

M E M O R A N D U M

**PLANNING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
CITY OF SANTA MONICA
PLANNING DIVISION**

DATE: December 10, 2007

TO: The Honorable Landmarks Commission

FROM: Planning Staff

SUBJECT: 829 Broadway, LC-07LM-010
Public Hearing to Consider a Landmark Designation Application

PROPERTY OWNER: NM Broadway Studios LLC
APPLICANT: City of Santa Monica Landmarks Commission

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

On October 8, 2007 an application was filed to designate the Quonset huts at 829 Broadway as a City Landmark. A Landmark Assessment Report (Attachment A) has been prepared for the property by the City's historic resources consultant, PCR Services Corporation.

The property at 829 Broadway is located on the north side of Broadway between 9th Street to the east and Lincoln Court to the west within the Santa Monica Tract of the City of Santa Monica. The two Quonset huts are arranged in an L-shape and oriented towards Broadway on the southwest end of the lot. The neighborhood surrounding the Quonset huts has a diversity of building types and uses. Broadway is largely a commercial street west of Lincoln Boulevard and a mix of residential and commercial buildings east of Lincoln Boulevard. The residential properties along Broadway are mostly multi-family while Ninth and Eight Streets are mostly single- and multi-family housing.

Historic Resources Inventory Status

The subject property is located in the area surveyed during Phase 3 (1990-1993) of the Santa Monica Historic Resources Inventory. The Quonset huts were not identified in the survey as being a historic resource. However, in the preliminary draft of the 2006-07 Citywide Historic Resources Inventory, the huts were identified as eligible for Structure of Merit.

PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

Notice of the public hearing was provided as follows: Pursuant to SMMC Section 9.36.120, notice of the public hearing was mailed to all owners and residential and commercial tenants of property within a 300-foot radius of the project and was published in the *Santa Monica Daily Press* at least ten consecutive calendar days prior to the hearing. A copy of the notice is included as Attachment C.

ANALYSIS

Property Information

The Quonset huts were probably placed on the subject property in 1946, based upon City of Santa Monica building permit records. On November 4, 1946, a building permit application for a store at 829 Broadway was filed by N.C. Wexler, the listed property owner. The permit listed the cost of the two huts as \$2,000, suggesting that each one was purchased for \$1,000 each and consistent with the government's asking price for surplus huts after World War II. Because of the match in asking price and the date of the sale, it appears that the huts were purchased directly from the federal government.

It appears that the west Quonset hut was the "Quonset hut – Redesign" model. The west hut appears to have retained many of its character-defining features including its original arched steel structural members and its corrugated surface. The dimensions of the hut appear to be 16-feet in width with 4-foot vertical walls below a semicircular roof. The only alterations appear to be tinted windows on the primary elevation (Broadway). The front elevation surface is finished with painted stucco and faded paint signage on the front façade says "Quonset Trading Post".

The east Quonset hut has large storefront windows facing Broadway that were a later alteration to the structure. It is unclear which Quonset hut model this was although it appears to resemble a modified version of the Quonset hut with one flat wall and one curved wall. The primary elevation has been altered with the placement of tinted sliding glass doors. As a result, its architectural integrity has been compromised and it does not retain sufficient character defining features to convey its significance.

Architectural Significance and Historical Associations

The significance of the subject property at 829 Broadway was evaluated against two potential associated historic contexts: The history of military architecture and technology; and the architectural history of the early-postwar (1945-1950) period in the United States. Based on this research detailed more fully in Attachment A, associations were found between the subject Quonset hut and the studied contexts.

As the United States began its military build-up for WWII, the Navy recognized that there was a lack of structures that could be quickly deployed for housing, storage, and other purposes. The British had already developed and were using the Nissen hut, a semicylindrical, prefabricated structure. However, the structure was too large to ship and it was too difficult to attach the exterior cladding to the frame. The Navy approached the George A. Fuller Company and Stran-Steel, a division of the Great Lakes Steel Corporation to design a prefabricated structure that would be quickly assembled and adapted for any one of 48 purposes including galleys, showers, office, and mess halls.¹ The design team was given 60 days and was headed by Peter Dejongh, a Dutch engineer who was likely influenced by the work and philosophy of the Bauhaus movement and the belief that beauty came from function.² Furthermore, the build-up for war meant that there was a paucity of resources and the necessity for new technologies. Dejongh's influence coupled with Fuller/Stran-Steel's experience with steel led to two innovations that made the Quonset hut possible: the Fuller Company's nesting of building parts resulting in a smaller shipping package and Stran-Steel's development of a nail groove that made it simple to attach the outer corrugated metal shell to the frame. The buildings could be packed in a 450-cubic-foot crate and shipped anywhere in the world to be assembled in a few hours. The Quonset hut was a reflection of the culture of wartime design and ingenuity. During WWII, between 150,000 and 170,000 Quonset huts were manufactured.

The original Quonset hut design ("T-rib Quonset") was 16 feet wide by 36 feet long and used a continuous arch so that the wall and roof were one continuous structural member. The semicircular arches were set four feet apart attached with bolts and tied to a concrete slab or grade-beams. The design featured a one-inch tongue-in-groove plywood floor supported on a raised metal framework, wood-fiber insulation between the outer shell and an inner lining of Masonite (pressed wood), and provisions for doors, windows, and chimneys.³ The design was further refined throughout the war to adapt to the Navy's functional needs. The curvature of the roof created unusable space so Dejongh and his team created a new U-shaped frame. The new supports met the floor at a 90-degree angle, rose vertically for 4-feet then arched into a barrel-shaped roof.⁴ The new interior allowed for counters and shelving along the periphery walls without the loss of floor space. The new design was termed the "Quonset hut – redesign". It appears that the west Quonset hut at 829 Broadway was modeled after this prototype. More prototypes were developed during the war and in total, the Navy approved 86 different interior layouts and a 40-by-100 foot warehouse model.⁵

After the war, manufacturers recognized that a domestic market existed for the huts to be used for storage, housing, commercial buildings, and light industry. The open floor plan huts were adapted for a wide range of uses including single-family homes, movie houses, hay barns, churches, repair shops, and small businesses. One of the largest purchasers of

1 Thomas, Adam, *Historitecture LLC. Soldiers of the Sword, Soldiers of the Ploughshare: Quonset Huts in the Fort Collins Urban Growth Area Historic Context and Survey Report*, July 2003, Page 7.

2 *Ibid*, Page 8.

3 "The Instant Building". http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/it/1998/3/1998_3_68.shtml; accessed December 5, 2007.

4 *Ibid.*: Thomas, , Page 9.

5 *Ibid*, Page 9.

the Quonset huts was universities and colleges which lacked sufficient housing for returning veterans and their families.

The subject Quonset huts at 829 Broadway represent the adaptability and innovation of the building type in the postwar years. In researching the business licenses for the subject property, staff found that the building was used for gunsales and anecdotal evidence indicates that the building was also used for sales of hardware and surplus goods. It would appear that the Quonset huts were used as a quick and affordable solution to opening a store on the vacant lot in the resource-scarce post-war era.

Although the vicinity of the subject Quonset huts may have once been an important postwar aircraft-industrial area where there were many Quonset huts, the subject Quonset huts now appear to be the only known remaining example of its type in the City of Santa Monica. A windshield survey of the area surrounding the site, the surrounding light-industrial corridors and districts, and the Santa Monica Airport would seem to support this assertion. While there are some Quonset-like buildings in these areas, none have the WWII era dimensions.

Landmarks Ordinance/Findings

The Landmarks Ordinance requires the Commission to review the building's eligibility as a landmark based on the six criteria discussed below. The Commission may designate a property as a Landmark if it meets one or more of these criteria.

Based on the research and evaluation of the Quonset huts at 829 Broadway, staff concludes that the west Quonset hut meets one of the six designation criteria and is eligible for City Landmark designation while the east Quonset hut does not appear to meet any of the six designation criteria and therefore is not eligible for City Landmark designation. The following draft findings are made to support these conclusions:

- (1) *It exemplifies, symbolizes, or manifests elements of the cultural, social, economic, political or architectural history of the City.*

There may have once been many Quonset huts in Santa Monica which were associated with the commercial and industrial growth of the post-war period. However, there is little historical documentary or photographic evidence to support this claim. Therefore the subject Quonset huts are not eligible under this criterion.

- (2) *It has aesthetic or artistic interest or value, or other noteworthy interest or value.*

The subject Quonset huts do not appear to meet this criterion.

- (3) *It is identified with historic personages or with important events in local, state or national history.*

The subject Quonset huts fails to meet the requirements for eligibility under this criterion.

- (4) *It embodies distinguishing architectural characteristics valuable to a study of a period, style, method of construction, or the use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship, or is a unique or rare example of an architectural design, detail or historical type valuable to such a study.*

The Quonset hut is a highly important building type related to both military architecture and the architecture of the early-postwar era. During World War II, between 150,000 and 170,000 Quonset huts were manufactured and shipped around the world. The Quonset hut was used as a mobile temporary building that could be used for nearly any wartime program, including housing, storage, manufacturing, and recreation. After the war, surplus Quonset huts were sold to the public for around \$1,000 each. The Quonset hut as a building type was a modern, affordable, adaptable, “building-in-a-box” that allowed people to construct a home or business with minimal cost and effort. It appears that the subject Quonset huts were used as a commercial building. The subject west Quonset hut appears to be the last World War II-era Quonset hut in the City of Santa Monica that retains its integrity. The west Quonset hut appears to meet this criterion.

- (5) *It is a significant or a representative example of the work or product of a notable builder, designer or architect.*

The subject Quonset huts do not appear to meet this criterion.

- (6) *It has a unique location, a singular physical characteristic, or is an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City.*

The subject Quonset huts do not appear to meet this criterion.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The Quonset hut was intended to be a temporary solution to address immediate housing and utilitarian needs during and after WWII. While there were once many Quonset huts in the United States, they are now a rare building type associated with WWII architecture and technology, and the architecture of the postwar industrial and commercial redevelopment. In fact, the only Quonset huts listed on the National Register were destroyed by a tornado.⁶

The integrity of the west Quonset hut is substantially intact and it is a good surviving representative example of a Quonset hut. The primary elevation of the east Quonset hut has been substantially altered with the addition of tinted glass sliding doors and has lost its ability to convey its significance; however, the west Quonset hut appears to be the last surviving WWII-era Quonset hut in Santa Monica. Based upon the cost and date of

⁶ “Tin-Can Treasures: Are Quonsets, steel hangar- like huts left over from WWII, worth preserving?” http://www.nationaltrust.org/magazine/archives/arch_story/111403.htm; accessed December 5, 2007.

construction on the building permits, it would appear that the hut was purchased from the federal government as military surplus. The hut was meant to be easily assembled and moveable and is significant for its association with military architecture and innovation.

Based on the foregoing, staff recommends that the Landmarks Commission only designate the west Quonset hut structure based on the draft findings contained herein. As the significance of the hut is not tied to its geographic location but lies in the uniqueness and ingenuity of design and rarity of building type, staff also recommends that the Commission not designate the subject property as a Landmark parcel.

Pursuant to SMMC 9.36.180, the Landmarks Commission's determination regarding this application may be appealed to the City Council if the appeal is filed with the City Planning Division within ten (10) consecutive days commencing from the date that the decision is made by the Landmarks Commission.

Attachments:

- A. PCR Services Corporation Landmark Assessment Report (December 2007)
- B. Public Hearing Notice