

Written testimony before the Portland Landmarks Commission and the State Advisory Commission on Historic Preservation

From The Irvington Community Association Historic Preservation Committee

Barb Christopher, February 5, 2015



NE 25th Avenue & Stanton Street

The Period of Significance for the Irvington Historic District encompasses over fifty years and the virtually the entire evolution of home building in streetcar suburbs from the late Victorian Queen Anne houses to the modernized English Cottages of the 1940s. Different styles and decades of construction are found throughout the District in varying numbers on each block. This eclectic pattern, very emblematic of streetcar suburb development, makes a Boundary Decrease Area based on artificially drawn lines very difficult to justify.

Visual case studies of the Irvington Historic District (attached in a separate document) will emphasize what one actually sees as you walk the street grid both inside and outside the proposed Boundary Decrease Area. These studies show that the argument that the Boundary Decrease Area “more closely resembles the Alameda Neighborhood than it resembles the Irvington Historic District” is not true. Nor does this claim have bearing on the criteria under which the Irvington Historic District was nominated.



2334 NE 24th Avenue (not in the Boundary Decrease Area)



3234 NE 24th Avenue (in the Boundary Decrease Area)

These visual case studies also address arguments that the Boundary Decrease Area is made up of “smaller lots and homes more characteristic of a typical working-class Portland neighborhood” and that the “number of large lots in the Boundary Decrease Area is much lower than in adjacent areas of the remaining Irvington Historic District.” While there are certainly larger multiple tax lot homes in both Irvington and Alameda, the Irvington grid, and the adjoining Edgemont and Gleneyrie plats were designed to facilitate movement in a streetcar neighborhood on foot and by streetcar. The Historic District blocks, both in and out of the Boundary Decrease Area, are largely made up of row upon row of 50’ x 100’ lots.



NE 18th Avenue between Klickitat & Fremont Streets (not in the Boundary Decrease Area)

The Boundary Decrease Nomination argues that Multnomah County's current day quality of construction ranking system should be applied to show disparity between the Boundary Decrease Area and the remainder of the Historic District. Even if one were to accept the premise that the Multnomah County construction ranking had bearing on the criteria for designation of historic properties, a true disparity between the Boundary Decrease Area and the Irvington Historic District as a whole cannot be proven. These visual case studies will compare the specific photographs chosen by writers of the Boundary Decrease nomination to photos drawn from the original Irvington Historic District nomination reconnaissance survey to illustrate a level of consistency in house styles and types that runs across the artificial boundary suggested by the Boundary Decrease nomination.

Finally, the Boundary Decrease nomination focused on the specific architects found listed in the Irvington Historic District nomination. While almost no historic district nomination lists all the architects and builders that contributed to its building inventory, this is particularly true for a district as large as the Irvington Historic District. With over 2800 properties and more than fifty years of significance, the Irvington nomination highlighted the vast array of architectural styles and a sampling of the master architects. The district meets Criteria C regardless of how many architects or styles are specifically called out in the nomination. Nonetheless, the Irvington Historic Preservation Committee has undertaken a visual case study of the 1930s & 1940s construction in the Irvington Historic District, specifically Kenneth Birkemeier and his contemporaries in order to counter the Boundary Decrease nomination contention that the omission of Mr. Birkemeier from the original Irvington nomination was significant in any way.



2733 NE 16th Avenue (not in the Boundary Decrease Area, attributed to Birkemeier)

The distinct tastes for new houses in Portland in the 1930s and 1940s, in the waning years of the streetcar era, are reflected the styles being built by a number of builders throughout in the Irvington neighborhood including Kenneth Birkemeier. While these early Birkemeier houses were well designed, they were hardly unusual. Essentially, Birkemeier and his contemporaries sought out empty building sites for homes wherever they could. While, as the Boundary Decrease nomination asserts, Birkemeier was adept at building homes on difficult sloping sites as found on the Alameda ridge and Portland Heights, he was also comfortable building on the flatter landscapes of Irvington, Rose City Park and East Moreland.

Recognition of Ken Birkemeier's work was relatively late in coming among Portland's architectural historians. It wasn't until local independent historian Jack Bookwalter began exploring the architects of the Mid-Century Modern era in the late 2000s that Birkemeier's name came up. While individual Birkemeier home owners had noticed something special about their homes, there was nothing written about his work in the standard architectural history literature up until that point. Bookwalter began serious research in 2009, contacting the Birkemeier family members, visiting the houses and compiling lists of properties, based on newspaper searches and on documents supplied by the family.

Subsequently, Bookwalter completed an article for the Northwest Renovation Magazine and in November, 2010, after the Irvington District Nomination had been approved, presented his first lecture on Birkemeier to a sold-out audience at the Architectural Heritage Center. His lecture and subsequent house tours organized through the AHC, brought Birkemeier home owners together and triggered a long overdue re-assessment of Birkemeier's legacy as a

builder/designer. Ironically, for all of his talent as a designer, he never was licensed as an architect, and hired a licensed architect to complete his plans and file for the required permits.

A link to Bookwalter's article for Northwest Renovation Magazine is found here:
<http://nwrenovation.com/architecture/the-mid-century-modern-homes-of-kenneth-l-e2%80%86birkemeier/>

Fundamentally, one reason that the Birkemeier homes may be under referenced in the Irvington Historic District nomination is that his work hadn't been fully researched at the time the nomination was being finalized. Like many early twentieth century builder/contractors who were not licensed architects, Birkemeier's work was not on the radar for architectural historians. Many of his projects are still being identified. Birkemeier-built homes that were actually owned by others at the time of their construction can be difficult to document with certainty. Unless, a design attribution was definitive, it was not called out in the Irvington Historic District nomination in 2010.

However, this new recognition for Birkemeier built homes is highlighted by the story of 3120 NE 22nd Avenue. In 2013, the property owners next door were considering purchasing and demolishing this 1947 home. While meeting with the Irvington Community Association Land Use Committee, it was discovered that a typo in the nomination had inadvertently listed the home as non-contributing in the Irvington Historic District. The contributing status was corrected. The possible connection to Birkemeier was brought to light. The property owners next door re-evaluated their plans, deciding instead to purchase, renovate and put the property on the market. The Birkemeier attribution was confirmed. In fact, this attribution was utilized to help sell the house for \$790,000 in 2014. According to the MLS listing for the property it is an: "Amazing renovation of a Birkemeier designed/built home in the heart of Irvington."



3120 NE 22nd Avenue (Birkemeier, in the Boundary Decrease Area)

The 1930s, and to a lesser extent the war years of the early 1940s, saw infill development characterized by numerous English Cottage style homes throughout Irvington as scattered empty lots were filled by builders “getting by” during the Depression and World War II. Most of these houses, like the known Birkemeier built homes of that era, used a mix of brick and some type of wood siding (board & batten and/or shingle clapboard) or stucco. Many have at least one of the large, horizontally divided light windows that were becoming popular. The waning importance of the streetcar can be seen in the inclusion of garages under many of these homes. These fully incorporated garage designs make a significant statement regarding the impact of increasing personal automobile ownership in the last decades of significance in a typical streetcar neighborhood in the United States.



2135 NE 22nd Avenue (not in the Boundary Decrease Area)

It is also important to note that Birkemeier’s revival style homes, built up through the 1940s are not considered to be his real significant contribution to local architecture. As Jack Bookwalter concluded, “Although credited with building some Colonial, English, and conventional Ranch-style homes, it is the Birkemeier Modern house that remains his most recognizable house style today. These brick (or partial-brick) houses were artfully designed, often with elements of avant-garde or whimsical detailing.” The classic Birkemeier Modern was a post -World War II house. This is another reason why Birkemeier did not necessarily merit mention with the architects and builders called out in the Irvington Historic District nomination.

The Boundary Decrease nomination has spurred the Irvington Historic Preservation Committee to take on additional research into the contributions of 1930s and 1940s builders, Kenneth Birkemeier and his many contemporaries. From the southwest corner of the district to the Edgemont and Gleneyrie plats of the northeast corner there is a remarkable consistency to their contributions. It is also clear that the availability of open lots created pockets of intense

development. The Boundary Decrease nomination points out the cluster of Birkemeier houses around 22nd Avenue and Siskiyou/Stanton Streets. However, it is important to note that there are also similar clusters of 1930s/40s development along Knott Street between 8th and 15th Avenues, and along 20th Avenue north of Knott.



1234 NE Knott Street (not in the Boundary Decrease Area)

The visual case study of 1930s & 1940s houses in the District is provided in a separate document.

Birkemeier Irvington Property Research

Note: on individual homes where owner is noted, the "Owner" name came from the plumbing permit. Items in blue are not in the proposed boundary decrease area.

- 2733 NE 16th - built 1947 - Attributed to Birkemeier by Jack Bookwalter research, owner Al Lovitt in 1946
- 2348 NE 22nd - built 1953 - Advertised as a Birkemeier in *The Oregonian*, May/April, 1979, built 1953 for C.W. Border - Attributed to Birkemeier by Bookwalter
- 3120 NE 22nd - built 1947 - Confirmed as a Birkemeier by Plumbing Permit, IHD Contributing status saved home from demolition in 2013
- 2225 Klickitat - built 1942 - Identified as a Birkemeier in the IHD RLS 2010
- 2235 Klickitat - built 1943 - Identified as a Birkemeier in the IHD RLS 2010, original owner - Mrs. E. H. Birkemeier

- 1504-10 NE Knott - built 1957 - On project list provided by K. Birkemeier's widow to Jack Bookwalter, Confirmed as Birkemeier by newspaper article and Plumbing Permit
- 2225 NE Siskiyou - built 1942 - Confirmed as a Birkemeier by Plumbing Permit (and is a near twin to 2225 NE Klickitat)
- 2235 NE Siskiyou - built 1942 - Confirmed as a Birkemeier by Plumbing Permit
- 2507 NE Stanton - built 1940 - Confirmed as a Birkemeier by Plumbing Permit
- 2517 NE Stanton - built 1941 - Confirmed as a Birkemeier by Plumbing Permit