

Historic Significance and Integrity Assessment Report for Listing Cattle Track Complex on the Scottsdale Historic Register

Cattle Track Complex

6105-6207 North Cattle Track, Scottsdale 85250

Scottsdale Historic Register SHR-01-10

Resolution No. 5776

Background

With the adoption of the Historic Preservation Ordinance in July of 1999, the Scottsdale Historic Register (SHR) was established as the City's official list of historic and archaeological resources that have special significance in the United States, Arizona or Scottsdale history, architecture, archaeology, engineering or culture. The initial group of properties to be considered for designation was those properties that had previously received HP overlay zoning under an earlier City Historic Preservation (HP) program. The Cattle Track complex was zoned HP in 1996. Additionally it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999.

Historic Context: Arts Colony & Tourist Destination

The development of the resort and the tourism industry in and around the Valley proved to have an important influence on Scottsdale's culture and its economic and physical growth. As part of their stay, visitors would often include an excursion into Scottsdale, traveling through the desert to shop and enjoy the charm of a small western town.

The Depression saw an influx of artists and architects to Scottsdale and nearby communities. Some of the impetus was provided by President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA), which established various relief programs to put people back to work. In 1936, Phoenix was selected as the site for a WPA funded art center that opened in 1937.

The physical place lured other artists and architects. Artists aspired to "put on canvas the color, bright sunlight, deep shadows and vast distances of desert and mountain." Desert scenery also influenced the built environment as resident architects established a style using organic and low profile forms, indigenous materials and natural colors. The aesthetics and design of their buildings and site plans blended with desert features and functioned well in the local climate. In addition to painters and architects, other artisans focused on creative crafts including sculpting, leatherwork, silversmithing, and textile design. The handicrafts were popular with tourists vacationing at nearby resorts who purchased the distinctive, high quality wares produced by these craftsmen.

Description

The Cattle Track Complex is located on two neighboring land parcels in Scottsdale, Arizona on the east side of Cattle Track Road (aka Miller Road) between McDonald and Lincoln Drives. The southern parcel contains the 8.4-acre Ellis family compound consisting of one main building and eight ancillary ones. Their property abuts the west bank of the Arizona Canal and is listed under Maricopa County Assessor parcel #174-13-004F. Immediately north of the Ellis compound is a second parcel owned by Fred Kueffner. One main building and two outbuildings are located on this 1.9-acre site, parcel #174-13-005.

Situated in the Sonoran desert at an elevation of 1280 feet, the relatively flat ten plus acre complex is characterized by a random arrangement of buildings related to the topography and evolution of uses. The building shapes are simple with varied massing. There is an eclectic mix of residences, utilitarian structures, artist studios and storage spaces, as well as a number of outdoor living spaces. Several buildings function as dual live/work spaces. The main building of the compound is the George L.

Ellis House, constructed in 1937 and substantially expanded in the 1940s. Outbuildings on the property are of varying vintage and consist of four workshop-studios, three residential-studio rental units, and a pump house. On the Kueffner property, the main building is a residence constructed by George Ellis in 1938 and ancillary buildings including two workshop-studios.

Although the complex is only two miles from the center of urban Scottsdale, its setting has a strong rural character with buildings shielded by vegetation and deeply set back from the main road. There is an absence of modern infrastructure improvements such as curbs, gutters, sidewalks and streetlights. The complex is accessible by meandering drives and roadways with granite surfacing. Vegetation on the properties is predominantly native creosote bush but desert riparian species including blue palo verde and mesquite are also present. Fencing is constructed with railway ties and tree limbs. Retired farm implements and art objects made from recycled materials also dot the landscape.

The Ellis House (building #1) is a one-story residence constructed by George L. Ellis in 1937. It is laid out in a distinctive “saddlebags” zoned plan with a central breezeway separating living areas from the sleeping quarters. The living area exterior walls are constructed of wide unfinished redwood planks arranged in a vertical pattern. Exterior walls for the bedroom zone addition are pumice block. The roof is a low-pitched gable with wide overhangs. Wooden, sliding windows are arranged in a continuous vertical band around the building’s living area façade with other glazing shaped to the roof’s gable ends. The bedrooms have horizontal windows tucked beneath the eaves. A screened breezeway extends north of the main living area and east from the bedroom zones. Throughout the house are distinctive examples of Ellis’ design philosophy and workmanship including four corner, cantilevered fireplaces, hand-made hardware, red concrete floors with integral baseboards and redwood built-ins and other custom cabinetry.

A one-story rectangular adobe (building #2) is directly southeast of the main house. Designed and constructed in 1942 by George Ellis for another family in the Cattle Track neighborhood, it was originally located approximately 1/3 mile northwest of the Ellis home but was moved in 1970 to save it from demolition. It is now used as a rehearsal studio, performance space, guest quarters, and community gathering place. As a result of the move and to prevent further erosion, the exposed adobe walls were clad with a concrete skirt. The building has a low-pitched gable roof and wide eaves. A full-length porch extends across the front façade on the west. Notable craftsmanship distinguishes the main façade including evenly spaced, narrow wood windows from foundation to eaves. Additional glazing is fitted to the gable ends. The main entryway is a distinctive rough-hewn redwood door made with wood salvaged from the Phoenix-Verde River pipeline that still bears metal band marks. There is also a massive adobe cantilevered fireplace.

Building #3 was originally constructed in the late 1930s as a barn. Circa 1944-45 Ellis moved the structure north of his house and converted it to a rental unit. When painter Philip Curtis moved into the building in the late 1940s, Ellis customized it to function as a studio-residence. A studio and storage addition on the west and private living quarters with a bedroom and bathroom were added to the east of the original structure, giving the building a rectangular, zoned plan. The one-story building has exterior walls of block, wood, and stucco and a very low-pitched gable roof with wide overhanging eaves. The studio addition roof is a shed style pitched toward the main building. A porch extends south from the main façade. Windows include groups of horizontal wooden sliders as well as a large, fixed glazing that slants inward at the top to cut glare in the studio space.

A small rental-residential unit (building #4) is located southeast of the Curtis rental and northeast of the Ellis house. Designed by architect Blaine Drake and located on the Arizona State University campus, Ellis moved it to his property in the 1960s to save it from demolition. Additions have been made to the original building, creating an irregular plan. The exterior walls are prefabricated panels of welded metal frames with poured perlite and pumice block is used for the additions.

Located immediately west of the Ellis house, building #5 was constructed in the early 1970s on top of the Ellis family pool (built circa 1947). The building, known as the “Pool Hall,” has served as a design studio and office space. One story wings wrap around the north and west sides of a square, two-story volume core. Exterior walls are comprised of wide, horizontal lapped siding. A low hip roof covers the central core and the wings have a shed roof shape. Both are sheathed in metal. Fixed and sliding wood windows extend from floor to ceiling in the main core.

Building #6 is a shop that evolved from several agricultural sheds built in the late 1930s and 1940s. Located east and southeast of building #2, it is a rambling series of interconnected artists’ workshops and studios that continues to be modified and reconfigured to suit its tenants. The original rectangular structure is constructed of wood and a pumice block addition is joined to the east façade and extends south. The roofs are a mix of gable and shed forms. There are several horizontal windows on the south facade.

South of the Ellis House is a costume studio (building #7) constructed in the late 1990s. The plan is rectangular with a front projecting wing. Exterior walls are constructed of narrow redwood boards arranged vertically. A rear addition is comprised of steel shipping containers. The building has intersecting gable roofs with wide eaves. Wood windows are square with additional glazing fitted in one front gable end.

Just east of the Curtis studio-residence is a residential rental unit (building #8) built in 1999. The square building has horizontal lapped exterior walls constructed of wide, recycled redwood boards and a low-pitched gable roof with an intersecting gable over the porch. The window openings are vertical and fitted with double-hung and fixed glazing. A clerestory window is tucked beneath one gable end.

Building #9 is a small pump house immediately south of the Pool Hall. Exterior walls are constructed of unfinished wood planks arranged in a vertical pattern. The structure has a low-pitched gable roof and angled horizontal slats over square window openings.

The main building on the Kueffner parcel of the complex is a residence constructed by George Ellis in 1938 (building #10). The plastered adobe features an extremely low-pitched gable roof sheathed in red concrete tile with wide overhanging eaves and exposed rafter ends. Details include corner casement windows and a 14-foot wooden beam Ellis salvaged from a nearby bridge and installed as an entryway lintel. The home is ringed with a 2’ retaining wall that has been expanded with the addition of wood columns, square plaster piers and classical molding to create a perimeter wall.

Building #11 is a more modern structure on the Kueffner lot that is used as a woodworking studio located just east of the main house. It has exterior walls that have been plastered to match the original home’s sheathing and a red concrete tile mansard style roof. Distinctive features include small, wood windows in bands beneath the eaves of all facades and custom doors with stained glass.

Immediately south is a smaller studio space (building #12) that is also modern. Materials and design elements are similar to those on the other buildings such as exterior plastered walls, a red concrete tile sheathing over a mansard roof and custom wood windows.

History

George Ellis was an engineer by trade who moved to Scottsdale, Arizona in 1935 and married Rachael Murdock. They purchased undeveloped desert land adjacent to the Arizona Canal immediately north of McDonald Drive. With a passion for architecture, Ellis began a period of building in 1937 that lasted for decades. His buildings were utilitarian in their design and function, taking advantage of

recycled materials and site conditions. Despite their modest construction, they are handsome and comfortable homes. Their simple profiles and natural materials engage the senses and blend with their environment. The arrangement of spaces with shaded walkways, breezeways, terraces and wide roof overhangs make the buildings particularly suited to the harsh desert conditions. Not surprisingly, the homes and other structures Ellis built in the Cattle Track area became a magnet for artisans who appreciated the aesthetic treatment that Ellis incorporated in his work. These emigrants contributed to Scottsdale's development as an arts colony beginning in the 1930s. Internationally acclaimed painter Philip Curtis resided in the same residential-studio space built by Ellis from 1949 until his death in 2000.

The Cattle Track complex also supported other endeavors in which George engaged that included farming and the design of fiberglass products. He died in 1971 but wife Rachael and daughter Janie carry on in his tradition and continue to reside on the property and stay involved in the local arts scene. An important collection of Ellis buildings remains on the ten plus acre site, which illustrate the distinctive Ellis design features and support uses associated with artistic endeavors and the concept of dual live/work spaces. While new structures have also been added overtime, their form, materials and arrangement continue the historic tradition of building, which occurred under Ellis' auspices.

Significance

The Cattle Track complex is historically significant for its association with Scottsdale's agricultural past and, even most importantly, to themes associated with art and architecture. The complex has been evolving since 1937 when George Ellis began his residential architecture and construction career in Scottsdale by building a small redwood cottage at 105 N. Cattle Track from boards reclaimed from an abandoned water pipeline. The architecture, aesthetic quality, and utilitarian nature of Ellis' buildings embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period and method of construction notable to the development of Scottsdale's built environment. The complex is also an integral part of Scottsdale's evolution as an arts colony and is the site where many artists came to live and work, including painter Philip Curtis.

The physical features of the buildings within the complex continue to convey its historical associations. The single story structures have a strong horizontal emphasis and low-pitched roofs with broad, overhanging eaves. Building plans are characterized by a flowing arrangement of rooms and breezeways integrating interior zones used for different functions with the outside. Other distinctive features include custom wood windows, especially strings of horizontal sliding windows, and eclectic handmade features such as screen doors and custom cabinetry. Materials further define the buildings' essential features. Adobe, brick, unfinished redwood, concrete floors, and the use of recycled goods as well as railway ties and forged and wrought iron hardware, are characteristic of the materials Ellis favored and are visible features throughout the complex.

Other aspects contribute to the complex' ability to convey its historic significance. Its location adjacent to the Arizona Canal illustrates the importance of water for early settlement in the Valley. The complex is the site of George Ellis' first residence and is the location most strongly associated with his work and contribution to the development of a distinctive local style of design and construction. The buildings exhibit a high degree of integrity; retaining the organization of space that physically manifests their utilitarian and eclectic uses. Also evident are the use of indigenous materials and workmanship that reveal the aesthetic principles of George Ellis. The complex' rural setting manifests in the deep building setbacks, absence of curbs, gutters, and street lights, meandering granite driveways, and Sonoran desert landscape. Together, these physical features combine to create a strong historic and architectural character for the complex.