

CITY OF NEWPORT BEACH
City Arts Commission Staff Report

Agenda Item No: _____
Meeting Date: August 12, 2010

TO: Newport Beach City Arts Commission

FROM: Planning Department
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SUBJECT: Listing of the Rawlins Solar House in the City of Newport Beach Register of Historical Property

RECOMMENDATION:

- Review application for listing of the Rawlins Solar House in City Register of Historical Property; and
- Forward recommendation to City Council regarding the classification of the property as a Major Historic Landmark (Class 1)

DISCUSSION:

Background:

The owner of the Rawlins Solar House has requested that the property, located at 804 South Bay Front, be listed in the City of Newport Beach Register of Historical Property (Attachment B). Pursuant to City Council Policy K-2, applications are reviewed by the Parks, Beaches, and Recreation Commission, the Arts Commission, and the Newport Beach Historical Society and their recommendations are submitted to the City Council for consideration.

City Council Policy K-2 allows a property to be placed in the Register of Historical Property if it is designated as having any one of the criteria for architectural or historical significance set forth in the Council Policy.

Analysis:

The Rawlins Solar House was designed by noted architect John Lautner and constructed between 1978 and 1980 for local philanthropists and patrons of the arts, Robert and Marjorie Rawlins. Located on Balboa Island and overlooking the inner Newport Harbor, the site created the challenge of maintaining privacy on a narrow lot while creating a light-filled living space in a seaside environment. The one-of-a kind Rawlins Solar House is a true reflection of Lautner's adaptable and ever-changing style and unique designs. A champion of Frank Lloyd Wright's philosophy of "organic architecture", John Lautner designed each project specifically for a site and the client's needs. As a result, each Lautner building is distinctively unique and holds its own mark of significance.

The design for the Rawlins Solar House is a highly innovative solution for the site and the client, and an excellent example of Modernist residential architecture. The house is composed of two side walls of reinforced concrete supported by steel cross beams and an arched wood frame roof structure. The south façade is composed almost entirely of glass, with curved copper bands at the second floor balcony and roof. The reinforced concrete proved suitable for the harsh beach environment and skylights and glass made a restrictive space seem expansive.

Because of the variety of designs and styles employed by Lautner, his work was difficult to categorize during his lifetime and therefore little scholarly work was previously published. However, with the benefit of time and recognition, his work is currently well documented. The John Lautner Foundation was established in 1996 following his death in 1994. Since that time, a number of exhibitions have been produced to showcase his work, the most recent being at the Hammer Museum of the University of California, Los Angeles in 2008.

Architectural Significance:

The applicant suggests that the building is significant due to the architect, the architectural design, and its integrity. Per City Council Policy K-2, the Rawlins Solar House may qualify for historical designation under the following standards of architectural significance:

Criterion 1-b.) Notable works of a master builder, designer or architect whose style influenced the City's architectural development, or structures showing the evolution of an architect's style.

John Lautner has recently gained notoriety as one of the twentieth century's and southern California's most important architects. He designed over fifty architecturally significant structures in the Southern California area alone. His focus was primarily on residential architecture. He enjoyed experimenting with new ideas and materials and designed a wide variety of building types and styles. His designs deal with the interplay of space, nature, the built

environment, and human beings; emphasizing the interior space created by the building rather than the structural forms.

John Lautner is cited as one of the few students who moved beyond his teacher, Frank Lloyd Wright, in driving Wright's philosophies beyond his master while developing his own style. Lautner's work has come to represent some of the most important examples of architecture in Southern California. The Rawlins Solar House is one of three houses and a single commercial building designed by Lautner in Orange County.

Criterion 1-d.) Structures which embody special architectural and design features.

The Rawlins Solar House is a significant example of the work of Los Angeles architect John Lautner, and an excellent example of Modernist residential architecture. The house embodies Frank Lloyd Wright's philosophy of "organic" architectural design, in that it involves a respect for the properties of the materials and the harmonious relationship between the form/design and the functions of the building.

Lautner solved the problem of maintaining privacy and creating a light-filled living space in a sea-side environment by using reinforced concrete walls with few to no windows on the sides and allowing light in from above with a creative roof design. By floating the second floor away from the side walls to allow light to filter down from skylights to the ground floor, glare from the expansive living room window wall was reduced. The sliding glass window wall completely opens to the bay, allowing the living room to become an extension of the terrace. Thus, the design addressed both the Rawlins' lifestyle and the Balboa Island environment.

Criterion 1-e.) Outstanding examples of structures displaying original architectural integrity, structurally or stylistically, or both.

The Rawlins Solar House retains a high level of integrity because it possesses all of its significant features. No major alterations have been performed since the house was originally built. The Rawlins lived in the house until 2009 and made only minor changes including the addition of a forced air heating system in the upstairs bedrooms and periodic repairs to the solar systems. The current owner, Michael LaFetra, has made some minor cosmetic repairs to the house due to deferred maintenance of the previous owners.

A 1992 Historic Resource Inventory conducted by an Ad Hoc Historic Preservation Advisory Committee established by the Newport Beach City Council included the Rawlins Solar House in its properties inventory. The Rawlins Solar House is listed as record #53 on the Inventory and is assigned a Class 4, "Structure of Historic Interest", status of significance at the local level. While the 1992 Historic Resource Inventory has

not been officially adopted, the 61 properties classified for their significance according to the criteria established by the Newport Beach Register and all are eligible to use the State Historic Building Code.

Per City Council Policy K-2, a Structure of Historic Interest (Class 4) is defined as a "building, structure, object, site, or natural feature *that has been altered to the extent that the historic/ architectural integrity has been substantially compromised* but is still worthy of recognition." (Emphasis added) Staff finds that consistent with Council Policy K-2 Criteria 1-e), the Rawlins Solar House retains a high level of integrity. Therefore, staff finds that the 1992 Historic Resource Inventory has incorrectly classified the Rawlins Solar House as a Class 4 structure.

In addition, because of the variety of designs and styles employed by Lautner during the course of his career, his work was difficult to categorize during his lifetime (1911-1994). As his work is only now being recognized and properly documented, it is possible that the 1992 Historic Resources Inventory did not account for John Lautner's recent notoriety as one of Southern California's most important architects.

Eligibility for Listing to the National Register

Generally, a property eligible for listing in the National Register is also eligible for listing in the California Register. The Rawlins Solar House is not currently listed on either the California or the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register has provisions for evaluating certain kinds of properties not usually considered eligible for listing, such as those that have achieved significance within the past fifty years. The fifty-year period is an arbitrary span of time, designed as a filter to ensure that enough time has passed to evaluate the property in a historic context. A property that has achieved significance in the past fifty years can be eligible for listing if it meets one of the four general Criteria for listing, possesses sufficient integrity, and is found to be of exceptional importance. The phrase "exceptional importance" may be applied to the extraordinary importance of a property or an entire category of resources so fragile that survivors of any age are unusual. The "exceptional importance" finding does not require that the property be of national significance. Rather, its significance should be within the appropriate historic context, whether local, State, or national.

Staff finds that the Rawlins Solar House is eligible for listing to the National Register under Criteria C, as the building is significant as a work of Modernist residential style, represents the work of a master, and possesses high artistic values. As the architectural community continues to recognize and document Lautner's buildings and understand the importance of Lautner's place in architecture, staff finds that the Rawlins Solar House, with its high level of integrity, is of exceptional importance. Without sufficient recognition, the structure is in a fragile state in danger of demolition or alteration beyond recognition. Therefore, despite the building's thirty-year age, staff finds that the Rawlins Solar House is eligible for listing in the National Register at the local level.

Note: Another of Lautner's buildings, the Stevens House in Malibu (1968), was listed to the National Register early this year.

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that the history of the Rawlins Solar House property is significant to the architectural history of the City of Newport Beach. Based on the new information provided by the applicant, staff finds the subject property would be eligible for listing in the Newport Beach Register as Class 1 – Major Historic Landmark due to its local and statewide importance.

Class 1: Major Historic Landmark

A building, structure, object, site, or natural feature of major historical significance. The property exemplifies historic/architectural themes of local and statewide importance and serves as a significant part of the heritage of Newport Beach.

Staff recommends that the Commission forward recommendation to City Council regarding the classification of the property as a Major Historic Landmark (Class 1) for listing to the Newport Beach Register of Historic Property.

PUBLIC NOTICE:

This item has been noticed in accordance with the Brown Act.

Prepared by:



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Economic Development Coordinator

Attachments: A. Council Policy K-2
 B. Application and property history submitted by owner
 C. Newport Beach Historic Resource Inventory Record #53