

HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION
PERMITS IN NATIONAL REGISTER HISTORIC DISTRICTS
MAY 21, 2012
NRD-2012-0002
2410 Pemberton Parkway
Old West Austin

PROPOSAL

Demolish c. 1950 house.

RESEARCH

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 Service 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

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. 16th 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

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:

Release the demolition permit upon completion of a City of Austin Documentation Package consisting of photographs of all elevations of the house, blueprints, and a narrative history of the house and its occupants for archiving at the Austin History Center.

PHOTOS



Front elevations



Rear elevations



Rear addition



Rear elevations



Interior shot (through a window) showing the stone fireplace, back wall of windows, and the wooded hillside beyond, comprising the back yard.

OTHER FEHR & GRANGER HOUSES REMAINING IN AUSTIN



Cohn House, 2612 Spring Lane (1950)



Arthur Fehr House, 5102 Ridge Oak Drive (1949)



Garwood House, 1802 San Gabriel Street (1961)



Gellman House, 5200 Ridge Oak Drive (1951)



Hanna House, 2400 Pemberton Place (1949)



Heath House, 1808 Vance Circle (1948)



Hooten House, 4603 Ridge Oak Drive (1953)



Kreisle House, 2509 Schulle Avenue (1954)



Kreisle House (front door), 2509 Schulle Avenue (1954)



Mancaluso House, 2702 Scenic Drive (1955)



Ritter House, 2700 Scenic Drive (1955)



Steinhauser House, 2604 St. Anthony Street (1951)

OCCUPANCY HISTORY
2410 Pemberton Parkway
 c. 1950

City Directory Research, Austin History Center
 By City Historic Preservation Office
 February 2012

Note: There is no listing in City Directory for the address 2410 Pemberton Parkway; however Robert P. and Margaret C. Wagner are listed as residing at this address.

1974	No listing for Robert P. or Margaret Wagner
1973	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1972	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1970	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1968	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1966	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1964	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1962	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1961	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1960	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1959	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1958	No listing for Robert P. or Margaret Wagner
1957	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1955	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas

1954	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1953	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1952	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C, owners Professor, University of Texas
1949	Robert P. Wagner and Margaret C. listed as residing at 1511 Avenue F.

NOTE: City building permits (see below) indicate the house was built in 1950.

WATER SERVICE PERMIT
Austin, Texas

C No. 7912

Received of ROBT. P. WAGNER Date 12-12-50

Address 2410 PEMBERTON PARKWAY

Amount TWENTY & NO/100 20.00

Plumber FOX-SCHMIDT Size of Tap 3/4

Date of Connection 1-24-51

Size of Tap Made 3/4

Size Service Made 1"

Size Main Tapped 2" C.I.

From Front Prop. Line to Curb Cock

From 5 Prop. Line to Curb Cock 5'.

Location of Meter front curb

Type of Box Round hole

Depth of Main in St.

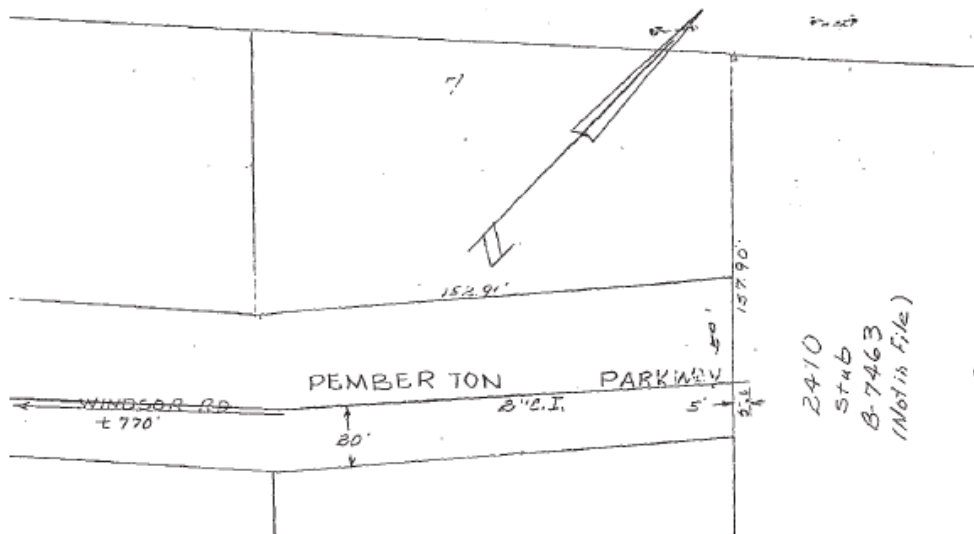
Depth of Service Line

From Curb Cock to Tap on Main

Checked by Engr. Dept. 3-30-51 EC

INDEXED

No. Fittings	Curb Cock	Elbow	St. Elbow	Bushing	Reducer	1" x 3/4"	13' Pipe COOPER	Lead Comp.	Nipples	Union	Plug	Tee	Stop	Box	Lid	Valves	Job No.	Per. No.



1950 water service permit

May 14, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

I am one of the owners of the property at 2410 and 2412 Pemberton Parkway, and would like to submit a few words about the proposed demolition of the property to allow for rebuilding on the site.

If any of the owners of these properties (a house and an unusable lot behind it) were to speak for historical renovation and/or preservation of this house, it would be me. When my dad passed away in 2005, after my mother in 2004, I was the one who was most interested in the historical value of the house, and I even had some internet “Meet-Up” activity and parties there and at other “modernist” houses in Austin. So I hope that the word of someone who loves modern architecture and this house in particular (after all, we owned it for over 35 years) would count as sincere when I say that we looked at every possible alternative before we decided that demolition was the only option.

Austin is a great place to live for a lot of reasons. It’s a university town, and this house is a “university neighborhood” house. Some attention has been paid about Robert Wagner, a professor who lived in the house for its first 26 years before my family bought it. I think we can all agree that he was a great person and did a lot of worthy academic work, but this town has had countless great professors, some who lived in interesting houses and most who didn’t. UT is a world-class university with world-class academics. I don’t think it’s realistic to call any house that any of them lived in worthy of heroic and costly renovations for that fact alone. Also, Mr. Wagner moved out in 1974 and moved on with his life, even retiring in another state. The house is really more my Dad’s, not his—and though I think my Dad was great, he’s hardly a historical personage.

The reason the house is interesting is of course that it’s an example of mid-century architecture, a period that’s been enjoying some revival lately. However, that revival isn’t exactly popular with the vast majority of residents. Even though the supporters of these houses are vocal and devoted (I’m one of course) the number of people in this group with the incredibly huge sums available to restore a house like this is almost nonexistent. Even the architectural firm that built it has stated that this house is not a good example of their work. The house has been on the market for over a year and a half, and even with contacting some of the “modernist” fans I know of, none has come forward with an offer, even though we have set the price at essentially the land value only. Letting this house sit vacant and unattended will only eventually create a problem for the neighborhood and the city.

There are a lot of unseen problems with restoration of this property that a casual view from the street or walk-through might not reveal (though it is deteriorating rapidly even there). The roof is not to code; my father added a metal pitched roof because rain on the flat composition roof beneath it had introduced a great deal of rot. For some time, I (who helped clean the house for my parents in their last years) had to regularly vacuum up sprinkles of rotted wood material that would fall into the master bedroom from the ceiling. We patched it up but any restorer would be in for a nasty surprise there, as the roof has to be now completely removed and rebuilt. There is also serious rot in the downstairs bathroom, where the original tile had to be ripped up to stop at least the worst of the water leaks. Of course there was always mold downstairs—Clorox was our friend. If it’s not visible now it’s because the water has been shut off for over a year. My son tells me after a recent walk-through that daylight is visible through the exterior paneling under the staircase downstairs. It is practically impossible now to air condition without some massive

replacing of insulation; the electric bill in the summer generally runs over one thousand dollars monthly.

A true historical renovator will have to face the fact that there is almost none of the original paneling, fixtures, flooring, or “built-ins” left in the house, and even the floor plan is radically different, especially downstairs. The aluminum casement windows, which are interesting, of course, are not complete; as in order to make them “square” in the settling house the handles were all removed and discarded, as they were no longer functional. A restorer may have to pay a great deal to find those parts. I could go on, but others more expert in this can describe the impossibly huge amounts of cash it would take to bring this house back to anything near its original state.

There is another problem of course, and that is the fact that this property is actually two legal lots. None of us ever knew how it was that Wagner got away with building smack in the middle of the road, cutting off the back lot; perhaps in 1950 the city wasn’t paying that much attention. But whoever owns this property will have to go every few years to the county tax assessor and beg to have the back lot’s taxes reduced, as my parents did for three decades. There’s no guarantee that that could be allowed forever, unless the back lot is actually condemned as perpetually unusable. There is no way to build a road around the house, either above or below, as the slope is far too steep. The enormity of the project that would have to be attempted to build a road around the house would require a huge retaining wall on a slope that is always eroding anyway. The house is awkwardly set right at the entry to the property; thus there is essentially no front yard, and a difficult-to-manage acre behind it. Most people who are not nature and privacy freaks like we were would not be enthusiastic about maintaining a full acre lot for a house of this size. There is currently no room for a single garage, even—with over an acre of land!

In the end, though, I have come to believe that one has to be realistic about what one is trying to restore. I realize now that modernism is about the architecture and the building anew, not really the houses already built—does that make sense? We have all the plans. Anyone who wants to could build it again, correcting some of the mistakes, adding some 21st century necessities (like air conditioning) and could do it for far, far less than the cost of renovating this one. And one would have honored the history of this style in a much truer way than by trying to un-build and then rebuild this particular house. I’ll be happy to post the plans on the internet for anyone to view and use.

I sincerely request that the historical commission not stand in the way of these builders who have shown themselves in past projects to be very sensitive to modern style and who want to produce something that will add to the beauty and sustainability of the little strip of houses along this street. What they are proposing is an improvement, not a destruction, of this neighborhood. They are not proposing a garish “McMansion” or cookie-cutter spec house, but a project that makes good use of this beautiful site. We are not able to invest the sums necessary to restore this house, and don’t believe it is feasible--or wise--anyway. We love history and Austin’s history, and we more or less “preserved” this house for 35 years against the accusations of protecting a “ghastly, hideous house” for a lot of that time. But no one house lasts forever. One can, though, preserve the style and the concept in a new construction. We sincerely request that the commission allow that to happen here.

Thank you,
Susan McElroy
Seattle, WA