

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Eugene Rolfs House
OWNERS: James Tynan & Margaret L. Kelly
APPLICANTS: Same
LOCATION: 67 Tiel Way - River Oaks

AGENDA ITEM: Iie
HPO FILE NO: 11LM247
DATE ACCEPTED: June-15-2011
HAHC HEARING: Jul-14-2011

SITE INFORMATION: Lot 24, Block 56, River Oaks Sec. 12, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic two-story, brick and wood single family residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Eugene Rolfs House was designed in 1949 and built in 1950, at the height of the careers of its architects, MacKie & Kamrath. The house was designed during a pivotal period for Karl Kamrath, who had met Frank Lloyd Wright in 1947 and then hosted Wright for a tour of Houston in 1949, when he was in town to receive the AIA Gold Medal. The Eugene Rolfs House, like other MacKie & Kamrath houses situated on Tiel Way, is an example of the Houston firm's interpretation of Wright's architectural principles, particularly the relationship between nature and architecture, as it is played out on the rolling terrain of Tiel Way. The Eugene Rolfs House was recently restored and expanded by Houston architect Reagan Miller, a scholar of MacKie & Kamrath's work.

The Eugene Rolfs House meets Criteria 1, 4, 5, and 6 for Landmark designation. If approved, it will become the second City of Houston landmark on Tiel Way.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Eugene Leonard Rolfs was born in Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1896. The 1930 census indicates that he resided in Dallas before moving to Houston with his wife, Faye. By 1933, he had moved to Houston and founded a company, Crutcher-Rolfs-Cummings, with Aubrey S. Crutcher and James D. Cummings. Each of the men had different backgrounds: E. L. Rolfs was a field engineer for a coating manufacturer, A. S. Crutcher was an equipment salesman and J. D. Cummings was an inventor/engineer. Together they formed a partnership to produce and sell pipeline construction equipment. According to the website of a successor company, Carey Crutcher, Inc., "these three men were brought together by the special equipment requirements of the contractors who were to build the first major pipeline in the Middle East." The company successfully "concentrated on the sales of all specialized machinery necessary for the construction of pipelines."

Initially the company had offices in the Niels Esperson Building. By 1949, the company was prosperous enough to commission MacKie & Kamrath to design their corporate offices on Katy Highway. The two partners, Crutcher and Rolfs, also commissioned MacKie & Kamrath to design their residences. There is a wonderful tie between the architectural firm and Crutcher-Rolfs-Cummings with these three buildings. E.L. Rolfs served as President of Crutcher-Rolfs-Cummings for many years; it appears that he retired around 1961. After his retirement, he sold the house to

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Hugh Buck (1964) who then sold to Palmer Wigby (1967). By 1968, the house achieved stable ownership again when it was purchased by Robert Bybee, a lifelong manager for Humble Oil/Exxon. Bybee would remain in the house until the early 1980s when property records show that he passed the house to his daughter, Corinne Simpler. Corinne Simpler sold to D.K. Shah in 2001, and Mr. Shah sold to the current owners, the Kellys, in 2004. After living in the home for a year, Lynn and Ty Kelly hired an expert on MacKie & Kamrath, Reagan Miller, to complete a sympathetic restoration and expansion.

MacKie & Kamrath

Karl Fred Kamrath (1911-1988) was born in Oklahoma and graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in Architecture in 1934. He worked in Chicago for architects Pereira and Pereira, The Interior Studios of Marshall Field & Company, and the Architectural Decorating Company. He returned to Texas and in 1937 established his own Houston firm with fellow UT graduate Frederick James MacKie, Jr. (1905-1984).¹

The firm was one of the first in Houston to design modernist buildings, and their designs quickly attained national recognition. Examples of their early work include a house for Kamrath's family (1939); the City of Houston Fire Alarm Building (1939, demolished); the Covington and Kivlin houses (1941, 1942); and San Felipe Courts (1942, 1944, listed on National Register 1988), a large federal housing project near downtown Houston. Kamrath incorporated the design ideals of Frank Lloyd Wright even prior to their meeting in 1946. The firm's subsequent work, as seen in the Farnsworth and Chambers Building, further exemplifies their following of Wright's Usonian architectural ideals.² The Farnsworth and Chambers Building is a clear example of the influence of Wrights' horizontal emphasis as exemplified at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona (see photos at end of report).

MacKie and Kamrath's major buildings in Houston and Texas include:

- Phillis Wheatley High School (1948);
- Temple Emanu-El (1949, with Lenard R. Gabert);
- Dow Chemical Company complex, Freeport (1953);
- Schlumberger Well surveying corporation complex (1953);
- Humble Research Center, located at Buffalo Speedway and Alabama (1954);
- St. John the Divine Church (1954, with H. A. Salisbury);
- University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute (1954, with Schmidt, Garden, and Eriksen, altered);
- Champlin Oil Company Building, Fort Worth (1956);
- Commercial Standard Insurance Company Building, Fort Worth (1956);
- Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church, Bunker Hill Village (1957, 1974);

¹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Kamrath, Karl Fred," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/KK/fka15.html> (accessed March 10, 2006).

² *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Kamrath, Karl Fred," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/KK/fka15.html> (accessed March 10, 2006).

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- Temple Rodef Shalom, Waco (1962);
- Pasadena State Bank Building, Pasadena (1962, with Doughtie and Porterfield);
- Science and Research Building, University of Houston (1968);
- Big Three Industries Building (1974); and
- University of Texas School of Public Health Building, Houston (1975).³

The Eugene Rolfs home was designed at the height of MacKie & Kamrath's influence and popularity. They had just finished Temple Emanu-El (1946), Phyllis Wheatley High School (1947), the UT Dental School (1948), and M.D. Anderson Hospital (1948). Despite these numerous and large institutional commissions, they had also just finished their first design for a home on Tiel Way, the Keating residence, in 1949. In addition, Kamrath and his wife had traveled to Taliesen in 1947 and met with Frank Lloyd Wright – a pivotal moment in Kamrath's career and life. Wright traveled to Houston in 1949 to receive the AIA Good Medal. During this trip, Kamrath toured Wright around Houston and also took him to view his office, where Wright made comments on various designs in progress.

River Oaks

When Will C. Hogg, Mike Hogg, and Hugh Potter began the development of River Oaks in 1923, it was with the intention of making it into a demonstration of the highest standards of modern community planning, a role model for the rest of Houston to follow. Will Hogg's ambitiousness and Hugh Potter's skillful management of River Oaks during its first thirty years made the community known nation-wide as a symbol of Houston. Since its creation, River Oaks has been published in national news, real estate, and design media, and has been the focus of scholarly analysis, in recognition of its significant contributions to the history of Houston and twentieth-century American elite suburban community development.

The creation of this type of subdivision was unique for Houston in many respects. The subdivision was laid out at what was then the far western edge of Houston. Prior to 1923, the majority of Houston's residential developments had occurred in a tight girdle around the downtown business district, such as Westmoreland (1902), Avondale (1907), Montrose (1911), Audubon Place (1906), Cherryhurst (1908), Binz, Southmore (1914), and Courtland Place (1906). River Oaks, however, was situated at the western city limits far away from other developments.

In addition, the developers broke with convention by laying out an organic pattern of roadways which lent a sense of spaciousness to the neighborhood, which was very different from the traditional Houston neighborhoods that followed a more rigid approach to development. These traditional neighborhoods used street grids which carved the land up into predictable square or rectangular blocks.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Eugene Rolfs House is located on Tiel Way, one of the last streets to be developed in River Oaks. According to the Houston Architectural Survey, "the northernmost tract, between Kirby Drive and the bayou, was bisected by a deep ravine which seemed to produce too few buildable

³ Ibid.

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lots. Ironically, this portion, Section 12, became the site of several remarkable houses designed by architect Karl Kamrath in the manner of Frank Lloyd Wright. Kamrath took advantage of the difficult terrain to achieve some spectacular landscape effects.” Miller echoes these thoughts in his thesis:

For Wright, nature and architecture were inseparable. The site defined the realm of opportunities for built form. One of Kamrath’s greatest talents was site planning. In this area he transcended issues of style and demonstrated his ability to weave the landscape and architecture into a cohesive whole. Wright stated that, “the horizontal line is the line of domesticity.” Kamrath observed this dictum by emphatically ‘grounding’ his buildings to their site. Unlike the ascetic interventions of Mies who sought to differentiate man and nature, Wright felt man and nature were inseparable. This is most apparent in the Tiel Way houses, which take full advantage of the dramatic topography and views, in the attempt to “make a structure of the site instead of on the site.” These houses extend along the ridge of the site to capture the view of the ravine.

The Rolfs House, which faces south and is sited on a ridge along Tiel Way, is typical of a MacKie & Kamrath home in its horizontality, lack of applied ornamentation in allowing the materials to ornament the home, and its long wing that extends from the center of the home. The exterior materials of the home are brick and redwood. A garage fronts the home; the garage door is also of redwood. The roof line of the house is low and side gabled. A small triangular, low dormer with two lights extends above the garage door. Windows on the front facade are of single paned glass, horizontal and situated under the roof line of the house.

As mentioned previously, Lynn and Ty Kelly hired Reagan Miller to plan a renovation and expansion of their home. Miller, A.I.A., founded a private practice in residential architecture in 1995. With a Bachelor of Architecture from Iowa State and a Master of Architecture from Rice University, he has used his education and experience in Houston to build a strong foundation for projects relevant to specific neighborhoods and enhancing a sense of place. He has been a board member of Houston Chapter AIA, Habitat for Humanity, and received the Young Architect Award for Houston AIA. In 1993, Miller wrote a Master’s thesis on “The Architecture of MacKie & Kamrath” at Rice University.

Miller’s research in his Master’s thesis on MacKie & Kamrath made him a natural choice as an architect for remodeling, enlarging and updating the Kelly home. The Kellys requested a design that would preserve Kamrath’s original design in the original structure and incorporate and extend Kamrath’s design principles in the addition. Their work included:

- Full updating of original wiring, plumbing and lighting;
- Restoration of original windows;
- Removal of a 1960 addition and replacement with an addition in the back of the original structure with a new kitchen, den, and three bedrooms (the footprint was increased by only three feet);
- The new addition in the rear of the house incorporates Kamrath’s unique brick and redwood exterior throughout, and adds a second chimney similar to Kamrath’s signature design of the original chimney;

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- The portion of the two story addition that is visible from the front of the property is recessed toward the rear of the house, leaving the original structure intact, but seamlessly incorporates Kamrath's interpretation of Wright's Usonian design features of extended eaves, corner windows, and use of dark- stained redwood as material for siding and soffits.

After the renovation, architectural historian Stephen Fox commented of 67 Tiel Way:

The Rolfs House was a small house, designed for a couple with no children. An addition completed in 2011 for Mr. and Mrs. Ty Kelly and their two children expanded the size of the house by adding a rear wing on the foundation of a wing added in 1963 by a subsequent owner, Hugh Buck. The 2011 wing is two stories tall. The addition of the wing entailed no exterior alterations to the original house. The architects, Miller-Dahlstrand, carefully detailed the addition to maintain architectural compatibility with the original MacKie & Kamrath house. Reagan Miller of Miller-Dahlstrand wrote his Master's Thesis in Architecture at Rice University on the architecture of Mac Kie & Kamrath. He was hired by Mrs. and Mrs. Kelly because of his knowledge of and respect for MacKie & Kamrath's work.

Mr. and Mrs. Kelly acquired this house to ensure its preservation. They undertook a laborious exterior restoration of the 1949 house to return its surfaces to their original finishes. They have demonstrated exceptional commitment to preserving the architectural legacy of River Oaks and of MacKie & Kamrath in their rehabilitation of the Rolfs House.

Also according to Stephen Fox, the Rolfs home was one of seven houses MacKie & Kamrath designed for sites on Tiel Way, a street containing only thirty-two lots. Of these seven houses, two have been demolished and a third is threatened. Fox wrote, "Kamrath's houses on Tiel Way represent the largest concentration of their residential work in Houston." The home at 67 Tiel Way is a part of the rich architectural legacy of MacKie & Kamrath.

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The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Courtney Spillane, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

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EXHIBIT A
EUGENE ROLFS HOUSE
67 TIEL WAY



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EXHIBIT B SITE LOCATION MAP EUGENE ROLFS HOUSE 67 TIEL WAY NOT TO SCALE

