

27 February 2011

Francoise Carrier, Chair  
Montgomery County Planning Board  
8787 Georgia Avenue  
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

Dear Chair Carrier and other members of the Board,

I write in support of the designation of the Flower Theater and Shopping Center on the county's Master Plan for Historic Preservation. Since I wrote you only a few weeks ago concerning the Americana Glenmont apartments, I will not repeat my credentials here except to note that since the early 1980s I have done an enormous amount of research on shopping centers throughout the U.S., and that a substantial segment of that work has focused on developments in the greater Washington, D.C., area – in the post-World War II era as well as the interwar decades. While I have published a large portion of that research in scholarly books and journals, I have not have the opportunity to cover all the ground in print.

Part of the significance of the prewar shopping center phenomenon in Washington (enumerated in “The Planned Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D.C.” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, March 1992) was the impact much of this work had on postwar developments nationally, including in greater Washington. The Flower complex is an excellent example, and the fact that it dates from a later period in no way affects its historical significance today, over half a century later, than the significance of a federal-period house is affected by the fact it came late in that period rather than early. What *does* matter is the property's intrinsic qualities, the degree to which they remain intact, and the incidence of survival among examples of its kind. These factors need to be considered in the *local* – that is, the Montgomery County – context. There may be plenty of examples in New Jersey or Illinois (in reality, there are not), but that does not impact what the County accounts for *its* heritage. This is a major reason why local significance has formed the bedrock of the national historic preservation program since its emergence over forty years ago.

The case has been made for the Flower Theater and Shopping Center's design qualities in relation to complexes of its type. As far as integrity is concerned, yes the complexes has experienced a number of alterations over the years, but this is common to retail centers, and many of the changes are reversible. Moreover, we have precious few

such complexes built during the decade after World War II left in any kind of recognizable form throughout the Washington metropolitan area. The Flower complex is indeed a good surviving example of a type once commonplace, but now seldom found – just like an early nineteenth-century blast furnace such as that at Catoctin. It is indeed one of the *most* intact examples of its kind in the metropolitan area.

Having visited virtually all shopping centers developed in greater Washington during the post-World War II era and having seen most of them either demolished or altered to a far greater extent of the Flower, as well as having done extensive research from printed sources, I find the consultant's comments of February 2013 opposing designation to be unfounded and indeed rather odd. "Common" and "unremarkable" (p.2 in his report) are used pejoratively, and they are certainly not appropriate for any sound historical analysis of a property. The complex is a good and now very rare representative example of its type and period, which more than qualifies it for local listing and well as listing on the National Register. What Peter Blake's widely read and highly polemical book has to do with the subject is beyond comprehension. Tract housing of the period was also widely criticized, but we have come to recognize many examples as being of great historical significance – as a social phenomenon and in many cases in terms of site planning; they have become a major subject of study and preservation in many states across the country. New York tenements were long derided, but that has not prevented many of them from being soundly rehabilitated to a higher standard or the creation of the now celebrated Tenement Museum there.

Shopping centers were never objects of mass-production (p. 3); again the consultant is casting his subject in a highly biased manner that is antithetical to sound scholarship in my view. The fact that the type was once commonplace nationwide, does not address its local significance of its rarity.

Like many shopping centers, the Flower was designed in phases, and in this case each was by a different architect. The north parking lot was a product of the second, altering phase. Probably due to the narrowness of the lot, offstreet parking fronting the buildings is far more limited than was generally the case by the late 1940s. In some examples, such as the Park and Shop or the Silver Spring Shopping Center, the front parking area was far more a defining feature than it is here. My comments on the historical importance of parking lots to shopping centers, which the consultant interprets in a rather simplistic way, should not be construed as being essential to the integrity of such places in all places and at all times. Rear parking also existed at the Silver Spring Shopping Center, but those of us who worked long and hard for its preservation never suggested it was a central defining element or protested when plans called for its elimination. Similarly, I do not see the north parking lot as essential to maintaining the integrity of the Flower Shopping Center.

I find curious that the consultant accuses the Historic Preservation Office's staff of arbitrarily selecting this property for designation, when the nomination evinces serious consideration of appropriate contexts.

Finally, I am saddened that a consultant, especially one who does not reside in the area, would suggest facadism as an appropriate solution (p.6). Facadism is considered to be a terrible treatment for any property worth preserving. It has denatured many buildings in Washington, and a number of us have work for years to try to lessen its use. Montgomery County has, for the most part, been spare of this worst practice. Please do not reverse that course. Facadism mangles history and is poor excuse for planning.

I find nothing in the consultant's February update to be of substance in terms of historical content or sound preservation practice. In my opinion, it is no more than a re-hash of the same tired arguments that consultants hired to oppose preservation use when they cannot find solid ground for an argument.

Designation the Flower Shopping Center affords a real opportunity not just to keep a valuable historic resource, but to give new life through appropriate rehabilitation to a complex that can continue to serve the community for years to come. I strongly urge its approval.

Yours very sincerely,

Richard Longstreth, Professor

Chair, Maryland Governor's Consulting Committee on the National Register of Historic Places

President-elect, Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy