophy. As the residence was his personal home, he was free to embrace his ideas in the design and construction of the home and explore their viability and potential for use in future designs. In doing so, he developed his California Rancheria style and marketed the subject property as the embodiment of this new style that blended the romance and charm of early California design with modern living in an affordable package. Despite the modifications detailed in the discussion of Criterion C, the building retains integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting, location and association to its 1935 period of significance. Therefore, staff recommends designation under Criterion A as a special element of San Diego’s architectural and aesthetic development.

CRITERION C - Embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period or method of construction or is a valuable example of the use of natural materials or craftsmanship.

The subject property located at 4338 Adams Avenue was constructed in 1935 in the California Rancheria style developed by Master Architect Cliff May, and features a “U”-shaped footprint set sideways to the street; a low-to-medium pitch hipped roof with overhanging eaves and rafter tails; a mixture of smooth stucco and vertical board-and-batten siding over wood frame construction; and a concrete foundation. From the street, the house presents a broken side gable roof over a two-car garage with a tilt-up wood door to the left and to the right a habitable area with paired 3-lite and 4-lite wood frame and sash casement windows and a smaller window set high on the building wall covered by a simple wood screen. The entry door with rough hewn lintel sits between these two bays and leads not to the interior, but through a passageway to the interior courtyard. A covered walkway leads around the interior perimeter of the house, which features the vertical board-and-batten siding, as well as large, distinctive 16-lite fixed windows. Remaining fenestration consists of paired 3-lite and 4-lite wood frame and sash casement windows, as well as 4-lite wood doors.

The primary modification occurred in 1967 when a second story was added over the rear wing of the “U” shaped footprint. The addition, which resulted in the demolition of the original roof at this location, is clearly differentiated through the use of a gable roof, fascia boards and single-lite fixed and casement metal frame and sash windows. While the addition of a second story addition over the original building is not ideal, the lack of any developable lot area to the rear dictated the placement of the addition. While the massing is not consistent with the original one story configuration, the placement of the addition preserved the key character-defining features of the resource, including the “U”-shape, the central courtyard, and the distinctive 16-lite fixed windows. Given that these essential character defining features were preserved, staff finds that the building retains integrity. Other minor modifications include the replacement of the entry door and garage door.

In the days of early California, ranch houses were built around a center courtyard both as a convenience and protection against invaders. A student of old adobe Hacienda construction, Master Architect Clifford May sought to combine the designs of early California history with modern home building. May's early houses clearly represent the Spanish Colonial revival style. However, to differentiate his houses from other Spanish style houses in the area, May copied elements from the Estudillo and Las Flores adobes to give them a much more crude appearance. Most of his houses reflect traditional adobe hacienda architecture, but featured the newest materials and construction techniques. They are typically low in scale and spread out on the parcel to create definition between the street and the private courtyard space for the resident.

His designs evolved from the Hacienda in 1931 to Rancheria in 1935 and later the Western Ranch style. The Hacienda was a one-story, one-room deep structure in a U-shaped configuration around a central courtyard. The front door entered not into the house, but into a covered walkway and courtyard. The covered walkway or *corridor* served as the central hallway of the house. To make the Hacienda appear more like an old California adobe, red clay roof tiles were laid haphazardly atop each other; exterior walls were coarsely plastered; rough-hewn wood lintels were present over windows and doors, inside and out; crude wood window grilles covered some windows on the front façade; and floors were paved irregularly with rustic terra cotta tiles. The Rancheria differed from a Hacienda in that it had a shingle roof instead of a tile one, and had slimmer rafters and thinner walls. Otherwise, it had the same patio-oriented plan. It was a less expensive house and its early California sounding name gave it a selling point. The Hacienda and Rancheria would evolve into the Western Ranch style, the prototype of the Modern Ranch house that would become the standard of suburban living in the United States in the post-World War II period.

Significance Statement: The house continues to convey the historic significance of Cliff May's California Rancheria style by embodying the historic characteristics associated with the style; including a (generally) one-story, one-room deep structure in a U-shaped configuration around a central courtyard; a shingle roof; overhanging eaves and rafter tails; a mixture of stucco and vertical board-and-batten siding over wood frame construction; a front door with rough-hewn lintel leading to a covered walkway and courtyard; crude wood window grilles; and fenestration consisting of paired 3-lite and 4-lite wood frame and sash casement windows, as well as distinctive 16-lite fixed windows. Despite the modifications detailed above, the building retains integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting, location and association to its 1935 period of significance. Therefore, staff recommends designation under HRB Criterion C.

CRITERION D - Is representative of a notable work of a master builder, designer, architect, engineer, landscape architect, interior designer, artist or craftsman.

Master Architect Clifford May, undisputed father of the modern ranch house, was a sixth-generation San Diego native and a descendant of the pioneering Estudillo family. He did not have formal architectural training, but learned his craft on the job, finding inspiration in his personal connection and detailed knowledge of the region's Spanish colonial architectural heritage.

In the days of early California, ranch houses were built around a center courtyard both as a convenience and protection against invaders. A student of old adobe Hacienda construction, May sought to combine the designs of early California history with modern home building. May

designed both custom and speculative ranch houses that touted quality craftsmanship, practicality, and idyllic charm. Throughout his career, May maintained that his designs could “restore the romance and charm of early California design to modern living,” which he accomplished not only through indoor-outdoor living and the notion of the Ranch house lifestyle, but with the integration of modern efficiency.

May's early houses clearly represent the Spanish Colonial revival style. However, to differentiate his houses from other Spanish style houses in the area, May copied elements from the Estudillo and Las Flores adobes to give them a much more crude appearance. In addition, he created his own signature details: chimney pots, wooden window grilles with flower pot boxes, tile doorbells, painted flower decorations on wooden beams, doors, shutters, and cupboards, and landscaping with yucca, cacti, and olive trees. His San Diego designs prompted nostalgia for the old Spanish Colonial Revival style so popular a century earlier, but on a smaller, more low-key scale that became May's California Ranch style.

May built his first house with the help of engineering contractor Orville U. Miracle in 1931. Its successful sale encouraged him to build additional speculative houses. Between 1931 and 1937, May designed approximately fifty houses in San Diego. Most of his houses reflect traditional adobe hacienda architecture, but featured the newest materials and construction techniques. They are typically low in scale and spread out on the parcel to create definition between the street and the private courtyard space for the resident. The result was a new informal suburban style with understated luxury and stressing his belief that a house should be integrated with nature.

In January 1935, May and his wife Jean purchased a lot at 4338 Adams Avenue, where May built the first house for his own family. He called it a Rancheria, not a Hacienda, which was his term for the houses he had built up to that point. The Rancheria, which was a made-up name for sales purposes, differed from a Hacienda in that it had a shingle roof instead of a tile one, and had slimmer rafters and thinner walls. Otherwise, it had the same patio-oriented plan. It was a less expensive house and its early California sounding name gave it a selling point. In February, *The San Diego Union* announced in the "Tete-a-tete" section: *Mr. and Mrs. Cliff May are building their first home on Adams Avenue, Talmadge Park. They call it a 'California Rancheria' ... Mr. May is taking his inspiration from the early California casas of his ancestors (he is descended from the Estudillo and de Pedrorena families). May's own house plan matches the third house that he built. But, like the Sweetwater Women's Club, May put on a wood shingle roof and decorated part of the exterior with board-and-batten walls. He also installed a large window in the living room facing the courtyard. Completed in April 1935, the house drew praise for May and was featured in Arts & Decoration and Architectural Digest.*

In 1938, May moved to Los Angeles where he became internationally known through published designs in *Sunset Magazine*. May sold the subject property in 1939 following his move to Los Angeles. In addition to Cliff May's prolific architectural career in San Diego and Los Angeles, he also designed buildings in over forty U.S. states, Mexico, South America, Australia, the British West Indies, and Ireland, proving that his ranch style had an international appeal as well as an adaptability to various climates. Over the course of his life May designed more than one thousand buildings including the headquarters of *Sunset Magazine*, the Los Angeles home of Zubin Metha, music director for the New York Philharmonic, and a house for Gianni Agnelli, founder of Fiat, the Italian car company. He is considered to be a master architect and his designs have influenced

the course of architecture in Southern California and later generations of architects. There are currently nine May designed homes listed on the San Diego Historic Register, eight of which were constructed between 1932 and 1935.

Significance Statement: The subject property located at 4338 Adams Avenue was constructed in 1935 by May as his personal residence, and was the first residential building he constructed in his California Rancheria style, which had evolved from the Hacienda style and would later evolve into the Western Ranch style, the prototype of the Modern Ranch house that would become the standard of suburban living in the United States in the post-World War II period. The subject property located at 4338 Adams Avenue, which was designed and built by May for his family in his newly emerging California Rancheria style, is representative of the notable work of this established Master Architect. Despite the modifications detailed in the discussion of Criterion C, the building retains integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting, location and association to its 1935 period of significance. Therefore staff recommends designation under HRB Criterion D.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

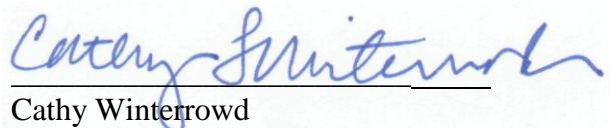
If the property is designated by the HRB, conditions related to restoration or rehabilitation of the resource may be identified by staff during the Mills Act application process, and included in any future Mills Act contract.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff's field check, it is recommended that the Cliff May House located at 4338 Adams Avenue be designated with a period of significance of 1935 under HRB Criterion A as a special element of San Diego's architectural and aesthetic development, Criterion C as a resource that embodies the character defining features of California Rancheria architecture, and Criterion D as a resource that is reflective of the notable work of established Master Architect Cliff May. The designation excludes the 691 square foot second story addition constructed in 1967. Designation brings with it the responsibility of maintaining the building in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. The benefits of designation include the availability of the Mills Act Program for reduced property tax; the use of the more flexible Historical Building Code; flexibility in the application of other regulatory requirements; the use of the Historical Conditional Use Permit which allows flexibility of use; and other programs which vary depending on the specific site conditions and owner objectives.



Kelley Stanco
Senior Planner



Cathy Winterrowd
Deputy Director/HRB Liaison

KS/cw

Attachments:

1. Draft Resolution
2. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover

RESOLUTION NUMBER N/A
ADOPTED ON 4/24/2014

WHEREAS, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego held a noticed public hearing on 4/24/2014, to consider the historical designation of the **Cliff May House** (owned by Dampier Family Trust 4-18-07, 4338 Adams Avenue, San Diego, CA 92116) located at **4338 Adams Avenue, San Diego, CA 92116**, APN: **465-323-08-00**, further described as LOT 192 in the City of San Diego, County of San Diego, State of California; and

WHEREAS, in arriving at their decision, the Historical Resources Board considered the historical resources report prepared by the applicant, the staff report and recommendation, all other materials submitted prior to and at the public hearing, inspected the subject property and heard public testimony presented at the hearing; and

WHEREAS, the property would be added to the Register of Designated Historical Resources as **Site No. 0**, and

WHEREAS, designated historical resources located within the City of San Diego are regulated by the Municipal Code (Chapter 14, Article 3, Division 2) as such any exterior modifications (or interior if any interior is designated) shall be approved by the City, this includes but is not limited to modifications to any windows or doors, removal or replacement of any exterior surfaces (i.e. paint, stucco, wood siding, brick), any alterations to the roof or roofing material, alterations to any exterior ornamentation and any additions or significant changes to the landscape/ site.

NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED, the Historical Resources Board based its designation of the Cliff May House on the following findings:

(1) The property is historically significant under CRITERION A as a special element of San Diego's architectural and aesthetic development and retains integrity to its 1935 period of significance. Specifically, the resource, designed by Master Architect Cliff May as his personal residence, is one of his seminal designs in which he explored his personal Hispanic heritage and its influence on his design philosophy. Through experimenting in the design of his own home, he developed his California Rancheria style and marketed the subject property as the embodiment of this new style that blended the romance and charm of early California design with modern living in an affordable package. This finding is further supported by the staff report, the historical research report, and written and oral evidence presented at the designation hearing.

(2) The property is historically significant under CRITERION C as a resource that embodies the distinctive characteristics through the retention of character defining features of the California Rancheria style, and retains integrity to its 1935 period of significance. Specifically, the resource continues to convey the historic significance of Cliff May's California Rancheria style by embodying the historic characteristics associated with the style; including a (generally) one-story, one-room deep structure in a U-shaped configuration around a central courtyard; a shingle roof; overhanging eaves and rafter tails; a mixture of stucco and vertical board-and-batten siding over wood frame construction; a front door with rough-hewn lintel leading to a covered walkway and courtyard; crude wood window grilles; and fenestration consisting of paired 3-lite and 4-lite wood frame and sash casement windows, as well as distinctive 16-lite fixed windows. This finding is further supported by the staff report, the historical research report, and written and oral evidence presented at the designation hearing.

(3) The property is historically significant under CRITERION D as a notable work of established Master Architect Cliff May, and retains integrity to its 1935 period of significance. Specifically, the resource was constructed in 1935 by May as his personal residence, and was the first residential building he constructed in his California Rancheria style, which had evolved from the Hacienda style and would later evolve into the Western Ranch style, the prototype of the Modern Ranch house that would become the standard of suburban living in the United States in the post-World War II period. The subject property located at 4338 Adams Avenue, which was designed and built by May for his family in his newly emerging California Rancheria style, is representative of the notable work of this established Master Architect. This finding is further supported by the staff report, the historical research report, and written and oral evidence presented at the designation hearing.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, in light of the foregoing, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego hereby approves the historical designation of the above named property. The designation includes the parcel and exterior of the building as Designated Historical Resource **Site No. 0**.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the designation shall exclude the 691 square foot second story addition constructed in 1967.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Secretary to the Historical Resources Board shall cause this resolution to be recorded in the office of the San Diego County Recorder at no fee, for the benefit of the City of San Diego, and with no documentary tax due.

Vote: N/A

BY: _____
JOHN LEMMO, Chair
Historical Resources Board

APPROVED AS TO FORM AND
LEGALITY: JAN I. GOLDSMITH,
CITY ATTORNEY

BY: _____
CORRINE NEUFFER,
Deputy City Attorney