

Survey Report for “Eight Houses in Oakland Designed by Harris Armstrong”

Harris Armstrong, a St. Louis leader in architectural design, chose to live in Oakland, a small community squeezed between Kirkwood and Webster Groves. It is fitting that the Oakland Historic Preservation Commission pay tribute to this widely respected and admired architect by taking steps to create National Register listings for eight of the nine buildings in Oakland designed by our former citizen, Harris Armstrong, who lived here from 1938 until his death in 1973.* As a first step, we propose hiring a professional to submit a Multiple Property Documentation Form. Four of the eight houses are on Sappington Spur and one is at 200 S. Sappington. This cluster of residences is a good candidate for a National Register District nomination at a later time. The other three could not be included in a district because of their location, but could be nominated in the future as individual listings. A goal of the Oakland Historic Preservation Commission is increasing public awareness of our architectural gems and their value to the community. We wish to encourage owners to restore and preserve these treasures so future generations can enjoy our diversity of architectural styles both traditional and modernist.

For our survey, members of the Oakland HPC interviewed property owners as well as previous owners or their family members. We made use of the information, photographs and references provided by Andrew Raimist from the Harris Armstrong Collection housed by the Special Collections Department of Washington University Libraries. We also consulted property tax records from the City of Oakland, pre-1949. Much of the needed information had been compiled for *Oakland: A History of the People & Their Homes*, published in October, 2011 by Reedy Press. Photographers were members of the Oakland HPC or Michelle Kodner who accompanied Esley Hamilton on an architectural tour of Oakland and East Kirkwood.

Armstrong designed about 60 houses in the St. Louis area as well as commercial, institutional and religious buildings. His design for the Shanley building in Clayton, the first Midwestern example of the International architectural style, was very modern for St. Louis in 1935. It is now listed on the National Register. Armstrong also designed the engineering campus for McDonnell-Douglas Corporation in Hazelwood and the very distinctive Ethical Society in Ladue. Armstrong’s early designs show the influence of Art Deco, the International style and perhaps the older Prairie School. His later work could be classified as Mid-century Modern. Much of Armstrong’s study of architecture was intermittent and self-taught. After a stint in the army, Armstrong worked as an apprentice for several St. Louis firms including George Brueggeman, LaBeaume & Klein and Maritz & Young. He studied for one year at Ohio State University and took night courses at Washington University, but earned degrees from neither. Armstrong also worked as a draftsman for architect Raymond Hood in New York for less than one year.

Since he grew up in neighboring Webster Groves, Armstrong was familiar with the Oakland area before moving here. After marrying Louise McClelland in 1926, Armstrong borrowed the money from his father to build a cottage at Big Bend and Baker in south Webster Groves.

In 1931, early in his architectural career, Armstrong designed his first Oakland house for a young teacher named Katherine Moore at 745 Oakland Avenue. The two-story Moore residence (SL-AS-046-002) is a familiar landmark to anyone who uses Oakland Avenue as a shortcut to Highway 44. This brick house

with its low pitched hipped roof has Art Deco elements. Armstrong's use of brick for ornamentation in this building is quite striking. Wide horizontal bands below the roofline were created by altering courses of brick. This pattern is repeated on the façade between groups of windows and the entry. The Moore house should be considered for an individual listing on the National Register, as is the somewhat similar Cori residence in Glendale, Oakland's neighbor to the north.

* Armstrong also practiced architecture in Oakland. His first studio/ office suite was in his residence at 3 Sappington Spur from 1938 until about 1948 when he moved into a larger free-standing building near the northern boundary of his property. Armstrong retired in 1969.

When the northern portion of the 12-acre Curlee estate became available, the Armstrongs and two other couples bought lots on the heavily wooded hillside. Mrs. Armstrong worked as a real estate agent during the Depression to supplement the family income and might have used her commission for the parcel of land where Armstrong would build their home. The driveway leading to the outbuildings behind the Curlee mansion became Sappington Spur, the location of four of the five houses in a proposed NR Armstrong District. The July 1937 issue of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* includes a sketch of the three houses Armstrong intended to adapt from the outbuildings.

An earlier owner of the Curlee property, James L. Blair had commissioned architect E. C. Klipstein to design stables at the end of the driveway in 1901. By June, 1938, the former stables had become the home of Herbert Alcorn and his family at 4 Sappington Spur. The original rendering of the Alcorn house, as shown in the newspaper article, was very similar to Klipstein's stables. Armstrong's concept evolved and the L-shaped, two storied Alcorn house (SL-AS-046-008) has a white stucco finish, low hipped roof and shows influence of the International architectural style. This structure, although somewhat modified, should be a contributing member of a National Register District.

The McClure house at 2 Sappington Spur (SL-AS-046-006) and Armstrong's own residence at 3 Sappington Spur (SL-AS-046-007) were both built about 1938. A former owner had converted an old barn into an artist's studio and gallery on the site of 2 Sappington Spur. Armstrong had planned to adapt it as a residence. Poor condition prevented its use as Armstrong intended, so the McClure residence was probably all new construction, although Armstrong may have salvaged material from the old barn. The two-storied McClure house shows a mix of architectural influences, including the International style. Armstrong used brick as well as white stucco for contrasting texture and color. Part of the slate-covered roof is side gabled and part is low hipped. An unusual feature is the triple-hung window left of the entry, a type of fenestration Armstrong used in his own house next door. An addition on the east was built by the current owners in 1992. The McClure house should be considered as a contributing member of a National Register District.

Armstrong's own residence at 3 Sappington Spur is two-storied at the back and on the right with a one story section (front and left) which housed Armstrong's office, studio and garage. The stone façade of the one story section was probably fashioned from foundation materials of the former outbuildings at the site - an icehouse and a chicken house. The two story portion is stucco-covered and its hipped roof still has the original slate. The copper guttering turns upward at the corners and suggests a Japanese pagoda. A screened porch at the far right is open on three sides. Its shed roof features a wide overhang

and tapered rafter tails. The Armstrong residence has had only one minor alteration of the original footprint. This building should be a contributing member of the proposed National Register District.

In 1947, Armstrong built a free-standing office/studio suite in a flood-prone area down the hill from his residence. Armstrong created a pond and built the office above the water level. It is supported by posts resting on stones. Armstrong retired as an architect in 1969 and sold the office which was converted to a residence. Unfortunately, the house at 934 Singlepath Lane is considered ineligible for a NR district because the footprint is now greater than twice the original size.

The wedge-shaped Kohler residence (SL-AS-046-005) was built in 1948 at 1 Sappington Spur, is covered in wood board and batten siding and is a bold departure from the style of Armstrong's earlier designs in Oakland. The house increases in height from left to right from the single story section - formerly a carport, now a patio - to five levels (including the basement) on the far right. The Kohler house is well-fenestrated. There are several spots where matching windows at the front and back make the house seem transparent. The unusual house created quite a buzz among Oakland residents during and after construction. Armstrong incorporated ideas from original owners, Theodore and Pauline Kohler, in the plans for the house. Later, Mr. Kohler and Armstrong were co-inventors for a corner former for poured concrete. It appears that the Kohler house was shortened on the left side (where the carport was) to make room for a driveway. Former owner and architect Tad Tucker built an addition of his own design at the back of the house. The Kohler residence should be considered a contributing member of the proposed National Register District.

Armstrong was ahead of his time in his consideration of energy efficiency as well as esthetics in his designs. He was an early proponent of double-glazed windows to reduce the transfer of heat. * His wide overhanging eaves on southern exposures shielded windows from the rays of the hot St. Louis summer sun. Armstrong also used pergolas covered with flowering vines for their cooling effect as well as their beauty.

The Peter Geist residence (SL-AS-046-001) at 737 Lexington Ave. was built in 1950 and based on Armstrong's submission to the Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Company book, *Your Solar House* as well as ideas from the owner. This single story Mid-century Modern ranch house is set back from the street and has a U-shaped pond in the front yard. The house is clad with wood siding and has a side butterfly roof with deep overhangs. Locally, it is known as the "butterfly house." The rear carport and office were originally joined to the main dwelling by a pergola. This wing at the back was converted to a master bedroom suite by a later owner and a hallway was created to join the two sections. Although the exterior of the master bedroom suite is partially clad with corrugated metal, the Geist house could be nominated for an individual listing on the NR at a future date.

In 1951, Armstrong designed a new split level residence with modern styling at 200 S. Sappington Rd (SL-AS-046-004). The house is built into the hillside below the Kohler house and is clad with redwood sheathing above and brick below. The residence has two sections, each with its own shallow shed roof. The boards in the upper, private area on the right are placed at an angle in one section and are vertical in the adjoining area to provide visual interest. The public area has a somewhat lower roof and the

façade and back wall of the double-height living room are largely glazed. Armstrong added a screened porch on the east (left) during the 1950s. The current owners subdivided the lot and built a residence on what was once the front yard of the Armstrong residence. Their daughter lives in the original house at

* Unfortunately, the spacing between the panes of glass was too wide. Over time, warping of the frames allowed condensation to form and damage the wood.

200 S. Sappington Rd. The second Armstrong residence in Oakland would be a contributing member of the proposed National Register District.

The final house in Oakland designed by Harris Armstrong was built in 1961 for Egon and Dorothea Schwarz at 1036 Oakland Avenue (SL-AS-046-003). Dorothea had read *Your Solar House* and asked Armstrong to design one for the Schwarz family. After much persuasion, Armstrong agreed to design a house with some passive-solar features. He kept costs down by selecting a hill – rejected by building contractors - for the site. It was within walking distance of Armstrong's own residence and he personally did some of the work to complete the project on schedule. The wood-paneled Mid-century Modern Schwarz house is split level with the entrance hall, office, garage and storage areas at ground level and the living room, dining room, kitchen and bedrooms above. Egon Schwarz, an internationally acclaimed scholar and professor emeritus at Washington University, still lives in the house. The Schwarz house could be nominated as an individual listing on the NR in the future.