

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: Simon and Mamie Minchen House

OWNER: Meyer, Ralph and Dorothy Minchen

APPLICANT: Meyer A. Minchen

LOCATION: 1753 North Boulevard

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: April 19-2001

AGENDA ITEM: Ia

P.C.MEETING DATE:06-14-01

HPO FILE NO.: 01L94

DATE ACCEPTED: Mar-15-01

HAHC HEARING DATE:05-24-01

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 8 and west 25' of Lot 7, Block 4, Ormond Place Subdivision, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The buildings on the site are a two-story, brick veneer residence and a detached one bay, two-story brick veneer garage/servant quarters building with a two bay, one-story garage addition.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation for house and unattached garage

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Simon and Mamie Minchen House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on December 7, 2000. It has also been designated as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark on December 8, 1999. The house and garage/servant quarters building were constructed in 1931. The buildings were designed in the Italian Renaissance style by Joseph Finger, a prominent Houston architect. Finger, who is known as the builder of Houston, used the Italian Renaissance style of architecture because its classic design and prominence was best suited for the spacious lot in Ormond Place. He had designed every type of commercial and institutional building in Houston. This large residence and its outbuilding are unusual and unique in residential architectural design due to the fact that Finger very successfully incorporated in this residence some of the same specifications and use of over sized materials he utilized in his more grandiose commercial projects. The house and garage building are also unique due to the fact that they have been maintained and preserved just as constructed in 1931 by the building contractor, W. J. Goggan. Finger selected Goggan as the contractor because of his outstanding reputation for his attention to detail and for his achievement as a quality craftsman. Simon Minchen, a native Texan, moved to Houston in 1902 where he became very successful in the real estate business and also in oil and gas development. He was owner of the Fidelity Realty Corporation, which developed the Fidelity Addition, a Houston subdivision. As a member of the Houston Real Estate Board, Minchen help guide Houston's real estate development during the difficult years of the Depression-era.

The Minchen House is located at 1753 North Boulevard on the south side of North Boulevard. The house lot has a 100' frontage on North Boulevard and 169' frontage on Woodhead Street. The large spacious home and open lot compliments North Boulevard which consists of one lane streets on either side of a landscaped esplanade whose huge oak trees create a canopy over the entire street.

The Minchen House is a large, two-story residence with a full basement and faces north. It was constructed in a distinctive design utilizing a mixed tan and brown brick veneer exterior; a low pitched hip roof clad in Spanish style green clay tiles; decorative, curved rafter ends under the eaves; wide ceramic tiled entry porch floor; inset porch featuring a single wood-paneled arched entry door; door surround is cast stone flanked by two engaged columns; and arched windows on the first floor of the façade.

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According to the family, the Minchens chose the Italian Renaissance style design for their new home when Mr. Finger showed them a magazine of a house of the same style that was constructed along the Italian Mediterranean coast. The style in the United States evolved through its migration west from Italy, then across Europe, then to the northeastern coast of the United States, then west and south gaining popularity from 1890 to 1935. The long narrow design of the house was well suited to the Houston climate and constructed to take advantage of the prevailing southeast gulf breezes. The house was the first of seven houses eventually constructed in the block of North Boulevard. It differs, however, from the others since the house sits at a grade about three feet above the curb, and the yard is terraced steeply down to the sidewalks.

Joseph Finger, the architect of the Minchen House, was born on March 7, 1887, in Bielitz, Austria. Finger received his primary, secondary, and technical education in Bielitz. Immigrating to the United States in 1905, Finger settled initially in New Orleans. He moved to Houston in 1908 where he worked in the branch office of the Dallas architect, C. D. Hill and Company. In 1912, Finger became the junior partner of Houston architect, Lewis Sterling Green. Between 1914 and 1919 he was in partnership with James Ruskin Bailey and from 1920 to 1923 with Lamar Q. Cato. From 1923 to 1944 Finger practiced under his own name. From 1944 until his death, he was in partnership with George W. Rustay. From the beginning of his first partnership, Finger was identified with the design of office, hotel, retail, and industrial buildings. He designed a small number of residential buildings, and the Minchen House is one of only a few that remain in existence today. He was responsible for the American National Insurance Company Building in Galveston (1913, demolished); the Ricou-Brewster Building in Shreveport, Louisiana (1924, with Seymour Van Os); the De George (1913), Tennison (1922), Plaza (1925), Ben Milam (1925), Auditorium (1926), and Texas State (1929) hotels in Houston; the Vaughn Hotel, Port Arthur (1929); the Charlton Hotel, Lake Charles, Louisiana (1929); and the McCartney Hotel, Texarkana (1930). Finger designed retail stores for Everitt-Buelow (1926, altered), Levy's (1930, altered), and Battelstein's (1923, 1936, 1950) in Houston, and numerous auto showrooms in Houston during the 1920s. He was architect of the Model Laundry, Galveston (ca. 1913); and the Cheek-Neal Coffee Company (1917), Texas Packing Company (1924), H. M. Tennison Manufacturing Company (1925), and Truscon Steel Company (1941) buildings in Houston.

As the city's foremost Jewish architect from the 1910s through the 1940s, Finger designed many Jewish institutional buildings, as well as buildings for individual Jewish clients. Among these were Congregation Beth Israel Temple (1925), Congregation Beth Israel Mausoleum (1935), and Congregation Beth Yeshurun Synagogue (1949), as well as the Concordia Club (1915, demolished) and the Wolff Memorial Home (1930, demolished). During the 1930s Finger was responsible for such major public buildings as the Montgomery County Courthouse, Conroe (1935, altered); Jefferson Davis Hospital (1937, demolished; with Alfred C. Finn); Houston City Hall (1939); and the Houston Municipal Airport Terminal and Hangar (1940). At the time of his death, Finger and Rustay's Harris County Courthouse (1953) was under construction in Houston. Finger was best known for his exuberant modernistic designs. These included the Art Deco-style Houston Turn-Verein (1929, demolished), the A. C. Burton Company auto showroom (1929, demolished), and the Barker Brothers Studio (1930). Finger's office produced the Clarke and Courts printing plant (1936) and the Carnation Company creamery (1946-47, demolished) in the streamlined modernistic style. Finger's public buildings of the 1930s and 1940s were also designed in the modernistic style. Among the prominent clients for whom Finger designed multiple buildings, for both personal and business use, were the industrialist Henry M. Tennison, the confectioner W. H. Irvin, the merchant Philip Battelstein and his sons, the grocer Joseph Weingarten and his brothers, the oil operator James M. West and his sons and business associates, and Simon Minchen, a real estate developer.

Finger was a member of the American Institute of Architects. He was also a member of Congregation Beth Israel, the Independent Order of B'nai Brith, the Houston Turn-Verein, the Westwood Country Club, Chamber

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of Commerce, and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. Joseph Finger died on February 6, 1953, in Houston.

The house at 1753 North Boulevard was constructed for Simon Minchen and his family in 1931. Mr. Minchen was born in Austin, Texas on May 18, 1886. He moved to Houston in 1902 and went into the real estate business in which he was active his entire life. His largest investment during his early years was in 1912 in the Fidelity Addition, a subdivision that contained 86 blocks and 3,000 lots. In 1919 he began making investments in land, minerals and royalties in areas of Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma where oil and gas fields were being developed or where he believed such development would occur. Subsequently, he became one of the early developers of the oil and gas business in Texas by drilling and producing oil and gas wells himself. In 1929 he served as a member of the Houston Real Estate Board, then a very small board, that helped guide Houston real estate development. He married Mamie Pesses of Galveston on January 14, 1922. Three children were born to this marriage, namely, Meyer, Ralph and Dorothy Minchen. The Minchen family have been the only occupants of the home since its construction. Mr. Meyer A. Minchen continues to live in the house to this day.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION:

The building has been maintained by the Minchen family as it was originally constructed. When repairs were necessary, only materials that resembled the materials replaced were used.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION...:

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

- | S | NA | S - satisfies | D - does not satisfy | NA - not applicable |
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- (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;
- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;
- (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;
- (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;
- (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
- (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;

- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

PUBLIC COMMENTS: NONE

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Recommends that the Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends to City Council the landmark designation of the Simon and Mamie Minchen House.

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SITE LOCATION MAP

SIMON AND MANIE MINCHEN HOUSE

1753 NORTH BOULEVARD

NOT TO SCALE