

Queen of the Hill: 3805 Red River Stands Another Day

Demolition efforts are delayed by the HLC



By [Anne Harris](#), 10:00AM, Wed. Jul. 30, 2014

Entering Room 325 of One Texas Center on Monday night, one had the idea that this routine meeting of the [Texas Historic Landmark Commission](#) was more well-attended than most. As the room quickly filled, there was buzz was about one property – Case No. CH14-2014-0007, the long-beloved, creme stucco International Moderne house at 3805 Red River.

As the property's fourth time in front of the commission, at issue for it on this occasion was a change in zoning designation to **Historic Landmark**, which would prohibit demolition of the house by the owners if the City **Planning Commission**, and subsequently the **City Council**, approve by a supermajority of two-thirds of the vote. Since both bodies are known for rarely voting against the wishes of property owners in historic landmark cases, the next two phases of the zoning process are seen by most as uphill battles.

A few days earlier, before Monday's unanimous vote to recommend historic zoning to "single family residence historic landmark conditional overlay", social media

posts by Modern Movement awareness group [Mid Tex Mod](#) made the case a lightning rod for issues such as owners' rights; the expense associated with historic zoning as offset by tax incentives; and, aside from the official criteria, what constitutes a landmark worth saving. Most notable were the numbers and variety of indignant citizens who protested on social media and attended Monday night's Commission meeting.

Historic Preservation Officer **Steve Sadowsky** made a compelling case for preservation, dubbing the house "Red River International House" for its pure devotion to the International Moderne movement, before introducing the group of professionals who had come, many simply as fans of the house, to give

recommendations for preservation, and to speak to the home's significance to the community and its physical condition.

Caroline Wright, co-chair of [Preservation Austin](#), and a board member of Mid Tex Mod, referred to the case as "a poster child for candidacy as related to historic preservation." Other speakers included former Deputy Historic Preservation Officer for the City, **Alyson McGee**, currently a board member of **Preservation Austin**; architectural historian **Gregory Smith** of the [Texas Historical Commission](#); **Tere O'Connell**, principal and architect at VOH Architects; **Evan Thompson**, director of [Preservation Texas](#); and **Lin Team**, Kinney Company's Old Austin Realtor and a longtime Preservation Austin vice president who co-chairs its Preservation Committee.

All provided an ample case for "community value," one of the criteria for residential historic zoning. Lin Team's remarks provided valuable insight, "Dr. Browning graciously met with me to visit the house with a preservation architect, who found the house to have much architectural value and potential for restoration. She also allowed me to show it to a prospective buyer, who was not deterred by the condition of the property nor the desire of the owner to delay a sale until three years from now for tax reasons. He immediately said he wanted to buy it and that he was willing to work with the timing issues that were had been described as obstacles to the sale of the property. He asked that the family attorney be in touch with his attorney to pursue plans for a transaction, but that never happened. At that point Dr. Browning said that the family is not interested in selling the property, but they just want the building to be demolished. I hope that the information that has been and will be presented this evening will persuade the Shive family to preserve the house themselves or sell it to someone who respects the house and will restore it as a City of Austin Landmark."

The other criterium for historic zoning is architectural significance, spoken to best by Mr. Sadowsky, as he described it as the only true International Moderne example in Austin, residential or commercial, with as many features significant to that movement, such as the cantilevered overhang, vertical fins, portholes, and its most glamorous feature, the brown horizontal banding that embraces it.

Built to 1,958 square feet in 1947, the house has not only an astounding drive-by fan base, but many locals recall events in the house that probably do not qualify as historic. Local band the **Bad Livers** are said to have lived there. People remember professors who lived there when it was rented as a duplex. **Tom Pittman** of the **Austin Lounge Lizards** was a longtime resident, and maintained it for many years. In fact, Austinite Lisa Francher, in a Facebook comment, recalled meeting **Joni Mitchell** there during one of Pittman's legendary parties, and reports that "**Bob Mould** wrote a song about this house without knowing anything about it, inspired by its appearance." More than a few people have memories of living there as renters. It has been described as a "beautiful shit-hole" by the last artists who lived there, and despite memories of rains flooding under the front door, it sounds as if they wouldn't have lived anywhere else.

The opposition to historic zoning at Monday's meeting was represented by **Karen Browning**, daughter of **Gwyn Shive**, the owner and last member of what was known as the **Delta H Corporation**. Delta H was a consortium of neighbors formed in the early 1960's who feared commercial encroachment further down Red River after the City sold the back nine holes of the Hancock golf course to developers for the Hancock Shopping Center. The other properties along Red River owned by Delta H have been rented or torn down. Browning stated that her family was opposed to preservation of 3805, defending an old engineering report that claimed the house was not fit for rehabilitation, citing foundation and structural caveats. She also described the property as an "unpleasant place to live" saying that the dining room feels as though it were "in the intersection." One of her recommendations was to replicate the house on another site. Attorney **Matt Williams**, representing the Shive family, brought up the rear, calling the

veracity of a more recent engineering report into question, but only in that it under-estimates the rigors and expense of a renovation.

The issue that will prominently float to the surface as the case moves forward will surely be the disparity between two engineering reports – the first one, done some years ago by an engineer whose expertise in historic residences is unverified, and which calls into question the structural integrity of the home; and a report done in recent weeks by **Patrick Sparks**, P.E., president of Sparks Engineering, Inc., "a firm that specializes in existing structures". The report states that "the concrete flooring on the first floor is cracked, but the house was constructed in such a way that the floor is independent of the actual foundation. Similarly, many of the cracks visible on the walls of the house are in non-structural walls."

As to owners' rights in doing as they please with private property, Mid Tex Mod makes the case that "preservationists are aware of, and concerned with, the balance necessary between private property rights and historic preservation. However, we all see that structures like this, even as they are privately owned, contribute to the character of and have value within our community. Without the commitment of property owners to maintain their historic buildings, our community would lose a great deal of its essential character. These processes allow for public participation because they do have an impact on the public ... our goals as preservationists are never to freeze time, but to promote growth in a way that also respects and embraces our physical history."

Stay tuned to this space for updates as both sides prepare to present their cases to the Planning Commission. The meeting agenda can be accessed [here](#), and backup materials can be found [here](#).







