



City of Arts & Innovation

**COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
DEPARTMENT
Planning Division**

**CULTURAL HERITAGE BOARD
LANDMARK DESIGNATION STAFF REPORT**

AGENDA ITEM NO.: 2

WARD: 3

CULTURAL HERITAGE BOARD HEARING DATE: NOVEMBER 18, 2015

I. CASE NUMBER: P15-0816

II. PROJECT SUMMARY:

- 1) **Proposal:** Historic Designation request to designate the Eugene and Mildred Best House as a City Landmark
- 2) **Location:** 5036 Myrtle Avenue
- 3) **Applicant:** Max Loder, for Matthew and Hillary Pruitt
- 4) **Case Planner:** Gaby Adame, Assistant Planner
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III. RECOMMENDATION:

That the Cultural Heritage Board Recommend that the City Council:

1. **DETERMINE** that P15-0816, City Landmark Designation, is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) per Sections 15061(b)(3) and 15308 of the CEQA Guidelines as it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity will have a significant effect on the environment, said action is intended to preserve the historic character of the building and site, and to provide notice of the historic status; and,
2. **APPROVE** Planning Case P15-0816 based on the facts for findings outlined below and thereby the designation of the Eugene and Mildred Best House as a City Landmark.

FACTS FOR FINDINGS: (From Sections 20.20.030 and 20.50.010(U) of the Riverside Municipal Code)

FINDINGS: Criterion 1: Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, architectural, or natural history;

FACTS: The Best House meets Criterion 1 because the Best family were prominent member of Riverside and Inland Empire society with Eugene Best having served as the City Attorney for the City of Lake Elsinore and City of Riverside.

FINDINGS: Criterion 3: Embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period or method of construction, or is a valuable example of the use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship;

FACTS: The Best House meets Criterion 3 because it exemplifies unique Tudor Revival architecture with neo-gothic elements in a prominent location within the City.

FINDINGS: Criterion 4: Represents the work of a notable builder, designer, or architect, or important creative individual;

FACTS: The Best House meets Criterion 4 because it was designed by notable Riverside architect Welmer P. Lamar. Lamar was noted to have worked on several prominent homes within the City including the A.M. Lewis House on Mission Inn Avenue.

FINDINGS: Criterion 6: Reflects significant geographical patterns, including those associated with different eras of settlement and growth, particular transportation modes, or distinctive examples of park or community planning, or cultural landscape;

FACTS: The Best House meets Criterion 6 because its location in the Victoria Hill and Country Club Park neighborhoods, area important to the city's early expansion.

III. BACKGROUND/HISTORY:

On April 23, 1930, the Building and Realty page of the Riverside Daily Press announced the commencement of construction of a stately single-family residence at 5036 Myrtle Avenue in the recently plotted Country Club Park subdivision on Victoria Hill. The column noted the soon-to-be developed lot on the northwestern corner of the hill as one of the subdivision's "most attractive," lauding its "striking view over Riverside" and its expansive 160-foot frontage.

Designed by notable local architect Welmer P. Lamar and built by contractor E.A. Thompson, its commissioners and first occupants were Riverside City Attorney Eugene Best, who often went by Gene, and his wife, Mildred, along with their children Eleanor and Jack. Gene was the son of Raymond Best, who arrived in Riverside from Indiana in 1891 and soon rose to local prominence as the head of a reputable law firm he established from the law library of John G. North, the son of the founder of Riverside. The elder Best was also the founder of the Riverside Abstract Company (later to become Safeco Title), which he sold in 1915 to focus solely on his budding law practice.

Born in 1893, soon after his father arrived in Riverside, Gene graduated from Poly High School in 1911 and then attended the University of Southern California and Stanford University where he studied physics and engineering.

As recounted on the Best, Best and Krieger law firm website, Gene's interests eventually shifted to the law and in 1918 he passed the California bar exam and joined his father's firm, all without attending law school. He became partner in 1925 of the newly named Best & Best. This exemplary law firm would later expand to include Berkeley-educated attorney John G. Gabbert in 1938, becoming Best, Best & Gabbert in 1941. In 1947, the firm expanded further with the addition of James H. Krieger as partner, forming Best, Best, Gabbert & Krieger. When Gabbert left to take a seat on the Riverside County Superior Court in 1949, the firm took the name it has been continuously known under since that year: Best, Best and Krieger. Also called BB&K, the firm has built upon the expertise and professionalism provided by Gene Best and his father, as well as the later additions of Gabbert and Krieger, to become one of the preeminent law firms in California, with locations across the Southland as well as in Northern California and Washington, DC. BB&K is especially known for its expertise in California water law.

Though arguably known most for his role as partner in BB&K, Gene Best also served as the city attorney of Elsinore (now Lake Elsinore) and then of Riverside from 1929 to 1940, where the Daily Press described him as "highly regarded for his steadfast integrity." Gene was also a prominent part of Riverside and Inland Empire society, having been "instrumental" in organizing a Lions club chapter in Elsinore, serving as an active member of the Riverside's Chamber of Commerce and as a leader of its efforts to revamp the city charter in 1950, and as a member of the California State Bar Board of Governors for three years. Joan Hall describes in her book *Cottages, Colonials and Community Places of Riverside, California* that he never completely lost his interest in engineering, however, as World War II saw him splitting his time between his law firm and "making tools at Hunter Engineering Company as his contribution to the war effort." Eugene Best was a person of many talents as well as a fixture of Riverside until his death in 1981.

Country Club Park is significant for its place in the city and for the range of architectural styles and achievements represented within it. Because the neighborhood developed gradually and lots were sold to individual buyers for personal development, the homes on Victoria Hill reflect a range of styles from Romantic Revival to Mid Century Modern as well as transitional styles. These homes comprise one of Riverside's most beautiful neighborhoods with both historical and architectural significance. From its inception, the neighborhood has been one of Riverside's higher end residential developments, enhanced by its proximity to Victoria Club and enabled by the rise of automobile culture and the prosperity brought to Riverside by the citrus industry and winter tourism.

Around 1947, Gene and Mildred Best moved out of the house built for them at 5036 Myrtle Avenue. By that time Jack and Eleanor had grown up and moved out, leaving a house too large for just two people. As Hall tells us in *Cottages*, the Bests moved first to 4370 Oakwood Place and then to 4041 Glenwood Drive, selling the stately Tudor on the hill to pediatrician Harold Batzle and his wife, Kathleen. They and their three children lived there until 1975. The house has had numerous short-term owners since then, and suffered through a bank foreclosure. Some original features were removed, including "lighting fixtures and the leaded glass doors," adding to the removal of a swimming pool in the front yard by Mildred Best years earlier, after a near-drowning of one or more neighborhood children. By the 1990s, Michael Uterback and his family owned the home and helped reverse some of the effects of aging and neglect. The Pruitt family is the current owner of the integral piece of Riverside history.

V. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

The 1930 single-family residence at 5036 Myrtle Avenue (The Eugene and Myrtle Best House, or simply "Best House") is built in the Tudor Revival style with neo-Gothic elements. The property is wedged-shaped and faces the northwest. Typical of most houses of this style, it follows an asymmetrical, la-shaped floor plan, and sits on a brick stem foundation with balloon frame construction. The house is two stories with attic and basement. The basement exterior is clad in red brick, built into the hillside, above ground on all elevations except the rear. The house features a steeply pitched gable and cross gable roof. It also features hipped eaves and simple verge (fascia) boards. Originally roofed with shake shingles, brown fiberglass composite shingles were installed in 1992 to mitigate fire hazard. A prominent red brick chimney with two flues and iron chimney caps is positioned behind the front left bay.

The primary elevation faces northwest and includes two bays. At basement level, the left bay features a modified brick turret forming the base of the front staircase with three decorative neo-Gothic recessed arches. The stairway is entered from grade level off the northeast elevation and leads to an entryway with a heavy arched neo-Gothic door clad in quarter sawn oak veneer. The door has two octagonal windows. An iron lantern light fixture hangs on the left side of the door. Set into the roofline above and to the right of the door is a small gable dormer with two six-paned casement windows. The first and second floors of this façade are clad in decorative straight and curvilinear half-timbering with stucco infill. Fenestration is varied, with sash, casement and fixed window types. In keeping with typical Tudor Revival windows, they are tall and narrow, with multiple mullions. The stairs feature wrought iron railings, which give way to a balustrade of wooden curvilinear "X" shapes at the landing.

The north front bay contains an assembly of three multi-paned windows, which feature prominently. The center window is fixed and significantly larger in size. It consists of one large central pane and four square panes above, flanked by two eight-paned casement windows. There are two additional multi-paned casement windows located on the north bay, close to the junction of the south bay of the primary elevation. The central feature of the main facade is a two-story half-hexagonal balcony bay projection. The balcony is topped with a balustrade of wooden curvilinear "X" shapes and has two casement windows and a larger fixed window. It is a true balcony with two eight-paned French doors leading outside. The two doors are on either side of a window with a large central pane and four smaller panes above. Under the peak of the front gable is a circular, wooden jalousie vent. A non-original white Christian cross is attached at the gable apex. On the basement level the windows on the sides of the half-hexagon are fixed windows with four divided lights. The center window is an eight-paned casement window. On the first floor level the windows on either side are eight-paned casement windows. The center window is a large fixed window with four smaller panes above the central pane.

The northeast elevation, ground level, contains a two-car garage with a non-original white garage door with clerestory windows. An iron lantern light fixture hangs on both sides of garage. The original screened sun porch on the first floor over the garage has been enclosed in glass and surrounded by a City required iron railing. The glass consists of nine floor-to-ceiling panes in total, arranged in three sets of three. The middle windows on both of the two sets above the garage door slide open to allow for ventilation. The third set of windows rests on the primary façade. Scalloped rafter tails crown the glass enclosure. A concrete stairway located along the north elevation leads to the rear of the house onto a cement patio at first floor grade. A wooden jalousie air vent pierces the brick foundation wall to the right side of the cement stairs on the

north elevation. Additionally, there is one multi-paned fixed window, flanked by two double-hung windows on the east bay of the north elevation. The double-hung windows have one four-paned sash and one single-paned sash each. Un-ornamented rafter tails protrude from the hipped roofline to the east of the glass enclosure. Behind the hipped roof is a cross-gable with a circular jalousie vent inset.

The rear, southeastern elevation is set into a terrace. The cladding is stucco and half-timber, with no visible brick. It is three bays wide, with the projecting north bay of the rear elevation having a hipped roof with rafter tails as well as an assembly of three small six-paned fixed windows. The recessed center bay, containing the second floor sleeping porch, features an assembly of multi-paned casement windows and small rafter tails. There is an assembly of two single-pane fixed windows on the first floor. The south bay is the most prominent and is composed of an asymmetrical gable with the north pitch extending to the ground floor level. There is a modified dormer on the roofline, which merges into the center bay. A square jalousie vent sits near the apex, while just below it is an assembly of three double-hung windows. The ground floor level has three more assemblies of double-hung windows and a slight protrusion of the façade to allow for a more spacious laundry room. A white door leads into the south bay, with an iron lantern inset into the wall beside it.

The southwestern elevation is clad in stucco and half-timbering. It features several assemblies of double-hung windows as well as smaller stand-alone double-hung windows, in keeping with the style and pattern of the other elevations. It is three bays wide. The center bay of this elevation projects slightly and consists of a gabled roofline with a circular wooden jalousie vent. There are two casement windows. The right and left bays feature plain rafter tails. A wooden jalousie air vent, identical to the one on the northeastern elevation is found piercing the brick foundation on the section above ground on this elevation.

The house faces the street and sits at a large distance from it, in reference of an English country house. As a nod to the land's citrus industry origins, the home is built to ride the crest of its terraced hill. Directly abutting the street is a series of large hedges interrupted at regular intervals with stone columns upon an original retaining wall. Further into the property, a large oval driveway leads to the front of the house and encompasses a spacious grass lawn lined with hedges, flowers, bushes and palm trees of various sizes. A swimming pool was part of the lawn but was filled in relatively early in the home's history after a near fatal drawing accident. Additional trees, including three mature Deodor cedars, and more hedges are also in the front of the property. On the southwest side of the driveway is a small wooded clearing, mostly obscured by hedges save for a small wooden arched entryway.

The original context of the Best House has been somewhat impacted by the post war construction of houses on either side of the property. While the view shed of the home from the street retains its historic grandeur, the north-east and south-west elevations are more constrained due to loss of set-back. The rear yard of the property is small by comparison and contains an original poured concrete patio and tree stump adjacent to the house. The rear yard is heavily terraced with several trees and features a white stucco detached fireplace as well as a recently built playhouse constructed out of wood.

VI. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The residence at 5036 Myrtle Avenue ("Best House") is significant as the home of Eugene Best and his family, who lived there from its construction in 1930 until ca. 1947. It is additionally significant as a reflection of the city's early suburban expansion via subdivisions in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Best House's own subdivision, Country Club Park, was laid out in order to provide easy access to the relatively new Victoria Club and its English style golf course. The property's position on the northwestern slope of Victoria Hill was another selling point, making the home a perfect vantage point from which to witness the growth of Riverside beneath Mount Rubidoux as well as placing it within a neighborhood closely associated with Riverside's early twentieth century expansion. Finally, it is significant as a fine example of the work of its architect, Welmer P. Lamar, and of the Tudor Revival style. The residence is therefore eligible for designation as a City Landmark in accordance with the following Criteria in RMC 20.20.010:

Criterion 1: Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the city's cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, architectural, or natural history;

Criterion 2: Is identified with persons or events significant in local, state, or national history;

Criterion 3: It embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period, or method of construction, or is a valuable example of the use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship;

Criterion 4: Represents the work of a notable builder, designer, or architect, or important creative individual;

Criterion 6: Reflects significant geographical patterns, including those associated with different eras of settlement and growth, particular transportation modes, or distinctive examples of park or community planning, or cultural landscape.

VII. PUBLIC NOTICE AND COMMENTS:

Public notices were published in one newspaper of general circulation within the City, and mailed to property owners and occupants within 300 feet of the site, at least ten (10) days prior to the scheduled hearing. No responses were received to date.

VIII. EXHIBITS:

1. Location Map
2. Zoning Map
3. Designation Application with Photographs
4. Cultural Resources DPR Evaluation Form