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May 26, 2022

Terri Myers, Chair
City of Austin
Historic Landmark Commission

Re: 2002 Scenic Drive

Dear Ms. Myers,

Preservation Austin exists to empower Austinites to shape a more inclusive, resilient, and meaningful community culture through preservation. We love a good building, and write today to express our concern over the possible demolition of 2002 Scenic Drive (PR-2002-032448), a property that we believe is eligible for historic designation.

Following the May HLC meeting during which this case was postponed, Preservation Austin conducted additional research into the history of the site beyond what was included in the case backup materials. Based on the backup materials and our additional research, Preservation Austin believes that the property meets the criteria for significance under Architecture and Historical Association. However, we also believe that additional research is needed and ask that HPO staff be given more time to research the complete history of this property so that the best preservation outcome may be achieved.

The property on Scenic Drive retains integrity as defined by the National Register of Historic Places and clearly conveys historical significance. Its wholly unique design and landscape tell a distinct Austin story that we are just beginning to understand, and we echo neighbors' extreme dismay that this rare architectural treasure might be razed. Preservation Austin believes the properties meet the following criteria for preservation under Austin's current development code:

Architecture:

The primary building at 2002 Scenic Drive is a two-story Spanish eclectic residence with Modern and eclectic additions constructed during the historic period. Fenestration includes multi-light wood casement windows irregularly placed throughout. A cylindrical turret with a crenelated parapet and arched windows flanks an open masonry porch that leads to an expansive designed landscape. Both the exterior and interior feature elaborately carved keystones with human and animal motifs. The landscape features tinted concrete elements including a footbridge and a bench.

Based on our research, we determined that 2002 Scenic Drive (formerly 2002 River Road) was built in 1923. Its architect is yet unclear; however, we know that the home was built by Raymond Delisle, who was the builder of several homes along Lake Austin around this time. Delisle was a businessman involved in many endeavors, including the Urnite Manufacturing Company, where he held the position of director.

2002 Scenic Drive's architecture is extremely similar to that of the smaller cottage at 2005 Scenic Drive, which features stonework and a mantle bearing the face of a Viking, warranting additional research into this fanciful complex along Lake Austin. The property also resembles other stone homes at 2008, 2102, and 2105 Scenic Drive, clearly reflecting a development pattern in this area.

Urnite Company was established as early as 1927. An ad for the company in 1929 stated that they manufactured "permanent rustic features made to order," including fountains, birdbaths, benches, and other fixed and moveable objects similar to those seen in the landscape at 2002 Scenic Drive. A 1929 newspaper article in the Austin American describes the Urnite Company employing a "special Spanish process" to create a faux-wood effect out of tinted concrete that its staff learned from Mexican artisans. This technique is almost certainly that of *faux bois* or *trabajo rústico*. *Faux bois* (French for "false wood") is a technique in which concrete structures resemble rustic wood or pieces of fallen or decaying trees. The material thus gives the impression of being malleable and organic in form.

In Austin, the most prominent example of *faux bois* is the Briones House on E. 7th Street, colloquially known as *Casa de Sueños*. It was designed and built by Mexican artisan and builder Genaro P. Briones and completed in 1947. Briones worked with Mexican-born builder Dionicio Rodriguez, known for his masterful designs and artistic techniques. He was best known for his expertise in concrete *faux bois*, a style he learned while in Mexico. Rodriguez most frequently used the *faux bois* technique in footbridges, benches, and shelters. The influence of his work is quite evident in Briones' home, particularly the outdoor furniture Genaro constructed for his own terrace and grotto. This method of applying tinted and sculpted stucco to reinforced concrete was not common in Texas, which makes Rodriguez's and Briones' constructions all the more unique.

In addition to describing the Urnite Company's work in manufacturing objects made of tinted concrete, and referencing Rodriguez' work in San Antonio's Brackenridge Park, the 1929 Austin American article mentioned that the Urnite Company was conducting work on the Delisle House that would create a "woodland scene" once completed. While further investigation is needed to determine the exact relationship between this work and the current conditions at 2002 Scenic Drive, the documentation suggests that the property is likely home to the earliest known example of the *faux bois* technique in Austin, predating the Briones House by nearly twenty years.

Historical Association:

Based on our initial research, Raymond Delisle appears to have been a prominent businessman involved in many ventures. As previously mentioned, he built several houses around Lake Austin and owned an optical business that was operational as early as 1921. He and his wife, Ammon, were socially active and their home on Lake Austin is referenced in newspapers as the "Delisle place" by the late 1920s. He continued to pursue real estate endeavors around Austin into the 1940s and was a member of the Chamber of Commerce and the Lions Club. He passed away in 1953. Additional research is needed into Raymond Delisle and the Urnite Company to determine if its association is significant.

As the backup report identifies, the property also appears to have significant historical associations with longtime residents CH and Mildred Slator, who purchased the property in 1946. Slator was a prominent local attorney and co-owner of the Tavern circa 1953 and came from a prominent Llano family. The home stayed in the Slator family until 2021. The property is also significant for its association with Fehr & Granger. Established in 1946, Fehr & Granger was one of the first and possibly most influential mid-century modern architectural firms in Austin. They designed a c. 1946-47 addition to the house.

The residence at 2002 Scenic Drive clearly displays a high degree of historic significance worthy of historic designation; however, the story of its association with Raymond Delisle, the Urnite Company, and its application of the *faux bois* technique merits further investigation. We urge the Historic Landmark Commission to allow staff additional time to conduct this research with the ultimate recommendation of individual landmark designation for the property.

Thank you for your service to our community

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Linda Y. Jackson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Linda Y. Jackson, President