

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: Paramount Apartment Building

Owner: Caspian Enterprises

APPLICANT: Caspian-Renaissance, Joint Venture

LOCATION: 3015 Chenevert Street

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: Sep-3-99

AGENDA ITEM: I.a

P.C. MEETING DATE: Oct-28-99

HPO FILE NO.: 99L079

DATE ACCEPTED: Sep-1-99

HAHC HEARING: Oct-7-99

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 5, 6, and 10, Block 5, Holman Outlot 27, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is a 2-1/2 story, U-shaped, brick-faced apartment building.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Paramount, constructed in 1926, is one of only two surviving examples of "Tudor style" apartment buildings, of its time, in Houston. The Paramount is an important chapter in the story of how housing needs developed in Houston. It offers a visual model of dynamic shifts in aesthetic preferences and architectural styles of early 20th century Houstonians. By the 1920's, South End (Midtown) was home to many of Houston's first apartment buildings. Of seven apartment buildings constructed along a nine-block area of Chenevert, only the Paramount remains standing today.

Until the end of the 19th Century, Houstonians lived primarily in large, single-family houses on sizeable lots. Land was so plentiful and inexpensive in Houston that row-houses with common walls, which were common in other cities, did not occur here until after the turn of the century.

At the turn of the century, Houston was growing at an unprecedented rate. The devastation of Galveston by the hurricane of 1900, and the discovery of oil at Spindletop near Beaumont, four months later, ensured Houston's future as a major trading and business center. Because of the escalating prices of urban real estate, Houston builders began to construct higher density housing. It is believed that in 1899 Houston's first apartment building was completed, and by 1910 the city had nineteen such buildings. A small number of builders experimented with high-rise residential buildings. However, Houston's pervasive preference for low-density buildings endured, keeping most apartment construction of the period below five stories. The period from about 1900 to 1930 marked a fundamental change in the manner in which Houstonian's approached land use and perceived domestic life.

By the 1920's, South End had witnessed the construction of a large number of apartment buildings. City Directory listings from 1927 document the existence and occupancy of dozens of such structures in the neighborhood. City Directory listings suggest that seven apartment buildings were located along a nine-block section of Chenevert, including the Paramount. Of these, only the Paramount remains standing today as a reminder of this significant time in Houston's development.

The Paramount is a standing reminder of architectural change in Houston. By 1900, Houston's appreciation for Victorian architecture began to make way for newer styles. Some of the more dominant themes were Colonial

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

Revival, Craftsman, and Tudor. The Paramount, whose physical attributes and characteristics are unmistakably Tudor, is one of only two surviving Houston apartment buildings of the time constructed in the Tudor style.

By the time planning was underway for the paramount, the Tudor style was gaining popularity. It seems only natural that a city such as Houston, founded by New Englanders and steeped in Anglo-American history, would draw its architectural inspiration from old English traditions. One of the most striking examples of the Tudor style found on the Paramount is the steeply sloping roof. Covered in a diamond-patterned asbestos shingle, the roof carried hints of the decorative Victorian era forward while taking advantage of what was believed to be the latest in material technology. The steep pitch of the roof and the building's front gabled façade give the building an impressive presence. Like most structures of Tudor design, the Paramount is clad entirely in brick, adding visual mass and durability to an already prominent elevation. This brick, unlike that found on any other buildings in Houston today, is paler in color than traditional brick. Common to Tudor architecture, an interesting pattern has been built into the brickwork, with individual bricks protruding to offer depth to what is otherwise a massive, flat-walled structure. In addition, most of the bricks are scored with black markings, probably the result of the manner in which the bricks were kiln-fired. These markings give additional texture to the walls. While brick buildings built prior to the 1920's were typically constructed of solid masonry, the recent advent of brick veneering enabled wood-framed buildings to achieve the same stately appearance with less cost. The pier-and-beam foundation of the Paramount continues to support the light wooden structure, while the more substantial perimeter foundation supports the exterior brickwork.

Other advances in masonry construction made Tudor styling more affordable. The ability to perform stonework through casting enabled the introduction of creative stone trim elements for the building's façade. This is visible in the gabled front facades of the Paramount, whose windows are set in cast-stone surrounds. These highly ornate castings feature braided patterns that accentuate the building front and break up the monotony of the sizeable facades. Most of the windows at the Paramount are set in double or triple groupings. The practice of grouping windows is characteristic of Tudor buildings. The Paramount had double-hung windows, which was not common practice for Tudor buildings. This choice is likely explained by budgeting constraints attributed to building a viable investment property.

It appears as though the design, development, and operation of the Paramount can all be attributed to one man – Mr. Hugh McIntyre Wilkin. Of unknown origin, this carpenter moved to Houston in 1915 and worked both for lumber companies and independently as a contractor for nearly a decade. During the course of his life, Wilkin was involved in many aspects of Houston's development. As co-founder and president of the Beaconsfield Realty Company in 1917, (along with two partners, William Branum and Joseph Martin) Wilkin undertook a number of construction projects. He was primarily an apartment builder, and worked both as a general contractor constructing the plans of others, and in the role of developer of his own investment properties such as the Paramount. At the opening of the Paramount, he was quoted as describing the development and ownership of apartment complexes as a very profitable affair.

Taken as a whole, the Paramount marks an important turning point in Houston's architectural history, and continues to serve as a reminder of the forces that wove the urban fabric of America's fourth largest city.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION:

The Paramount has survived for more than seventy years in a volatile area of the city and today retains its original architectural form. However, years of disrepair and insufficient attention have resulted in significant damage from age, usage, and weathering. The building has been gutted in preparation for the rehabilitation of

the building's original sixteen apartments into thirteen newly designed units. A permit has already been issued for the rehabilitation of this structure.

The permit was issued in March of 1999 and calls for the following work:

1. Reconfiguration of 16 existing units into 13 larger units, 6 simplex and 7 duplex designs.
2. An arched 8-foot wide breezeway will be created to provide safe access to the parking area.
3. Six shed-roofed dormers will be added to the building to create usable floor space under the steep pitched roof. Each dormer will be 11 feet wide and constructed of similar materials as the building's original two dormers.
4. New composition roofing will replace the original diamond-pattern asbestos shingles. Specified roofing will be similar diamond pattern shingles, if available. Other options include large fiberglass shingles or imitation slate.
5. New exterior doors will be painted wood four-panel residential-type.
6. All existing windows will be replaced with similar wood-sash to match the originals in configuration and size.
7. Decorative cast-stone casings around front elevation windows will be preserved.
8. Eight-foot high ornamental metal fencing will be used to close in the front courtyard and parking lot at the rear of the structure. Additional brick pylons will be used at the front entrance to the courtyard, expanding the size of the courtyard.
9. The courtyard and adjacent sidewalks will be paved with brick. A fountain of unspecified design and landscaping will complete the courtyard.
10. Existing mature trees will remain on site.

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 NA - not applicable

- (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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

That the Houston Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends landmark designation of the Paramount Apartments to City Council since the application complies with the applicable criteria.

SITE LOCATION MAP
PARAMOUNT APARTMENT BUILDING
3015 CHENEVERT STREET
NOT TO SCALE