

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
STAFF REPORT

HPC Meeting Date: 02/07/2022
Ald. District 13, Scott Spiker
Staff Reviewer: Carlen Hatala

PROPERTY

TOPS Club Inc.
4575 S. 5th Street
Milwaukee, WI 53207

OWNER/APPLICANT

TOPS Club Inc.
4575 S. 5th Street
Milwaukee, WI 53207

CONSULTANT

Rowan Davidson Associate AIA
Legacy Architecture, Inc.
605 Erie Avenue Suite 101
Sheboygan, WI 53081

PROPOSAL

Certified Local Government Review of the National Register
Nomination for the TOPS Club Inc. (1965)

STAFF COMMENTS

TOPS, standing for Take Off Pounds Sensibly, was established in 1948 and to quote the National Register nomination “has been one of the most significant dieting organizations in the nation while influencing other dieting methods and trends, self-help social groups, medical research into obesity, and genetic aspects of metabolism and attracting membership around the world”.

TOPS began as a means of support among housewives trying to lose weight. The organization focused on science based dieting information, a group setting for support, and subscription-based affordable literature. At its approximate peak in 1979 the organization had 300,000 members, men and women, in every state and other countries.

The current building was constructed in 1965 to house the organization’s headquarters and publishing operations. It was built by Baudhuin and Associates, Engineers. The front part of the building houses the organization’s offices while the rear is used for publication, printing and distribution purposes. It remains the main headquarters and distribution point to this day and is the “only remaining resource associated the organization”. TOPS initiated funding into obesity studies that would lead to an understanding of obesity as a disease, arranged for members to participate in medical research trials, and worked out calorie intake for members.

The building retains most of its integrity and has last been remodeled and expanded in 1969. Windows were replaced as were the glazed tile panels on the exterior at that time. The rear portion was also expanded at that time. Floor plans in the office section have been altered but the basic arrangement of spaces has remained. The warehouse and printing rooms remain the same. The memorial garden at the rear of the property was constructed in 2000 honoring founder Esther S. Manz.

The National Register nomination has a good summary of the history of dieting from the Greeks to self-help organizations as well as efforts by the Federal Government to establish guidelines related to food consumption.

The TOPS Club Building is being nominated not for its architectural significance but for its significance in the area of medical and social history. "TOPS donated \$250,000 to the Deaconess Hospital in Milwaukee, beginning a direct relationship with the medical research field that would later become the Obesity and Metabolic Research Program at the Medical College of Wisconsin and lead to later genome registries of TOPS members that have been used extensively since for genetic research into obesity and metabolism science." TOPS has donated millions over the years to support the Medical College of Wisconsin. This sets it apart from other weight-loss programs which rarely engage in research.

The building is NOT endangered and TOPS is still headquartered here.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Recommend that HPC support the nomination.