

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer House

OWNERS: Anne & J.W. Stewart

APPLICANTS: Same

LOCATION: 3 Longfellow Lane - Shadyside

AGENDA ITEM: Ile

HPO FILE NO: 11LM247

DATE ACCEPTED: May-17-2011

HAHC HEARING: Jul-14-2011

SITE INFORMATION: Lots E, H, and Tracts F2, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, masonry, single family residence , and a non-historic pool house.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer House was designed in 1918 by Birdsall Parmenas Briscoe. The house contains an unusual and picturesque assortment of English details recombined in an early twentieth-century suburban house. It is one of six houses in the Houston subdivision of Shadyside to be designed by Birdsall P. Briscoe, a locally important eclectic architect. The house is notable for the quality of its interior detail, some of which was executed by Peter Mansbendel, the Austin woodcarver.

The Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 for Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The house for Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer occupied a site of two and one-third lots in Shadyside, a 38-acre suburban enclave developed on the southern rim of Houston between 1916 and 1919 by Joseph Stephen Cullinan, founder and former president of the Texas Company. Cullinan retained the St. Louis landscape architect George E. Kessler to lay out the subdivision, just as Kessler had done for the adjacent Hermann Park and the parkway segment of South Main Street between the park and Shadyside. As Cullinan divulged in a letter to Blaffer shortly after purchasing the property, he intended to subdivide the tract, selling house sites to friends and business associates.

Robert Lee Blaffer (1876-1942) maintained an interest in the subdivision during the three years that elapsed between the time of Cullinan's acquisition and the sale of lots. Blaffer was a New Orleanian who left Tulane to go to work after his father suffered business reverses. He was sent to Beaumont after the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901 to purchase fuel oil for the Southern Pacific railroad, but quickly became involved in oil exploration himself. In 1904, Blaffer formed a contract drilling firm with William Stamps Farish, another young fortune seeker. Blaffer and Farish transferred their operations to Houston in 1905 to exploit the Humble field, a profitable venture which eventually resulted in their participation in the organization of the Humble Oil and Refining Company in 1917. Blaffer was a vice-president and treasurer of the company until his election as president in 1933. From 1937 until his death, he was the chairman of the board of the Humble Oil and Refining Company, retaining throughout the office of the treasurer. Blaffer also served as director and

CITY OF HOUSTON

chairman of the board of the South Texas Commercial National Bank, a trustee of Kinkaid School and a trustee of the Rice Institute.

In 1909, Blaffer married Sarah Jane Campbell, the daughter of William T. Campbell, an English-born newspaperman who had also become involved at Spindletop. Campbell was a member of the Hogg-Swayne syndicate, a group of investors who brought J. S. Cullinan to Beaumont in 1902 which led to the organization of the Texas Company the next year. At the time they began planning to build a house in Shadyside, Mr. and Mrs. Blaffer had three children.

Cullinan tried to interest Blaffer in the services of his St. Louis architect, James P. Jamieson, in 1918. However, in early 1919, Mr. and Mrs. Blaffer turned to another architect, Birdsall Parmenas Briscoe (1876-1971) of Houston. Since beginning practice in 1912, Briscoe, a native Houstonian, had designed a series of houses in the South End neighborhoods of Courtlandt Place, Montrose Place, and Southmore. These not only reflected the tendency of the period toward eclecticism, but marked Briscoe as the ablest eclectic designer then practicing in Houston. Briscoe would design five more houses in Shadyside between 1922 and 1927 (three in partnership with Sam H. Dixon, Jr., between 1922 and 1926), as well as houses in Broadacres and River Oaks. Briscoe is best known for his formally composed houses. The Blaffer house thus falls among his less characteristic works. But the counterplay of formal detail and informal massing and the graceful resolution of problems created by the alterations and additions of 1925 and 1927 remark Briscoe's talent. In contrast, the sumptuous interior detail of major ground floor rooms is quite characteristic of the architect's sensibility.

To assist him in executing some of this detail, Briscoe commissioned Peter Mansbendel (1883-1940), a Swiss born Austin woodcarver. Mansbendel built the delicate Adam style mantelpieces in the library and dining room. Although Mansbendel did work for many Texas architects during his 30 year career in Austin, Briscoe was his foremost client.

Robert Lee Blaffer was apparently as dedicated to Shadyside as was its founder Cullinan. He convinced both his partner Farish and Harry C. Wiess, another Humble cofounder, to build houses there and tried unsuccessfully to get the attorney James A. Baker, chairman of the Rice Institute trustees, to do the same. After Blaffer's death, his widow continued to dwell in the house. Mrs. Blaffer was well known both for her eccentricities and her splendid collection of modern paintings and antique furniture. Contrary to some published accounts, all rooms in the house are wired for electricity. But when entertaining, Mrs. Blaffer illuminated the house entirely by candlelight, reflected in the many mirrors with with interior shutters are paneled.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The house for Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer presents an intriguing amalgam of architectural detail. Located in the Houston neighborhood of Shadyside, in proximity to the Museum of Fine Arts, Hermann Park, the campus of Rice University and the Texas Medical Center, it is emblematic of the discriminating taste and cultural ambition which, during the 1920s, marked that stratum of Houston society known as the Best Oil Money.

The Blaffer House is a rambling, asymmetrically massed house. The ground plan of the house is in the shape of a T, with the central portion (the stem) oriented north-south facing Sunset Blvd and a series of perpendicular wings (the cross piece) running east-west at the east end where there is a slight one-story projection and at the west end, where a one-story extension has been added. The

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

south (garden) elevation of the house contains 5 bays centered on the garden entrance, with the added one-story bay to the west, the two bays of a projecting south wing to the east and a fenestrated half bay emerging beyond the south wing's eastern flank. The north (entrance) elevation contains a gabled entrance bay encompassed on the west by a larger gabled bay and the one-story addition. To the east of the entrance bay lie an inset bay, the gabled end of the projecting two-bay north wing and a two-bay eastward projecting garden front wing. On the east are a four-bay unit contained by a composite gable-within-a-gable, another two-bay range and the projecting two-bay northeast wing visible on the entrance elevation. The west elevation is three-bays wide. The house is constructed of masonry bearing walls above a concrete foundation and partial basement. The exterior walls are faced with a light brown brick laid in Flemish bond. Stone is used for some external trim work. The roofs are sheathed with silvery slate.

The garden entrance comprises a wood paneled door set within a recess framed on the south elevation by a stone Venetian portal. The theme of a central arch flanked by lower trabeated members recurs in the treatment of the north entrance, where a paneled wood door is capped by a wood fanlight and bracketed by shuttered sidelights. A smaller arched entry leads into the service porch on the north elevation of the northeast wing. The implied formality of this Anglo-Palladian detail is countered by the picturesque treatment and variety of window openings. A tri-part projecting bay above the north entrance articulates the presence of the main stair landing. To one side of this, a 1 ½ story projecting oriel filled with wood casements denotes the location of a secondary stair. French doors occur in the central gabled unit on the east side of the house. Triple hung windows, 6/6/6, are located in ground floor openings on the west end of the house and in projecting bays on the east and west elevations of the south wing. Six-over-nine double hung windows occur in the second floor openings on the garden elevation. Six-over-six double hung windows occur in most of the other second floor openings, and ground floor openings on the eastern range of the house. Casement windows are grouped in long dormers on the north and south sides of the house, a projecting rectangular bay on the garden elevation and in second floor windows on the south and northeast wings. Most window openings are shuttered with aquamarine louvered blinds.

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CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

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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 LANDMARK DESIGNATION

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation

(a) The HAHC, 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 |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | | | |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | | | |
- (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;

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

- (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.

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)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer House at 3 Longfellow Lane.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT A

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer House
3 Longfellow Lane



CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT B

SITE LOCATION MAP

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer House
3 Longfellow Lane

NOT TO SCALE

