



TOWN OF GREENWICH

Town Hall • 101 Field Point Road • Greenwich, CT 06830

Historic District
Commission

March 12, 2021

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PLANNING & ZONING
COMMISSION

Planning & Zoning Commission
Town of Greenwich
101 Field Point Road
Greenwich, CT 06830

Via email and USPS

Re: Application PLPZ 2021 00052, for a Final Site Plan and Special Permit, for demolition and reconstruction of the Eastern Greenwich Civic Center

Dear Planning & Zoning Commission:

On March 10, 2021, the Historic District Commission discussed the proposed demolition of the Eastern Greenwich Civic Center (originally named the Ekman Center and also known as the Electrolux Recreation Center) designed and constructed between 1948-50 by the architectural firm Raymond & Rado. At the meeting, HDC stated that the site was worthy to be documented (through photography). It is the hope of the HDC that the Planning & Zoning Commission include in its decision that documentation of the site as well as a copy of the building's plans be given to the Greenwich Historical Society along with the photographs for future research.

The following states the site's historical importance that prompted the Historic District Commission to make its request:

The Ekman Center is an intact example of a post war employee recreation area in the area of Architecture as the work of nationally important architects. From 1950 until its purchase by the Town of Greenwich in 1966, the building functioned as an employee recreation center for the Electrolux Corporation. The period of significance begins with the construction of the building (1948) until its sale by Electrolux to the Town of Greenwich.

In 1932, an article in the *Greenwich News and Graphic* announced "Electrolux Inc. Plans to establish a plant in Old Greenwich, giving employment to 200 operatives, the bulk of whom will be recruited in the neighborhood." The article continued in describing the factory as "one of the many industrial structures erected during the war [World War I] to fill government orders. It was constructed for the Dalton Machine Tool Company and subsequently sold to the Magazine Repeating Razor Company, manufacturers of the Shick (sic) Razor and sold again to the Welte Tripp Company, manufacturers of the Welte organ who sold it to Electrolux¹. The factory was situated paralleling the New York New Haven railroad tracks (that have their axes running east and west). Its structure was composed of concrete block and face brick.

By 1948, Electrolux had filed a request with the Town of Greenwich's Board of Zoning Appeals to authorize the construction of a recreation area for its employees. The project was designed to provide a wide range

¹ "New Factory at Old Greenwich to Employ 200". *Greenwich News and Graphic*. December 12, 1932.

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of facilities for their employees' leisure hours. The plan was a result of a yearlong study with F. Ellwood Allen Associates², a nationally recognized consulting firm of recreation planners.

Recreation consultant F. Ellwood Allen made a dual survey of existing facilities in the community and of worker's needs. Greatest demand was for bowling alleys. Also needed: a recreation hall-auditorium, snack bar, craft and meeting rooms, plus the usual outdoor athletic fields and lockers for them. The usual swimming pool was omitted because beaches were nearby.

When the owner started to acquire a site several miles from the factory, Allen objected because workers would not travel far from a plant to a recreation center, he said except in a one-company town. A site of 14 acres was then bought just across the road. Their plan called for a large recreational building with showers and lockers, an auditorium to seat 1,300, a stage, bowling alleys, a lounge, reading rooms, clubrooms, a snack bar, a dark room and a projection booth. The outdoor area would include a large ball field with bleachers, courts for tennis and other games, facilities for horseshoe pitching and shuffleboard, a picnic area and children's playground³.

At the outset the recreation consultant stressed two requisites:

- 1) Flexible use rooms: Despite strong pressure from enthusiasts not every sport and hobby can justify the cost of a separate room. Nor can all future activities be forecast. Here, for example, the recreation hall handles basketball, shuffleboard, banquets, dances, concerts and children's movies. The projection room is used for a sewing class and the basement houses an upholstery class.
- 2) Step-by-step development. To permit completion by stages if desired, the building was designed at Electrolux' request in four self-contained sections: the bowling alley; lobby and first floor lounge; second floor club rooms; recreation hall. (Though the structure was actually completed in one operation, this "unit" idea gave double assurance that each part would be adequate).⁴

It is possible that Allen recommended the firm Raymond & Rado to Electrolux as he had begun collaborating with the architectural firm since 1947 on the design of park facilities, community buildings and pools. Over the next few years, their partnerships would amount to over a dozen projects. Clients included municipal governments (Lincoln, Nebraska and Hickory, North Carolina to name a few) and corporations such as Farm Insurance and General Electric.

Antonin Raymond (1888-1976) was born in Kladno, Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic). He graduated with a degree in architecture from the Czech Higher Polytechnical Institute in 1910. While a student there he discovered the work of Frank Lloyd Wright as Wright's portfolios debuted in Prague and across Europe. Raymond noted in his autobiography that "Wright had restated the principles of building; he had overcome the cell, liberated the plan, made space flow, given buildings a human scale and blended them with nature ... He was what we had been longing for, a real revolutionary." Landing in New York in 1910, he soon found the Czech quarter where he was introduced to a fellow Czech immigrant who was at the time managing Cass Gilbert's architectural office. Raymond soon joined the firm serving as assistant superintendent during the construction of the Woolworth Building (completed in 1913).

Two years later, he was a member of the Taliesin East fellowship (1915-1916) and served as Frank Lloyd Wright's chief designer for Tokyo's Imperial Hotel (1919-1921) before opening his own firm and launching a career in Japan during which he would be hailed as the father of modern architecture in that country.

L(adislav) L(eland) Rado born in Czechoslovakia, was a graduate of the University of Prague and began his architectural career in Brno. He came to the United States at the invitation of Walter Gropius, then the

² Formed in 1945 by F. Ellwood Allen (1901-1961) as an expansion of the recreation planning work Ellwood had done in the public sector (he had been the Chief Planner of the National Recreation Association (today's National Recreation and Park Association) from 1938 until 1945).

³ "Electrolux Seeks Authorization for Recreational Area". *Greenwich Time*. 1948.

⁴ *Architectural Forum*, April, 1953.

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chairman of the architecture school at Harvard University, and received his master's degree from Harvard in 1940. In 1945, he and Antonin Raymond founded Raymond & Rado, which designed the American Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia; 2 Hammar skjold Plaza in Manhattan and the Federal Office Building in Albany as well as many residential, recreational and industrial structures.⁵

In 1948, the firm established a Tokyo office. During the Cold War era, the firm designed military buildings in both the United States and the Pacific. Additional works include the American Embassy in Jakarta Indonesia (completed in 1956); the American Headquarters of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines in New York (completed in 1960); and the United Nations Headquarters in New York (completed in 1972).

When the Ekman Center was completed in 1950 (named after the President of Electrolux Elon V. Ekman), the opening coincided with an article that appeared in *Recreation* (the magazine for the recreation movement) that commented upon the importance of management to provide recreation and recreation facilities for the men and women working in mills and factories⁶.

In early 1966, the Town of Greenwich's Office of the Selectmen became aware of the possible availability of the Ekman Center and they moved rapidly to negotiate its purchase. After vigorous town-wide discussions, the acquisition of the Center was approved by the Representative Town Meeting's members for \$432,000 payable in three annual installments of \$144,000 each⁷.

Shortly after assuming ownership of the building, the town's First Selectman (Lowell P. Weicker, Jr.⁸) announced the center's new name calling it the "Citizens' Center". The name was chosen as a result of conferences with members of veterans' organizations who also decided that the dedication ceremony should be held on December 7th 1966 to mark the 25th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The plan included a dedication plaque to read, "In honor of those citizens of the Town of Greenwich who have served and will serve their town, state and nation" [the plaque is still visible in the present structure's entrance]. This afforded inclusion of all persons who have participated in civic, state and national affairs, not just the members of the Armed Services.⁹

At the dedication ceremony First Selectman Weicker urged young people to take an active part in affairs of their community, state and nation and added that community service was a long-standing part of the nation's heritage. Taking part in the presentation of colors were the Second Howitzer Battalion, the 192nd Artillery; Division 3-12 'M' U.S. Naval Reserve: Company (F), Second Battalion, 25th Marines, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve; Greenwich Post 29, American Legion; Col. Raynal C. Bolling Post 1,792 Veterans of Foreign Wars; Ninth District Veterans Association and Byram Veterans Association. Further, the dedication day marked the 25th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor and that the center would serve as a living memorial to all those who take part of its facilities.¹⁰

⁵ "Ladislav L. Rado; Architect, 84". *The New York Times*, October 29, 1993.

⁶ Clarence E. Brewer. "Recreation - In the Industrial Plant". *Recreation*. September, 1950. P. 195. [vol. XLIV, no. 4].

⁷ "Recreation Center." *Annual Report, Town of Greenwich, 1965-66 Fiscal Year*. Greenwich, CT: Board of Estimate and Taxation, 1966. p.6

⁸ Lowell Palmer Weicker, Jr. (1931-) is a former Town of Greenwich First Selectman, U.S. Representative, U.S. Senator and the 85th Governor of Connecticut (not since the mid-nineteenth century had an independent been elected state governor of Connecticut). He unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for President in 1980.

⁹ "Ekman Center's Name Change To Honor Residents." *Greenwich Time*. October 5, 1966. Originally the center was to have been called "Greenwich Memorial Center," and be dedicated to citizens of the town who were killed in the nation's wars. Under that plan, the center was to have been dedicated on Veteran's Day, November 11. The new plan afforded inclusion of all persons who had participated in civic, state and national affairs, not just the members of the Armed Services.

¹⁰ "Dedicate Town's Civic Center In Brief Ceremony". *Greenwich Time*. December 8, 1966.

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Within the following year, the renamed "Greenwich Civic Center" rapidly became an important part of the community's life. Over 70,000 individuals made use of the facility as compared with the 18,000 per year when it was privately owned¹¹.

During its 50+ years as a public facility, the building has been subject to modest alterations and the limitations of municipal maintenance. The original lounges have been converted to day care and offices for a community service organization (the Old Greenwich Riverside Community Center "O.G.R.C.C.") but the original minimalist fireplaces remain. The bowling alleys shown on the building plans were used through 1972 and were removed due to a drop off in bowling and subsequent financial loss to the Town¹². A large multi-purpose room replaced the alleys.

Based on the above narrative, the Historic District Commission believes the site's contribution to both the history of Architecture as well as the Town of Greenwich makes it worthy of documentation prior to its demolition.

Sincerely,



Stephen L. Bishop
Chairman

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¹¹ "Greenwich Civic Center." *Annual Report, Town of Greenwich, 1966-67 Fiscal Year*. Greenwich, CT: Board of Estimate and Taxation, 1967. p.6

¹² "Parks and Recreation." *Annual Report, Town of Greenwich, 1971-72 Fiscal Year*. Greenwich, CT: Board of Estimate and Taxation, 1972. p.143.