

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Edward Weil House

OWNERS: Reza Jou

APPLICANTS: Same as owner

LOCATION: 308 Avondale Street

AGENDA ITEM: IIIa

HPO FILE NO: 11PL100

DATE ACCEPTED: Apr-6-2011

HAHC HEARING: May-19-2011

SITE INFORMATION: Lot 4, Block 9, Avondale, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic two-story, tile and stucco, single-family residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The historic house at 308 Avondale was built in 1917 by the Russell Brown Company, who sold it to Edward Weil, a retired wholesale liquor dealer. Subsequent owner, Joseph Tennant, developed many oilfield tools and designed and built one of the first gas recycling facilities in the world. The Russell Brown Company was a leader in Texas home design and construction and built elegant homes in many affluent neighborhoods in Houston and throughout Texas.

The Edward Weil House was designed in the Prairie Style. It is unusual in that it was styled with a blend of Craftsman, Prairie and Mediterranean influences, a style departure from many of the homes on Avondale. In 1919, the Russell Brown Company published a catalog of some of its completed projects entitled Modern Homes. The Edward Weil House at 308 Avondale is featured in this catalog.

The Avondale neighborhood is an architecturally and historically significant example of an early 20th century affluent Houston community. Avondale was home to many of Houston's early business and social leaders more than a decade before the development of River Oaks and Broadacres, Houston's later exclusive neighborhoods. The Weil House sits just outside the Avondale West Historic District, which was designated by City Council in 2007.

The Edward Weil House meets Criteria 1, 4, 5, and 6 for Landmark and Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Prairie-style Edward Weil House was built in 1917 by the Russell Brown Company who sold it to Edward and Celeste Weil. Mr. Weil was a retired wholesale liquor dealer. Weil owned his own company, Edward Weil Company Inc., which dealt wholesale liquor and distributed Houston & Southeast Texas Cook's Bottled beer. The office was located at 418-420 Louisiana Street.

In 1919, consulting engineer Joseph Tennant and his wife Lucille purchased the house. Tennant developed many oilfield tools and designed and built one of the first gas recycling facilities in the world. The 1919 Houston City Directory lists Tennant's company, "Tennant Lovegrove Co.

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Consulting & Constructing Engineers, High Grade Machinery, Manufacturing Agents for Boilers, Engines, Pumps, Air Compressor” with offices at 1016-1017 Union National Bank. The Tennants lived in the house until 1927, when they commissioned John Staub to build them a new house at 1505 North Boulevard in Broadacres.

In 1926, David and Laura Schwarz purchased 308 Avondale. Schwarz was Vice President of South Texas Cotton Oil Co. He died February 2, 1926, at the age of 49. In 1937, Laura Schwarz sold the house to her son and daughter-in-law, Andrew K. and Henrietta Schwarz. Andrew succeeded his father as Vice President of South Texas Cotton Oil Co.; he was also Vice President of Pancrust Plant Co. In 1964, Andrew K. Schwartz became President of Brine Service & Chemical Co.

Avondale

Avondale was platted in 1907 by the Greater Houston Land and Improvement Company. The company’s officers included Joseph Meyer, who owned the land on which the eastern half of the future neighborhood would be developed; W. T. Carter, a lumber magnate and builder; and Thomas Ball for whom the town of Tomball would eventually be named. The name 'Avondale' was chosen in a citywide naming contest and derived from the combination of two place names from William Shakespeare’s home in Stratford-upon-Avon in England. The neighborhood included three east-west thoroughfares, all with Shakespeare-related names: Hathaway (now Westheimer Road), Avondale, and Stratford.

Avondale attracted many of Houston’s most influential citizens of the time. The neighborhood was home to residents such as Ross Sterling, the founder of Humble Oil Company, who subsequently served as Governor of Texas from 1931-1932. Other notable residents included Albert L. Bath, manager of a cotton exporting firm, and his daughter Harriet, who was a founder and lifelong supporter of the Houston Ballet. Neal Pickett, mayor of Houston during World War II, lived in the two-story brick house at 217 Avondale. James House, who lived at 404 Avondale, was the son of prominent Houston banker T.W. House and the brother of Edward Mandell House, a confidant of President Woodrow Wilson. Abe and Esther Levy, who owned the Levy Dry Goods stores, resided at 309 Avondale. J. Robert Neal, Vice President of Cheek Neal Coffee Company, which later became Maxwell House Coffee, lived at 603 Avondale. George and Joe Meyer Jr., who worked for their father Joseph F. Meyer Sr., a partner in the Greater Houston Land and Improvement Company that developed Avondale, also lived in the neighborhood. George Meyer went on to develop the Meyerland subdivision in southwest Houston several decades later.

The new subdivision meant to set itself apart from other Houston developments in a number of ways. The neighborhood was developed with special attention paid to quality of life issues. Deed restrictions included setback requirements and established a minimum cost for homes. The two major streets, Avondale and Stratford, were both very wide and paved with oyster shell with cement curbs and gutters. To enhance the visual appeal of the neighborhood, utility poles were located at the rear of the properties. All deliveries and trash pick-up were to take place in the alleys behind the homes.

The new subdivision was one of several, including Audubon Place, Courtlandt Place and Westmoreland, which broke with the traditional pattern of upscale neighborhoods clustered around

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the Main Street corridor south of downtown. Before the expansion of the Houston Electric Street Railway Company's streetcar service to outlying areas, much of Houston's development occurred close to downtown's business district. With the extension of the South End line, "suburban" neighborhoods like Avondale were made viable.

The historic homes of Avondale are representative of the architectural styles that were in vogue in Houston and across the country during the time period. Styles represented within the neighborhood include Prairie, American Four Square, Craftsman, and Tudor Revival. The eastern portion of Avondale, which includes all of the 100 blocks of Avondale and Stratford Streets and the eastern half of the 200 block of Stratford, were designated as a City of Houston Historic District in 1999. On November 9, 1999, the Houston City Council designated the eastern portion of Avondale, as the Avondale East Historic District. Avondale West Historic District was designated by City Council in 2007. The blocks between these two designated areas suffered a substantial loss of historic integrity over the years, and thus were not included in either district. The Weil House is located just outside of the Avondale West district.

Russell Brown Company

One of the most prolific builders in Avondale was the Russell Brown Company, which offered custom homes marketed to Houston's middle and upper class. The Russell Brown Company was responsible for more than a dozen of the homes designed and built during the time of Avondale's initial development (1908-1925), including the Edward Weil House at 308 Avondale. In addition to those in Avondale, the company was responsible for many of the fine homes in Courtlandt Place, Broadacres, Montrose, River Oaks, and Westmoreland, where Brown resided. Brown utilized the talents of architect Charles Oliver, who designed many homes in River Oaks while staff architect for the River Oaks Corporation.

Russell Brown (c. 1877-1963) organized the Russell Brown Company in 1908 and remained extremely active in residential construction until after World War II. In 1919, the Russell Brown Company published a catalog of some of its completed projects entitled Modern Homes. The Edward Weil House at 308 Avondale is featured in this catalog.

Russell Brown was born on December 12, 1875, in Taylor, Texas, and came to Houston in 1902. The company was a prolific builder and designer of new houses in Houston from 1902 until the early 1940s. Brown expanded his operations by opening branch offices in Dallas in 1916, San Antonio in 1922, and Los Angeles in 1923.

The Russell Brown Company provided architectural services (although Brown himself was not an architect) in addition to construction services. The firm specialized in house design and construction, and also designed several commercial buildings in Houston in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the first Jefferson Davis Hospital and the Schlumberger Building, as well as the six-story Guaranty State Bank and Simpson Office Building in Ardmore, Oklahoma in 1917.

The firm was very active in Houston from the 1910s until World War II. His houses were known to be of the first quality in design and materials. Three houses by his firm were constructed in Boulevard Oaks in 1924-25: 1611, 1612 and 1636 South Boulevard. In 1928 another went up at

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1611 North, and in 1937, 1908 North was built by the Russell Brown Company. 1927 North Boulevard was constructed for his daughter, Virginia Brown Angly in 1938.

The Russell Brown Company constructed numerous houses in the Avondale, Westmoreland, Montrose, Boulevard Oaks, and River Oaks neighborhoods in Houston and in the Dallas subdivision of Munger Place. The company was the general contractor of such notable Houston houses as the William S. Farish House in Shadyside (1925) and the Cleveland Sewall House in River Oaks (1926, N.R. and COH Protected Landmark). Among the architects who worked at various times for the Russell Brown Company in Houston were A. N. Dawson, Charles W. Oliver, Mike Mebane, and Gonzalo Ancira. In an indication of the quality of the Russell Brown architects, the River Oaks Corporation hired one of Russell Brown's architects, Charles Oliver, as in-house architect in 1926.

Additional information on the Russell Brown Company comes from a company brochure published circa 1936 which notes the following: "The restful harmony and careful designing, the elegance imparted by graceful simplicity marks the difference between Russell Brown Company homes and the regular run of places so often built."

Russell Brown retired from the building business in the mid 1940s. He lived out his retirement at his ranch near Juliff, Texas, south of Houston, where he died in 1963.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Edward Weil House was constructed in 1917 and designed in the Prairie Style. It is an unusual example in Avondale, as it was styled with a blend of Craftsman, Prairie and Mediterranean influences, a style departure from many of the homes on Avondale.

The most common features of the Prairie style include low-pitched roof, usually hipped, with widely overhanging eaves; two stories, with one-story wings or porches; eaves, cornices, and façade detailing emphasizing horizontal lines, often with massive, square porch supports. The Prairie style originated in Chicago within a group of architects that have come to be known as the Prairie School and were led by Frank Lloyd Wright. Landmark examples of the Prairie style are concentrated in Chicago's early 20th-century suburbs and in other large Midwestern cities. The Prairie style is one of the few indigenous American styles. Vernacular examples were spread widely by pattern books and popular magazines; they are common in early 20th-century suburbs throughout the country. Most were built between 1905 and 1915; the style quickly faded from fashion after World War I.

The Edward Weil House at 308 Avondale falls within the "Hipped Roof, Symmetrical, with Front Entry" subtype; this form is commonly referred to as the American Foursquare. This subtype was the earliest of the Prairie subtypes and developed into the most common vernacular version. It features a simple square plan, low-pitched roof, and symmetrical façade. A one-story wing attached to the east façade is clearly subordinate to the principal two-story elevation. The entrance is centered in the front elevation, features a portico, an arched gable dormer above the portico, and is a conspicuous focal point of the façade.

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In 2010, the current owner, Reza Jou, completed an extensive restoration of the house. The exterior work included repairing and painting exterior walls, refurbishing all original doors and original window hardware, repairing the roof and porch; and replacing damaged fascia and suffix.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Handbook of Texas Online.

Johnston, Marguerite, Houston: The Unknown City 1836-1946, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1991.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee, Field Guide to American Houses, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984.

Sanborn Fire Insurance map for Houston.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Diana DuCroz and Courtney Spillane, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

S NA

S - satisfies NA - not applicable

Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1)):

- (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;

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- (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.

AND

- (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

OR

- The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2));

OR

- The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3));

OR

- The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Edward Weil House at 308 Avondale Street.

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EXHIBIT A
EDWARD WEIL HOUSE
308 AVONDALE STREET



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EXHIBIT B SITE LOCATION MAP EDWARD WEIL HOUSE 308 AVONDALE STREET NOT TO SCALE

