
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 09-08

Brookland Bowling Alleys

3726 10th Street NE
Square 3822, Lot 805

Meeting Date: July 28, 2016
Applicants: D.C. Preservation League and Brookland Community Development Corp.
Affected ANC: 5B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Brookland Bowling Alleys, 3726 10th Street NE, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board request the nomination to be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1938 to 1952, from the construction of the first story and its duckpin bowling lanes until the restoration of the two-story building after a fire.

The property merits designation under District of Columbia designation Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) and National Register Criterion C, for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles [and] building types... significant to the appearance and development of the District of the District of Columbia,” specifically for being a good example of an Art Deco-style neighborhood commercial building that was purpose-built as a bowling alley to serve the Brookland area, and thereafter becoming a visual landmark of the neighborhood.

Historic background

The Brookland Bowling Alleys was constructed in 1938-1939 for the Brookland Recreation Center, Inc. to accommodate lanes for duckpin bowling. The building’s designer was William Edward St. Cyr Barrington, an architect who learned drafting as a youth in the office of Jules Henri di Sibour. In the mid 1930s, Barrington was known mostly as an interior designer of restaurants, night clubs and hotel dining rooms. Later, he designed mostly single-family homes, plus several apartment buildings, a hotel, warehouses, stores, a gas station, a factory and a dairy. He was employed by the Home Construction Corporation on commissions for a number of affordable, single-family homes in the late 1930s.

Late in the Depression, bowling was increasing in popularity as an inexpensive entertainment for a rapidly growing D.C. population. When the Brookland facility opened, there were thirteen other commercial bowling alleys in Washington, plus lanes in clubhouses, universities,

government bases, etc.¹ Most are gone, including all of the public lanes themselves, but about a half dozen of the buildings remain from that time, only one other in Northeast (1123 H Street). The sport's popularity induced the property owners to add a second story and additional lanes to the Brookland facility within a year of its opening, still perceptible as a change in brick color on the exposed side and in the more subtly distinct set-back second-story façade. Nationally, bowling's popularity peaked in the early/mid 1960s, but the number of District alleys peaked during World War II—with the number rising to 22—thereafter presumably crowded out by “higher and better” uses.

Precursors to modern bowling go back to ancient times, when it was an outdoor sport. Dutch and German settlers popularized bowling alleys in America in the nineteenth century; there are records of German-operated alleys in Washington and Alexandria in the 1850s. The oldest extant lanes in the U.S. date to the early 1840s, incorporated into the Connecticut summer home of Henry Chandler Bowen. The rules and equipment of standard tenpin bowling were standardized in the late Victorian period. A variant, duckpin bowling, played with fingerless, grapefruit-sized balls and proportionately squatter pins, originated in New England in the early 1890s, but was adopted in Baltimore by the end of the century. It was never as popular as the standard tenpins, but duckpins remains common among the bowling alleys in those regions.

Managed by prominent local bowlers, the Brookland Bowling Alleys operated until a major fire in 1950. Architect Barrington was again engaged to restore the building, no longer for bowling or other recreation uses, but as a wholesale store for electric lighting, parts and appliances.

Evaluation

The Brookland Bowling Alleys was one of W.E. St. Cyr Barrington's most prominent commissions. The building is not as sophisticated or as rich in its materiality as the Kennedy-Warren apartments or Brownley Building but is more comparable to plainer examples of the Art Deco style, such as the Bond Bread Factory or, more aptly, another Brookland landmark and recreation center, the Newton Theater. In village-like Brookland, characterized by modest, small-scale residential and commercial buildings, the bowling alley is a visual standout, especially as its setting in the Turkey Thicket section is now of mostly nondescript commercial and industrial buildings. A contemporary enamel-paneled park-and-shop next door was bastardized in the 1970s, before being rehabbed beyond recognition in 2007-2008. The designation criteria contemplate the potentially special character of each neighborhood and the fact that the sum of the particular development of each is the physical story of the District as a whole.

The building has good physical integrity. The 1950 fire and subsequent renovation erased the bowling lanes themselves, but one could hardly expect the interior of any pre-war bowling alley to be intact today. The exterior masonry is pretty much intact; the EIFS cladding of the shopping center next door unfortunately laps onto one corner of the façade. The first-floor show windows and entry doors have been replaced, but the second-floor steel casements are of the period.

¹ There were a couple of lanes in the landmark Kiplingers' Editors Building. A 1940 Masonic lodge in Anacostia devoted its first floor to bowling; a building contributing to the character of that historic district, it does not have the same level of architectural pretension as the Brookland facility.



Above: A 1943 Office of War Information photograph of a pinsetter at work in a Washington duckpin bowling alley. Just as automatic pinsetting machines were used in standard bowling alleys, they were adopted in duckpin lanes, but during bowling's heyday, young men often performed the task. The Brookland Bowling Alleys, like many other local commercial and social establishments, were for the use of whites only, but such racial segregation did not exclude African Americans as employees. Below, a 1942 OWI photo of the interior of the "Chevy Chase Bowling Alley," Washington, D.C. Photos courtesy of the Library of Congress.

