

ZONING CHANGE REVIEW SHEET

CASE NUMBER: C14H-2024-0016

HLC DATE: April 3, 2024 PC DATE: TBD CC Date: TBD

APPLICANT: Robin Abrams (owner-initiated)

HISTORIC NAME: Russell and Jean Lee House

WATERSHED: Waller Creek

ADDRESS OF PROPOSED ZONING CHANGE:

ZONING CHANGE: SF-3-CO-NP to SF-3-H-CO-NP

COUNCIL DISTRICT: 9

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends the proposed zoning change from family residence-conditional overlay-neighborhood plan (SF-3-CO-NP) to family residence-historic landmark-conditional overlay-neighborhood plan (SF-3-H-CO-NP) combining district zoning.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION: Architecture and historical associations

HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION ACTION:

PLANNING COMMISSION ACTION:

CITY COUNCIL ACTION:

CASE MANAGER: Kalan Contreras, 512-974-2727

NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATIONS: Austin Independent School District, Austin Lost and Found Pets, Austin Neighborhoods Council, CANPAC (Central Austin Neigh Plan Area Committee), Central Austin Community Development Corporation, Friends of Austin Neighborhoods, Friends of Heritage, Heritage Neighborhood Association, Homeless Neighborhood Association, Neighborhood Empowerment Foundation, Preservation Austin, SELTexas, Shoal Creek Conservancy, Sierra Club, Austin Regional Group

DEPARTMENT COMMENTS: The 2020 North Central Austin Historic Resource Survey recommends 3110 West Avenue as eligible for individual landmark designation, eligible for individual listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and contributing to potential local and National Register historic districts.

BASIS FOR RECOMMENDATION:

§ 25-2-352(3)(c)(i) Architecture. *The property embodies the distinguishing characteristics of a recognized architectural style, type, or method of construction; exemplifies technological innovation in design or construction; displays high artistic value in representing ethnic or folk art, architecture, or construction; represents a rare example of an architectural style in the city; serves as an outstanding example of the work of an architect, builder, or artisan who significantly contributed to the development of the city, state, or nation; possesses cultural, historical, or architectural value as a particularly fine or unique example of a utilitarian or vernacular structure; or represents an architectural curiosity or one-of-a-kind building.*

The house at 3110 West Avenue is described in the West Campus, North University, Heritage, Bryker Woods, and North Hyde Park Historic Resource Survey, concluded in 2020 by H-H-M, Inc., as architecturally significant for its design by developer Ada Penn.¹ It is characteristic of Penn's designs, which often incorporated elements from the Craftsman and Prairie styles. Its ribbon windows and rustic stone porch piers are indicative of Penn's stylistic tendencies.

§ 25-2-352(3)(c)(ii) Historical Associations. *The property has long-standing significant associations with persons, groups,*

¹ Historic Building Survey Report for North Central Austin: West Campus, North University, Heritage, Bryker Woods, and North Hyde Park. H-H-M, Inc. Appendix D, p. 856. 2020.

institutions, businesses, or events of historic importance which contributed significantly to the history of the city, state, or nation; or represents a significant portrayal of the cultural practices or the way of life of a definable group of people in a historic time.

3110 West Avenue is primarily associated with nationally renowned photographer Russell Lee and Texas political strategist Jean Smith Lee, who occupied the house between 1949 and 1993. “Both Lees were extraordinarily noteworthy occupants,” remarks property owner and architect Robin Abrams in her summary of their contributions. “Russell Lee was one of the foremost Depression-era photographers and photojournalists in the United States...in 1965 he became the first instructor of photography at the University of Texas. Jean Lee was a pivotal figure in the Texas Democratic Party.”²

The Handbook of Texas describes Lee’s national impact as a photographer and humanitarian:

Lee was best known for his photographs taken for the United States Farm Security Administration between 1936 and 1942. Probably that agency's most prolific photographer, [...] Lee’s social-documentary photographs were used by the agency to explain its work to the public [...] He also spent considerable time photographing political and social situations in Texas; [including] a large series on Spanish-speaking people, a series on mental institutions, and many photographs of political events.

[...] After the war, the Lees moved to Austin, where Lee remained active as a photographer...In 1946 and 1947 he conducted an intensive photographic survey of coal-mining regions for the United States Department of the Interior [for which] he made more than 4,000 photographs of living and working conditions among miners, many of which were published in *A Medical Survey of the Bituminous Coal Industry* in 1947 and helped to bring about changes in work rules and health requirements in the mining industry...After his retirement in 1973, Lee and his wife lived quietly in Austin, working with students and scholars who were interested in photography. He died on August 28, 1986.³

Abrams, who knew Jean Smith Lee as a neighbor, discusses Jean Smith Lee’s role as a Texas journalist, political advisor, and mentor. Abrams’ documentary research and oral histories paint Jean Lee as a dynamic and savvy political organizer:

Jean Lee began her professional life as a journalist. She moved to New Orleans in the 1930s, where she met Russell Lee. They relocated to Washington DC during WWII, where Russell became an aerial photographer for the Air Transport Command, and Jean worked for the Office of War Information. According to the author of *Power, Money, and the People* (Anthony M. Orum), Jean and Russell Lee were active in [New Deal policymaking]. After the war, they moved to Austin, where Jean became a noted political organizer...she served as campaign manager for Emma Long, the first woman elected to Austin’s City Council, and continued to work with Ms. Long through nine further terms. She [managed] Senator Ralph Yarborough’s 1952 and 1954 campaigns for governor. She led a successful campaign to keep the Austin Central Library downtown when plans were afoot to move it to the suburbs.

[Abrams] knew Jean Lee as a neighbor and was told many stories by her...[Lee] was Governor Ann Richards’ mentor, [referring to Lee] as her “role model” and “a woman of extraordinary talent and a good fighter.” When President Kennedy came to Texas in November 1963, a fight broke out [among the] Texas Democratic Party regarding whose party the President would attend when he arrived from Dallas...The party was to be held at 3110 West Avenue. Sadly, the president never made it.⁴

§ 25-2-352(3)(c)(iv) Community Value. *The property has a unique location, physical characteristic, or significant feature that contributes to the character, image, or cultural identity of the city, a neighborhood, or a particular group.*

The house at 3110 West Avenue contributes to the character of the Heritage Neighborhood as one of the original houses built by designer and developer Ada Penn and shares a lot with the Penns’ Heritage House, one of the oldest residences in Austin. After her husband’s death, Penn became a drafts person, and began to design and sell houses on portions of her property; the construction, rental, and use as collateral of the home at 3110 West Avenue provided a significant revenue stream that bolstered Penn’s growing business in its formative years. Abrams, who documented the house’s history through

² Abrams, Robin F. “Narrative: Jean and Russell Lee House, 3110 West Avenue.” Application for Historic Zoning: C14H-2024-0014. 2023.

³ Hurley, F. Jack. “Lee, Russell Werner.” Texas State Historical Association, 2024. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/lee-russell-werner>.

⁴ Abrams, 2023.

archival research and neighborhood oral histories, describes the home’s impact on the Penn subdivision and its inhabitants: “Among the first houses built [by Ada Penn] was a two-story bungalow at 3110 West Avenue in 1913-14, which she retained as a home for extended family, and later used as a rental ...[A neighbor] recalled that everyone living adjacent to the alley behind the houses was related except for her family and that it didn’t matter which house you went to for dinner, the back doors were always open. She said that the neighborhood children created a string-and-tin-can communication system that stretched behind all the houses...”⁵

PARCEL NO.: 0217020305

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: N 30FT OF LOT 55 *& S39FT OF LOT 56 OLT 72&75 DIV D OAKWOOD

ESTIMATED ANNUAL TAX EXEMPTION (homestead, capped):

AISD	COA	TC	TC Health	Total
\$3,158.66	\$2,500.00	\$1,791.37	\$592.07	\$8,042.10

APPRAISED VALUE: \$ 1,125,000 (\$780,000 land; \$345,000 improvement)

PRESENT USE: Residence

DATE BUILT/PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: ca. 1913; 1913-1974

INTEGRITY/ALTERATIONS: High. A secondary apartment was created in the early 2000s, but alterations occurred only at the rear and side of the building and were designed to be reversible and not visible from the street.

PRESENT OWNERS: Robin Abrams, 3110 West Ave.

ORIGINAL OWNER(S): Ada Penn

OTHER HISTORICAL DESIGNATIONS: None







⁵ Abrams, 2023.

LOCATION MAP



HISTORIC ZONING

ZONING CASE#: C14H-2024-0016

-  N
-  SUBJECT TRACT
-  PENDING CASE
-  ZONING BOUNDARY

1" = 200'

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