

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

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Stanley Hong's Mannia Café, 265 East Baltimore Avenue



Final Report

By a resolution dated May 30, 2017, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB), a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Stanley Hong's Mannia Café Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Stanley Hong's Mannia Café Historic District is composed of the single building at 265 East Baltimore on the north side of the street between John R and Brush, two blocks south of East Grand Boulevard and just north of the Grand Central Railroad tracks. It is located in Milwaukee Junction, an area of Detroit on east side of Woodward Avenue and New Center historically important as an industrial area that served Detroit's early automotive growth. Jam

Handy/ North End-East Grand Boulevard Historic District (local), the Ford Piquette Avenue Plant (local, NR, NHL) and the Piquette Avenue Industrial Historic District (NR) are other historic districts located in Milwaukee Junction. Small industrial buildings, vacant parcels, and a pocket park are in the immediate vicinity of Stanley Hong's Mannia Café. It is approximately 4.25 miles north of the point of origin in Campus Martius Park.

Boundaries:

On the South, the centerline of East Baltimore Avenue;

On the North, the centerline of the alley between East Baltimore Avenue and East Milwaukee Avenue;

On the east, the lot line of lot 54 of the Patrick McGinnis Subdivision;

On the west, the lot line of lot 59 of the Patrick McGinnis Subdivision, W C R 1/97, Liber 4 Page 93.

Boundary Justification: Parcel on which property associated with the building is sited.

HISTORY

Statement of Significance:

Stanley Hong's Mannia Café possesses significant local ethnic and racial history for its associations with the Hong family, who were successful Chinese American business owners, and Nathan Johnson, its African American architect who broke new ground by opening his own architectural office in Detroit during the height of the civil rights challenges of the mid-1950s. It is also significant for the role it played in Detroit's cultural history for its associations with Detroit's hip-hop music legacy, and for its architecture, a rare example of a Googie-style building in the city of Detroit. Its period of significance is 1969, when construction began, through the late 1990s, when the restaurant was shut down and sold.

Ethnic and Racial History

The Chinese, one of Detroit's earliest immigrant groups, began their presence in Detroit in 1872, seeing opportunities in establishing laundries, and then restaurants. Henry Ford recruited workers from Hawaii's immigrant population for jobs in his automobile factories in the early twentieth century, increasing this relatively small population. Although its population peaked in the 1920s, Detroit retained a Chinatown community through the early 1950s, when about two thousand people of Chinese ancestry lived within the city limits. Urban renewal and highway construction displaced the core of the community in the mid to late 1950s and 1960s; some businesses relocated to the Cass and Peterboro area. In the decades after the Immigration Act of 1965, highly educated Chinese moved to Detroit's suburban communities east of Woodward Avenue, to Madison Heights, Troy and Rochester Hills. Others would eventually move to cities in the western metropolitan area like Farmington Hills, Canton, and Novi. By 1980 census, only 1,213 ethnic Chinese lived in the city¹. According to Amy Elliott Bragg, Board President of Preservation Detroit, there are not "... many remnants of Detroit's once-thriving Chinese-

¹ Zia, Helen, "Asian American Dreams."

American Community. Stanley Mannia Cafe is one of the few brick-and-mortar places that testify to this heritage.”²

Stanley Hong came to Detroit with family members from Canton Province (now Guangdong), China, in the 1930s and first worked at a restaurant named Mun Fong Loo/Mungfung Low at 2728 St. Antoine. The Hong family achieved success in the restaurant business in Detroit; Stanley Hong operated three Chinese restaurants between 1940 and 2014: Stanley’s Mania Café at 565 E. Canfield at Hastings with his brother Oscar Hong (replaced by the Detroit Medical Center); Stanley’s Mannia Café at 265 E. Baltimore with his brothers Oscar Hong, Peter Tong, and Henry Hong (closed in 1995 and became a church, now vacant); and Stanley’s Other Place at 2411 W. 8 Mile Road (1978-2014).³

According to Paul Vachon, author of *Lost Restaurants of Detroit* (Arcadia, 1916), the Hong family was determined to reinvest in Detroit after the 1967 Rebellion. Coleman A. Young, a former classmate of Hong, was present at the opening of the new restaurant in 1971. Brother Oscar, who lost his restaurant, the Ten Sheng Ten, to fire on West Warren, quickly rebuilt. He sold the business a few years later and joined his other brothers at Stanley Hong’s Mannia Café. Always a family business, Stanley’s wife Fannie helped to manage the restaurant, and they were always welcoming to African Americans as customers for dining and special events. Even the brothers’ children frequently helped throughout the years by answering the phones, operating the cash register, packing carryout orders, or cooking. Sometimes on late nights after the restaurant closed at 3:30 AM these cousins would relax by playing baseball in the parking lot. The restaurant would employ as many as 80 people, Chinese cooks and African American waiters and waitresses, many of whom became good friends of the Hong family.

The lavish Stanley Hong’s Mannia Café came together as a result of the relationship between Stanley Hong and Nathan Johnson, an African American architect. In 1962 Stanley Hong entrusted the design of his family home to Johnson, who lived nearby and produced a thoroughly modern house for the Hong family at 961 West Boston Boulevard, on the corner of Hamilton.

Nathan Johnson was born in 1925 to parents who valued education and faith. He was raised in the small town of Herington, Kansas and showed artistic talent at a young age. He was encouraged to pursue a career in architecture by a white teacher when, in the eighth grade, she shared with him a magazine photograph of Paul Revere Williams, an architect from California who was the first licensed African American architect west of the Mississippi (1921) and the first African American member of the American Institute of Architects⁴. According to an article about Johnson in the *Detroit Free Press* by June Brown, “She showed him [Johnson] the relationship between his own artistic talent and the science of architecture and taught him that racial barriers are weak when talent and courage are strong⁵.”

After high school, Johnson spent three and one-half years in the Navy. In 1950, he came to Detroit with an architectural degree from Kansas State University. Two years earlier, he had visited Detroit for a convention of his fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, and while there met Don

² Amy Elliott Bragg, Board President of Preservation Detroit, Nov. 14, 2016

³ Correspondence from Bryan Hong to Janese Chapman (HDAB), 2/6/2018.

⁴ <http://www.paulrwilliamsproject.org/about/paul-revere-williams-architect/accessed> 5/28/2017

⁵ <http://www.paulrwilliamsproject.org/about/paul-revere-williams-architect/accessed> 5/28/2017

White, graduate of University of Michigan and the state's first registered black architect. After attempting to find work with large white firms in Kansas, Johnson was rebuffed in his efforts for lack of experience. With no opportunity to gain that experience, he returned to Detroit and landed employment with White and Griffin as a draftsman and later office manager. White and Griffin (Francis) employed and mentored other young black designers, among them Howard Sims. The office closed in 1954 when its two partners went to Africa to work with the Liberian government. Johnson subsequently worked with Harold H. Fisher and Victor Gruen & Associates, the latter the developer of shopping centers nationwide, including Northland and Eastland regional shopping malls.

Johnson established his own firm in 1956 after working on some of Detroit's biggest suburban churches while on other architects' staffs. Initially, Johnson operated out of the basement of his home and depended on the African American community for jobs, which tended to be small, requiring not much artistry and creativity. Among them were the first job on his own, Pure in Heart Baptist Church at Holcomb and Goethe, which resembled a small box with a glass front, and House of Diggs Funeral Chapel (1957).

For larger projects, he found opportunities limited because of his color, and was relegated to taking secondary positions along with larger white firms. When he was able to move out of his home office to 2512 West Grand Boulevard, Johnson purchased the building but couldn't get more than a \$20,000 loan. He had to pay cash to fix it up and did a lot of the work himself, including roofing and laying tile.

Within his own practice, Johnson developed a modernist sensibility in thought and design. "We don't go in much for symbolism," he said of his firm's design aesthetic. "So often symbolism says more than the person can grasp and becomes mere decoration⁶." His churches, although mostly located in the inner city and built on shoe string budgets, opened up onto sidewalks and displayed modern, easy-to-use materials — St. Clement Episcopal Church in Inkster was round in plan with altar in the center overlooking courtyards; Grace Episcopal Church, 12th and Virginia Park, had a hexagonal chapel; and the tabernacle-shaped Church of Christ of Conant Gardens, 18480 Conant, had a roof of pre-cast wood fiber compressed and clapped together every four feet.

The Second Baptist Church addition at 441 Monroe (1967) was Johnson's first large commission and one of his most well-known design projects. The \$625,000 education unit featured an open, sheltered rooftop garden with a floating roof.

Johnson became the Detroit Board of Education's first appointed African American architect in 1965 when he was approved as architect for an addition to Angell School. More commissions from Detroit's school board came his way, including Breithaupt Career and Technical Center and an addition to Redford High School. The public school system was adapting to a standardized building unit system in the early 1970s and Johnson was awarded the contract for an addition to Sherrard School as part of a four school pilot program using the new method. He served on an advisory board to the Board of Education and his work on school buildings increased as more African Americans moved into positions of power in Detroit. He worked for other area districts as well.

⁶ Hiley H. Ward, "His Ideas Add Sparkle' Churches." Detroit Free Press (Detroit, Michigan) Sat, 16 Mar 1963,4

Johnson earned some Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) projects, including Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church Tower and Townhouses (c. 1970), Belle Maison East (1976), and Coleman A. Young Manor (1978). In the 1980s, when “set-aside” ordinances required that a percentage of contracts with public involvement be awarded to minority firms, Johnson’s firm partnered with Albert Kahn Associates as associate architect on the Wayne County Community College (1981). In 1989 Nathan Johnson & Associates sued Smith, Hinchman & Grylls unsuccessfully over his reduced role in the Veterans Administration Hospital project.

Nathan Johnson & Associates had anywhere from two to forty employees during its long practice, which wound down around the year 2000. Johnson achieved success locally as a modernist architect and deserves to be recognized for his contribution to Modern architecture in the Detroit area. Examples of his many and diverse commissions are:

House of Diggs, 1957
Mercy General Hospital, 1958
Thunderbird Inn, Northville, 1959
Church of the Resurrection, Ecorse, 1962
Stanley Hong’s residence, 961 West Boston, 1962
Second Baptist Church addition, 1967
Stanley Hong’s Mannia Café 1969-71
Sherrard Jr. High School Addition, 1971
Eastland Shopping Center, 1972
Bethel AME Church, Tower and Townhouses, 1974
Belle Maison East, 1976
Coleman A. Young Manor, 1978
Shed 5, Eastern Market, 1981
Wayne County Community College, 1981
E. Side Prison, 1986
Detroit People Mover stations, 1987
University Towers, 1995

Cultural Events

Stanley Hong’s Mannia Café opened to diners in 1971 and was the scene of several events of cultural significance or interest, particularly in the area of Detroit’s entertainment history. The Temptations practiced there early in their careers; Mayor Coleman Young frequented the restaurant as a good friend of Hong’s, and Aretha Franklin and other famous sports and recording stars often Detroit’s dined there.

In its later years, a new chapter was being written in Stanley Hong’s Mannia Café—that of the “Rhythm Kitchen.” Founded by clothing designer Maurice Malone c. 1991, one night a week the restaurant was transformed by promoters into a music club featuring reggae, jazz, and classics, and, according to Paul Rosenberg, became “... the original epicenter of the rap music club scene in the early ‘90s in Detroit⁷.” The hip-hop event Rhythm Kitchen was born as a weekly underground night held at Hong’s throughout most of the 90’s, which most notably saw the rise of rapper Eminem as he participated in rap battles with several other local rappers of notoriety.

⁷ [http:// bunyan Chopshop.blogspot.com/2008/01/rhythm-kitchen-flyer.html](http://bunyan Chopshop.blogspot.com/2008/01/rhythm-kitchen-flyer.html)

After Stanley's Mannia Café closed in the late 1990s it stood vacant for a short time, between early 2000s and 2012 the building was sold off to two different church congregations — Omega Baptist and Grace Fellowship Church, respectively. During these years, original interior features were removed. By 2013 the building was left abandoned, its interior gutted of most original features.

Architecture

Stanley's Mannia Café, built in 1969-71, is a rare Googie-style building in the city of Detroit. "Googie," a dramatic and sometimes outrageous variant of the modern style, was popularly used in the design of restaurants, coffee shops, bowling alleys, drive-in theaters, motels and other road-side architecture in the 1950s and 1960s. Influenced by space-age themes and futuristic designs, the Googie style became a part of the car culture of the times. The characteristic boomerang arches, tapered columns, cantilevers, parabolas, curved domes and free-forms became instant marketing for new commercial businesses meant to be instantly recognized from a moving car. Originally a Southern California phenomenon, the term "Googie" was taken from the name of a coffee shop that exemplified the style in West Hollywood, designed in 1949 by John Lautner, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. The flamboyance of Googie architecture expressed the post-WWII optimism that swept the nation. However, by 1970 a cultural shift towards a new Post-modernist traditionalism prevailed in commercial design, best witnessed by the iconic Golden Arches of McDonalds (1953) giving way to the brick-walled, mansard-roofed designs that followed.

According to architectural historian Dale Gyure, the design of Stanley's Mannia Café "... utilizes a concrete structural system to create an animated yet graceful rhythm across the facade; the use of the building's structure as decoration was common to this era and can be seen in many of the works of Minoru Yamasaki, the world-famous Detroit-area architect ..."⁸ Brian Conway, Michigan's State Historic Preservation officer, calls it "a strong vernacular example of organic architecture in the tradition of Eero Saarinen's Yost Ingalls Hockey Rink at MIT or William Kessler's Savings and Loan Building in Mt. Clemens, Michigan."⁹

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Stanley Hong's Mannia Cafe is in an area of vacant lots and industrial sites in the Milwaukee Junction neighborhood, an area beginning to experience a resurgence within proximity of the route of the Q Line, Detroit's light rail. West of the former restaurant is a large paved parking lot, originally with a pagoda-topped arch entrance, no longer extant. A paved roadbed to the east of the building is in poor condition, and the alleyway to the north is loose gravel and rocks.

Stanley Hong's Mannia Cafe was erected under City of Detroit building permit #35615 issued to Stanley Hong for a masonry restaurant, one-story tall, with dimensions of 76' x 98' to cost an estimated \$150,000 on June 10, 1969. A rear vestibule entrance was added in 1972. The building is described in the Historic Structure Report prepared by University of Detroit Mercy (UDM Report). Much of its architectural description is taken from that report.

The Googie-style, modernistic building is composed of exposed concrete block on the unadorned rear (north) and east elevations; other materials include particle board, sheet metal, and thin cast

⁸ Dale Allen Gyure, Ph.D, Professor of Architecture, LTU, Nov. 11, 2016, Letter of support.

⁹ Brian Conway, MSHDA, SHPO, Nov. 21, 2016 Letter of support.

concrete. Downward facing parabolas create rows of arches resulting in the wave-like roof ends, five bays along Baltimore (south) and six along the parking lot on the west. The peaks of the half-arches meet at the corner entrance and rise into a tall concrete corner tower, originally displaying the name of the restaurant. The inverted parabolas are smooth cast concrete, with approximately 12' of void space between. Each arched area forming the wall surfaces of the east and south facades are filled with a precast panel of concrete and coarse aggregate mixture.

According to the UDM Report, five diagonal glass strips on either side of the entrance meet at the entry corner, with entry doors on either side underneath the high end of the diagonal glass panels. The glass panels are currently boarded up but still intact and framed in black steel. The entry doors are approximately 36" in width, framed out by black structural steel members that help support entry tower.

Facades that were formerly cream color have been almost completely covered by dark gray spray paint as a means of buffing the graffiti that covered the exterior surfaces of the building. There is a second door on west side of the building, at the rear – it was originally used for a "take out" entrance; there are two entries for deliveries on the north side of building; and one additional egress at south end of the east facade.

The roof system is composed of Steel I-beams and girders that supported corrugated metal decking and an insulation layer, which was then finished with roll out rubber and tar. The roofing material wraps up to cover the backside of the parapet (rising 25" above the roof line) on the north and the east sides of the building, and on the embellished south and the west sides, the roofing material slopes up to meet and partially cover the backside of the inverted concrete parabolas - peaks of which rise approximately 18 inches above roof line.

Criteria

The proposed historic district meets the first criteria contained in section 25-2-4 (f):

- (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 designation of the proposed Stanley Hong's Mannia Cafe Historic District.

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: Melanie A. Bazil, Keith A. Dye, Louis Fisher, Zené Fogel-Gibson, Theresa Hagood, Calvin Jackson, Victoria Byrd-Olivier and Kari Smith. The *ex-officio* members who may be represented by members of their staff, are Director of Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the director of the Planning and Development Department.

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Amy Elliott Bragg, Board President of Preservation Detroit, Nov. 14, 2016

Support letter to Kristine Kidorf, Kidorf Preservation Consulting:

Brian Conway, MSHDA, SHPO, Nov. 21, 2016

Support letter To Whom it May Concern

Dale Allen Gyure, Ph.D, Professor of Architecture, LTU, Nov. 11, 2016

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Interview:

Nathan Johnson, April 12, 2017.

Contributions via email 2/6/2018 from:

- The Stanley Hong Family
- The Oscar Hong Family
- The Peter Tong Family
- The Henry Hong Family