

**Historic Landmark Commission**  
**March 26, 2012**  
**Permits in National Register Historic Districts**  
**NRD-2012-0002**  
**Old West Austin**  
**2410 Pemberton Parkway**

**PROPOSAL**

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Demolish c. 1950 house.

**RESEARCH**

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The house built in 1950 was designed by Fehr & Granger Architects for Robert P. Wagner and his wife Margaret who lived in the house until 1973 or 1974. Robert Wagner was born May 11, 1918 in the Bronx, NY. Mr. Wagner had a distinguished career at University of Texas (UT), where his contributions to teaching and research spanned nearly four decades. He arrived in Austin, TX in 1940 to serve at UT as a Teaching Fellow in Zoology. In 1946 he was selected as a National Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow and moved to California to continue his genetic studies at the California Institute of Technology. It was there he met his future wife, Margaret (Peggy) Campbell. Dr. Wagner returned to Austin with Margaret in 1947, where he taught, conducted research and wrote in the field of genetics at UT until his retirement in 1977. After his retirement from UT, the Wagners relocated to Santa Fe, NM, where Dr. Wagner became a consultant for the Life Science Division of Los Alamos National Laboratories until 1999.

Dr. Wagner received a career award from the National Institutes of Health in 1962-1977, a Distinguished Serves Award from the Texas Genetics Society of America in 1971, and was the recipient of numerous grants during his career including from the Office of Naval Research, National Institutes of Health, and the National Science Foundation. He was selected as a Guggenheim Fellow in 1957, and served as the President of the Genetics Society of America in 1971. He also published more than 100 articles and abstracts and co-wrote six books in genetics, the first of which was translated into several languages and had worldwide influence in the emerging field of biochemical genetics.

Dr. Wagner died in Santa Fe, NM on March 3, 2004 and was preceded in death by his wife Margaret.

The firm of Fehr & Granger was started in 1938 by Arthur Fehr and Charles Granger.

Arthur Fehr graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a Bachelor's Degree in Architecture in 1925 and studied in graduate programs at Columbia University, New York University, and the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in New York City. In the 1930's, he worked for the National Park Service on the Bastrop State Park Project in Bastrop, Texas, where he met Charles T. Granger, another Austin native and University of Texas graduate.

Charles Granger was born in Austin in 1913. He graduated from the University of Texas in 1936 and moved to Los Angeles to work with architect Richard Neutra. In 1938, he returned to Austin to join Arthur Fehr's architectural firm until World War II when he

attended Cranbrook Academy of Art, in Bloomfield, Michigan where he earned his master's degree in Architecture in 1946. He worked with the firm (Eliel) Saarinen and Swanson before returning to Austin to reopen Fehr and Granger in 1946. Fehr & Granger were known for their residential, institutional, educational and ecclesiastic designs. The firm received local and national recognition for such Austin projects as the Sneed residence, O. Henry Junior High School, Saint Stephen's Chapel, and the Robert Mueller Airport.

Shortly after becoming a fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1966 Charles Granger was killed in an automobile accident. Arthur Fehr continued to run the firm until his death in 1969.

### **PROJECT SPECIFICATIONS**

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The existing residence is a 2,744 sq. ft., two story house built in 1950. The house is located at the end of a private street on a sloped lot above the Shoal Creek ravine. The property includes two parcels totaling over 1 acre. Because of the sloped lot the upper level serves as the main living area with a walk out lower level. Three quarters of the second level façade is contains a ribbon of aluminum-framed casement windows. The remaining third includes the front door, which has a geometric patterned, leaded side lite, and walls sided with a concrete and asbestos siding identified as "Corr. Transite" on the original building plans. This siding is also found on other Fehr & Granger designed houses including the Granger House at 805 W. 16<sup>th</sup> Street, which is a City Historic Landmark as well as being listed on the National Register of Historic Properties.

Limestone is used as a veneer on the wall surrounding the door to the lower level, as well as on the stairway to the upper front door landing. The decorative metal railing on the stairs and landing appear to be original. The nearly flat roof structure over the lower level entry has been expanded with wood columns and framing to create a deck area.

A rear master bedroom and bath designed by Fehr & Granger was added to the house in 1964 and is sided in the "Corr. Transite" material to match the rest of the house. There is a glass greenhouse incorporated as part of this addition.

The large areas of windows and greenhouse addition are characteristic of mid-century residential design, which has the intent of reducing the barrier between the interior and exterior environments.

According to the current owners there have been many interior changes to the house.

The applicant proposes to demolish the house and develop both parcels with two 5,000 sq ft. residences. The two replacement homes have not yet been designed.

### **STAFF COMMENTS**

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The house is listed as contributing to the Old West Austin National Register Historic District. The NRD has no design guidelines. The Old West Austin National Register

Historic District has no design guidelines for new construction. Applicable general design review guidelines state:

The distinguishing original qualities or character of a property and its environment shall not be destroyed. Removal or alteration of any historic material or distinctive architectural features should be avoided.

Changes, which have taken place in the course of time may have acquired significance in their own right, and shall be recognized and respected.

Distinctive stylistic features or examples of skilled craftsmanship, which characterize a property, shall be treated with sensitivity.

The project as proposed does not meet the general design guidelines and will result in total demolition of the house.

The property has been vacant and poorly maintained for a number of years, and has open and broken windows allowing exposure to the elements. The grounds are overgrown and cluttered with debris; however, the house appears, from exterior visual inspection, to be structurally sound. This would have to be confirmed by an appropriate professional.

Staff visited and photographed a number of remaining Fehr & Granger houses in Austin in the interim between the February meeting and today, and has determined that this house represents a very good example of the firm's mid-century modern design in its long, horizontal configuration, use of extensive walls of glass to blend the inside of the house with its environment, and its siting on a wooded cul-de-sac overlooking Pease Park and the wooded hillside immediately behind the house and making up the back yard of the house. See attached photographs for examples of other Fehr & Granger houses remaining in the city. Staff was also struck by how many of the remaining Fehr & Granger houses have been modified over the years, especially with the replacement of windows, and further, how many of the original designs are no longer extant.

#### **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

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Staff recommends delaying release of the demolition permit and requesting that the applicant reconsider the proposed demolition and consider rehabilitating the house, possibly with a sensitive and appropriate addition if needed.