Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission

MINUTES

Wednesday, November 8, 2017

Public Meeting:
1:30 PM, Room 1210 – 12th Floor
Omaha/Douglas Civic Center
1819 Farnam Street

Certification of Publication: Omaha Preservation Administrator certifies publication in the Daily Record, the official newspaper of the City of Omaha, on Monday, October 30, 2017 notice re: Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission meeting on Wednesday, November 8, 2017.

Members Present: Carrie Meyer – Acting Chair
Kathryn Aultz
Scott Dobbe
Regan Pence
Jaime Suarez
Curt Witzenburg

Members Not Present: Joan Fogarty, Chair
George Killian, Vice-Chair
Brian Magee

Others Present: Jed Moulton, Urban Design Planning Manager
Trina Westman, LHPC Administrator
Jennifer Taylor, City Law Department
Clinette Ingram, Recording Secretary

It was the consensus of the board to elect Ms. Meyer as Acting-Chair.

Ms. Meyer – Acting Chair, called the meeting to order at 1:42 pm and introduced the Commission members and staff. She explained the procedures for hearing the cases. There were six members present.

Approval of Minutes:

Mr. Witzenburg moved to APPROVE the September 13, 2017 minutes. Mr. Dobbe seconded the motion.

AYES: Aultz, Dobbe, Pence, Suarez, Witzenburg,

ABSTAIN: Meyer

MOTION CARRIED: 5-0-1
LOCAL LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

CASE NUMBER: 17-34-H1                     NAME: Grand Theater Building
PRESENTED BY: Lawrence Butler_Owner of 2922 N 16 Street LOCATION: 2920-22 N 16 Street
REQUEST: Recommendation of Approval for Local Landmark Designation

At the Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission meeting held on November 8, 2017, Lawrence Butler appeared before the Commission. Jed Moulton and Trina Westman appeared on behalf of the Planning Department.

Mr. Butler explained that the Grand Theater Building was constructed as part of a conjoined building. It is located on the north side of the site. He was not able to get permission to take pictures of the south side of the site which is currently a church. The Grand Theater Building is 3,800 square feet with limited remaining ornamentation. The auditorium descends 5’ to the basement level. He showed historic pictures of the 2,200 square foot storefront which was comprised mainly of windows that are still intact. He showed pictures of the interior of the building which has deteriorated over time. The roof caved in on the south side of the building into the basement level. He stated that the walls and columns are still intact; however, the stage area had been removed to create a church pulpit.

William McFarland, president of the Omaha Real Estate Board until 1950, built the building in 1914. A drug store and a cleaners originally occupied the storefronts. He owned five other motion picture buildings, including two theaters on Farnam Street and two on 16th Street that are no longer standing. The Grand Theater Building was designed by architect Lloyd D. Willis.

The applicant indicated that the building is significant under Criterion A for its cultural influence. He stated that there are very few building left in the 16th & Locust Streets building district. Its period of significance if from 1914 to 1931. He added that 16th & Binney Streets was an entrance to the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition. He indicated that he would obtain owner support from the adjacent property owner that evening.

Ms. Westman stated that the recommendation of denial was based on the fact that initially there was no support from the adjacent property owner, although it was not necessary. She advised that, per the Omaha municipal code, six affirmative votes from the Commission would be required without owner consent. She added that the lack of integrity of the building and some missing architectural details of the theater also made it difficult to support the request.

Mr. Moulton stated that the commission needed to decide whether the storefront and movie theater met the cultural standard to be worthy of a local designation. Ms. Aultz responded that Omaha had a long history of motion picture theaters that contributed to the City’s past.

Mr. Dobbe stated that support from the adjacent property owner was critical to the commission’s decision. He suggested that a written statement of support from the adjacent property owner and photos of the interior of the theater portion be obtained and submitted to the commission for review. He suggested a layover to give the applicant time to obtain those items. The applicant agreed that a layover would be in the best interest of the case.
Mr. Witzenburg moved to LAYOVER. Mr. Dobbe seconded the motion.

AYES: Aultz, Dobbe, Pence, Suarez, Witzenburg, Meyer

MOTION CARRIED: 6-0
At the Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission meeting held on November 8, 2017, Brian Whetstone and Ben Swan – Swan Development (Property Owner) appeared before the Commission. Jed Moulton and Trina Westman appeared on behalf of the Planning Department.

Mr. Whetstone stated that the building had been built in 1923 as two separate buildings. The south building served as an auto repair shop and the north building as a bakery from 1925 to 1944. In 1945 the two building were merged into one address and the site became a local performance venue. He showed current pictures of the exterior that showed the garage entrances, original light fixture and brick and masonry detailing. The interior pictures showed the I-beams that support the southern portion of the structure, wooden ceiling joists, the brick exterior walls and intact portions of plaster.

The applicant stated that the building was significant under Criterion A for its historical and cultural importance relating to the heritage of Omaha’s north side, African-American community. During the 1920’s, North Omaha saw a transition from a mostly White immigrant area to a mostly Black population (90%) by the 1940’s. Mr. Whetstone interviewed native Omahan and jazz guitarist Calvin Keys and North Omaha resident Daniel Goodwin, Sr. who both recalled that many fathers in North Omaha worked in the packing houses in South Omaha. The streetcar system at the time enabled workers to travel to South Omaha for jobs. The streetcar system also helped 24th Street to become a major commercial corridor and the home to many music and entertainment venues.

Mildred Brown, owner and operator of the Omaha Star newspaper, opened the Carnation Ballroom in 1948 as a social and performing arts center that would serve the area’s black community. The ballroom was supposedly named for the carnations that she wore. The Carnation Ballroom quickly became a popular jazz and blues performance venue on the 24th Street corridor. Many black performers came to play at the Carnation Ballroom. It also served as a community center where political and civil rights meetings were held. There were also social events such as the Healthy Baby contest, fashion shows and dances that helped to strengthen the social fabric of the community. The ballroom’s period of significance ended by November of 1959, when it ceased operation as a popular performance and entertainment venue. In 1961 it was again split into separate buildings and eventually became vacant.

Mr. Swan stated that he purchased the building so that it could be preserved until such time that 24th Street is redeveloped. He indicated that he is looking for a tenant that will complement the community and that would reflect the history of the building. He believed that the nomination would increase the awareness of the building and help to ensure that it would remain for years to come.

Mr. Pence moved to APPROVE. Mr. Witzenburg seconded the motion.

AYES: Aultz, Dobbe, Pence, Suarez, Witzenburg, Meyer

MOTION CARRIED: 6-0
ADJOURNMENT:

It was the consensus of the Board to ADJOURN the meeting at 2:32 p.m.