

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Brown-Melcher House
OWNER: Sam and Paula Douglass
APPLICANT: Sam and Paula Douglass
LOCATION: 13 Tiel Way – River Oaks
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: II.c
HPO FILE NO.: 07L186
DATE ACCEPTED: Jun-07-07
HAHC HEARING DATE: Aug-22-07
PC MEETING DATE: Aug-30-07

SITE INFORMATION:

Lot 33, Block 56, River Oaks Section 12, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is an historic two-story stucco-clad residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Brown-Melcher House at 13 Tiel Way in River Oaks was designed and built in 1949 by Houston architect Hamilton Brown for his family. Upon its completion, the Texas Society of Architects bestowed its first honor award to the house for its innovative plan. The house was later purchased by Houston philanthropists Mr. and Mrs. LeRoy Melcher, Jr., who hired architect Howard Barnstone to complete an extensive renovation in 1961-1962. The Brown-Melcher House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 6 for Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Brown-Melcher House at 13 Tiel Way (originally 17 Tiel Way) is located in Section 12 of River Oaks, one of the last two sections to be developed in the neighborhood. Section 12, a tract that lies between Kirby Drive and Buffalo Bayou, is bisected by a deep ravine and provides difficult terrain for building. In 1949, Hamilton Brown, a noted Houston modernist architect, designed and built a home for his family that addressed the challenging terrain. The original architectural plans for the house are labeled "Hamilton Brown for Mrs. Hamilton Brown."

The home immediately received recognition as noted by the Houston Post in an article that appeared on September 18, 1949:

"AWARD WINNERS – The firm of Hamilton Brown and David C. Baer won the first honor award for designing the contemporary-colonial residence of Mr. Brown at 17 Tiel Way, River Oaks. The home...was constructed upon a pie-shaped lot with a confined building area due to the rapid fall to a ravine at the rear of the property. It was designed to allow for informal living in dignified surroundings and to blend with the natural surroundings while avoiding the unconventional which would attract curious Sunday crowds."

On the same day, the Houston Chronicle reported:

"Prize Winning House Design in the Texas Society of Architects competition was taken by Houston Architect Hamilton Brown with this plan of a house built for the architect and his family at 17 Tiel Way at a cost of \$25,000. Mr. Brown's entry took first honors in the residential

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class...[The] floorplan of the downstairs features sliding glass doors between the living room and back porch and the dining room screened porch. Another feature of the downstairs is a back-to-back fireplace arrangement whereby a fireplace is in the den and the living room and each available to the same chimney... The house was especially designed for the Houston climate."

Hamilton Brown was the father of current Houston City Councilmember and architect Peter Brown. In a personal interview, Councilmember Brown recalled site preparations for 13 Tiel Way in which his father employed a man who used a team of mules to clear the building site.

Hamilton Brown was born in Alameda, California, on March 23, 1908. He studied at the University of California at Berkeley and received his B.S. in Architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1932. During his time at M.I.T., he took a year abroad (1931) to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the world-renowned school for the arts in Paris, France.

By 1937, Hamilton Brown had established his architectural practice in Houston and later became well-known for his modernist style. According to the report for the Landmark and Protected Landmark designation for the Albert Ladner House (PLM 2006), Hamilton Brown's designs include: First Christian Church (1601 Sunset Blvd.); the Medical Center National Bank; Adams Petroleum Center (6910 Fannin); the Elizabeth L. Ring Branch for the Houston Public Library; numerous elementary schools for Houston Independent School District; and City of Houston Fire Station No. 27 (PLM 2006). Brown was active in community affairs and was involved in the Arts Council of Harris County, the Houston Ballet Foundation, and the Neighborhood Improvement Council. He was also a leader for the preservation and development of Old Market Square and Allen's Landing in downtown Houston.

In the early 1960s, Mr. and Mrs. LeRoy Melcher, Jr., purchased the home from the Brown family and began an extensive renovation. For the renovation, they hired another well-known local architect, Howard Barnstone. According to correspondence found in the Howard Barnstone archives, the renovation added 2,800 square feet to the existing 2,000 square foot home. The changes included an enlargement to the living room, the addition of a master suite over the old garage, a complete update to the kitchen, and the addition of two playrooms (up and down) for the Melcher boys. From the plans available at River Oaks Property Owners, the façade was dramatically changed to its current appearance. Although the alterations to the home were substantial, the remodel occurred in 1962, and is itself nearly fifty years of age. Furthermore, the alterations were executed by a prominent Houston architect in a style in character with other mid-century examples also located on Tiel Way and designed by architects such as Mackie & Kamrath and Hugo Neuhaus.

For much of his career, LeRoy Melcher, Jr., (1938-1981) worked with his family's company, the UtoteM Food Store chain, which had been acquired by his father Leroy Melcher, Sr., in 1950 and expanded to more than 1,000 locations from a modest 10. Starting in 1957, the younger Melcher held positions in a variety of areas in the company, including public relations, advertising, real estate, and construction. By 1976, he was responsible for managing the entire eastern half of the U.S. for UtoteM. Leroy Melcher, Jr., eventually left UtoteM to start his own chain with his father, called Ranger Markets. At the time of his death in 1981, he was president and general manager of Ranger Markets.

Melcher's recreational activities included automobile racing. He held a full F.I.A. International Automobile Racing License from 1963 to 1981. He won several national and many state championships, including the Al Parker Sportscar Driver of the Year Trophy and the British Government Cup presented to the outstanding driver of a British racing car. He was also an accomplished pilot with experience

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piloting high performance single and multi-engine airplanes and gliders, as well as jet helicopters. Finally, he held a state Ship Captain's License and had navigation experience within 200 miles of the Texas coast from Brownsville to Port Arthur, the Florida East Coast south of Fort Lauderdale, the Bahamas, the U.S. Virgin Isles, and the British Virgin Isles.

Melcher's other achievements include his service as a Director of Meyerland State Bank, Board of Trustees of the Houston-Harris County Lighthouse for the Blind, Chairman of Mother's March of Dimes, member of the Harris County Aviation Committee, and Board of Directors of the National Association of Convenience Stores.

Melcher completed the renovation of the home with his wife, Anne Schlumberger Melcher. After the renovation, the home was featured on the 12th Annual Contemporary House Tour held in December 1964. An article about the tour appears with a photo of Mrs. Melcher with her three sons, Le, Marc, and Pete, enjoying their new sun deck. The article states:

"SCENE: HOUSTON House Tour – A heavy screen of trees and foliage hides the home of Mr. and Mrs. LeRoy Melcher, Jr. from the passer-by in the street at 13 Tiel Way.... A stately pine, years old, thrusts its head through beams toward the sky; its trunk is a handsome part of the enclosure and entrance to the home...Three little boys are the center of the Melcher family activity...A long porch, living and dining room were combined for one enormous living area. Parquet floors enrich the room, paneling in dark tones and bookshelves flank the fireplace, and glass walls look out on two sides to the wooded bayou."

The article also features a photo of Mrs. Melcher with her dog Fang by the fireplace with a "many colored tapestry acquired in Paris."

Howard Barnstone served as both architect and decorator for the home. Barnstone was born on March 27, 1923, in Auburn, Maine. After receiving an architecture degree from Yale University in 1948, he moved to Houston where he remained for the rest of his life, teaching and practicing architecture.

Barnstone's early work was strongly influenced by New York architect Philip Johnson and German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, both of whom designed modernist buildings in Houston in the 1950s. Modernist architecture was especially identified in Houston with the collectors Dominique and John de Menil, whose house had been designed by Johnson and who were patrons of Barnstone's for the duration of his career. While in partnership with Preston M. Bolton (1952-61), Barnstone produced a series of rectilinear, flat-roofed houses in the manner of Johnson and Mies that brought Bolton and Barnstone to national attention.

During the 1960s, Barnstone designed a number of public buildings that exhibited differentiated massing shapes and articulation of reinforced concrete structural members, such as Piney Point Elementary School (1962), the Galveston County News Building in Galveston (1965), and the Center for the Retarded (1966). His houses tended to be architecturally 'introverted' and characterized by open interiors with high ceilings, simple planar walls, and dramatic expanses of glass. During the 1970s and 1980s, Barnstone's work became even more varied architecturally, as he designed projects in Mexico, Arizona, New York, and Connecticut.

Barnstone joined the faculty of the University of Houston in 1948, becoming Associate Professor of Architecture in 1952 and Professor in 1958. He also taught as a visiting instructor at Yale University (1964) and the University of St. Thomas (1965). He wrote two books on Texas architectural subjects, *The Galveston That Was* (1966) and *The Architecture of John F. Staub, Houston and the South* (1979). Barnstone served on the boards of numerous civic and cultural organizations, and was elected a fellow of

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the American Institute of Architects in 1968. He died in Houston in 1987. Barnstone's papers are deposited at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center of the Houston Public Library.

Howard Barnstone's involvement as both architect and interior designer of the Melcher Home is illustrated in the many correspondences that have been archived by the Houston Public Library. In one letter written by Mrs. Melcher to Howard Barnstone on March 20, 1963, and signed, "The Legend", she writes: "Dear Howard, In your capacity as decorator, can you please advise me whether to have green, turquoise, gold, light blue, gray or burgundy colored felt placed on the pool table for 13 Tiel?...Moreover, I see that you have made no provisions for mounting the pool cues upon the den wall...isn't this going to be a built-in?"

The Brown-Melcher house was later sold to Sandy Gerry and Bob Mosbacher who, in turn, sold it to Jan and Susan Barksdale. The home is currently owned by Paula and Sam Douglass who have initiated the Landmark Designation application for the house.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The Brown-Melcher House at 13 Tiel Way is designed in the modernistic style, which is in harmony with other mid-century architectural works located on the street. The home is two stories in height and is sited on an irregular, undulating lot on Tiel Way. This section of River Oaks was one of the last sections to be developed and is characterized by a later phase of architectural styles with many examples of mid-century modern design. A stylistic cousin of this house may be seen at 54 Briar Hollow Lane, another of Barnstone's designs from 1960.

The exterior of the Brown-Melcher House is notable for its broad panels of white stucco framed by bold contrasting steel beams which are painted black. The cubic massing of the house with its external steel skeleton is in the spirit of both Phillip Johnson and Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, who worked in this style and who each produced groundbreaking architectural works in Houston during the 1950s.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Houston Chronicle, "Prize Winning House Design", September 18, 1949.

Houston Post, "Award Winners," September 18, 1949.

Landmark Designation Report, "Albert L. Ladner House", May 6, 2005.

Handbook of Texas Online, s.v. "," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/BB/fbael.html> (accessed May 8, 2007).

Correspondence of Mr. and Mrs. Melcher with Howard Barnstone, Houston Public Library.

Houston Post, "Scene: Houston House Tour", December 1, 1964.

Houston Chronicle, "LeRoy Melcher Obituary", March 8, 1981.

Houston Architectural Survey, "River Oaks Subdivision", 1980.

Visit with Councilman Peter Brown by Kelley Trammell, May 30, 2007.

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

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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:

- | <u>S</u> | <u>NA</u> | <u>S - satisfies</u> | <u>D - does not satisfy</u> | <u>NA - not applicable</u> |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <input checked="" 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; | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event; | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present; | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride. | | |

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of the Brown-Melcher House at 13 Tiel Way.

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SITE LOCATION MAP
BROWN-MELCHER HOUSE
13 TIEL WAY
NOT TO SCALE

