

Heritage Preservation Commission

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Meeting Date: March 23rd 2021

Subject: Landmark Request Application – Red Owl Grocery Store & Time Theater

Action Items

Commission Action Summary: Evaluate landmark application for the property at 11 4th Street SE, Red Owl Grocery Store & Time Theater.

Background

An application for historic Landmark designation of the property at 11 4th Street was received by the City on February 5th, 2021. Application was submitted by Kevin Lund, private citizen of the City of Rochester. The property is owned by the City of Rochester and has most recently housed the business, Legends Bar. Past uses include the Union Labor Center and Moon Shine Shorty's.

The property was not identified on “The Stark List”ⁱ It was, however reviewed by The 106 Group as part of the Phase I Survey work completed in 2014 (Attachment A), “Minnesota Architecture – History Inventory Form”ⁱⁱ. The recommendation from The 106 Group was that the property did not warrant further consideration as a potential landmark. There is no substantive historic information contained in that document. As required under both MN State Statute and the Rochester Heritage Preservation Ordinance, the application for Landmark designation was provided to the State Historic Preservation Office for their review. An email from Michael Koop is attached, providing his comments (Attachment B).

The submitted application (Attachment C) “Rochester Community Development ... Landmark Nomination Form”) requests consideration of landmark designation for the two buildings located at the address, 11 4th Street SE. The property is currently one tax parcel but the buildings were constructed at different times and for two different purposes. The following information, therefore, provides information separated for each building. Attachment D, shows the location of the property within its current tax parcel configuration.

Property Summary – Red Owl

Description

Legal description of the property is: The Westerly 46.62 feet and the northerly 39.96 feet of the westerly 56.62 feet of that part of the Mill Reservation platted in Moe and Olds Addition to Rochester, Minnesota described as follows: Commencing at the north property line of fourth Street Southeast and continuing thence in a northeasterly direction along the east line of the alley for a distance of 175 feet, more or less, thence south along such retaining wall back to the north property line of Fourth Street Southeast to beginning.

Approximate dimensions of the building (as measured by aerial photo) are: 45 feet in width at 4th Street lot line and 131 feet in depth, with an area of 5,800 square feet. While currently sharing a tax parcel with the building to the east, this property had a separate address which is

now used for both, 11 4th Street SE. There appears to be an addition on the rear/north side of the building; its date of its construction is unknown.

South elevation: The building is single story and faced in square grey masonry panels along the front/south elevation (See Attachment E, Photos). According to the phase I survey from the 106 Group for this property, these panels are limestone, however that should be verified as closer inspection appears to be concrete. A decorative cornice of a band of large dentil like features sits at the top of the south elevation. A large bank of windows extends nearly the entire width of the south façade. These windows are a dark smoky brown tint and are surrounded with bronze colored anodized aluminum frame. Polished black granite extends along the entire width of the front bulkhead. There is no door on this elevation. There is one course wide of a dark colored brick extending the height of the bulkhead in approximately the center of the storefront. This may be an indication that a doorway or other feature was present in this location in the past. The corners of the south façade are rounded

West elevation: The masonry panels of the front/south façade wrap around to the west side and extend for about 8 feet toward the north. From that point and back to the north, the wall is comprised of a buff colored brick. Two windows puncture the west wall starting at a height of approximately 7 feet. There is evidence of a third window which has been filled in. Black bricks, the same size as the buff colored, extend for a height of approximately 2.5 feet along the base of the wall. An addition on the rear of the building extends for approximately 30 feet, its wall extends northward flush with the brick wall. The exterior of the addition is textured concrete block.

North elevation: The addition of textured concrete block extends the entire width of the north side of the building. A wooden fenced trash enclosure obscures most of the rear of the building. An entry double leaf entry door of bronze anodized aluminum frame is located at the east corner of the north wall is set back with an awning above the doorway.

East elevation: This building directly abuts its neighbor to the east and has no exposed eastern elevation.

History

The date of construction for the building is unknown. Photographic evidence shows that it was prior to the construction of the Time Theater, which was constructed in 1935, directly abutting it to the East. These early photos show it to be the location of a Red Owl store. According to information in the application, from the History Center of Olmsted County (HCOC), the first Red Owl store was established in 1922 and located on this same block, northwest of this site. Its address was 310 South Broadway.

A 1930 deed conveyed land from the Rochester Milling Company to the Mayo Properties Association, land that appears to have included the location of both this building as well as the location of where the Time Theater would be constructed and also the land of the present day parking lot (north of the building, south of the present day parking garage). The deed identifies the property conveyed as being 140 feet in width at the north end and 70 feet in width at the south end, which are the dimensions of this property.

Information provided by the applicant indicates that the old Mill at this site, would be acquired by General Mills company, which would have a role in establishing the chain of Red Owl stores.ⁱⁱⁱ This chain grew throughout the Midwest, at its peak having "... 55% of the grocery business in Minnesota" and 172 stores in 10 states.^{iv}

Evaluation

While documentation indicates that the first Red Owl store was established in 1922 on this same block, the history of how and when the brand was acquired or established by General Mills or its affiliated investment firm has not been identified. The connection between the old Mill and General Mills and the grocery store, having started here in Rochester is intriguing. So too is the relationship between Dr. Will Mayo and James Ford Bell, President and then Chairmen of General Mills over this period of time.

Historical Context:

The building fits well within the context, "Urban/Downtown Development 1889-Present". As typical in Midwestern US urban development, the City of Rochester had its early formation in what became the downtown primary commercial area. The power generated by the Zumbro River and the presence of the Dubuque Trail (which followed present day 4th Street on which this property is located) was the center of early euro/American settlement here. The location of the first Red Owl store on Broadway, directly adjacent to the flour mill and then this subsequent location just south of the mill may reflect the transition of early commerce in the City (milling) to retail commercial prevalent of the post 1889 period.

While the property was owned by the Mayo Properties Association and there was clearly a relationship between Dr. Will Mayo and James Ford Bell, its possible result of the practice to the enrich flour, would need to be further documented. If that is the case, the local context of "Born in a Storm: Mayo Clinic & Hospitality in Rochester 1889- Present". May come in to play.

In a broader historic context, the building in question is similar in size and configuration to other grocery stores that gained popularity in the 1920's and 30's. Piggly Wiggly claims to be the "first true self-service grocery store".^v That store was established in 1916 in Memphis Tennessee. Its growth in the 1920s led to franchising and expansion of the store. The trend of self-service grocery expanded throughout the US. The 1930's building in Rochester for the Red Owl would have provided the space and layout for this new style of shopping. Additional research may find that the change of location of the Rochester Red Owl was to accommodate this trend. And, given the time frame, this building may be a prototype for the Red Owl chains earliest stores that expanded throughout the state.

Criteria: The applicant proposes several criteria for both buildings combined, however, some features or historic documentation is lacking to support many of these.

Criteria 1, Its character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the city, state or United States; Given the fact that Red Owl was established in Rochester and later grew into a chain that would garner over ½ of the grocery store market (economically) in the State, the local history of the store is significant under this criteria. More documentation is needed in order to fill in the gaps of the story as to how this unfolded in Rochester and the role this particular building played.

Criteria 3, Its location within and contribution as an element of a landmark district; This building along with its neighbor, the Time Theater would likely fit within the proposed historic district for the downtown and is directly adjacent to that.

Criteria 4, Its identification with a person who significantly contributed to the culture and development of the city; While the Mayo Foundation owned the property and Dr. Will Mayo had a relationship with the head of General Mills, this does not constitute a significant association under Criteria 4.

Criteria 5, The architecture of the building is simple and reflects the 1930's era in which it was constructed. The detailing of the buildings cornice provides an elegant feature that has some aspects of classical revival style, but in a more (1930's era) streamlined approach. The integrity of the building material should be further explored to verify that it would allow for historic significance of the building under this criteria.

Criteria 8, Its location, scale, or other physical characteristics representing an established and familiar visual feature or a neighborhood, a district, the community, or the city; the building is rather diminutive and tucked in between other buildings of a similar size and type. There is nothing with this building on its own that support it being significant under this criteria.

Historic Integrity

Photographic evidence indicates the primary façade (south/Broadway facing) of the building is very much in a similar appearance to when the store first opened. The square panels appear to be of the same size and configuration and the cornice also appears to have been preserved. None of the historic photos show the configuration of the door, however it is likely that one existed on the 4th street elevation, providing the primary customer entrance. The windows and framing have been replaced, but it appears that the current window units fit within the original opening.

A more complete historic photo of the property would help to verify historic integrity. However, this building is in a familiar configuration and the front façade likely a symmetrical appearance, so the photo showing the east part of the south side of the building provides good documentation. Integrity of Location and setting remains strong. Integrity of Design is good, with the primary issue likely being only the lack of a doorway into the front of the building. The rear addition also distracts from the integrity of design. Materials and Workmanship appears to be fair to good. While the masonry panels have the same appearance as the historic images, a deeper study of the material that is now present should be completed. The windows have been changed to modern smoky colored glass within an anodized frame. Integrity of Feeling and Association is fair. The building can be recognized as an early to mid-20th century commercial retail building, which were common throughout the US during that time period.

Statement of Significance

The period of significance for the Red Owl would likely be for the entire period of its operation at this location. A more complete history of the reasons for the move to this location in the early 1930's and an a date of its closure would help to narrow in on a period of significance.

As indicated in the letter from the SHPO, more evidence would need to be uncovered in order to clearly show the historic significance of the building before Landmark designation can be considered.

Recommendation

Minnesota State Statute requires that applications related to zoning must be approved or denied within 60 – days, or approval is automatically granted. Our local ordinance allows for an extension of 30 days. The application was received by the City on February 5th. 60-days from application submittal is April 6th. The next possible opportunity for City Council consideration is the April 5th meeting.

Based on evaluation, the evidence gathered to date does not support Landmark designation. Therefore, it is the City team recommends that the request for Landmark designation be denied.

The HPC is given the authority to evaluate requests for Landmark and provide a recommendation to the City Council. It is recommended that the HPC recommend denial.

Property Summary - Time Theater

Description:

Legal description of the property is all that part of the Mill Reservation as platted Moe and Olds' Addition to Rochester, Minnesota, described as: Commencing at the north property line of Fourth Street Southeast and continuing thence in a northeasterly direction along the east line of the alley for a distance of 175 feet, more or less, thence 90 degrees east to the retaining wall of the Zumbro River, thence south along such retaining wall back to the north property line of Fourth Street Southeast, to beginning, except the westerly 46.42 feet and the northerly 39396 feet of the westerly 56.62 feet.

Approximate dimensions of the building (as measured by aerial photo) are: 30 feet in width at 4th Street lot line and 109 feet in depth, with an area of 4,070 square feet. While currently sharing a tax parcel with the building to the west, this property had a separate address of 15 4th Street SE.

South elevation: The building is single story at the front, along 4th Street, faced in buff colored brick. Two bands of brick are set at an angle creating a textured double vertical line that extends along each side of and then over the doorway. Bronze color anodized aluminum storefront including a double door and sidelight windows are in place of original doors. Black granite extends along the entire width of the front bulkhead. Square masonry panels surround the door opening. According to the phase I survey from the 106 Group these panels are limestone, however that should be verified. A Large rigid awning in red with white wording "Union Labor Center" covers a large portion of the south facade.

East elevation: The east wall is made of the same buff color brick with little ornamentation present. Each 7th row is comprised of bricks turned on their end to provide variation in the horizontal pattern. A poured concrete foundation painted black, extends from the ground for

approximately 2 feet in height. A rounded column (possibly of concrete) is located where the east elevation angles inward toward the west. Windows puncture the east side of the building toward the rear/north end on both the main level and upper mezzanine level. These overlook a wooden deck extending from the side of the building over the City bike trail which passes the building at a lower elevation along the river.

North elevation: A rear entrance from the parking area & outdoor patio along with windows (bronze color anodized aluminum) and the same type, color and pattern as the east side is present. A black awning covers the doorway entrance.

West elevation: This building directly abuts its neighbor to the west and has no exposed western elevation.

History: The building was constructed in 1935^{vi} as a movie theater on property acquired by the Mayo Properties Association five years prior.^{vii} The land on which the building sits was part of the property originally platted as the Mill Reservation in the Moe and Olds Addition, platted in 1857 and was conveyed to the Mayo Properties Association by the Rochester Milling Company for \$1 in 1930.

A newspaper article from January 8, 1937, covers the story of the Time Theater's grand opening the evening prior. Minnesota Amusement Co. appears to have been the business operator, as indicated by the records of rent paid by them to the endowment account of the Mayo Association. The Association owned the property until 1978. It is not clear from the application materials submitted when the theater ceased operation (perhaps 1982, which is when it was sold to P&R Properties). In the 1980's the property was redeveloped into a space for a restaurant.

Evaluation – Time Theater

Historical Context: Reviewing the building through two local contexts helps to evaluate the historic significance of the building.

The building fits well within the context, "Urban/Downtown Development 1889-Present". As typical in Midwestern US urban development, the City of Rochester had its early formation in what became the downtown primary commercial area. The power generated by the Zumbro River and the presence of the Dubuque Trail (which followed present day 4th Street on which this property is located) was the center of early euro/American settlement. Growth of business and industry primarily extended to the north and west, due the barriers created by the river. "By 1928, Broadway Avenue from 2nd Street NW to 4th Street SW was heavily lined with one and two-story commercial buildings that housed grocers, a steam laundry, sign painting, tin shops, candy stores, general merchandise stores, lumber yards, hotels, theatres, and butcher shops, among many others."^{viii} The Time theater was on the eastern edge of this activity in a space that was created for development potential when the mill race was buried.

The Time Theater also is related to the development of the Mayo Clinic and might be evaluated through the lens of the context, "Born in a Storm: Mayo Clinic & Hospitality in Rochester 1889- Present". The fact that the building was constructed by the Mayo Properties Association, the forerunner of the Mayo Foundation would seem to indicate that its purpose was for benevolent reasons. Additional research on the work of this organization may yield s

better understanding of the reasons for the construction of the theater. From a broader historic context, it is known that bringing theater and other forms or arts to communities was part of a larger endeavor within the U.S. as part of the New Deal programs. The Federal Theater Project, was "...created by the U.S. Works Progress Administration in 1935, was designed to conserve and develop the skills of theater workers, re-employ them on public relief, and to bring theater to thousands in the United States..."^{ix} while this federal program was for live theater, it could be that the Mayo Property Association was taking a similar approach locally with the development of this movie theater.

Movie theaters were significant gathering places during the 1930's. The advances in technology of the period brought color and sounds to the screen and provided a distraction for a nation that was suffering from the economic hardships of the Great Depression. Common movie themes of the time include screwball comedies and the glamour of dancing from choreographer Busby Berkely and from the movie stars, Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers. Highly stylized sets provided a background to these movies. Many movie theaters were designed to further present this exuberant imagery, bringing the theater going audience into the setting. The Chateau Theater, built only a few years earlier, in 1927 was such a place. "The theater interior is designed in the "atmospheric" mode, including an extraordinarily elaborate plaster fantasy design reminiscent of medieval European architecture, with balconies, turrets, battlements, gates, and arches. The proscenium arch was expressed "as a bridge over a waterway silhouetted against the sky," according to J. Raymond Corwin, the designer."^x While the Time Theater presented a clean Art Deco style, it was much more of a simple setting than that of the Chateau.

Criteria: The applicant proposes several criteria for both buildings combined, however, some features or historic documentation is lacking to support many of these.

Criteria 1, Its character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the city, state or United States; The Time Theater was one of several in the downtown business district during its period of operation. Its connection to the Mayo Properties Association is interesting, but would need to be further documented to understand its relevance.

Criteria 3, Its location within and contribution as an element of a landmark district; This building along with its neighbor, the Red Owl store, would likely fit within the proposed historic district for the downtown and is adjacent to that.

Criteria 4, Its identification with a person who significantly contributed to the culture and development of the city; While the Mayo Clinic through the Mayo Foundation appears to have been the instigator to develop the movie theater, the role of the Mayo Family in its development is not substantiated with the research completed to date.

Criteria 5, Its embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, period, form, or treatment; The brick patterns on the south side of the building are what remains of the Art Deco style. However, the building in its current condition it is not a strong example of the style. Its original doors and the marquee sign which added to the Art Deco design are gone.

Criteria 8, Its location, scale, or other physical characteristics representing an established and familiar visual feature or a neighborhood, a district, the community, or the city; The view of the building from the east, coming over the 4th Street Bridge is likely similar to what it would have been when the theater was originally built, except for the presence of the windows. Still, there is nothing particularly unique or eye-catching from this elevation.

Historic Integrity

Based on photographic evidence, the building retains most its integrity of Location and setting. While things have changed around it somewhat, its directly adjacent neighbors continue to be the same as when it was constructed. Integrity of Design, Materials and Workmanship are fair to good. The brick detailing on the front of the building remains although is obscured by the awning. The addition of the masonry panels appear to cover where the sign and original doorway openings were once prominent features. Integrity of Feeling and Association are poor. There is little that remains to indicate that this building was once a movie theater.

Statement of Significance

The period of significance for the Time Theater, would likely be for most, if not for its entirety period of operation. The opening date of 1937 is known, but its date of closure is not. This along with additional information would need to be ascertained before a statement of significance could be formulated.

As indicated in the letter from the SHPO, more evidence would need to be uncovered in order to clearly show the historic significance of the building before Landmark designation can be considered.

Recommendation

Minnesota State Statute requires that applications related to zoning must be approved or denied within 60 – days, or approval is automatically granted. Our local ordinance allows for an extension of 30 days. The application was received by the City on February 5th. 60-days from application submittal is April 6th. The next possible opportunity for City Council consideration is the April 5th meeting.

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