
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 12-05

Harbour Square

Square 503, Lot 116

400 and 500 blocks, even numbers, of N Street SW;
400 and 500 blocks, odd numbers, of O Street SW; and
1400 block, odd numbers, of 4th Street SW

Meeting Date: February 28, 2013
Applicant: Harbour Square Owners, Inc. (property owner)
Affected ANC: 6D
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Harbour Square, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The staff further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1966, the date of the complex's completion.

The property meets District of Columbia Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism") for "embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types, or methods of construction... [and as] expressions of landscape architecture.. urban planning, siting or design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia..." and Criterion F ("Creative Masters") as a notable work of its influential architect, Cloethiel Woodard Smith, and landscape architect Daniel Urban Kiley. The property therefore merits listing in the National Register of Places under National Register Criterion C. As one of the main building blocks of the Southwest Urban Renewal Area, designed by one of its principal planners, Harbour Square is of sufficient importance to be listed in the National Register despite being a bit short of fifty years old.

Background

Harbour Square was built between 1963 and 1966, developed by Shannon & Luchs. Its construction was delayed by a year-long negotiation of the sale and by revisions to an initially even more ambitious site plan. It is a complex of 448 apartments and seventeen townhouses, arranged around a series of interior quadrangles. It is said to consist of eight buildings, including ones consisting of a series of rowhouses (see the floor plan among the nomination's illustrations). The buildings are tallest at the west end, where the complex opens in a U shape to provide views of the river to the greatest number of apartments. Toward the east end, nearer to and along 4th Street, the buildings drop in height, to a minimum of three stories. They have staggered setbacks and varying skins and fenestration in order to modulate a three-block-long building into less repetitive, more comprehensible and human-scaled pieces. The varied structures allowed for varied plans—large apartments and small, some having views on opposite

sides of their buildings and some with especially high ceilings—encouraging a mixing of residents of various incomes.

Harbour Square’s design architect was Cloethiel Woodard Smith, a woman with a strong planning background, having studied under and worked for Henry Wright, one of the founders of the Regional Planning Association and partner with Clarence Stein in designing Sunnyside Gardens in Queens and Radburn, New Jersey. When she left Wright’s employ, Smith quickly rose to the position of chief of research and planning in the Large Scale Housing Division of the Depression-era Federal Housing Administration. After returning in 1946 from a professorship and government posts in Bolivia (where she also authored a city plan for Quito, Ecuador), she joined the modernist D.C. firm of Berla and Abel, which did mostly residential work. Five years later, Smith and Nicolas Satterlee left the office to become partners with Arthur H. Keyes and Nicolas Lethbridge, and she mostly undertook the planning of residential subdivisions. Smith and Satterlee soon formed their own firm, among whose first projects was the successful Capitol Park, the first section developed within the Southwest Urban Renewal Area.

While still with Keyes, Smith, Satterlee and Lethbridge, Cloethiel Woodard Smith collaborated with Louis Justement on a new plan for Southwest urban renewal commissioned by the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA). This plan was intended to be a bolder alternative to the 1951 Peets Plan, which called for more preservation of building stock. The National Capital Planning Commission ultimately synthesized the two plans, but many in the architectural world preferred the Justement-Smith Plan, and her work on it raised her profile and influence greatly. It was largely on the basis of this plan that she obtained the commission for Capitol Park and Harbour Square, both of which contributed to the implementation of her vision for a new community.

The Harbour Square complex is unique among those of Southwest for the way it incorporated several historic buildings into itself. Wheat Row, the 1793 seven-rowhouse development by James Greenleaf, remains the dominant feature on 4th Street, flanked by brick townhouses of a definitively modern character, set back slightly and built slightly lower to leave the historic building foremost and even allow the return of its cornice. Around the corner on N Street stand the Duncanson-Cranch House (about 1794) and the Edward Simon Lewis House (about 1817), similarly abutted by new construction in a manner that recalls pre-urban renewal Southwest.

The portions of the complex most recessed from N and O Streets are the multi-story, multi-family links—Buildings C and D—between the townhouses and the towers. These also stretch over the entrance to a 448-car underground garage, and provide the primary means of entry from outside the complex to the common spaces within, including a central “tree court.” The garage entrances are made less conspicuous from most vantage points by the deep recess, which is further softened by plantings in front and hanging down from above. The recesses also help divide the long complex into a couple of approximately block-long pieces.

In fact, the complex is characterized by its plantings and hardscape, the finest of any of the Southwest housing complexes and designed by the acclaimed landscape architect Dan Kiley. With Garrett Eckbo and James Rose at Harvard University, Kiley tried to synthesize Beaux Arts formal traditions with modernist “social, spatial, and artistic interests” more recently introduced

from Europe. After World War II, Kiley worked with some of the foremost modernist architects and firms active in the country, including Eero Saarinen, Louis Kahn, Skidmore Owings and Merrill and Pei Cobb Freed. Kiley had first collaborated with Cloethiel Woodard Smith on Capitol Park, creating a courtyard with stepping stones through a signature water feature, terminating at a pavilion with a vaulted roof sheltering an artwork.

At Harbor Square, the landscape was far more ambitious and complex, divided by the buildings themselves into multiple themed gardens. The most impressive part is the one-acre “Aquatic Garden,” which contains a pool with its own willow tree on a square island. The pool is the main element of a central courtyard onto which most apartments look, softened at the west end by groves of trees that provide privacy for the complex and some separation from the public space along the waterfront. This space is also seen through the glassy ground floor of Buildings A and B, and that interpenetrability of interior and exterior spaces is a hallmark of modernism. Kiley placed an additional fountain on the south side of the complex, accessible to public view, and designed a “tree court,” a Japanese garden, etc.

Evaluation

Ideally, much of “near” Southwest would have been designated a historic district, encompassing nearly all of the urban renewal area, but including many of the older buildings. Such a nomination, or a multiple-property document, would have covered the development of the urban renewal project in greater detail than could any one of the landmark nominations for the properties within. Certainly the whole, despite not being completed until the 1970s, should be considered to be of exceptional significance for being one of the most comprehensive implementations of an urban renewal plan in the nation, as well as for having significant constituent parts and many notable architects involved.

This nomination, like those for preceding landmarks Capitol Park Apartments and Tiber Island, goes into considerable detail on the genesis and development of the Southwest Urban Renewal Plan. In one sense, Harbour Square is simply a continuation of the earlier segments of the plan, in that it was erected on the southern part of Area C, one of the several constituent superblocks that had been sold to various developers and designed by one of several modernist architects. It was not the first project undertaken under the plan. In fact, Harbour Square was the fourth residential superblock project to be completed in Southwest, preceded by Capitol Park, River Park Mutual Homes, and finished after its nearly contemporaneous neighbor, Tiber Island. These had set the pattern of the residential “tower in the park” surrounded by townhouses. And the honor for the development with the most unusual or iconic architecture has to go to the barrel-roofed River Park townhouses, designed by Charles Goodman and constructed largely of aluminum, as a demonstration of the uses of the products of Reynolds Aluminum. Yet each of these projects is unique, and a couple of the unique features of Harbour Square merit the property’s designation as a landmark.

First, Harbour Square contains the best and most ambitious landscape, designed by master landscape architect Dan Kiley. The landscape is warm, welcoming, humane and innovative (the willow in the pool required a box for its roots that continues down into the parking garage), and visually accessible to the public, as well as affording welcoming views and reasonable privacy for such a sizable complex.

Second, Harbour Square is unlike its peers and neighbors in the degree to which the constituent buildings are both joined and varied, including incorporating historic buildings. The complex already has demonstrated historic value by the fact that it contains Wheat Row, the Duncanson-Cranch House, and the Lewis House, all D.C. landmarks and listed in the National Register of Historic Places. While the Justement-Smith Plan of 1952 included no provision for historic preservation of Southwest, by the end of the decade, the RLA agreed to the retention of these buildings, as well as the Thomas Law House next to Tiber Island. Ultimately, Cloethiel Smith embraced the mission of preserving the venerable homes in a context that featured them—within a complex that could easily have overwhelmed them if not handled sensitively. In doing so, she introduced many design concepts that are still utilized in contextual design within urban historic districts today: breaking down large, new construction into smaller components to improve its scale and avoid relentless repetition; varying heights and streetscapes, but relating to the size and scale to historic buildings; reinforcing a predominant building line near the street, but concealing or de-emphasizing parking structures and entrances; using building materials compatible with traditional buildings; and deferring to the primacy of historic buildings in setting the visual character. Judged by the awards and write-ups it has received and the popularity of the complex with its residents over decades, Harbour Square must be considered one of the great successes of modernist multi-family residential development in Washington, as well as one of the first major historic adaptive reuse projects. And Smith was recognized in her time as one of the more important architects of the era.

Harbour Square has been home to many important D.C. figures, most notably including Vice President, and Presidential candidate, Hubert Humphrey. The complex has been featured in the fourth edition of the *AIA Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.*, in James M. Goode's *Best Addresses*, in Scott and Lee's *Buildings of the District of Columbia* (Oxford University Press, 1993), and in Kousoulas and Kousoulas's *Contemporary Architecture in Washington, D.C.* (Preservation Press, 1995). In the latter's appraisal, "This building shows how wonderful modern architecture can be. The architect used scale, materials, and details to express the domestic use of these buildings and sited them to catch river views and to create defined spaces that vary between public and private."

Although there have naturally been numerous changes over time, the buildings and landscape retain a high degree of historic integrity; the historic photos of the late 1960s are instantly recognizable in comparison with the property today.