

February 26, 2018

FROM: DANIEL ZACK, AICP, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
Development and Resource Management Dept.
Secretary, Historic Preservation Commission

BY: LAURA VAN ONNA
Historic Preservation Specialist

SUBJECT: REVIEW AND APPROVAL (WITH CONDITIONS) OF THE WILLIAM
SAROYAN HOUSE MUSEUM PURSUANT TO FMC 12-1617.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Commission review and approve the William Saroyan House museum at 2729 W. Griffith Way (HP#187) pursuant to FMC 12-1617 with the following conditions:

- 1) There shall be no significant alterations to the exterior of the property visible from the public right-of-way including but not limited to the residence itself, the driveway, the walkway, and the front yard;
- 2) No statue, mural, or "info" stone shall be placed in the front yard or on the structure in a manner visible from the public street without additional HPC review and approval;
- 3) Supporting documentation for non-substantial alterations to the exterior of the property such as the proposed main entry door replacement and historical plaque replacement must be submitted to and approved by the Historic Preservation Specialist prior to the commencement of work;
- 4) The main residential entrance facing W. Griffith Way shall serve as the public entrance into the museum;
- 5) Signage shall be limited to the historical plaque replacement on the west side of the garage door and/or a hanging sign above the door, subject to a sign permit;
- 6) Alterations to the interior shall not affect the exterior of the property visible from the public right-of-way, during construction or upon completion of project plans;
- 7) Final construction documents with material notations will be submitted and approved by the Historic Preservation Specialist prior to the release of a Conditional Use Permit;
- 8) Staff will be allowed to photograph before, during and upon completion of the project;
- 9) Any changes to the approved project will be submitted to the Historic Preservation Specialist prior to the commencement of any related work.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Intellectual Renaissance Foundation of Yerevan, Armenia has applied for a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) for the purpose of creating a museum honoring the life and work of William Saroyan. If approved, the house museum will be located in the Pulitzer Prize winning writer's last residence in Fresno, the 1963 ranch style home located at 2729 W. Griffith Way.

BACKGROUND

The Intellectual Renaissance Foundation of Yerevan, Armenia has applied for a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) for the purpose of creating a museum honoring the life and work of William Saroyan. If approved, the house museum will be located in the writer's last residence in Fresno, the 1963 ranch style home located at 2729 W. Griffith Way.

Saroyan was an Armenian-American novelist, playwright, and short story writer who was born in Fresno in 1908. During his illustrious career he won many accolades, including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1940 and the Academy Award for Best Story for *The Human Comedy* in 1943. His parents emigrated from the Ottoman Empire, and Saroyan wrote extensively about the Armenian immigrant life in California, with many of his stories being set in Fresno. He was described by British actor/writer Stephen Fry as "one of the most underrated writers of the (20th) century..." who "takes his place naturally alongside Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Faulkner."

The "common variety tract home" (as stated in the Local Register nomination) at 2729 W. Griffith Way was Saroyan's home and place of work for 18 years. Mr. Saroyan actually lived in the home about six months out of each year, spending the balance of the year in Paris, France, where he owned an apartment. He purchased the subject residence in 1964 for \$13,500, and lived there until his death in 1981. He produced the last twelve writings of his prolific literary career in the Griffith Way home. These writings include specific references to this home, its neighborhood and daily life experiences here.

Saroyan was clearly a "world citizen" with opportunities for a flamboyant lifestyle, given his associations in entertainment and academic circles. He was in great demand as a lecturer. Saroyan, however, chose a more subdued lifestyle and delighted in his associations with common people and local characters, the experiences allowing him to create in his writings, interesting sketches of everyday life. The home at 2729 W. Griffith Way is reflective of this lifestyle and his literary interest.

The Intellectual Renaissance Foundation is an organization located in the Republic of Armenia. The founder is the businessman, patron, and producer Arthur Janibekyan. Their mission involves spreading reliable and competent information about the Republic of Armenia as well as Armenian culture and the Armenian language.

The foundation proposes to convert the residence on Griffith Way into a museum. Outside would remain as it currently is; inside would be extensively remodeled into an open exhibit

space. Multimedia materials such as photos, videos, and audio recordings will be on display to present Saroyan's personal life, hobbies, professional career, and his dreams. Advanced technology such as holograms will be used to connect visitors with the author.

The location of the proposed museum presents many challenges above and beyond historic preservation. The house is embedded within a quiet post-war subdivision of single-family homes, and an active civic use, while allowed with a CUP, must be approached in a sensitive way. Current Planning staff has been actively working with the applicant to ensure that operating hours, visitor capacity, and other aspects of the museum are handled in an appropriate manner.

The historic aspects of the proposal are easier to manage, but still involve challenges. Certain aspects of the proposal have been unclear or inconsistent, so it is important to ensure that the Commission and staff understand what is being proposed and what is being approved.

Attachments

Exhibit A: *William Saroyan House project* architectural drawings. Storaket Architectural Studio, 2018.

Exhibit B: Updated *Operational Statement* for the Saroyan House Project. Hakob Hakobyan, Director for Intellectual Renaissance Foundation, 2018.

Exhibit C: *Resolution Recommending Designation of the William Saroyan Home, 2729 West Griffith Way to the Local Official Register of Historic Resources*, Staff Report to the Housing and Community Development Commission. November 23, 1988.

Exhibit D: Photographs of the Home of William Saroyan 1964-1981 at 2729 West Griffith Way. *Historic Resources Inventory*, April 20, 1988.

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