CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission **Planning and Development Department**

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Buhmann-Fleming House
OWNER: Bette T. Hawn
APPLICANT: Bette T. Hawn
LOCATION: 1928 Larchmont Lane – River Oaks
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: II.a
HPO FILE NO.: 07L184
DATE ACCEPTED: Jul-30-07
HAHC HEARING: Aug-22-07
PC HEARING: Aug-30-07

SITE INFORMATION:

Lot 12, Block 6, River Oaks Country Club Estates, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story brick veneered house.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Buhmann-Fleming House at 1928 Larchmont Road was one of the first homes to be built in River Oaks Country Club Estates, which was the first developed section of the River Oaks subdivision. The house was built in 1925 for William Buhmann, the owner of a local lumber company, by noted Houston architect R. D. Steele. It was subsequently purchased by C.C. Pat Fleming, a pioneering Texas landscape architect, who completed a major renovation of the building in 1955. The house meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, and 6 for Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Buhmann-Fleming House at 1928 Larchmont Road is one of the earliest homes constructed in River Oaks, built shortly after the William L. Clayton Summer House (COH Landmark, 2006), the first home built in River Oaks. On November 11, 1924, the Houston Chronicle announced: *"Begin Work on Two More Homes at River Oaks" – Two more beautiful homes were started in Country Club Estates during the last week. One of them is to be that of Blakely Smith and is to be of Spanish architecture and located on Groveland Lane. The other is that of William Buhmann and it is being built on Larchmont Road. This home is to be in the colonial style...Finishing touches are now being put on the handsome colonial home of W.L. Clayton overlooking the River Oaks Country Club golf course."* A Houston Chronicle aerial photograph of the neighborhood dated April 11, 1926, shows the neighborhood with only 15 to 20 homes. The Buhmann house is set amongst empty land with the closest residence appearing to be that of John Staub at 1804 Larchmont Road. The listings that appeared in the City Directory for 1926 and 1927 simply show William Buhmann on Larchmont with no number address, as no address appears to have been necessary. A photograph of the house that appeared in the 1929 "River Oaks: A Pictorial Presentation of Houston's Residential Park" shows a white clapboard-style home with a covered columned entryway.

William Buhmann (1884-1974) was President of Buhmann Lumber Company, which advertised "Lumber and Building Material," and was located at 7900 Washington Avenue. Buhmann hired local architect R. D. Steele to design his new residence, and the family moved from their previous home at 808 Sul Ross to the new house in 1925 or 1926. Buhmann and his wife Ann resided in the home until

the mid-1940s, when the house was sold to William T. Hancock, Jr., a geologist and vice-president of Kirby Petroleum.

Cauthen Cook ("C.C." or "Pat") Fleming, one of Houston's preeminent landscape architects, bought the house from Hancock in the mid-1950s. Fleming, born in Beaumont on February 13, 1909, was one of seven children born to Joseph Vandever and Keziah Fleming. In 1918, the family left Beaumont for the drier climate of Arizona to escape malaria. In 1928, Fleming left Arizona and began undergraduate studies in architecture at the University of Texas in Austin. Due to an eye injury sustained while welding, Fleming was forced to abandon his college studies. He would never complete his architectural training or receive formal landscape training.

In 1930, Fleming started his career with an assignment under Mrs. C. B. Whitehead, an Austin landscape contractor, in completing the master plan for the University of Texas designed by Hare & Hare of Kansas City. After completing that assignment, he was asked to work for the National Park Service, first at Palmetto State Park near Gonzales, and later as the supervising landscape architect for the San Jacinto Monument and Battlegrounds, a high profile assignment that advanced Fleming's career in several ways. First, he was introduced to Alfred Finn, the architect for the monument, who was impressed with Fleming's work and recommended him to influential Houstonians. Second, Fleming worked with Albert Sheppard, a UT classmate, who would become his business partner from 1937 to 1942. And, finally, he was appointed to serve on the City of Houston Planning Commission by Mayor Fonville, and in 1938, he was appointed as assistant director of the Houston Housing Authority.

In 1937, Fleming formed a professional landscape planning practice with Albert Sheppard called Fleming & Sheppard. Until the practice closed in 1942, Fleming & Sheppard received numerous commissions in River Oaks, Shadyside, and Broadacres, often for homes designed by John Staub. The firm also designed the Diana Garden at Bayou Bend for Miss Ima Hogg. The Houston Architectural Guide describes the Diana Garden as "a series of terraces that step down from the north side of the house toward Buffalo Bayou."

Fleming served as the first director of the combined Department of Parks and Recreation of Houston from 1943 to 1945. In 1945, he reestablished a private practice, later named Fleming Planning Associates. Over the next 35 years, Fleming received recognition for both corporate and residential projects. In 1952, he created the first corporate campus in Houston for Prudential Life Insurance Company and was awarded the 1955 Plant American Award from the American Association of Nurserymen. Fleming also designed the R.E. "Bob" Smith fountain, a landmark in downtown Houston. On the residential side, his assignments were numerous and included projects in Louisiana, New Mexico, Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, Arkansas, Colorado, Minnesota, Canada, Mexico and Europe. He received the International Award for Landscape Planting by the Garden Club of America for the Cecil R. Haden residence in 1962 and for the William McIver Streetman residence in 1963, both in Houston. In the Houston Architectural Guide, Stephen Fox names other Fleming gardens at: 1405 South Boulevard, 2909 Inwood Drive, 1323 North Boulevard, and 2950 Lazy Lane (Dogwoods – demolished). During his career, Fleming's work received notice in various issues of House Beautiful, Better Homes and Gardens, Southern Accents, Houston Home and Garden, Texas Homes, and Landscape Architecture.

Fleming was also active in the Houston community. In 1954, he helped to found the Harris County Heritage Society. He was an early advocate for using Buffalo Bayou as an "amenity for the City." Fleming retired for a time to the Texas Hill Country and returned to Houston in 1984 to resume a limited practice. At this time, he installed the gardens at the Oscar F. Holcombe estate. He died on

February 7, 1996, after a long illness. His papers reside in the Texas Room and include the manuscript for an unpublished book.

Rezin D. ("R.D.") Steele, the architect for the Buhmann-Fleming House, had offices downtown at the 510 National Bank Building, and practiced architecture in Houston from 1893 until his death in 1936. Steele produced a substantial body of work, although he never achieved "especial prominence." According to Stephen Fox, Steele's major buildings include the Star Engraving Co. Building (nominated as a National Landmark); the original St. Paul's Methodist Church (1909, demolished); the original Memorial Hospital (1910, 1924, demolished); downtown retail buildings for Harris-Hahlo (1920, demolished), the grocer Henry Henke (1924), and Rettig's, Inc. (1927, demolished); Sidney Lanier Junior High School (1925, with Jonas & Tabor); and Baptist Temple in Houston Heights (1931). Steele's most well-known building is the Henke-Pillot South End grocery market at Travis St. and Tuam Ave. (1923, extensively altered). Historian Richard Longstreth has identified the Henke-Pillot store as the first suburban market building to be oriented not to the street but to its own off-street parking lot.

RESTORATION HISTORY AND CONDITION:

The Buhmann-Fleming House was built as a two-story clapboard home in 1925 by R.D. Steele. A 1929 photograph shows an entry way on the front of the home with two columns and a railing above. Upon his purchase of the home around 1955, C.C. Pat Fleming completed a major renovation "to enhance the dialogue between indoors and out." According to a thesis on Fleming's career prepared by Paige Phillips, the front door was moved from the east side of the house to the north side, and a plate glass window was added to the south side of the house on axis with the new front door. Upon entering the home, one was able to see through the curved stair rail through the drawing room and into the courtyard, which contained a pillar-like "dolphin fountain."

Phillips notes the "heavy deference to the automobile" in the plan. A significant portion of the lot is given to the parking and passage of automobiles. The home had a driveway on its north and west sides that circled around the back of the house. The largest uninterrupted green space is at the front of the house, where a "modern" circular pool was intended but never completed. Philips states, "Despite the more modern characteristics of his plan, Fleming by no means abandoned classical design in his home garden. Many axially symmetric relations exist in his home landscape."

Phillips describes different thematic elements in different areas of the garden. "Fleming's various garden rooms in his home lent a variety of moods and experiences which invited the viewer's mind to wander." She quotes Kenneth McMinn, an employee of Mr. Fleming, who said, "what Fleming loved about these rooms is that he could go around the world in one house by extending this axis off that window. He could be in Japan in that little Japanese garden. He could then go into the drawing room and be in a villa he had visited in Italy."

Fleming lived in the house until 1963, when he sold the house to William R. Hayes, an oil producer. The house was later sold to Charles Coates, and in the 1970s, the house was purchased by John and Bette Winter (now Bette Hawn). During the Winters' ownership, the windows on the east side of the home were converted to bay windows. The driveway in the backyard was altered, with the backyard now converted to grass and a pool. The home has been well-maintained and still retains its charm from the C.C. Pat Fleming days. Upon entering, the visitor is greeted by a fabulous iron balcony installed by Fleming and a view of the dolphin fountain through a dramatic plate glass window at the end of the hall.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Fox, Stephen, personal notes and research about R.D. Steele, June 2007.

Fox, Stephen, Houston Architectural Guide, American Institute of Architects, 1999.

Houston Chronicle, "Begin Work…," November 16, 1924.

Houston Chronicle, aerial photograph, April 11, 1926.

Houston Chronicle, "San Jacinto Battleground Architect Dies", February 8, 1996.

Phillips, Paige Allred, C.C. Pat Fleming: Houston, Texas Landscape Architect, LSU Masters Thesis.

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.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

The HAHC and the Planning 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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);
☐	☑	(2)	Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event (Sec. 33-224(a)(2);
☑	☐	(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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(3);
☑	☐	(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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(4);
☐	☑	(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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(5);
☑	☐	(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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(6);
☐	☑	(7)	Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7);
☐	☑	(8)	Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride (Sec. 33-224(a)(8).
☐	☑	(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 the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of the Buhmann-Fleming House at 1928 Larchmont Lane.

SITE LOCATION MAP
BUHMANN-FLEMING HOUSE
1928 LARCHMONT LANE
NOT TO SCALE