



Final Report:

Proposed San Telmo Cigar Company Historic District 5700, 5716 and 5728 Michigan Avenue

By a resolution dated December 12, 2008, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed San Telmo Cigar Company Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed San Telmo Cigar Company Historic District is a single resource district spanning three adjacent parcels located at 5700, 5716, and 5728 Michigan Avenue, on the north side of the street between Thirty-Fifth Street and North Campbell Street in southwest Detroit, about three and a half miles directly west of downtown. Of these, the

most visually striking and historically significant property is the San Telmo Cigar Manufacturing Company No. 2 plant, located at 5716 Michigan Ave. This large structure is flanked by a smaller, integrated addition, located directly west at 5728 Michigan Ave., and a vacant lot, located directly east at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Thirty-fifth Street. The properties are undergoing rehabilitation and conversion to mixed residential and commercial use.

BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed San Telmo Cigar Company Historic District are outlined in black on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the south, the centerline of Michigan Avenue;

On the west, the west boundary line of Lot 8 of A. Brush's Subdivision, Liber 16 Page 24.

On the north, the centerline of the alley running east-west between North Campbell Street and 35th Street;

On the east, the centerline of 35th Street.

HISTORY

Detroit's tobacco industry is significant as one of the key components of the city's manufacturing base during the late nineteenth century and into the 1920s. The industry employed almost entirely women, a large majority of whom were members of the Polish immigrant community. The San Telmo Cigar Manufacturing Company was one of the three largest (along with Lilies Cigar Company and Wayne Cigar Company, whose facilities no longer exist) of numerous tobacco producers within the city. The San Telmo Manufacturing Company No. 2 building is also significant due to its connection with the development of Michigan's labor movement in the 1910s.

Detroit's tobacco industry began in 1841 with a small operation conducted by George Miller. The first major enterprise, the Hiawatha Tobacco Factory, was established in 1856 by David Scotten with a facility on the 100 block of Randolph Street. By 1864 there were seven large tobacco manufacturers in the growing city, several of which were located nearby on Atwater Street and Jefferson Avenue. Scotten himself moved his operation in 1875 to a newly constructed building on Fort Street and Campau Street, later renamed Scotten Street.

The San Telmo Cigar Manufacturing Company was organized by Oscar Rosenberger in 1892. Rosenberger was an immigrant and philanthropist, becoming involved with United Jewish Charities after the eventual success of his cigar business. He supported the Fresh

Air Society, an organization that provides outdoor opportunities to low-income immigrant and Jewish-American youth, in its 1912 purchase of a permanent camp on Lake St. Clair about four miles south of Mt. Clemens. The Fresh Air Society continues to exist, and in subsequent years moved their operations first to Brighton and finally Ortonville.

Detroit's cigar industry grew during the peak of Polish immigration to the United States, when large numbers of people left Poland as land-use changes and mechanization necessitated that many agricultural workers seek employment elsewhere. Consequently, a large number of Polish immigrants came to Detroit and found employment within the city's growing tobacco industry. Polish-Americans became the largest ethnic group in the city, almost 20% of the population by the 1920 census. The Polish language became common within the factories, and workers would encourage friends and family members to seek jobs in the cigar industry, establishing a strong association between the tobacco industry and the Polish immigrant community. Although most of these immigrants settled on the city's east side, a smaller community established itself around Michigan Avenue and Twentieth Street, and spread westward along Michigan Avenue over the following years.

In order to take advantage of this growing pool of labor, many cigar companies moved their operations to the city's growing Polish neighborhoods. The San Telmo Cigar Company supplemented its existing plant at Forest Avenue and Dequindre with an additional facility, constructed at Michigan Avenue and Thirty-fifth Street, in 1910.

By 1913, the tobacco industry was one of the leading industries in the city, ranking third in number of people employed and fifth by value of product.

At this time, the city's tobacco companies were particularly significant as major employers of women. The ten largest cigar producers employed 302 men and 3,896 women (many of whom were under twenty years old), making the industry the largest employer of women in the city. The labor-intensive, semiskilled process of hand-rolling cigars provided a somewhat above-average wage for many of Detroit's women, who were able to earn from twenty-five to forty dollars per week. Although these women, not organized into unions, earned much less than union men, the wage was still significantly greater than many would have been able to attain elsewhere.

Despite the relatively high wages, controversy arose over the working conditions and degree of compensation faced by female cigar makers. After several attempts to establish an apprenticeship system failed due to lack of cooperation among the city's cigar companies, new employees were trained on the job. In order to encourage employees to remain with the company that trained them, wages for new employees were withheld for a period of time, commonly six months. If an employee left the company before this training period had expired, all income earned during that time was forfeited.

In 1912, the Cigar Makers' International Union called for a boycott of Detroit-made cigars, and in September 1913 the Detroit *News-Tribune* supported the union with an

article critical of child labor practices in the cigar factories. In January 1915, *Tobacco Leaf*, an industry journal, joined the debate with a piece highlighting the high wages earned by the city's cigar makers, and held up the San Telmo Company as a model of corporate responsibility, describing a pleasant work environment and calling attention to that company's financial support of the construction of new housing in the nearby neighborhoods. In 1915, the Michigan Legislature considered a minimum-wage law that would apply to women in the tobacco industry, but the cigar makers successfully lobbied against it, threatening to leave the state if it passed. In that same year, the San Telmo Company extended the aforementioned unpaid training period to a full twelve months.

On June 26, 1916, tensions increased as the unionized, male cigar makers negotiated a major pay increase. Three days later, women at the Lilies Cigar Company, located at 222 East Forest Avenue, went on strike demanding a similar pay increase. Over the next several days, all the city's major producers, including San Telmo, were on strike.

By 1917, the workers were able to achieve some of their demands, but only after several of the major cigar companies established operations in nearby states and in Ontario. In 1918, Oscar Rosenberger sold his enterprise to Haas Brothers Tobacco Company as the importance of the Detroit industry began to slowly decline.

The San Telmo building was subjected to a variety of uses after the cigar operation finally closed in 1926. According to city directories and building permits, the building was used as a "Boys Club" beginning in 1926, and later as a secondhand store, operated by the League of the Handicapped. It then served as location of a store, Bargain Office Equipment, until the structure was acquired for redevelopment by its current owner, Southwest Housing Solutions, in 2007-2008.

On the small, easternmost lot, at 5700 Michigan Avenue, a branch of the American State Bank was constructed in 1919, and continued to exist until it was closed in 1936. By then, the building had been acquired by the First National Bank of Detroit. A restaurant operated in the building until it was closed, and the building demolished, in 1974.

To the west, at 5728 Michigan Avenue, building permits indicate the construction of a single story "storage addition" to the San Telmo building. This structure was used for the aforementioned purpose for only a short time, if at all. By 1920, city directories indicate the address occupied by Belz & Wilhelmy Steel. Several manufacturing businesses came and went until the building was vacated in 1930. It was eventually incorporated into the Bargain Office Equipment operation mentioned above.

ARCHITECTURE

The San Telmo Cigar Manufacturing Company No. 2 building, facing south at 5716 Michigan Avenue, is a nearly cube-shaped, four-story, five-bay, flat-roofed industrial building, with a stretcher-bond red brick veneer, designed by Albert Kahn & Associates

in 1910-1911. A cutaway corner at the northeast interrupts the cubelike shape and allows the building to conform to its irregularly shaped lot.

The front and rear of the building feature five large, evenly spaced window openings on each of the four floors, with four identical openings on each side of the building. Although no major alterations appear to have occurred to the façade, the historic integrity of the structure is somewhat diminished by loss of the historic fenestration. At an unknown date, the windows were eliminated and the openings closed in with concrete block. On the first two floors and in the central bay on the second floor, this concrete block work has been covered with red brick that closely matches the color of the building's existing brickwork. Small aluminum and vinyl windows have been set into the concrete block on the first two floors and on the central bay of the third and fourth floor. The front door opening has been altered in a similar fashion; the original wide door opening with transoms, as shown in construction drawings, has been replaced with concrete block and a single glazed aluminum door. Two stone steps project onto the sidewalk from the building's main entrance. Exterior fire escapes, shown in original construction drawings, do not exist.

The first floor is raised approximately five feet above ground level, with small, rectangular basement windows facing the sidewalk at the front of the building. Raised brick pilasters extend vertically from ground level between each of these window openings, culminating in square brick crenellations that project approximately three feet above the roofline around the entire perimeter of the building. Each pilaster is decorated with a small, grey medallion between each floor. At the top of each pilaster, the projections at the roofline are decorated with grey limestone Greek crosses above limestone medallions. Repeating courses of decorative tile run horizontally around the outside of the building between the second and third and third and fourth floors, intersecting the cross patterns and underlining the window openings on the upper floors. A limestone string course runs around the structure between the first and second floors. A similar limestone cornice adorns the top of the structure on the east elevation only, apparently having been removed from the façade.

On the roof, sawtooth windows, now covered, provided light and ventilation to the upper floor, though these windows are set back and not visible from the street below. A water tank, which would have been visible from the exterior, has since been removed.

The interior retains the mostly open configuration of a factory or warehouse space. A small elevator and second stairwell near the front were added in the 1970's due to building code requirements. The original stairwell centered at the rear of the building remains intact. All four floors retain a majority of the original diagonal maple hardwood flooring and the original heavy wooden columns supporting each floor.

The building was built in accordance with "mill construction" practices, which used load bearing masonry walls to support the heavy timber floors and roof. In the event of a fire, even if the floors and roof collapsed, the walls would typically remaining standing and the structure could be rebuilt.

Although Albert Kahn is most well known for larger, more monumental industrial and commercial structures such as the Fisher Building, General Motors Building, and the Ford Rouge Complex, the San Telmo building is significant as an example of Kahn's work during an earlier stage of his career. Many of the design elements found in the San Telmo building also found their way into Kahn's later buildings. In particular, the crosses and medallions that adorn the San Telmo Cigar Manufacturing Company No. 2 building were also incorporated into the now-demolished Hudson Motor Car Company building, which Kahn designed immediately after the San Telmo building. Also present is the "base-column-capital" arrangement that Kahn more fully expressed in later, taller office buildings in subsequent years. The San Telmo building is similar in style to several other contemporary Albert Kahn structures, including the Ford Motor Company's Boulevard Building, and the Ford Assembling Plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Kahn's firm also designed several other cigar factories, all of which were located in Detroit: Consolidated Cigar Company, Mazer Cigar Company, Independent Cigar Company, Bernard Schwartz Cigar Corporation, and Spietz & Worch.

A single-story addition to the west of the structure, at 5728 Michigan Avenue, was constructed in 1916. The addition is clad in unpainted wood paneling on its lower half, and steel panels, painted brown, on its upper half. The façade of the addition is unfenestrated except for a single door, recessed into the east end of the façade. The recessed entrance area is faced with red brick. Vertical, molded steel panels anchor the ends of the addition. A historic photograph indicates that this building was once clad in face brick similar in color to the building's original section, and was fenestrated with sash windows similar to those on the building's original section.

CRITERIA

The proposed historic district meets the first and third criteria contained in Section 25-2-2: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; (3) Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction.

RECOMMENDATION

The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the Detroit City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed San Telmo Cigar Company Historic District. A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.

COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three ex-officio members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, De Witt Dykes, Zene' Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and Doris Rhea. The *ex-officio* members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are: the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department.

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DISTRICT MAP

Sanborn Map Company 2003.

Proposed district boundaries are indicated by bold black lines.

