



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO  
**Historical Resources Board**

DATE ISSUED: March 15, 2013 REPORT NO. HRB-13-012

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board  
Agenda of March 28, 2013

SUBJECT: **ITEM #6 – Warren and Elleene Wright/John Mortenson House**

APPLICANT: Richard Rementilla and Roger Neil Frank represented by IS Architecture

LOCATION: 4431 Palo Verde Terrace, College Area Community, Council District 9

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the Warren and Elleene Wright/John Mortenson House located at 4431 Palo Verde Terrace as a historical resource.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Designate the Warren and Elleene Wright/John Mortenson House located at 4431 Palo Verde Terrace as a historical resource with a period of significance of 1961 under HRB Criteria C and D. The designation excludes the circa 1961-1965 partial rear deck enclosure and the 1974 lanai and bathroom addition at the southeast corner of the structure, totaling about 648 square feet. This recommendation is based on the following findings:

1. The resource embodies the distinctive characteristics through the retention of character defining features of Custom Ranch architecture and retains a good level of architectural integrity from its 1961 date of construction and period of significance. Specifically, the resource exhibits a prominent low-pitch raked cross gable roof form with overhanging eaves and exposed rafter tails; a sprawling one story floor plan; board-on-board siding and wood shingle roofing material; fenestration consisting of aluminum fixed and sliding windows; and extensive floor-to-ceiling glass on the west elevation.
2. The resource is representative of a notable work of proposed Master Builder John Mortenson who constructed high quality custom homes that were well integrated with their site topography. Specifically, the resource at 4431 Palo Verde Terrace exhibits John Mortenson's signature design language and custom features, is a notable example of his early work as a Mid-Century Modernist and contributes to an overall understanding of his career and design philosophy.

**Development Services Department**

1222 First Avenue, MS 512 • San Diego, CA 92101-4155  
Tel (619) 235-5200 Fax (619) 446-5499

## BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with the owner's desire to have the site designated as a historical resource. The building is a one-story single family residence located below street level, on a steep western sloping lot at the west end of Palo Verde Terrace in the Alvarado Estates Subdivision of the College Area Community.

The historic name of the resource, the Warren and Elleene Wright/John Mortenson House, has been identified consistent with the Board's adopted naming policy and reflects the name of Warren and Elleene Wright, who constructed the house as their personal residence, and the name of John Mortenson, a proposed Master Builder.

## ANALYSIS

A historical resource research report was prepared by IS Architecture, which concludes that the resource is significant under HRB Criteria C and D, and staff concurs. This determination is consistent with the *Guidelines for the Application of Historical Resources Board Designation Criteria*, as follows.

*CRITERION C - Embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period or method of construction or is a valuable example of the use of natural materials or craftsmanship.*

The subject property is a one-story Custom Ranch style single family residence built in 1961. It is of standard wood frame construction on a concrete foundation. The building features a prominent low-pitch raked cross gable roof form with projecting eaves and exposed, tapered rafter tails. Exterior cladding consists primarily of board-on-board vertical siding and slump block veneer. The building form is highly responsive to the terrain and, from the front, exhibits strong horizontal massing as it clings to west facing slope. From the northeast, the building appears asymmetrical, with the main living space taking up the northern portion with a carport and attached garage to the east. The west elevation, when viewed from below seems to soar, yet maintains a well anchored horizontal appearance with the prominent rear deck mimicking the shape of the low-pitch projecting raked gable end. Expansive floor-to-ceiling glass on the west elevation provides occupants with unrestrained vistas to the west. Fenestration throughout consists of aluminum sash fixed and sliding windows.

The Custom Ranch style of architecture was popular between 1950 and 1975 and is differentiated from Tract Ranch homes because they were typically custom-designed with a specific client in mind. The Ranch style became the era's most prevalent type of residential construction in San Diego. Custom Ranch Homes are generally more lavish than their tract counterparts, but like Tract Ranch housing, materials and detailing are generally traditional. Primary Character defining features include horizontal massing, wide to the street; usually single-story; custom details such as wood shutters, large wood windows, or large prominent brick or stone chimneys; and prominent low-sloped gabled or hipped roofs with deep overhangs. Secondary Character defining features include a sprawling floor plan frequently "L" or "U" shaped around a central courtyard; large attached carports or garages; and expensive building

materials such as wood shingle roofing, wood siding, brick, stone, and adobe which are usually much more generous in materials and craftsmanship than tract homes.

Modifications to the house are relatively minimal and do not significantly impact the building's integrity. Sometime shortly after construction, between 1961 and 1965, the southwest corner below the projecting raked cross gable on the west (rear) elevation was enclosed in a manner complimentary to the original design. In 1974, a pool and 100-foot fence were built along with a 280 square foot lanai with "bar, sink and bath." In 1982, a 320 square foot "open deck" was constructed at the southwest corner (rear) of the structure. It is not entirely clear whether this section of deck was part of a reconstruction due to fire damage or an addition. At some unknown date, a solar water heating system was added on the southern portion of the roof but it has little visibility. Also at an unknown date, it is believed that decorative trim moldings were tacked onto the outside of the presumably original wood front doors. In 2006, exterior lighting fixtures were replaced once with neo-renaissance style fixtures, and then a second time with more period appropriate fixtures. Also in 2006 was the replacement of original full-light single doors with dual glazed units. These include the service entrance door to the left of the main entrance, and the north facing door to the lanai addition.

The limited modifications to the subject building do not alter its character defining features or significantly impair the integrity as it relates to the 1961 date of construction. The subject house conveys the historic significance of Custom Ranch architecture by embodying the historic characteristics associated with the style, including prominent horizontal massing and design with a wide street elevation; low-sloped gabled roof; wide overhanging eaves; a large attached garage and carport; and traditional building materials such as wood shingle roofing, and board-on-board siding with slump block cladding. Therefore, staff recommends designation of the subject property under HRB Criterion C as a resource that embodies the distinctive characteristics of Custom Ranch architecture and retains integrity to the 1961 date of construction.

*CRITERION D - Is representative of a notable work of a master builder, designer, architect, engineer, landscape architect, interior designer, artist or craftsman.*

John Nelson Mortenson was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1919. From an early age, Mortenson exhibited a skill and affinity for working with hand tools and building small projects. He soon expanded these projects to include kitchen remodeling. Despite these early signs of a latent home builder, it was not until 1951, after a short stint with the U.S. Navy in San Diego, when Mortenson began to pursue a contractor's license. To gain experience in this pursuit, he began working with contractor Ben Allen in Banning, California and later with prominent San Diego housing developers Jackson & Scott, Inc.

In 1958, Mortenson received his license and started his own business designing and building custom homes in Mt. Helix, east of San Diego. He quickly developed a reputation and specialty for constructing homes on particularly challenging lots. Effective integration of building form with site topography became his creed. By the end of 1959, his home designs had a recognizable uniqueness about them that helped them to become known as "*Mortenson Houses*." Characteristic among his design-build works were prominent roof forms, floor-to-ceiling glass, cantilevered decks, fluid floor plans with minimal use of hallways, and optimized cross-ventilation – all meant to unify indoor spaces with natural outdoor spaces and expansive vistas.

The mid-1960s brought about an expansion of his career when, in 1964, Mortenson subdivided and developed the El Jardin Verde subdivision at the base of Mt. Helix. Here, Mortenson continued to design unique *Mortenson Houses* alongside other prominent architects and designers like John Mock and the Weir Brothers who purchased lots and built speculation houses. In 1966, in conjunction with the American Housing Guild, Mortenson designed and oversaw construction on the Combined Arts and Education Council (COMBO) house built on donated land in El Cajon and with donated materials from the building industry. In the late 1960s, he also began developing and constructing multifamily housing and industrial complexes, although perhaps not with the same zeal and consideration that he granted his custom home design-build projects. By 1972, Mortenson moved his family from their home in Mt. Helix to a new custom home on one of four coastal lots he developed in La Jolla.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Mortenson fostered a greater involvement in local and national building associations. In 1970, he was appointed trustee to the National Committee for Apartment Councils. In 1975, as president and co-founder of a national Home Owners Warranty (HOW) program sponsored by the National Association of Home Builders, Mortenson helped San Diego to become the first city in California to adopt the new program which protected homeowners of new houses against major structural deficiencies. John N. Mortenson, Inc. and 27 other builders became charter members in the HOW program. In addition, Mortenson spent time during his tenure as president of the San Diego Building Contractors Association (BCA) to establish the H-E-L-P Committee, designed to address the needs of “Housing Elderly and Low-income People.” Mortenson’s civic involvement continued into his retirement.

In just two decades, John Mortenson designed and built over 200 custom homes in the San Diego region, primarily located in Mt. Helix and in the cities of El Cajon and La Mesa. He became well known in the industry as an innovative designer and builder of the unique *Mortenson House*, of which the house at 4431 Palo Verde Terrace is an excellent, well-preserved example. Other known works of his within the City of San Diego include the Gooding Residence at 4878 Avion Way (1968), and the Mortenson House #4 at 7126 Vista Del Mar (1972). Mortenson’s philosophy and design language are readily apparent in each of these other works: the properties are built on sloping lots with floor plans that offer sweeping vistas, encourage interaction with the outdoors and respond according to the topographic conditions that each site presents.

In July of 2012, the San Diego County Historic Sites Board designated the Hines Residence located at 9701 Sierra Vista Avenue in La Mesa. The subject property at 4431 Palo Verde Terrace was a relatively early work for Mortenson, and when compared to very similar works that occurred later – like the recently designated Hines Residence (1963) in La Mesa and the Mortenson Residence #3 at 1792 Circo del Cielo (1964) in El Cajon – one can detect a certain consistency of overall design cues coupled with an eagerness to experiment and expand upon his ideas.

John Mortenson is presently listed as a contributing designer in the San Diego Modernism Historic Context Statement. Based on his career and reputation as an innovative designer and builder in the Mid-Century Modernist movement, staff recommends that the Board establish John Mortenson as a Master Builder and designate the subject property under HRB Criterion D as a representative and notable work of John Mortenson.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

If the property is designated by the HRB, conditions related to restoration or rehabilitation of the resource may be identified by staff during the Mills Act application process, and included in any future Mills Act contract.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff's field check, it is recommended that the Warren and Elleene Wright/John Mortenson House located at 4431 Palo Verde Terrace be designated with a period of significance of 1961 under HRB Criterion C as a resource that exhibits the distinctive characteristics of the Custom Ranch style; and HRB Criterion D as a notable work of Master Builder John Mortenson. The designation excludes the circa 1961-1965 partial rear deck enclosure and the 1974 lanai and bathroom addition at the southeast corner of the structure, totaling about 648 square feet. Designation brings with it the responsibility of maintaining the building in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. The benefits of designation include the availability of the Mills Act Program for reduced property tax; the use of the more flexible Historical Building Code; flexibility in the application of other regulatory requirements; the use of the Historical Conditional Use Permit which allows flexibility of use; and other programs which vary depending on the specific site conditions and owner objectives.



Camille Pekarek  
Planning Intern



Cathy Winterrowd  
Assistant Deputy Director/HRB Liaison

CP/jb/cw

Attachment(s):

1. Draft Resolution
2. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover

RESOLUTION NUMBER N/A

ADOPTED ON 3/28/2013

WHEREAS, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego held a noticed public hearing on 3/28/2013, to consider the historical designation of the **Warren and Elleene Wright/John Mortenson House** (owned by Richard Rementilla and Roger Neil Frank, 4431 Palo Verde Terrace, San Diego, CA 92115) located at **4431 Palo Verde Terrace, San Diego, CA 92115**, APN: **461-400-10-00**, further described as LOT 70/EXC HWY OP/ in the City of San Diego, County of San Diego, State of California; and

WHEREAS, in arriving at their decision, the Historical Resources Board considered the historical resources report prepared by the applicant, the staff report and recommendation, all other materials submitted prior to and at the public hearing, inspected the subject property and heard public testimony presented at the hearing; and

WHEREAS, the property would be added to the Register of Designated Historical Resources as **Site No. 0**, and

WHEREAS, designated historical resources located within the City of San Diego are regulated by the Municipal Code (Chapter 14, Article 3, Division 2) as such any exterior modifications (or interior if any interior is designated) shall be approved by the City, this includes but is not limited to modifications to any windows or doors, removal or replacement of any exterior surfaces (i.e. paint, stucco, wood siding, brick), any alterations to the roof or roofing material, alterations to any exterior ornamentation and any additions or significant changes to the landscape/site.

NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED, the Historical Resources Board based its designation of the Warren and Elleene Wright/John Mortenson House on the following findings:

(1) The property is historically significant under CRITERION C for its distinctive characteristics through the retention of character defining features of Custom Ranch architecture and retains a good level of architectural integrity from its 1961 date of construction and period of significance. Specifically, the resource exhibits a prominent low-pitch raked cross gable roof form with overhanging eaves and exposed rafter tails; a sprawling one story floor plan; board-on-board siding and wood shingle roofing material; fenestration consisting of aluminum fixed and sliding windows; and extensive floor-to-ceiling glass on the west elevation. This finding is further supported by the staff report, the historical research report, and written and oral evidence presented at the designation hearing.

(2) The property is historically significant under CRITERION D as a notable work of Master Builder John Mortenson and retains integrity as it relates to the original design. Specifically, the resource at 4431 Palo Verde Terrace exhibits John Mortenson's signature design language and custom features, is a notable example of his early work as a Mid-Century Modernist and contributes to an overall understanding of his career and design philosophy. This finding is further supported by the staff report, the historical research report, and written and oral evidence presented at the designation hearing.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, in light of the foregoing, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego hereby approves the historical designation of the above named property. The designation includes the parcel and exterior of the building as Designated Historical Resource **Site No. 0**.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the designation shall exclude the circa 1961-1965 partial rear deck enclosure and the 1974 lanai and bathroom addition at the southeast corner of the structure, totaling about 648 square feet.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Secretary to the Historical Resources Board shall cause this resolution to be recorded in the office of the San Diego County Recorder at no fee, for the benefit of the City of San Diego, and with no documentary tax due.

Vote: N/A

BY: \_\_\_\_\_  
JOHN LEMMO, Chair  
Historical Resources Board

APPROVED AS TO FORM AND  
LEGALITY: JAN I. GOLDSMITH,  
CITY ATTORNEY

BY: \_\_\_\_\_  
CORRINE NEUFFER,  
Deputy City Attorney