
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 19-02

Safeway Grocery Store

4865 MacArthur Boulevard NW
Square 1389, Lot 25

Meeting Date: March 7, 2019
Applicant: NAI Saturn Eastern LLC (owner)
Affected ANC: 3D

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board not designate the Safeway Grocery Store at 4865 MacArthur Boulevard NW a historic landmark in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites. It is also recommended that the nomination not be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing.

Background

This nomination has been submitted by the property owner in the expectation that the Board will deny designation. It is an unusual circumstance, but one that the regulations allow, and one that is not unprecedented.¹ It is like any other nomination in the sense that the Board may designate the property if it finds in it sufficient merit.

The apparent advantage to the owner is that, if the Board does deny designation, no other landmark application may be submitted for the property within the following year.

The Safeway Grocery Store

Grocery chains entered the Washington market by 1880, in the form of a single downtown branch of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, which then had about 100 branches across the country. The Sanitary Grocery Company and Piggly Wiggly followed with several locations each in the 1910s, as did a few cooperatives, i.e., independent grocers who joined forces to purchase and warehouse goods and develop a common brand. In the early days, the stores of even the chains were small and individualized architecturally and in terms of layout and staff. Sanitary Grocery Company purchased Washington's Piggly Wiggly branches in 1927, and in the following year, the company merged into the West Coast's Safeway, Inc., whose branches numbered more than 3,500 stores in 1931.

When Safeway entered the D.C. market, it did so in a big way. Initially doing business under the continued Sanitary Grocery name, it built 31 "Safeway"-branded stores and several dry warehouses, cold storage plants and delivery garages in the city between 1928 and 1942. Many of these were constructed by the firm of Warren Spencer, which was also responsible for several

¹ There was one other such case in the District, the Park Lane Apartments at 2025 I Street NW, reviewed and denied in fiscal year 1998. The apartments were replaced by the office building known as 2099 Pennsylvania Avenue.

of the designs. Other contractors were the Tompkins Company and Beauchamp, Inc., with project architects including Russell Kluge, A.J. Scullen, Edward Gilder, and William E. Kramer.

As construction was constant through the era, the year 1941 does not stand out except for the fact that it brought the collaboration of the architect Carroll Meigs and builder George C. Martin on a total of five branches, the last completed in 1942. Their commissions with the corporation overlapped; Meigs had designed a Minnesota Avenue branch in 1940, and Martin continued to build others until 1947. Their collaboration produced a standardized look: a symmetrical one-story brick box with a slightly stepped parapet, contrasting quoins and streamlining, and a central expanse of storefront (examples can be seen on page 11 of the nomination). This describes the original construction of the MacArthur Boulevard store, which measured 50 feet by 130, making it several times the size of the average Safeway store of a decade earlier, 6,500 square feet versus about 1,000. Ironically, the stores of the challenging Depression years illustrate the advent of the supermarket, even if they were not yet characterized by the expansive parking lots that are now familiar. This increase in size was indicative of the move from the individualized mom-and-pop store, where staff retrieved items for shoppers, to warehouse-like open shelving for customers to help themselves.

Built to satisfy the food demands of Washington's exploding Depression-era population, the MacArthur Boulevard Safeway soon had to accommodate still more newcomers, arriving for wartime work. There are signs that the store was outgrowing the building in the early 1950s; an additional checkout stand merited advertising in 1953. The corporation's outright purchase of the property and adjoining parking from the Kogods in 1952 signaled a long-term commitment to the neighborhood. Four years later, the corporation undertook a west addition to the building that nearly doubled its size. Although sympathetically designed with matching materials and quoins, the addition is the reason why the storefront glazing is now off-center. A utility rear addition was added in the second half of the 1960s. The branch remains in service today under Safeway management, but the property has been sold. In the Palisades neighborhood, the store is one of the longest-serving purveyors of food.

Evaluation

An application that seeks to landmark a property must convince the Board that it meets only one of the designation criteria. An application that concludes that none of the criteria apply must convincingly address the failure of a property to meet each.² In the end, of course, the Board is designating, or choosing not to designate, a property and not its nomination.

Architecture/Artistry/Creative Masters—DC Criteria D, E and F and NR Criterion C

The importance of the building as a specimen of important architecture can probably be dismissed with little discussion. The initial construction was modest in size and design, not much different from the purpose-built masonry independent grocery stores that had preceded it in the 1920s and 1930s. Of brick-faced block, this Safeway was little more than a box with an expansive storefront. Its decoration was limited to elements of projecting brick: Georgian-Revival quoining next to Moderne streamlining. The building is not easily distinguished from many one-story commercial buildings in the suburban commercial nodes. It is one of several

² This is similar to Determinations of Eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places that are prepared, pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act, for undesignated federal properties.

contemporary Safeway branches that were nearly identical—and one among these possessing lesser historical integrity. Even if its architect had been recognized as a creative master, this is not a master work or a manifestation of artistry. Rather, it is a perfectly functional commercial building of the early 1940s demonstrating competence and functionality.

Its designer, Carroll Meigs, was not especially prominent among Washington architects, but he was a member of the local chapter of the A.I.A. and published several plans for modest homes in the pages of the *Evening Star* during the Great Depression. He is probably best known in Washington for his commercial work—including his Safeway stores and the Cleveland Park post office. His residential work, however, landed him a job as architect for the Montgomery County Housing Authority in 1941, which curtailed his activity in this city.

Builder George C. Martin is also not well known. Extant building permits credit him as contractor and occasional designer of at least 37 buildings in Washington between 1928 and 1949, with a few single-family residences produced in partnership with his brother. On his own, Martin built almost exclusively commercial structures in the city, with shops and gas stations most numerous among them. The group of Safeway stores he built from 1941 to 1947—from designs by architects Carroll Meigs, Russell Kluge, and Arthur Starr—probably constitute his most important work.

DC Criterion D and National Register Criterion C do contemplate the significance of properties as especially good or representative *examples of building types*, a theme that is discussed below.

Significant Persons—DC Criterion C and NR Criterion B

For the reasons stated above, the store’s architect and builder should not be historically considered significant persons for the purpose of designating this property.

The Kogod family, who initially leased the property to Safeway, Inc., has certainly been prominent in D.C. But their significance would be dispersed among the numerous commercial properties they owned and be more closely associated with those they operated. This property was operated by, and soon sold to, the Safeway supermarket chain.

Events—DC Criterion A and NR Criterion A

We are unaware of any important historical events that took place at this Safeway branch. Newspaper items are almost exclusively limited to advertisements and to mentions of a recycling program and several robberies and burglaries.

The property’s main historic events would relate to the physical evolution of the store itself: its construction and opening in 1941-1942, its purchase by the Safeway corporation in 1952, and its expansions in 1956 and the 1960s.

History—DC Criterion B and NR Criterion A

The designation criteria acknowledge not only momentary events, but also longer and broader contributions to the development of the District and the nation, and associations with important movements, groups, institutions and patterns and growth and change. The Board has previously supported arguments in favor of the significance of properties as making a contributing to the

development of their neighborhoods—and thus contributing to the development and character of the District as a whole.

The nomination slights consideration of the significance of the Safeway store as representing the development of the Palisades. There is an insufficient historical context for understanding all commercial properties in the Palisades, let alone the whole District. Yet, there is some documented background on grocery stores to the mid twentieth century.

There were several earlier groceries in Palisades—a total of five in 1909, as suburban development began to accelerate. Joseph Amberger built 5122 MacArthur Boulevard (then Conduit Road) in 1907, and the home did double duty as his business, with a grocery on the ground floor. The store continued as a grocery and meat market until 1934, when replaced by a cabinet shop. About 1909, Araminta and Frank Bennett expanded their own home dry-goods store at 5207 MacArthur into food sales. Elizabeth Burgee ran her family's store at the Reservoir Road intersection while her husband was employed at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Joseph Minkin, a Russian-Jewish immigrant and the 25-year-old son and brother of grocers, set up his own Conduit Road shop in 1908, before marrying and relocating to 6th and S Streets NW in 1912.

One of the most esteemed and longest-lasting business establishments in the history of the Palisades was located at 5100 MacArthur. The grocery was established before 1917 by Isadore Stamler, another Jewish immigrant from the Russian empire. Stamler had arrived in the U.S. in 1899 and in the District sometime between 1903 and 1906, with a first grocery in Capitol Hill in the latter year. He would replace his Conduit Road shop with a new brick store on the same spot in 1930. Six years later, he opened a liquor store nearby, and soon leased the grocery to Charles Dworin. The new store, renamed the MacArthur Market in honor of its street's own name, was a member of the District Grocery Stores, Inc. cooperative until that coop's dissolution in 1972. Barry Mauskopf, a former apprentice grocer and concentration-camp survivor from Czechoslovakia got a job as a delivery boy at the store in 1950 and soon owned a share of the business, buying out his partners in the mid 1950s. It was under the tenure of Barry and Regina Mauskopf that the market became a beloved neighborhood institution, and they remained until 1985. The store is featured in the book *The Palisades of Washington, D.C.*, fondly remembered as “a place where families were extended credit without asking and where children were always welcomed and given candy.” Barry Mauskopf “ran the store like a community center, which it became,” one resident recalled, “and he was for many of us a social worker, banker, charity, teacher and friend.”

In 1927, another shop associated with District Grocery Stores was erected for Frederick Schnertner at 5435 Conduit. It specialized in meats and had a bakery next door. By 1950s, it was branded a Capital Food Store; in the 1990s, it became Mimi's convenience store.

The Safeway, erected at the end of 1941, is nearly of as long a tenure in the Palisades as Capital Food/Mimi's and even more enduring than the MacArthur Market, and it has remained under the same corporate management for its entire existence, and ownership by Safeway since 1952. It differed from its predecessors in that it was a chain store, larger and more representative of what we think of as a supermarket, although we do not have detailed information about the interiors of

each Palisades groceries and their levels of service. In terms of food provision, it may be regarded as a difference in degree, rather than in kind, from what had preceded it, and it may have contributed to the disappearance of some of the more traditional markets. Longtime residents of the Palisades would be better qualified to testify as to the store's significance to the community, but there would probably be few of these who could recall its early decades.

Architecture as building type—DC Criterion D and NR Criterion C

Closely related to the property's contribution to broader patterns of neighborhood and city history is its building type. This is one example of a chain grocery store building, and probably the first such grocery in the Palisades, if we discount the fact that other grocers participated in coops before this time. Even the expansions of the building testify to the evolution of the city's grocery stores. But there are several counts against the building as an exemplar of the mid-twentieth-century chain grocery. First, the MacArthur Boulevard branch was one of six nearly identical stores designed by Carroll Meigs—and these were not markedly distinct from branches that immediately preceded and followed them. Second, there are other, more architecturally distinctive examples of Washington chain stores by Safeway and others, including several some larger, several older, and others more intact. Even focusing on the small group of 1940-1942 Meigs-designed stores, the MacArthur Safeway rates in the bottom half of the group for historic integrity. Interior changes would have occurred at all branches, but the 1956 addition to the MacArthur branch—even if it represented an evolution of that particular store—harmed the original design. Even superficial alterations such as the painting of the building and the replacement of the storefront made a modest building into a nondescript one.

It may be worthwhile to develop a thematic context or multiple-property document on groceries or chain stores, to better compare examples.³ While the best examples from each era may be worthy of designation, the more picturesque ones of earlier decades and the more iconic arch-roofed Safeway supermarkets of the Modern era stand out.

Archaeology—DC Criterion G and NR Criterion D

Regarding the criteria for archaeology, the application is correct in stating that this lot has not had its own archaeological investigation or evaluation. Yet, the Palisades is a hotspot for prehistoric sites and artifacts, and this property stands not far from a stream, which makes it especially sensitive for prehistoric lithics, camp sites, etc.

The grocery store appears to be a slab-on-grade structure built on fill surrounded by a parking lot. Such paving and fill could easily conceal prehistoric features, and more likely, scatters of lithics, but we have no positive evidence of eligible sites at this point. Archaeological investigations could be conducted to determine if eligible sites are present. Of course, archaeological potential is separate from the significance of the store, and it is impossible to know whether such investigations would produce information more readily or more valuable than from many nearby properties, few of which have been investigated.

³ There is a list of post-1924 D.C. chain groceries online here: <http://www.groceteria.com/place/washington-dc/chain-supermarkets-in-washington-dc-1925-1975/>