AN ORDINANCE to designate the Kay Apartment House located at 118 North 31st Street as a landmark pursuant to the Landmark Heritage Preservation Ordinance of the City of Omaha.

BE IT ORDAINED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF OMAHA:

Section 1. That the Kay Apartment House located at 118 North 31st Street, which is on the following described land, to wit:

Lot 7 and 8, Block 4, West End, a subdivision as surveyed, platted and recorded in Douglas County, Nebraska, together with adjacent vacated alley,

is hereby deemed historically significant and worthy of recognition for the reasons cited in Landmark Heritage Preservation Resolution attached hereto as Exhibit "A" and made a part hereof by reference.

Section 2. That the "Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Buildings", as may be from time to time amended, are hereby adopted as the design standards to be applied in the enforcement of this ordinance and Chapter 24, Article II, of the Omaha Municipal Code.

Section 3. That the Kay Apartment House is hereby designated as a landmark pursuant to Section 24-61 of the Omaha Municipal Code and hereby subject to all of the provisions of this Ordinance and Chapter 24, Article II, of the Omaha Municipal Code.

Section 4. That this Ordinance shall be in full force and take effect fifteen (15) days from and after the date of its passage.
INTRODUCED BY COUNCILMEMBER

Ben D. Bracy

APPROVED BY:

Ben D. Bracy

MAYOR OF THE CITY OF OMAHA

DATE

9/27/18

ACTING

PASSED

SEP 25 2018

7-0

ATTEST:

CITY CLERK OF THE CITY OF OMAHA

DATE

9/27/18

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

CITY ATTORNEY

DATE

8-12-XX

plnt0019pj
C3-18-153

Honorable President

and Members of the City Council,

The attached Ordinance approves the Local Landmark designation for the Kay Apartment House located at 118 North 31st Street. The applicant is Court 31, LLC c/o Ashley Kuhn.

CASE DESCRIPTION: The purpose of this request is to provide a local landmark designation to the Kay Apartment House located at 118 North 31st Street.

DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION: Approval.

SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY: The Planning Board held a public hearing on this request July 11, 2018. A full summary of the proceedings is attached.

PLANNING BOARD RECOMMENDATION: Approval, as recommended by the Planning Department, 6-0.

Respectfully submitted,

[Signature]

David K. Fanslau
Planning Director

Pln0017pjb
RESOLUTION – EXHIBIT A
Kay Apartment House
LANDMARKS HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION

RESOLVED BY THE LANDMARKS HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION OF THE CITY OF OMAHA:

WHEREAS, Ashley Kuhn is the owner of the Kay Apartment House; and,

WHEREAS, this owner, on June 13th, 2018, requested that the Kay Apartment House be designated a Landmark under the City of Omaha’s Landmark Heritage Preservation Ordinance; and,

WHEREAS, the property, is a multi-dwelling brick building at 120 North 31st Street in Omaha’s midtown neighborhood and real estate investor Louie W. Kay developed the property in 1924 amidst an acceleration in the construction of apartment buildings on the periphery of the downtown area; and,

WHEREAS, it was designed by architect Matthew J. Lahr; and,

WHEREAS, notable features include the staggered but symmetrical configuration of windows and glazed balcony-access doors of varying dimensions, the bracketed, broadly overhanging eaves, and the clay-tiled, hipped roof; and,

WHEREAS, the Kay Apartment House faithfully represents trends in the history of attached-dwelling development in Omaha; and,

WHEREAS, the Kay Apartment House has local significance as a noteworthy example of the Italian Renaissance Revival architectural style and as a representative of the growth of apartment dwellings during the city’s westward expansion. The building retains a remarkable degree of integrity in its character-defining features in regards to both aspects of significance; and,

WHEREAS, the Kay Apartment House historic significance satisfies two standards for designation;

Standard A: Historical and cultural importance, having significant character, interest or value, as part of the development, history, heritage or cultural characteristics of the city, state or nation; or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or is the site of an historic event; or exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, educational, social or historic heritage of the community;

Standard B: Architectural and engineering importance, portraying the historical setting or environment of a distinctive characteristic of an architectural or engineering type, period, style, or method of construction; or is the work of a master or designer whose individual work is significant in the development of the city; or contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship of distinctive quality, or which represents a significant innovation; and,

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE LANDMARKS HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION OF THE CITY OF OMAHA:

THAT, the Kay Apartment House, be designated as a Landmark of the City of Omaha.

Joan Fogarty
Chair: Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission        Date: June 13th, 2018
Local Landmark Application for the Kay Apartment House,
120 North 31st Street, Omaha, Nebraska

May 2018
Prepared by Matthew Pelz
on behalf of Restoration Exchange Omaha, Inc.
and White Lotus Group
I. Summary

The Kay Apartment House is a multi-dwelling brick building at 120 North 31st Street in Omaha’s midtown neighborhood. Farmer and real estate investor Louie W. Kay developed the property in 1924 amidst an acceleration in the construction of apartment buildings on the periphery of the downtown area. Kay hired architect Matthew J. Lahr, whose Italian Renaissance Revival design remains intact. Notable features include the staggered but symmetrical configuration of windows and glazed balcony-access doors of varying dimensions, the bracketed, broadly overhanging eaves, and the clay-tiled, hipped roof. Kay owned and maintained the apartment house until 1934, when he sold it to investor Marshall E. McArthur. Multiple twentieth-century owners continued to market the building under the name “Kay Apartments” until 1981 when it was rebranded as the “Sara My Apartments.” Other aliases include the “T.S.M. Apartments” and—the most common alternate name—the “Sara Mia Apartments.”

II. Physical description

The Kay Apartment House stands on North 31st Street near the northwest corner of its intersection with Dodge Street at the eastern edge of the midtown area. The neighborhood to the north are predominantly single-and multi-family residential. To the east, a cluster of modern commercial buildings at the active intersection of Dodge and Park Avenue insulate the apartment house from the Gerald Ford Freeway and U.S. Route 75, which form the eastern boundary of midtown. The 1921 Turner Park Apartments (National Register #14000910, 2014) are located immediately to the south and Turner Park lies on opposite side of Dodge Street. Buildings associated with the Midtown Crossing
developments and facilities of Mutual of Omaha Insurance extend westwards from Turner Park.

Positioned at the center of its 0.32-acre lot, the Kay Apartment House is set back from North 31st Street. The street frontage has a concrete-slab sidewalk and a grass-covered curb strip. Concrete walkways extend from the sidewalk to the building’s two primary entrances on the east elevation. Concrete drives on the north and south sides of the building access the paved surface parking lot on the rear (west) portion of the lot. A chain-link fence bounds the lot on the north side. Aside from the curb strip, the lot contains no vegetation.

The rectangular building has two stories built atop a brick look-out basement foundation. The structure is wood frame. Facades on primary elevations are ornamented with dark-red face brick. The green, glazed clay tile of the low-pitched hipped roof is original. A front hip projects from the center of the roof’s eastern slope. The rear (west) elevation of the building presents a flat roof edge.

The primary (east) façade has ten bays. A vertical axis of symmetry cuts through the middle of the elevation resulting in two identical and adjoined five-bays elevations. The following section describes each of these five-bay designs:

A centrally-positioned primary entrance is boldly distinguished by its hipped awning, topped with green tiles to match the roof of the building. The awning is cantilevered from the face of the building and supported by heavy brackets painted white. The center bay of the second story has an adjoined pair of six-over-one wooden sash windows. Three-over-three transoms top both windows.
The adjacent bays (the second and fourth bays if counting from the corner of the building) feature four walk-out balconies with cantilevered concrete patios and metal railings. Each door in the sets of glazed French doors has ten panes divided by thin muntins with simple profiles. On the peripheral bays, six-over-one wooden sash windows similar to those of the central bay are positioned in a regular configuration. In addition to the above-described openings, a row of six-over-one windows, smaller than those of the upper-stories, lines the basement level. A soldier brick course delineates the basement level from the rest of the façade.

The ornamentation of the identical, three-bay north and south elevations is far more reserved than that of the primary façade. On both the first and second stories, each bay contains a six-over-one wooden sash window matching those previously described. And here again, the basement level has a row of smaller, sash windows.

The brick façade of the rear (west) elevation is finished with less precision and with thicker mortar joints. Like the front elevation, the rear elevation has a vertical, central axis of symmetry dividing the building into two repeated segments. Each segment has four rear entrances accessible by wood-plank staircases which represent the only substantial exterior alteration to the original design of the building. Each entrance includes a partially-screened door in front of a glazed and paneled wood door. On each story, seven one-over-one sash windows on are arranged in a regular pattern with one of the windows turned outwards to the corner of the building as part of a projecting central portion of the elevation.
III. Historical description

In their study of Omaha’s attached dwellings, Jennifer Honebrink, Timothy Smith, and Chad Moffett identified factors that contributed to the evolution of attached-dwelling developments in the city. They cited a national trend between 1900 and 1940 in which real estate investors increasingly found greater profitability in apartment developments, especially if located outside of downtown areas and their higher land costs. Concurrently, increased automobile use necessitated new accommodations for parking—a preference that caused greater problems in previously developed areas where space for automobile infrastructure might be difficult to create.

The authors of the attached dwellings study see national trends demonstrated in Omaha during the early twentieth century, with their growth intensified by the decentralizing effects of the city’s streetcar system. The total number of attached buildings in the city nearly doubled between 1890 and 1918, and strong growth continued throughout the 1920s. Extant examples of these buildings typically embody architectural styles of the Eclectic movement, particularly Tudor Revival and subcategories of Renaissance Revival.2

In its location, architecture, and operation, the Kay Apartment House faithfully represents trends in the history of attached-dwelling development in Omaha. The building deviates from typical patterns, however, in that developer Louie Kay came from a farming background. Investment in attached dwellings was usually a source of secondary income for private individuals from upper-class, professional backgrounds. Honebrink, Smith, and Moffett specify “doctors, lawyers, and established merchants.”3
Louie W. Kay was born 1883 to Charlie Kay, a farmer, and Lizzie Waseff in Minden, Pottawattamie County, Iowa. He married Christena L. Blunk, also of Minden, in 1908. The 1915 Iowa Census lists his occupation as farmer. Around 1920, the couple relocated to Los Angeles, California, but they returned to the midwest prior to 1924, settling in Omaha.4

After his return from California, Kay embarked on his first and only documented real estate development project in Omaha. In August 1923, he purchased a previously-undeveloped tract of land near the corner of Dodge and North 31st Street from Nellie M. Johnson. He began construction of the subject apartment house on the site the following year.5

To design the project, Kay hired architect Matthew John Lahr, of whom Place Makers of Nebraska offers the following biographical details: 6

“Matthew John Lahr was born in Aurora, Illinois on June 13, 1889. He attended the Chicago Technology College from 1909-1915, during which time he worked for the firm, Pond & Pond, in Chicago. At the age of 25, Lahr attended the esteemed Columbia University School of Architecture, during which time, in 1916, Lahr started his own firm, Lahr & Stangel, in Omaha, Nebraska. From 1917-1919, Lahr served as a Master Engineer for the 491st Construction Squadron, and a year after this began a new firm, Ellert & Lahr, in Omaha. The partnership dissolved, and Lahr began working independently at his own firm, M.J. Lahr, until 1927. In 1927, Lahr once again partnered with Stangel, working together with him at their firm until 1941. It was at this time that Lahr, once again, worked on his own at the firm, M.J. Lahr, until 1960. Lahr was a member of the AIA throughout his career.”
When Kay contracted him to design the apartment house in 1924, the young Lahr was still working to establish his architectural practice. At that point, the highlight project on his resume was the 1921 St. Bridget’s Church. In the two years after the Kay Apartment House, Lahr’s career quickly developed with design of the Renaissance Revival-style Notre Dame Academy and Convent at 3501 State Street (National Register #98000192, listed 1998) and the Tudor Revival-style Nottingham Apartments at 3304 Burt Street (National Register #13000195, listed 2013). During the late 1920s and 1930s, he became a favorite architect for Omaha’s Catholic organizations. He contributed designs for several buildings on the campus of Father Flanagan’s Boy’s Home (1929-1931) as well as the Holy Cross School Building (1936) and an addition to the Notre Dame Academy (1937). 7

In the design of the Kay Apartment House, Lahr utilized a hip-roofed variation of the Italian Renaissance Revival style. While the building lacks the round arches and arcades typically featured in Renaissance-inspired buildings, the box-like form, vertical symmetry, and the bracketed, overhanging eaves affirm the categorization. Though Italian Renaissance buildings are sometimes associated with flat roofs and ornate parapets, the low-pitch, hip-roofed form is common. 8

Articles in the Omaha World-Herald from July 13 and July 20 review construction details, the original program of the building, and Kay’s early approach to marketing the apartments. There were eight units in total, four on each story. Staircases emanating from the front entrances accessed the front doors of the units in a central interior hallway. Each apartment had a small reception hall branching out into a living room, one bedroom, one bathroom, a kitchen, and a small dining area. Walls dividing the
units were tiled to buffer noise, in keeping with Kay’s promotion of the apartment house as offering “complete privacy.” The basement housed a “community entertainment room, showers, office, club room with bath, large laundry, drying rooms, store rooms, etc.” Later real estate listings for the building provide additional details regarding its finishes. Each apartment had oak flooring throughout, four closets, and a Murphy bed in the living room. Kay managed the property himself and enticed potential tenants by promising “everything cozy” and a “wonderful summer location” that was “cool and breezy.”

Construction concluded in November 1924 at an estimated cost of $35,000. Kilmartin and Tait served as general contractors. Kay immediately offered unfurnished rooms for rent. He and Christena took residence at the building and found tenants for each of the seven other units.

Kay had at least one documented dispute with neighborhood residents. In October 1931, six families complained to police that he had “roughly handled” children who were rolling skating on the pavement behind the building. The resolution of the case is unknown. By 1934, however, the Kays no longer resided in the building, and they sold the property the following year. They lived Pottawattamie County in 1940, spent some years in Colorado and California, and then returned to Omaha prior to 1958.

In 1935, oil executive and spokesman Marshall E. McArthur purchased the Kay Apartment House as an investment. The Byron Reed Company organized the transaction and afterwards acted as property manager. Advertisements show that the new owners made changes to the building’s interior finishes, including the installation of carpet in
hallways. Also coincidental with the change in ownership (but perhaps completed under Kay), the basement was renovated to create two additional apartment units.

The building continued to operate under the “Kay Apartments” name throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. City directory listings suggest that lengthy vacancies were atypical. The building had several long-term tenants, including Lilly M. Bartunek who resided in the building for at least 32 years. For portions of the 1950s and 1960s, most of the tenants were widows.

The list of twentieth-century owners of the property includes Knud Christensen (acquisition 1944), Harry Bearr (1945), Turner Court Realty (1960), Overland Wolf Inc. (1967), and Douglas Hiner (1975). In 1981 and 1982, city directories list the building as the “Sara My Apartments.” Since then, the building has also been known by the names “the T.S.M. Apartments” and “the Sara Mia Apartments.” While periodic interior renovations have altered finishes in the building, the overall spatial organization and exterior details are unchanged.

IV. Significance statement

The Kay Apartment House at 130 North 31st Street in Omaha has local significance as a noteworthy example of the Italian Renaissance Revival architectural style and as a representative of the growth of apartment dwellings during the city’s westward expansion. The building retains a remarkable degree of integrity in its character-defining features in regards to both aspects of significance. The architectural ornamentation is concentrated on the east façade, which retains the configuration and
materials originally designed by M.J. Lahr. While some changes in interior finishes have occurred, Lahr’s overall layout of apartment units is also retained.

V. Future plans

White Lotus Group plans to rehabilitate the building for use as an apartment building with 10 apartment units. The development team hopes to begin construction in August of 2018 and reopen the building in May 2019.

VI. Figures

Figure 1 - Drawing of the Kay Apartment House east elevation, designed by Matthew J. Lahr in 1924 and printed in the Omaha World-Herald. (“Kay Apartments to Feature Privacy,” Omaha World-Herald; Sunday, July 20, 1924, 8).
Figure 2 - Drawing of the Kay Apartment House plan, designed by Matthew J. Lahr in 1924 and printed in the Omaha World-Herald. ("Kay Apartments to Feature Privacy," Omaha World-Herald; Sunday, July 20, 1924, 8).

Figure 3 - Photograph of the Kay Apartment House, printed in the Omaha World-Herald upon Marshall E. McArthur’s purchase of the building. ("Buys Apartment as Investment," Omaha World-Herald; Sunday, April 7, 1935, 12).
Figure 4 - City of Omaha. Survey of Apartment Buildings.

VII. Notes

3 Honebrink, Smith, and Moffett, “Attached Dwellings of Omaha.”
5 “Building Notes,” Omaha World-Herald; Sunday, July 13, 1924, 10.


9 “Building Notes,” July 13, 1924; “Kay Apartments to Feature Privacy,” Omaha World-Herald; Sunday, July 20, 1924, 8.


12 “Kay Apartments to Feature Privacy,” July 20, 1924.

13 Omaha City Directory, 1925.

14 “Say Tenant Chastized Boys in the Alley,” Omaha World-Herald; Friday, October 2, 1931, 1.

15 “Real Estate Transfers,” Omaha World-Herald; Thursday, April 4, 1935, 22.


18 “Open for Inspection Today. Kay 118 N. 31st St.,” Omaha World-Herald; Wednesday, May 1, 1935.

19 Omaha City Directory, 1934.

20 Select Omaha City Directories, 1925-1987.

21 Omaha City Directories, 1981, 1982
CASE: C3-18-153
APPLICANT: Court 31, LLC c/o Ashley Kuhn
REQUEST: Approval of a Local Landmark Designation - Kay Apartment House
LOCATION: 118 North 31st Street