
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 14-13

The Ethelhurst
1025 15th Street NW
Square 216, Lot 26

Meeting Date: October 23, 2014
Applicant: Honeybee Hospitality (owner)

Affected ANC: 2F
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Ethelhurst, 1025 15th Street NW, a landmark to be entered in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites. The HPO further recommends that the Board request that the State Historic Preservation Officer forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1902, the beginning of its construction, to 1958, the date the building ceased being occupied as apartments.

The property merits designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C and District of Columbia designation Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types... or... expressions of... design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia,” as well as National Register of Historic Places Criterion A and District of Columbia designation Criterion B (“History”) for being “associated with... patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the... development of the District of Columbia,” specifically as an early form of purpose-built luxury apartment building designed in the Beaux Arts style, as detailed in the nomination and the Multiple Property Documentation Form *Apartment Buildings in Washington, D.C., 1880-1945*.

Background

Erected in 1902-1903, the Ethelhurst apartments were designed and developed by prominent Washington architect-builder-speculator T. Franklin Schneider. Schneider began his architectural career in the mid 1870s, working for the firm of Cluss and Schulze. He set up his own practice in 1883, and by the end of the 1880s he was developing single-family residences, most notably “Schneider Triangle” which occupies an entire city block (Square 53) adjoining Washington Circle. Schneider soon turned to apartment buildings, a relatively recent but increasingly popular building type. In 1900 alone he built the Albemarle and the Iowa apartments, but his most famous project was the twelve-story Cairo Hotel (1894).

The eight-story, 40-unit Ethelhurst was an early luxury apartment building, catering to the upper echelon of the management class in Washington’s downtown, before suburbanization dispersed more affluent city dwellers. The building was equipped with an elevator and elaborately

decorated in the fashionable Beaux Arts classicism of the period, with a rusticated base and quoins, tower-like corners, and a flamboyant attic story. The vocabulary provides a contrast to Schneider's earlier Victorian work and to contemporary apartments in a more transitional style, such as the 1897-1904 Portner Flats.

Evaluation

The building is a fine and early example of Beaux Arts architecture, at home among nearby commercial and institutional examples of the style. Unfortunately, there are significant integrity issues, including a nearly complete renovation of the interior in the 1950s to convert the building to office use. The same renovation was responsible for the removal of the original entry and steps in favor of a modern, at-grade entrance. The windows have been replaced, and there is a prominent rooftop safety rail and mechanical equipment. Still, the building retains most of its integrity and character, as one expects many such adaptive changes over time. Despite the entrance, the whole successfully communicates its origins and prior use.

In 1994, the Historic Preservation Review Board and the National Register adopted the Multiple Property Documentation Form *Apartment Buildings in Washington, D.C., 1880-1945*, which contained registration criteria for defined categories of early apartments. The Ethelhurst meets some of the MPD's criteria for both architectural and historical significance:

A-2 Buildings that illustrate the initial development of the apartment movement as it relates to the need for housing, including the introduction of the building type and the specific forms seen in this early period throughout the city [in this case, as a downtown luxury building];

A-3 Buildings that are part of clusters, corridors, or districts that illustrate the patterns of development of the city [in this instance, part of the downtown financial district];

C-5 Buildings that illustrate expressions of architectural styles, either rare, notable, or influential to the aesthetic development of the apartment building or architecture in general [a fine and early example of Beaux Arts, despite being marred by the new entrance]; and

C-10 Buildings that are the work of skilled architects, landscape architects, urban planners, engineers, builders or developers [Thomas Franklin Schneider as architect, builder and developer].

The last criterion cited was intended to cover significance derived from persons directly responsible for design and construction. This building is probably more significant for having been the creation of T. Franklin Schneider, especially as it exhibits his growth as both an architect and developer. But while Schneider might be considered a master in his field and important locally, the HPO is not comfortable with the property meriting designation under National Register Criterion B and D.C. Criterion C ("Individuals") for being "associated with the lives of persons significant to the history of the District of Columbia" because, as stated in the National Register Bulletin *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, of important "[a]rchitects, artisans, artists and engineers are often represented by their works, which are eligible under Criterion C," but "[t]heir homes and studios, however, can be eligible for consideration under Criterion B, because these usually are the properties with which they are most personally associated." In other words, to honor the work of an architect for being important for its association with the architect is self-referential, circular, and perhaps backward, because it is really for such works, and a whole body of work, that he or she is important. And an architect or builder is usually more important for having been prolific, but it is difficult to

apportion such significance among each and all of his or her works. For these reasons, and for consistency with the National Register, while we acknowledge the significance of the producers of important works, the works generally have to speak for themselves, under NR Criterion C and D.C. Criterion D.