



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

Report to the Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: October 13, 2016 REPORT NO. HRB-16-064

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board
Agenda of October 27, 2016

SUBJECT: **ITEM #7 – Midway Post Office**

APPLICANT: Steelwave, LLC represented by Scott A. Moomjian

OWNER: Rexford Industrial Realty LP

LOCATION: 2535 Midway Drive, Midway-Pacific Highway Community, Council District 2

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the Midway Post Office located at 2535 Midway Drive as a historical resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate the Midway Post Office located at 2535 Midway Drive as a historical resource with a period of significance of 1972 under HRB Criterion C. The designation excludes the post office box room addition at the northeast elevation (built 1985-1994), the southwest warehouse addition (1985), and two garage additions at the northeast and southwest ends of the vehicle maintenance building (built 1972-1981). This recommendation is based on the following finding:

The resource embodies the distinctive characteristics through the retention of character defining features of the Brutalism style of architecture and retains a good level of architectural integrity from its 1972 date of construction and period of significance. Specifically, the resource exhibits monumental massing; exposed reinforced concrete construction which comprises both the structural system and primary exterior finish; rectilinear forms and repetitive angular motifs; and a lack of traditional elements and ornament.

BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with a preliminary review application to determine whether or not the building is historically significant as part of a constraints analysis for future development. The resource is a large three-story former United States Postal Service facility built in 1972 in the Brutalist style on the north side of Barnett Avenue at

Midway Drive, in portions of Pueblo Lots 236 and 237 of the Pueblo Lands of San Diego in the Midway-Pacific Highway Community.

The building is located on APN 450-480-12-00 (Parcel 2 of Parcel Map 21105). The property was identified in the Draft 2011 Midway Community Plan Area Historic Resources Reconnaissance Survey as an example of the Brutalism style and given a Status Code of 5S3, "Appears to be individually eligible for local listing or designation through survey evaluation."

Subject resource occupies an area of Midway known as Dutch Flats, the airstrip site famously used by Charles Lindbergh for the April 28, 1927 initial test flight of the Spirit of Saint Louis built for him by Ryan Airlines prior to his landmark transatlantic flight. There are three commemorative plaques on this matter placed in or on the subject building. These plaques were placed by members of the San Diego Aerospace Museum (1977), the San Diego Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution (1998), and the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (2001).

The historic name of the resource, the Midway Post Office, has been identified consistent with the Board's adopted naming policy and reflects the historical name established by the community and the historical use of the property.

ANALYSIS

A Historical Resource Research Report was prepared by Brian F. Smith and Associates, Inc., which concludes that the resource is not significant under any HRB Criteria. Staff disagrees and finds that the site is a significant historical resource under HRB Criterion C. 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.

Research into the history of the property at 2535 Midway Drive did not reveal any information to indicate that the property exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's or Midway-Pacific Highway's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion A.

CRITERION B - Is identified with persons or events significant in local, state or national history.

Research into the owners and tenants of the property at 2535 Midway Drive did not reveal any individuals who could be considered historically significant in local, state or national history. Furthermore, no events of local, state or national significance are known to have occurred at the subject property. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion B.

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 resource is a very large three-story commercial facility built in 1972 in the Brutalist style as a processing and distribution center for the United States Postal Service. The property consists of two structures identified in the applicant's report as the Midway Postal Service Processing and Distribution Center (MPSPDC), which is the main post office building; and the Vehicle Maintenance Facility (VMF), which is a somewhat smaller accessory structure built at the rear corner of the property, northwest of the main building.

The main post office building is located immediately west of the intersection of Midway Drive and Barnett Avenue, with the primary elevation fronting northeast onto Midway Drive. It is an imposing structure of monumental scale and massing, presenting a blocky rectangular form with a flat roof. The building is constructed primarily of reinforced concrete, concrete block, and brick on a concrete foundation. The building's exterior finish is principally exposed concrete, alternating with areas of concrete block and spray on stucco as noted on the as-built elevation drawings. The main entrances are located on either side of a rectangular concrete tower element at the primary elevation, accessed from the two large stairways or the ramp leading to an elevated terrace. The concrete tower element introduces angular massing with the shed roofed extension at its base. This angular motif is repeated a number of times elsewhere on the building at all four main elevations. Further, the exterior concrete finish of the building offers a repeating pattern of horizontal bands across all wall surfaces. The building's fenestration is concentrated at the primary façade, consisting of massive horizontal bands of metal framed windows. The building's secondary elevations are characterized by sprawling concrete canopies sheltering various secondary entrances and loading areas, and expansive, near uninterrupted wall planes of concrete.

The main parking lot servicing the former post office is located to the southeast, along Midway Drive and Barnett Avenue. A smaller secondary parking lot is located to the northwest of the building's main entrances. Near the rear of the property is the vehicle maintenance building. This accessory structure is also a large rectangular building which repeats the same building materials and design characteristics as the main post office building.

Although not discussed in the applicant's report, the as-built drawings indicate that the landscape was designed by local Landscape Architects, Wimmer & Yamada. The extant landscape design is sparse, reflecting the stark nature of the building's design. Trees in the parking lot and planters near the main entrance are placed at regular intervals throughout, and single rows of trees or ground cover soften select areas of the building, primarily at or near the main entrances to the building and parking lot. The existing landscape does not appear to include any rare or unique plant species, and does not notably contribute to the impact of the main building or its significance as a Brutalist style resource. Therefore, staff does not recommend the inclusion of any elements of the landscaping as part of designation.

Alterations to the subject resource are apparent yet fairly limited, and do not significantly impact the property's integrity, taking into account the immense scale and massing of the subject buildings. The main post office building and the vehicle maintenance building each have two additions. Sometime between 1985 and 1994, a small, L-shaped, single-story post office box room addition was placed at the base of the front elevation tower element on the elevated terrace. This addition does not appear to have resulted in the demolition of the front face of the tower's base. In 1985, a warehouse addition was placed at the far southeast corner of the main building. At either end of the long, rectangular vehicle maintenance building, single-story garage additions were built sometime prior to

1981. Finally, standing seam metal roofing material appears to have been added over the angled shed roofed portions on both buildings. The alterations do not significantly disrupt the overall look of the resource or character defining features that are critical to its Brutalist style. Very little of the original structures has been removed. It is also relatively easy to recognize the additions because of slight changes in materials and design. There is little to no impact to general composition, massing, scale or decorative elements. Accordingly, the alterations do not greatly impair the buildings' integrity of design, materials, workmanship and feeling. Thus, the resource remains eligible under HRB Criterion C.

Where other properties previously brought before the HRB for designation have had additions visible at the primary elevations, these structures typically have been of a vastly different scale and character. In most cases, these buildings have been much smaller, single-family residences in more traditional architectural styles. Additions or alterations impacting primary elevations of these buildings are considered to have a much greater negative effect on the character defining features and integrity of the resource because their bulk and scale relative to the overall size of the original building is much greater. In these cases, staff has recommended against designation due to integrity loss from such impactful modifications. With a building as immense as the subject property, however, the aforementioned additions are relatively quite small and visually fade away as the building is viewed in its entirety. When the alterations are examined more directly, their exterior concrete surface and paneling does not exactly match that of the original, allowing for compatibility and differentiation, consistent with the US Secretary of the Interior's Standards. Relative to the overall bulk and scale of the two original buildings, all four additions are fairly diminutive in size – each is shorter than the massing adjacent to it – and they are distinguished from the original construction based on their exterior materials.

The applicant's report classifies the subject property as International style with Brutalism influence, while noting that its 1972 date of construction is well outside the International style's period of greatest popularity from circa 1935-1955, according to the San Diego Modernism Historic Context Statement. While the subject resource does exhibit some amount of ribbon windows and the overall rectilinear forms expected of the Modern International style of architecture, it does not present the light, almost weightless quality seen in many International style buildings. Rather, the subject building is more suitably classified as a Brutalist building with its monumental massing, heavy blockish appearance, and copious use of concrete.

The Modern style of Brutalism gets its name from the French term *béton brut* or "raw concrete." The Brutalism style first appeared as early as the 1950s, but was primarily seen in San Diego only from about 1965 to 1975. Inspired by Le Corbusier, buildings in the Brutalist style are strikingly blockish, geometric, and composed of repetitive shapes – all predominantly formed of concrete which is to be expressed as both the primary structural material and the finish. Buildings of this style are regularly described by critics as inhuman, stark, and out of place. Save for many buildings on the University of California San Diego (UCSD) campus, examples of Brutalism in San Diego are quite rare. In most cases, Brutalism style buildings in San Diego are associated with the work of a recognized master architect. The primary character defining features of Brutalism are listed in the Modernism Historic Context Statement as exposed and expressive structural system; monumental massing; angular and rectilinear forms; and exposed concrete finish. The style is secondarily by repetitive patterns; and intentional avoidance of traditional elements or ornament. The subject property exhibits all the

primary and secondary character defining features of the Brutalist style and fits well within the circa 1965-1975 period of its popularity in San Diego.

Of known Brutalist style resources in San Diego, only one has been historically designated, namely the Salk Institute for Biological Studies at 10010 North Torrey Pines Road (HRB Site #304). The Salk Institute building was constructed in 1965 and was historically designated in 1991 when it was less than 30 years of age. While this property gained noteworthy acclaim very shortly after its construction, the Salk Institute's designation is a leading demonstration of the fact that there is no minimum age required for a building to gain historic significance and be designated by the HRB.

Significance Statement: The Midway Post Office continues to convey the historic significance of the Brutalist style by embodying the historic characteristics associated with the style; including its monumental massing; exposed reinforced concrete construction which comprises both the structural system and primary exterior finish; rectilinear forms and repetitive angular motifs; and a lack of traditional elements and ornament. The limited alterations completed between 1972 and 1994 have not significantly impaired integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling, or association as it relates to its 1972 date of construction and 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

According to the as-built drawings, the subject property was designed by architects Deems/Lewis & Partners. The plans also bear the stamp and signature of Ward Deems. Ward Deems and William Lewis, Jr. are identified in the Modernism Historic Context Statement as architects contributing to Modernism in San Diego. The Context Statement also identifies the Midway Post Office at 2535 Midway Drive among their known San Diego works.

The applicant's report names William Lewis, Jr. as the designer of the subject property. Architect William (Bill) Sperry Lewis, Jr. was active in A.C. Martin & Associates as well as the firm of Deems Lewis (of which he was a principal). Lewis' partner, Ward Deems, joined the Los Angeles firm of A.C. Martin in 1953 upon graduation from USC. Lewis, who graduated from USC's architecture program the same year, joined the firm shortly thereafter. In 1958-1959, Deems explored the potential of opening an office in San Diego, which was then considered to be a cheaper, slower-paced city which survived on tourism funds and military spending. In April 1959, a corporate agreement was signed to launch "Deems-Martin Associates" with Lewis included. In 1983, Lewis was inducted as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and has been well recognized and awarded for his large portfolio of distinctive commercial architecture.

Beyond the statements made in the applicant's report, Lewis' exact role as a designer of the subject property could not be substantiated by any primary source documentation. However, information in the applicant's report relating to a 2016 interview with the architect suggests that Lewis does not consider the subject work to be particularly innovative and may not feel it is an especially notable work of his. Lewis' status as a Master Architect was established in January 2016 with the designation of the May Company/William Lewis, Jr. Building at 1702 Camino Del Rio North (HRB Site #1203); however this particular designation is currently on appeal. Staff still supports the establishment of

Lewis as a Master Architect; however, without clear support of the architect responsible for the design of the property, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion D as a notable work of Master Architect William Lewis, Jr.

Master Landscape Architect

The firm Wimmer & Yamada is an award-winning, local Landscape Architectural firm noted in the Modernism Historic Context Statement but not yet established as a Master Landscape Architecture firm. There is insufficient information to establish the firm as a master at this time. Furthermore, additional information and analysis relating to the integrity of the original landscape design and comparative analysis to other known works of the firm has not been provided. Nevertheless, the existing landscape functions to soften the massive structure and provide a small amount of shade, but the visual impact of the post office property has been ultimately defined more by the colossal building than by its landscape. Absent additional information on the firm of Wimmer & Yamada, and analysis on how the subject property fits into their overall body of work, staff does not recommend establishment of Wimmer & Yamada as a Master Landscape Architecture firm or designation of the subject property under HRB Criterion D for this association.

CRITERION E - Is listed or has been determined eligible by the National Park Service for listing on the National Register of Historic Places or is listed or has been determined eligible by the State Historical Preservation Office for listing on the State Register of Historical Resources.

The property at 2535 Midway Drive has not been listed on or determined eligible for listing on the State or National Registers. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion E.

CRITERION F - Is a finite group of resources related to one another in a clearly distinguishable way or is a geographically definable area or neighborhood containing improvements which have a special character, historical interest or aesthetic value or which represent one or more architectural periods or styles in the history and development of the City.

The property at 2535 Midway Drive is not located within a designated historic district. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion F.

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 Midway Post Office located at 2535 Midway Drive be designated with a period of significance of 1972 under HRB Criterion C as a resource that exhibits the distinctive characteristics of the Brutalism style of architecture. The designation excludes the post office box room addition at the northeast elevation (built 1985-1994), the southwest warehouse addition (1985), and two garage additions at the northeast and southwest ends of the vehicle maintenance building (built 1972-1981). 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.



Camille Pekarek
Associate Planner



Kelley Stanco
Senior Planner/HRB Liaison

CP/ks

Attachments:

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