

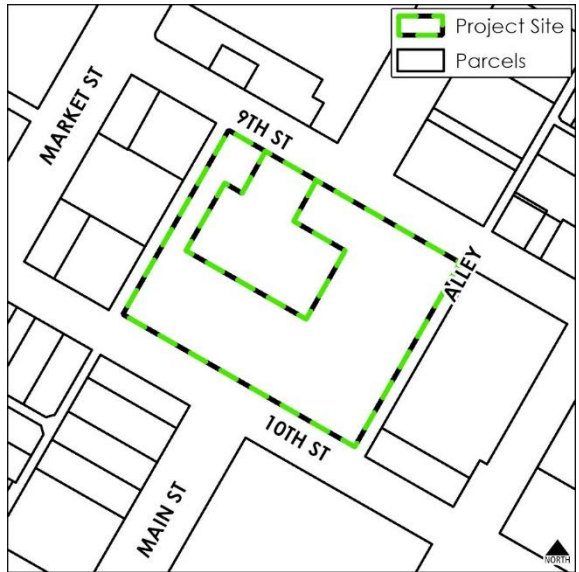


Community & Economic Development Department
3900 Main Street, Riverside, CA 92522 | Phone: (951) 826-5371 | RiversideCA.gov

Planning Division

CULTURAL HERITAGE BOARD MEETING DATE: JUNE 18, 2025
AGENDA ITEM NO.: 3

PROPOSED PROJECT

Case Numbers	DP-2025-00469 (Historic Designation)	
Request	To consider a Historic Designation request for City Landmark designation of Riverside City Hall	
Applicant	Jen Mermilliod of JMRC on behalf of Council Member Falcone	
Project Location	3900 Main Street, spanning the Main Street alignment between Ninth and Tenth Streets	
APN	215-372-013; 215-372-014	
Ward	1	
Neighborhood	Downtown	
Historic District	Not Applicable	
Historic Designation	Not Applicable	
Staff Planner	Scott Watson, Historic Preservation Officer 951-826-5507 swatson@riversideca.gov	

RECOMMENDATIONS

Staff recommends that the Cultural Heritage Board recommend that the City Council:

1. **DETERMINE** that Planning Case DP-2025-00469 (Historic Designation) for the designation of Riverside City Hall as a City Landmark is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15061(b)(3) (Common Sense Rule) and 15308 (Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment), as the proposal will have no significant effect on the environment, identifies the structure as a cultural resource, and preserves the historic character of a cultural resource; and
2. **APPROVE** Planning Case DP-2025-00469 (Historic Designation), based on the facts of findings, and designate the Riverside City Hall as a City Landmark

BACKGROUND

Riverside City Hall

Riverside City Hall is located at 3900 Main Street (Exhibit 1). The Brutalist-New Formalist Style civic building was design by the local architectural firm of Ruhnau, Evans, and Steinmann, and was constructed between 1973 - 1975.

After World War II, Riverside's population surged from about 47,000 in 1950 to over 140,000 by 1970, creating a need for updated civic facilities. In response, the city launched major projects like the Riverside Main Library (1964) and the Pedestrian Mall (1966), also designed by Ruhnau, Evans, and Steinmann.

The existing 1923 City Hall was too small, so a larger, more modern building was planned to meet both current needs and future growth. Located at the south end of the Pedestrian Mall, the new City Hall was designed to make a strong visual statement. Its style blended the bold, heavy forms of Brutalism with the symmetry and refined materials of New Formalism—featuring flat roofs, raised platforms, repeating arches, and public plazas to balance modern design with community appeal.

Brutalism

The 2009 Modernism Historic Context Statement discusses Brutalism as follows:

Brutalism was another architectural movement that developed during the 1950s in response to the International Style of architecture. International Style buildings often had a light and skeletal appearance created by the extensive use of steel structures with glass curtain walls. Brutalism was all about creating massive monolithic structures and stretching the limits of how concrete could be shaped. More properly known as “New Brutalism” during its heyday, the name was derived from *beton brut*, the concrete casting technique used by Le Corbusier in the Unite d’Habitation, Marseille, France (1952). The English architects Peter and Alison Smithson were its key proponents to whom Brutalism was more of an ethic than an aesthetic. In post World War II England, the Smithsons sought to exploit the low cost of mass produced and pre-fabricated materials to create economical and sculptural buildings. Other figures in the movement included Erno Goldfinger, Louis Kahn, Kenzo Tange, and Paul Rudolph.

Character-defining Features of Brutalism

- Blockish, geometric and repetitive shapes
- Facades with sculptural qualities
- Usually rough unadorned poured concrete construction
- Prefabricated concrete panels with exposed joinery or exposed concrete as building finish
- Windows as voids in otherwise solid volumes
- Raised plazas and base articulation
- Brick and stone sometimes used as the primary material in later examples

New Formalism

The 2009 Modernism Historic Context Statement discusses New Formalism as follows:

New Formalism was developed in the mid-1950s as a reaction to modernism's total rejection of historical precedent. A maturing modernism grasped the many commonalities with classicism, such as emphases on structure and a uniform construction grid, a carefully organized hierarchy, and clarity of geometric form. Searching for symbolic meaning, modernist architects of the mid-1950s through the early 1970s embraced classical precedents in establishing building proportions, in the use of the arch, stylized classical columns and entablatures, and in use of the colonnade as a compositional device, as well as the elevated podium. Traditional rich materials such as travertine, marble, or granite were used, as were manmade materials that mimicked their luxurious qualities. However, they were used in a panelized way that was non-traditional. On a larger urban design scale, grand axes and symmetry were used to achieve a modern monumentality. Primary in developing New Formalism were three architects: Edward Durrell Stone, Philip Johnson, and Minoru Yamasaki, all of whom had earlier achieved prominence working within the International Style and other modernist idioms. Stone's well-published American Embassy in New Delhi (1954) is considered by many to mark the origin of the movement.

In Southern California the style was applied mainly to auditoriums, museums, and educational facilities. In these campus settings, buildings were often arranged symmetrically along grand axes and landscape features to achieve a modern monumentality. Edward Stone produced his first Southern California design in the mode of New Formalism in 1958. His local masterpiece, the Stuart Pharmaceutical Company Plant and Office Building in Pasadena is listed on the National Register.

There are very few examples of New Formalism in Riverside. The Main Branch of the Riverside Public Library (1963-65) reflects many of the characteristics of the style with its symmetrical plan, wide overhanging flat roof, and sculptural screens.

Character-defining Features of New Formalism

- Symmetrical plans
- Flat rooflines with heavy overhanging entablatures
- Full height colonnades and elevated podiums used as compositional devices
- Repeating arches and rounded openings
- Large screens of perforated cast stone or concrete or metal grilles
- Lacey concrete block privacy walls
- Buildings set behind plazas

Herman Ruhnau

Herman Ruhnau is identified as one of the prominent local modernist architects in Riverside, alongside Clinton Marr and Bolton Moise. The Modernism Context discusses him as follows:

Herman Ruhnau was born September 1, 1912 in Santa Barbara. His family moved to Pasadena and then to Riverside in 1929. He studied architecture at the University of Southern California. He was an architect for the U.S. Navy during the World War II and helped design the U.S. Naval Hospital in Norco. In 1946, he opened a Riverside branch office for Heitschmidt and Matcham, a Los Angeles-

based architecture firm. In 1950, Ruhnau founded his own firm. Much of his work was in Riverside. He designed homes, banks, and government facilities. Ruhnau designed a Colonial Revival mansion for Tiny Naylor in Rubidoux, which is now used as the headquarters of the Riverside County Parks Department. In 1975, he completed two high-profile commissions in Riverside, the Riverside City Hall and the Riverside County Administration Center.

Ruhnau's architectural firm was officially incorporated in 1952 and went through several changes in partnership over the years. By 1965, the team was known as Ruhnau, Evans, and Steinmann—Evans having joined around 1950 and Steinmann by 1956. This trio, as previously stated, was responsible for designing the Riverside Pedestrian Mall on Main Street, opening in 1966. That same year they were awarded the contract to design Riverside City Hall, which was one of their major local projects along with the Riverside County Administration Center.

ANALYSIS

The applicant is requesting approval of a Historic Designation to designate Riverside City Hall a City Landmark.

Riverside City Hall was found eligible for City Landmark designation and listing in the California Register of Historical Resources as part of the 2013 Modernism Survey (Modernism II). Jen Merrilliod of JMRC, a Cultural Resources Consultant meeting the Secretary of the Interior Professional Qualification, prepared this Landmark designation application on behalf of Council Member Falcone which includes an updated California Department of Parks and Recreation Form (DPR Form) 523L (Exhibit 3) and construction photos.

Architectural Description

Riverside City Hall (1975) is a seven-story civic building with a basement level and semi-subterranean parking, situated between 9th and 10th Streets on the north and south (respectively) and two alley ways on the east and west. The building straddles Main Street at the southern end of the Riverside Pedestrian Mall. The site includes the main building, a detached City Council Chambers, a two-level parking structure to the east, and landscaped plazas to the north and south.

The building is set back from the street and surrounded by paved plazas, mature landscaping, and surface parking. The rectangular-plan structure is steel post-and-beam construction and topped with a flat roof featuring an inset rooftop helipad. The exterior features a double curtain wall system: an inner glazed curtain wall and an outer wall veneered in Norman brick laid in running bond. The outer wall is punctuated by stacked rows of low, segmental arched openings, which form covered balconies around the upper floors.

A distinctive feature is the cantilevered concrete beams supporting the second-story arches, each decorated with a stylized imprint of the City's Raincross logo. The ground and second floor areas are open underneath forming a large, covered breezeway, connecting the north and south plazas. The primary entrance to City Hall is located in the breezeway and accessed by a wide flight of concrete steps with steel angle and cable

railings. The entry consists of automatic sliding glass doors in an aluminum frame. A three-story, flat-roofed projection is asymmetrically located on the north (9th Street) façade.

To the south, the freestanding City Council Chambers building is situated on an elevated plaza. Rectangular in plan, it is topped with a steeply pitched, asymmetrical, three-sided hipped roof clad in clay barrel tiles. The Norman brick walls are interrupted by a glazed curtain wall wrapping the north and part of the east elevations. The Main Street entrance features an automatic glazed sliding door beneath a pitched metal awning that wraps the north elevation.

The south plaza contains several original landscape and design features, including the Mall Clock Tower and Pools (1966/1975)—a large water feature with a tall concrete spire bearing a clock—the Christiansen-Teel plaque (1971), and a Japanese Stone Lantern in a landscaped planter. The Mall Clock Tower, built in 1966, was part of the Riverside Pedestrian Mall project—a typical mid-century effort to breathe new life into struggling downtown areas. In 1971, it was joined by the Christiansen-Teel Plaque, which honors Riverside police officers who lost their lives in the line of duty. When City Hall was constructed in 1975, the original clock tower fountain was preserved, and new pools were added, shifting the water feature's layout to align with 10th Street. Upon the opening of the new City Hall building, Riverside's sister city, Sendai, Japan, gifted the Japanese Stone Lantern, which includes an eternal flame. A plaque beside it reads: "JAPANESE STONE LANTERN PRESENTED TO OUR SISTER CITY, RIVERSIDE. MAY OUR TIES OF FRIENDSHIP CONTINUE FOREVER. YOUR SENDAI FRIENDS, 1975." The plaza layout retains much of its original form, with elevated planters, walkways, grassy knolls, low walls, a monument sign, and mature trees, including Brazilian pepper, jacaranda, sycamore, pine, and Mexican fan palm.

Riverside City Hall has undergone only minor changes and remains highly intact. After a 1998 shooting, a major renovation led by Holt Architecture took place from 2006 to 2008, totaling \$6.25 million. Updates included new protective metal-framed windows and entries, a glass expansion on the first floor, window replacements, modernized railings, and new signage. The Mayor's Patio was redesigned as the Grier Pavilion, and the building's interior was also significantly remodeled. Changes to the pedestrian mall included removing the Bandstand during the reopening of 9th Street to cars and adding the Ben Franklin stage opposite in what is now known as Ron Loveridge Plaza, since 2014.

Statement of Significance

As stated on the DPR Form by Mermilliod:

Riverside City Hall is an excellent and rare, high-style example of the Brutalism style and New Formalism styles in civic architecture that reflects the maturation of modernism in the local context by significant local architectural firm, Ruhnau, Evans, and Steinmann. Previously found eligible for listing in the California Register and as a local Landmark (HRG 2013), JMRC resurveyed the now 50-year-old civic building. Relatively minimally altered, Riverside City Hall retains an excellent degree of integrity and reflects its time and place. The current study provides greater investigation into its design, identifying the influences of both Brutalism and New Formalism architectural styles, documents the full extent of the property, including related features, identifies the architectural firm as Ruhnau, Evans, and Steinmann as well as other important professionals, and expands previous findings.

JMRC found that Riverside City Hall is eligible for designation as a City of Riverside Landmark as it embodies distinctive characteristics of the Brutalism and New Formalism styles (Criterion 3) and represents the work of notable architects, Ruhnau, Evans, and Steinmann as well as other design and creative professionals (Criterion 4).

TITLE 20 EVALUATION

Under Title 20 (Cultural Resources), "Landmark" means: "Any improvement or natural feature that is an exceptional example of a historical, archaeological, cultural, architectural, community, aesthetic or artistic heritage of the City, that retains a high degree of integrity." Based on the applicable criteria from Chapter 20.50 of Title 20, Riverside City Hall qualifies for Landmark Designation as follows:

FINDING: 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: Riverside City Hall represents a unique blend of Brutalism and New Formalism Styles of Architecture. The original design for Riverside City Hall followed the Brutalist style, but it was later softened with elements and materials from New Formalism, which appealed more to the local community. Rather than being a typical late example of modernist architecture, the building represents a more mature phase of the movement in Riverside, blending features from both Brutalism and New Formalism. These styles shared characteristics like flat roofs, raised podiums, repeating geometric forms, and integrated public plazas. The bold, asymmetrical aspects of Brutalism were balanced by stacking the building's floors symmetrically and wrapping them in a curtain wall of repeating arches—recalling both Brutalist window voids and the patterned screens typical of New Formalism. As architect Herman Ruhnau explained in August 1971, the building was designed to reflect "the city's heritage of grace, beauty, and the blending of old with new," and to complement both the County Courthouse and the Mission Inn.

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

FACTS: Riverside City Hall was designed by the prominently local architectural firm of Ruhnau, Evans, and Steinmann. Although Walter P. Wild is listed as the project architect, his role in the design of Riverside City Hall is unclear. The firm's partners were actively involved in the project. Herman Ruhnau is recognized as one of the most prominent midcentury architects in the City, with works including but not limited to the RCC Cosmetology Building, (1957); County Law Office of Public Defender, 4200-32 Orange Street (1958); RCC Cutter Swimming Pool (1957); Press Enterprise Building, 3514 14th Street (1958); Marcy Branch Library, 3711 Central Avenue (1958); John

Adams Elementary, 8362 Colorado Avenue (1960); Riverside County Law Library, 3535 9th Street (1969); La Sierra High School, 4145 La Sierra Avenue (1969); and many more.

The design of Riverside City Hall was especially influenced by Swiss architect Kurt E. Steinmann, who led the design section and spoke publicly about the project. Known locally for his Horizon Homes and other notable work, Steinmann later became president of the local AIA chapter. According to his son Josef, it was Steinmann who insisted on including the distinctive arches in the building's outer curtain wall.

STRATEGIC PLAN

This item contributes to the Envision Riverside 2025 City Council Strategic Priority 2 – Community Well Being (Goal 2.3 – Strengthen neighborhood identities and improve community health and the physical environment through amenities and programs that foster an increased sense of community and enhanced feelings of pride and belonging citywide).

This item aligns with the following Cross-Cutting Threads:

1. Community Trust: This Landmark Designation request is being reviewed during a Public Hearing before the Cultural Heritage Board and the public is able to provide comments.
2. Equity: Historic property information associated with this designation will be added to the City's Historic Resources Inventory, which will be available to the public. This will allow information about the historic property to be available to all residents.
3. Fiscal Responsibility: No City General Funds are being allocated as part of this Landmark Designation.
4. Innovation: This Landmark Designation request made use of current research practices and looks at historic integrity based on best practices approaches.
5. Sustainability and Resiliency: This Landmark Designation will help to preserve the City's collective history for future generations.

PUBLIC NOTICE AND COMMENTS

A public hearing notice was mailed to property owners within 300 feet of the site. As of the writing of this report, no responses have been received by Staff regarding this proposal.

APPEAL INFORMATION

Actions by the Cultural Heritage Board, including any environmental finding, may be appealed to the City Council within ten calendar days after the decision. Appeal filing and processing information may be obtained from the Planning Division by calling 951-826-5800.

EXHIBITS LIST

1. Aerial/Location Map
2. Historic Designation Application
3. Current Photos

Prepared by: Scott Watson, Historic Preservation Officer
Approved by: Maribeth Tinio, City Planner