

ALDRIDGE PLACE LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT NOMINATION SUMMARY

The proposed Aldridge Place Local Historic District is a ten-block residential district located in north-central Austin encompassing 138 properties with 136 single-family homes and apartments, and 11 substantial, street-facing garage apartments. Also within the district are a historic park, bridges, stone entry gates, and vintage streetlights. The district is generally bounded on the north by West 34th Street, including the north side of the 500 block; by Speedway Blvd. on the east; by West 30th Street on the south; and by Guadalupe Street on the west.

The district includes the original Aldridge Place subdivision, which was platted as an addition to the City of Austin in 1912 and Aldridge Place Reserved (University Heights) which was added to the original plat in 1924. For the purposes of the proposed Local Historic District, the name "Aldridge Place" has been slightly expanded to include the historic Buddington-Benedict-Sheffield Compound which is adjacent to and historically associated with Aldridge Place on its north side.

Today, the Aldridge Place Local Historic District is a remarkably intact historic neighborhood rooted in the development of the University of Texas and Austin's early suburbs. Its layout reflects the principles of the City Beautiful movement, and its architect-designed structures outstandingly reflect the local and national trends of its time.

Period of Significance (1860; 1912-1965)

The Period of Significance for Aldridge Place extends from 1860 to 1965. It begins with the construction of the limestone dwelling built in the countryside north of the city of Austin in 1860 and ends with the close of the historic period in 1965, as recommended in the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for historic districts.

The earliest extant building in the Aldridge Place Local Historic District is the two-story limestone house built on Guadalupe Street by Albert Buddington in 1860. At the time, the house was one of only a few scattered farmsteads that dotted the rural landscape north of the Austin city limits and remains the oldest known building north of The University of Texas campus. The Buddington House survives as a vestige of the vernacular type most closely associated with prosperous frontier landowners in rural Central Texas in the antebellum period before the Civil War.

In 1883, nearly a quarter century after Buddington built his rural home, The University of Texas was chartered, an act that would draw the city's population northward to its environs. As Austin expanded from its original boundaries, the farmland north of the UT campus became attractive for development as suburban additions to the city. Numerous subdivisions were established from the late 19th and early 20th centuries surrounding the area that in 1912 Lewis Hancock platted as the Aldridge Place subdivision. Hancock was a prominent banker, mayor of Austin from 1895 to 1897 and founder of the Austin Country Club, which is now the City's Hancock Golf Course.

Aldridge Place Subdivision

Unlike the earlier subdivisions, Aldridge Place is an example of the aesthetically driven neighborhood planning principles of the City Beautiful Movement that became popular

during the first few decades of the twentieth century. The movement emphasized beautification and natural scenery to provide attractive and safe environments for urbanites in efforts to mitigate congestion, blight, and inappropriate land use. The goals of the movement were rooted in the ideologies and designs of famed landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903). Olmsted argued that parks and other green spaces raised surrounding land values, contributing to private enterprise and returning their costs through increased municipal real estate taxation.

In keeping with this City Beautiful tradition, Aldridge Place was platted around Hemphill Park, a greenbelt on either side of Hemphill Creek (aka West Branch of Waller Creek). The roads on either side of the Hemphill greenbelt are narrow and winding, forcing the busy city-goer to slow down as he or she enters the neighborhood. This sense of change in environment from the efficient grid pattern of the built environment surrounding Aldridge Place introduces quiet relief that is immediately felt. It is also notable that many of the streets in Aldridge Place dead end, without connecting to the surrounding streets. Hemphill Park, which was deeded to the city in 1912, remains a desirable amenity that attracts people to the neighborhood. Aldridge Place is an excellent, small-scale example of how the City Beautiful aesthetic played out in Austin.

Aldridge Place was designed with regard to the natural, gently sloping landscape of the site. The lots and blocks in Aldridge Place are organic; their size, shape, and placement follow the curve of the landforms and are thus of inconsistent size, shape, and placement along the sloping streets.

In advertisements from the time, Aldridge Place is referred to as “the suburb beautiful--- where suburban life and city luxuries are delightfully combined,” and a place “developed for lovers of the artistic and beautiful in their home surroundings.” Real estate agent, K.C. Miller claimed, “Drive or walk through Aldridge Place. You will exclaim: ‘How can such beauty lie in the heart of the town!’”

The sense of place was heightened by decorative streetlights and stone entry gates. The limestone columns are etched “Aldridge Place” and placed at the east and west entrances of West 32nd and 33rd Streets. This example of civic art, marking the entrance to the neighborhood, was likely also inspired by the City Beautiful movement.

Only houses, either single-family dwellings or low-density (two-to-four unit) apartment buildings, could be built in the subdivision. A minimum expenditure for construction was obligatory, with a tiered standard for one- and two-story dwellings. The deed also required that all houses be built facing inward toward the district’s streets; alleys were forbidden, and sidewalks were mandatory, making it a front-porch society. Stables were prohibited thereby deterring undesirable smells and waste. Electric utilities were placed on the back of lots and underground in public places. Houses within the district generally maintain a standard setback of about 20 to 25 feet from the street and are usually sited at the center of their lots.

Architectural Styles and Significance of Aldridge Place

National trends greatly influenced the architectural palette of Aldridge Place. By the 1910s, the country had moved away from Victorian models and embraced new American design as reflected in the Prairie School and Craftsman styles. When Aldridge Place was platted in 1912, Prairie School design was at the height of its popularity nationwide and a number of homes in the district fall into this category. As the decade

progressed, however, the Craftsman aesthetic supplanted the more restrained Prairie School in popularity, and a large number of the district's houses built from the mid-1910s, through the 1920s and into the 1930s display its distinctive form and decorative characteristics. At the same time, Americans began to look to their national past for architectural inspiration, launching an interest in Colonial Revival styles. Colonial Revival styles, including the Georgian Revival variant, appeared in the district by the late 1910s and remained popular throughout the historic period.

Veterans returning from World War I had been exposed to European architectural designs. Their interest in European-inspired Period Revival styles made its way to Aldridge Place where Tudor Revival, Spanish Eclectic (Spanish Colonial Revival), Italian Renaissance Revival and other romantic houses began to appear by the 1920s.

When the Great Depression hit the United States, Austin fared relatively better than other cities throughout the country in the early years of the crisis. Unlike urban centers that relied on manufacturing for employment, Austin's two main employers were the State of Texas and The University of Texas. The result was that construction of new homes in centrally located Aldridge Place continued throughout the depression until the district was largely built out by 1940.

Domestic building resumed immediately after the war restrictions were lifted in 1945 and all but a few of the remaining vacant lots in Aldridge Place were developed with the modern housing types and styles that arose in the early postwar period. The most significant of these modern trends was the huge popularity and wide proliferation of the Ranch Style across the domestic landscape. Little construction has taken place in the district after 1965, the end of the period of significance.

In sum, Aldridge Place LHD has 138 properties, two of which are undeveloped lots. Only a handful of primary houses appeared in the new Aldridge Place subdivision between 1912 and 1919 (13 or 10 percent). The end of World War I ushered in a period of robust construction: 66 or 49 percent were built during the 1920s. Development continued throughout the 1930s to 1940, when 38 resources, or 28 percent, were built. Postwar resources dating from 1946 to the end of the historic period in 1965 account for 7 percent, or 9 resources. An additional 9 resources, or 7 percent of the total number of primary houses, were built after the period of significance. That means 127 primary houses – 93 percent – date to the period of significance.

The dozens of handsome and stately homes in the neighborhood are physical evidence of the collaboration between many of the city's prominent citizens and celebrated architects and builders. The architects designed unique, artful interpretations of then-popular national styles. The use of quality materials and the demand for craftsmanship are evident from the large number of substantial, intact, well-designed landmark homes throughout the district. Due to the high quality of design, materials, and craftsmanship of the houses, owners have elected to preserve rather than replace the architecture of the neighborhood. Minimal changes, including the addition of garage apartments, enclosure of porches and updates to HVAC systems, reflect changing attitudes and amenities in American culture of the mid-century. Today, the desirable location, natural amenities, and attractiveness of the neighborhood remain. All this means that few historic buildings have been lost to demolition.

Assessment of Integrity

Assessments of “contributing” or “noncontributing” status of resources in the Aldridge Place LHD were made by a preservation professional with considerable experience in evaluating properties for local, state, and national historic designations. According to national criteria, “contributing”, properties must have been built during the district’s period of significance (1860-1965), retain sufficient historic integrity to be recognizable to their period of significance, convey an authentic sense of history, and contribute to the district’s overall historic character.

While Aldridge Place has 138 properties, it has 159 surveyed cultural resources; the resources include 136 primary houses, 11 other dwellings, 10 structures (bridges, entry columns, etc.), one collective object (streetlamps), and one site, Hemphill Park. Of the surveyed resources, 89% are contributing to the historic character of the district and 11% are not contributing, including a five-unit townhome built in 1981.

All buildings within the Aldridge Place district were constructed as dwellings of some type, including single-family houses, duplexes, apartment buildings, townhouses, and a substantial number of garage apartments with highly-visible street presence.

CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES:

NUMBER: 141 PERCENT OF TOTAL: 89%

NON-CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES:

NUMBER: 18 PERCENT OF TOTAL: 11%

Summary

Aldridge Place is an extraordinarily intact historic subdivision in Central Austin that has retained its original appearance and landscape patterns and conveys a vivid and accurate sense of its own history. Today, Aldridge Place seeks to confirm its commitment to its preservation by requesting designation as a local historic district.

The neighborhood is nestled in a park-like setting along the Hemphill Creek greenbelt that runs north-to-south through the middle of the subdivision. The curvilinear streets and natural landscape, enhanced by rustic stone-lined creek beds, culverts, and bridges, provide a “City Beautiful” backdrop to this lovely and enduring historic neighborhood

Aldridge Place contains a wide array of outstanding mid-19th to mid-20th century residential properties, ranging from the c. 1860 Texas vernacular stone Buddington House to Ranch and Postwar Modern style buildings from the 1950s. Its early frontier-era property and postwar designs notwithstanding, Aldridge Place is characterized by its large inventory of exceptional Craftsman, Prairie School, and Period Revival style architecture. Despite its relatively small size, Aldridge Place counts 14 City of Austin Historic Landmarks among its 159 historic resources. Most of the landmarks are outstanding examples of Craftsman and Period Revival architecture.

The quality of design and building materials, as well as the careful attention to architectural detail, is borne out by the fact that few of the district’s property owners have seen fit to significantly alter their homes’ original appearance. As a result, Aldridge Place has an exceptionally high ratio of historic to non-historic resources (89 percent versus 11 percent). Additions and modifications to historic resources within the district

are generally subordinate to the original design and use materials that are compatible with their early counterparts. Most new construction has been added to the rear or to the least-visible side of the primary resource. Few major design elements have been compromised by alterations such as front porch enclosures, additions to the primary façade, or replacement of authentic materials.

The neighborhood's meandering streets became home to some of Austin's most prominent citizens, including major political figures, business people, and educators of the early-20th century. These individuals contributed substantially to the growth and development of Austin, Texas.

Aldridge Place exceeds by far the city's requirements for establishing historic districts and is worthy to be designated as an Austin local historic district:

- it is overwhelmingly comprised of contributing historic-age resources 89%,
- it has significant owner support 95%, and
- it remains a fully intact City Beautiful neighborhood as originally planned by Lewis Hancock. Besides the beautiful homes and restful environment, Lewis Hancock's design for Aldridge Place did something equally important: it created a vibrant community. This may not be critical to LHD designation, but it is significant to those who live in the neighborhood. Aldridge Place residents gather for big annual events, like a neighborhood Holiday Party held since 1972, Fourth of July Parades and kids play, park clean-ups, and tree plantings. Equally valuable are more mundane and frequent visits, like sidewalk conversations, front porch talks, and the all-important meetings with dogs in the park.