

Greta Place as a Historic District

A Report to the City of San Luis Obispo, Cultural Heritage Commission

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Eligibility as a Historic District.....	3
Evaluation of Historic Significance.....	3
Criteria of Significance	4
Resource Integrity	6
Recommendations.....	6
Appendix 1: Photographic Survey of Mid-Century Homes on Greta Place	7
Appendix 2: Original Subdivision Declarations	10

Introduction

Greta Place is a small street located centrally in San Luis Obispo, CA (See Figure 1). It has a unique and distinct mid-century presence that is both a well-preserved and concentrated example of a collection of Mid-century single-family homes produced in San Luis Obispo as the City began to expand in the 1950s. It specifically called out in the City's Historic Context Statement when it describes the street as "a cohesive collection of one-story Mid-century Modern houses along Greta Place. (p. 118)"

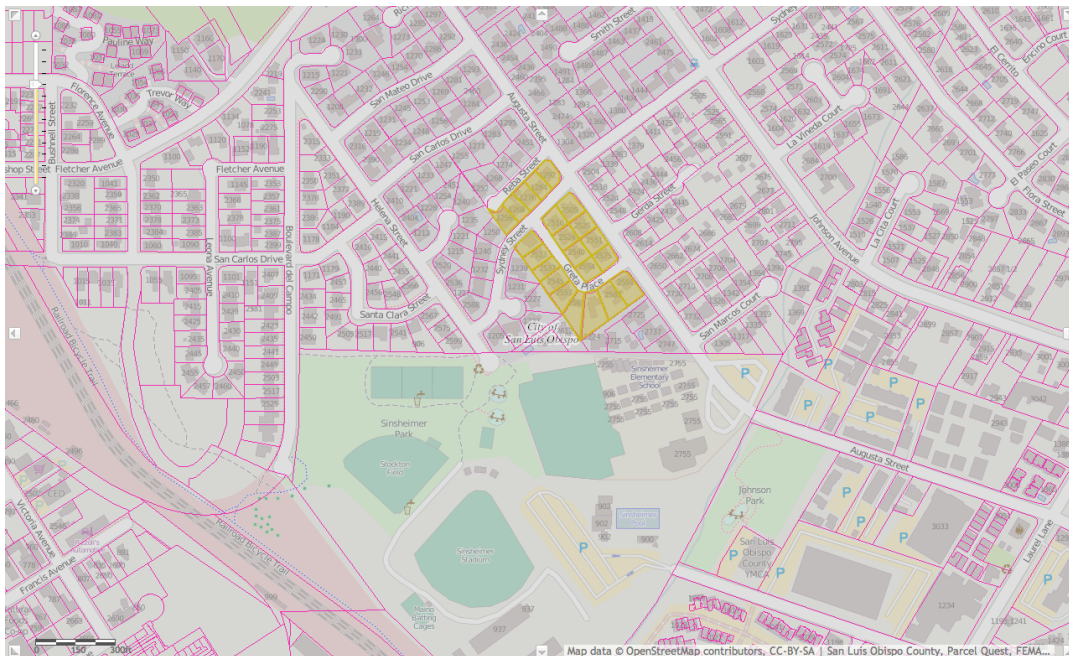


FIGURE 1: Potential Historic District. Source: SLO Parcel Viewer.

Eligibility as a Historic District

While the City's Context Statement provides a photograph of 2554 Greta Place (p. 124), built in 1951, as an extant stylistic example of the neighborhood, it is likely that the location is eligible as a historic district under the Department of Interior Standards. Eligibility could be based on Criterion C and D given the following factors:

- The majority of homes retain features that date from the period of significance;
- They reflect post-World War II planning and design principles;
- The character defining features of the subdivision (original layout, street plan, etc.) remain intact with a high degree of aesthetic integrity.

Evaluation of Historic Significance

Given the potential eligibility, one can validate the importance of the preservation of the resource by judging significance. In the case of Greta Place, the neighborhood forms a unique collection of homes when judged against the DOI thresholds for 1) **Criteria of Significance** and 2) **Resource Integrity**.

Criteria of Significance

- Criterion A (Event): Properties associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
 - Despite its' unique 1950s design the Greta area does not appear eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A (Events). Although the commission, design, and construction of the buildings were some of the first of their kind in the City, they do not appear to be associated with any events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- Criterion B (Person): Properties associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
 - The Greta location does not appear to be eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion B (Persons).
- Criterion C (Design/Construction): Properties that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction;
 - The Greta district appears to be eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion C (Design/Construction) as a resource embodying the “distinctive characteristics of a type, period, and method of construction.” Harkening to the modernist movement and the Second Bay Region Tradition of San Francisco, the structures employs an indoor-outdoor modernist style that was popularly at the time. It uses long clean lines that are tied to the landscape with very little to distinguish between the exterior and the interior, as is seen in the photograph of 1268 Sydney (Figure 2) which shows the relationship of the home to the plane of street.



FIGURE 2: 1268 Sydney. Source: William Riggs, PhD.

The Second Bay Region Tradition was a regional mid-century modern design movement that flourished in Northern California during the 1950s and 1960s. Building on the earlier First Bay Region Tradition, the Second Bay Region Tradition was aesthetically opposed to the machine-like glass-and-steel aesthetic of European and Southern California modernism. Building upon its regional antecedents by architects such as Bernard Maybeck, Julia Morgan, and A.C. Schweinfurth, architects working in the Second Bay Region Tradition fully embraced the natural elements of Northern California’s landscape and climate to

create a distinctive regional idiom.¹ This made use of earthy and organically derived materials like stone, brick, and wood with an earthy color palate.

The Greta area embodies this mentality often using materials like brick and glass in juxtaposition with wood and concrete. The long linear aspects draw on the Southern California modernism while the attention to large window placement for ventilation made it possible to take advantage of San Luis Obispo's temperate climate. Interesting, ornamental diagonal wood posts at entries and planter beds on the front facades of each structure provide a loose expression of the California midcentury pop culture phenomenon known as "Googie."² This hybrid of the style provides a blending of it with the Regional Tradition.



FIGURE 3: Integrated Planters. Source: William Riggs, PhD.

Although there are extant examples in San Luis Obispo by those such as Frank Lloyd Wright, the collection of home does not appear to be the work of a master, however it does provide an excellent concentration of homes designed in the modern style. Local architects who may have worked on this area include Mackey Deasy, Homer Delawie, George Hasslein, Warren Leopold, Paul Neel, and Piercy K. Reibsamen.³

- Criterion D (Information Potential): Properties that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.
 - Although it is somewhat beyond the scope of this assessment, the Greta area offers a unique window into development history. Being a first-tier, 1950s suburb it was designed to accommodate a growing City. It was also designed in a manner that was exclusionary, due to subdivision restrictions that predated the Federal Fair Housing Act. In addition to laying out specific design guidelines the Declaration of Restrictions clearly specifies that, "No person of any race other than the Caucasian race shall use or occupy any building or lot..." (See Appendix 2).

While this exclusionary practice may not have been unique at the time, it harkens back to the undertones of the design sentiments for these post-war suburbs.

¹ Sally Woodbridge, ed., *Bay Area Houses* (Layton, OH: Gibbs M. Smith Inc, 1988).

² Named for a popular coffee shop chain in Los Angeles, the style refers to the flashy and technology-centered commercial architecture of coffee shops, bowling alleys, motels, and other commercial structures that were once common in Los Angeles, Orange County, San Diego, and other centers on the West Coast. The style was also popular in the Pacific Northwest, achieving its pinnacle with the Space Needle and other structures built for the 1962 Seattle World's Fair. Common features of the style include upswept, butterfly, or parabolic roofs with wide eaves, integrated planting beds, brick or metal cladding and large areas of window wall.

³ Allison Dean Zike, "Mid-Twentieth Century Residential Development in San Luis Obispo," A Thesis presented to the Faculty of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, June 2012.

They typically reflected community-planning principles that grew out of Clarence Perry's neighborhood unit concept. While this featured a more curvilinear street and culs-de-sac street patterns, many times it also espoused specific division between classes that resulted in greater levels of segregation between groups.

Resource Integrity

Once a resource has been identified as being potentially eligible for listing in the National Register, its historic integrity must be evaluated. The National Register recognizes seven aspects or qualities that, in various combinations, define integrity. These aspects are: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. In order to be determined eligible for listing, these aspects must closely relate to the resource's significance and must be intact. Overall, the integrity of the Greta area is high for a collection of homes approaching 60 years of age. The following outline goes through each of the seven aspects of integrity.

- **Location:** Almost all of the structures remain intact and have not been moved or demolished since completion. They retain the original layout of subdivision that reference Perry's Neighborhood Unit.
- **Design:** The exteriors have undergone few changes (See Appendix 1 for photographs). They retain the majority of aspects from the mid-century period of significance and reflect post-WWII planning and design principles. Furthermore
- **Setting:** the original layout, street plan, and other planning features retain their integrity.
- **Materials:** As mentioned above, the homes along Greta have not undergone any substantive interior or exterior alterations. They retain integrity of Materials.
- **Workmanship:** Although the homes were built for an expanding working class, perhaps affiliated with CalPoly, the quality of workmanship was high. The buildings have organic materials with redwood framing, concrete slabs and brick and wood detailing. They have simple modern layouts indicative of the workmanship and style of the period and retain the integrity of Workmanship.
- **Feeling:** The corridor as a whole retains a 1950s feeling including the majority of its' historic fabric and setting. It is distinctive from its' surrounds and retains the integrity of feeling.
- **Association:** The homes in this area have retained their association with single-family occupancy in the City of San Luis Obispo. While some have become rentals over time, most are occupied by working families and professors in San Luis Obispo.

Recommendations

Given the significance and integrity of the homes on Greta Place, this report recommends that the City of San Luis Obispo consider a historic district to ensure their preservation as a collection. These homes are a valuable piece of the City's cultural fabric and recent past, and should be preserved and appropriately maintained.

Appendix 1: Photographic Survey of Mid-Century Homes on Greta Place



Figure 4: 2557 Greta Place. Source: William Riggs, PhD



Figure 5: 2554 Greta Place. Source: William Riggs, PhD



Figure 6: 2591 Greta Place. Source: William Riggs, PhD



Figure 7: 2540 Greta Place. Source: William Riggs, PhD



Figure 8: 2545 Greta Place. Source: William Riggs, PhD

Appendix 2: Original Subdivision Declarations

BOOK 551 PAGE 576

VOL 551 PAGE 576

DECLARATION OF RESTRICTIONS

WHEREAS, the undersigned are the owners of that certain tract of land situate, lying and being within the corporate limits of the City of San Luis Obispo, County of San Luis Obispo, State of California, and particularly described and referred to on that certain map entitled "Tract No. 55, Hagen Subdivision" filed for record December 15, 1949 in Book 5 Page 72 of Maps, records of San Luis Obispo County, California, and

WHEREAS, the undersigned desire to sell said land to the public subject to the following conditions, limitations, reservations and covenants in order to prevent such use thereof as might tend to diminish the value or pleasurable enjoyment of the same or might tend to over-intensive occupancy of said tract and the erection within it of small and poorly arranged building sites or any of such detrimental developments.

NOW THEREFORE, the undersigned do hereby declare that they have established and do hereby establish a general plan for the improvement and development of said tract and do hereby establish certain conditions, limitations, reservations, restrictions and covenants, subject to which all of the land therein and any part or parts thereof shall be sold or conveyed by them as owners and which shall apply to and bind the respective successors in interest of the present owners, each thereof being imposed upon said property as a servitude in favor of each and every parcel thereof, as follows, to-wit:

FIRST: All lots in the tract shall be known and described as residential lots. No structures shall be erected, altered, placed or permitted to remain on any residential building plot other than one detached single-family dwelling, not to exceed one story in height and a private garage for not more than two cars and customary out-buildings.

SECOND: No buildings, including garage, shall be erected, placed or altered on any building plot in this subdivision until the building plans, specifications and plot plan showing the location of such structure have been approved in writing by the architectural control committee as to conformity and harmony of external design with existing structures in the subdivision, and as to location of the building with respect to topography and finished ground elevation. No fence or wall shall be erected, placed or altered on any lot nearer to any street than the minimum building setback line unless similarly approved. The architectural control committee is composed of Horace Hagen, J. T. Arsenio and C. V. Wilson. A majority of the committee may designate a representative to act for it. In the event of death or resignation of any member of said committee, the remainder member or members shall have full authority to approve or disapprove such design and location or to designate a representative with like authority. In the event said committee, or its designated representative, fails to approve or disapprove such design and location within 30 days after said plans and specifications have been submitted to it, or in any event, if no suit to enjoin the erection of such building, or the making of such alterations has been commenced prior to the completion thereof, such approval will not be required and this covenant will be deemed to have been fully complied with. Neither the members of said committee, nor its designated representative, shall be entitled to any compensation for services performed pursuant to this covenant. The powers and duties of such committee, and of its designated representative, shall cease on and after 2-11-76. Thereafter the approval described in this covenant shall not be required unless, prior to said date and effective thereon, a written instrument shall be executed by the then record owners of a majority of the lots in this subdivision and duly recorded appointing a representative or representatives, who shall thereafter exercise the same powers previously exercised by said committee.

SEP 14 1950

1540

THIRD: No building shall be located on any lot nearer to the front lot line or nearer to the side street line than the minimum building setback lines shown on the recorded plat. In any event no building shall be located on any lot nearer than 20 feet to the front lot line, or nearer than 10 feet to any side street line. No building shall be located nearer than 5 feet to an interior lot line, except that no side yard shall be required for a garage or other permitted accessory building located 60 feet or more from the minimum building setback line. No dwelling shall be located on any interior lot nearer than 15 feet to the rear lot line. For the purpose of this covenant, eaves, steps and open porches shall not be considered as a part of a building, provided, however, that this shall not be construed to permit any portion of a building on a lot to encroach upon another lot. No fence or hedge exceeding 3 feet in height shall be erected or permitted to remain between the street and the front setback line. All dwellings erected on lots 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 in Block B of said tract, shall front on Sydney Street.

FOURTH: No dwelling shall be erected or placed on any lot having a width of less than 50 feet at the minimum building setback line nor shall any dwelling be erected or placed on any lot having an area of less than 5000 square feet.

FIFTH: No noxious or offensive activity shall be carried on upon any lot, nor shall anything be done thereon which may be or may become an annoyance or nuisance to the neighborhood. No fowls or domestic animals, other than house pets or dogs shall be kept or harbored on said premises. No bill boards or advertisements shall be erected or placed on said premises except "Property For Sale" and "For Rent" ads relating only to the property on which they are placed.

SIXTH: No structure of a temporary character, trailer, basement, tent, shack, garage, barn or other outbuilding shall be used on any lot at any time as a residence either temporarily or permanently.

SEVENTH: No dwelling having a ground floor square foot area of less than 800 square feet, exclusive of porches, patios and garages, shall be permitted on any lot in the tract, and no dwelling, costing less than \$_____ shall be permitted on any lot in the tract.

EIGHTH: Oil drilling, oil development operations or refining, or mining operations of any kind or quarrying, shall not be permitted upon or in any of the lots in the tract described herein, nor shall any oil wells, tanks, tunnels, mineral excavations or shafts be permitted upon or in any of the lots in the within subdivision.

NINTH: No person of any race other than the caucasian race, shall use or occupy any building or any lot, except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race domiciled with an owner or tenant.

TENTH: Basements affecting said lots are reserved as shown on the map recorded in the office of the County Recorder of San Luis Obispo County, California, in Book 5 Page 72 of Maps thereof for utility installations and maintenance.

ELEVENTH: These covenants are to run with the land and are enacted for the benefit of the other lot owners and shall be binding on all parties and all persons claiming under them until the eleventh day of February, 1975, at which time said covenants shall be automatically extended for, successive periods of ten years, unless by vote of a majority of the then owners of the lots it is agreed to change said covenants in whole or in part. It is distinctly

SEP 14 1980 1540

VOL 551 PAGE 578

understood that if two or more persons jointly own one lot, as a joint tenants, or tenants in common, or in any other manner, they shall be entitled to but one vote, if said voting is necessary as above stated.

TWELFTH: Invalidation of any one of these covenants, conditions, restrictions or limitations by judgment or court order shall in no wise affect any of the other provisions which shall remain in full force and effect. That each and all of the aforesaid conditions shall be enforceable by injunction or other form of action available to the parties aggrieved or to the grantors or their successors in interest, and in the event of any action or suit being brought, and or arising out of any or for the enforcement of any of the conditions, reservations, covenants, agreements and promises herein contained, whether for specific performance and/or foreclosure, and/or damages and/or forfeiture and the plaintiff shall recover in such action or suit, the defendant therein shall pay said plaintiff a reasonable attorney's fee in such action which shall be taxed by the court as part of the costs therein, and no action brought or judgment rendered shall be construed as a merger of the whole, nor a bar to any action for succeeding breaches.

Provided, also, that a breach of the foregoing shall not defeat or render invalid the lien of any mortgage or deed of trust made in good faith and for value, as to said trust, or any part thereof, but said conditions, reservations, restrictions, limitations and covenants shall be binding upon and effective against any owner of said tract, or any part thereof, whose title thereto is acquired by foreclosure, trustee's sale or otherwise.

Provided, further, that all applicable zoning laws shall be, and are hereby made, a part of this declaration of restrictions.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, we have hereunto set our hands the 11th day of February, 1950.

Horace Hagen M.D.
Horace Hagen, M.D.
Mayme Hagen
Mayme Hagen

State of California }
County of San Luis Obispo } ss

On this 11 day of February, 1950, before me J.T. Arsenio Notary Public in and for said County of San Luis Obispo, State of California, personally appeared Horace Hagen and Mayme Hagen, known to me to be the persons whose names are subscribed to the foregoing instrument and acknowledged that they executed the same.



Witness my hand and official seal the day and year in this certificate written.

J.T. Arsenio
Notary Public in and for said County and State.
J.T. Arsenio

1540

Page 3

RECORDED AT REQUEST OF
J.T. Arsenio
AT 4:50 MIN. PAST 11 A.M.
VOL. 551 Official Records p. 578
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County Recorder
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