

CT Trust Resource ID: 2135

HISTORIC RESOURCE INVENTORY – BUILDING AND STRUCTURES

State Historic Preservation Office, DECD, One Constitution Plaza, 2nd Floor, Hartford, CT 06103

*Note: Please attach any additional or expanded information on a separate sheet.

Inventory form modified for the Creative Places - Arts & Letters Project

GENERAL INFORMATION

Building Name (Common): New Britain Museum of American Art

Other Name(s) (Historic): Landers House; New Britain Museum of American Art

Street Address or Location: 56 Lexington Street, New Britain

Town/City: New Britain Village:

County: Hartford

Designation(s): SRHD, NRHD

Owner(s): New Britain Museum of American Art

Public/Private: Non-Profit

Latitude: 41.6643 Longitude: -72.7916

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Present Use: RECREATION & CULTURE: Museum

Historic Use: Domestic: single dwelling

Accessibility to public: Yes Exterior visible from public road? Yes

Interior accessible? If yes, explain: During museum hours

Style of building: Date of Construction: 1903, 2006

Material(s) (Indicate use or location when appropriate) Stucco, Fieldstone

Structural Systems(s): Load bearing masonry, Wood Frame

Roof(Type): Hip, Gable (Material): Tile

Number of Stories: 2 1/2 Approximate Dimensions: 46' x 50', additions

Structural Condition: Excellent

Exterior Condition: Excellent

Locational Integrity: On original site Moved, When: NA

Alterations?: Yes If yes, explain: modern museum additions, rehabilitation of original block

Related outbuildings or landscape features: Museum additions, Barn

Surrounding Environment: Residential

Interrelationship of building and surroundings:

The New Britain Museum of American Art (NBMAA) is located on a 2.59-acre parcel on Lexington Street adjacent to Walnut Hill Park. The oldest part of the museum is the Landers House, which occupies the southern tip of the site, facing the park. Acquisition of adjacent parcels to the north and construction of modern additions have enlarged the museum. The original house is a contributing resource in the West End Historic District. It is connected to the modern portions by a one-story glass wing. Modern terraces surround the house.

Other notable features of building or site:

The 1903 original house is a 46' x 50' 2 1/2-story block, with a red clay tile roof and walls of stucco and reddish-brown stone. The design is Arts and Crafts style with Spanish Mission revival characteristics. The ground floor of the façade and exterior chimneys are faced in basalt masonry, with the upper floor and rear finished in stucco. The tile roof has two parallel gables expressed as dormers on the west façade and as full width gable roofs on the north and south. These mask a flat-roofed section at the center of the building. Most windows are six-over-one double-hung. A projecting one-story portico is centered on the west facade and a wide curved bay with five window openings is on the south side. Gable- or hip-roofed attic dormers are on all sides.

Architect: Unknown Builder/Maker: Unknown

Historical or Architectural importance:

From 1853 on, the New Britain Institute fostered learning among immigrant workers in the city's factories. In 1901 the Institute moved to its own building including a portrait gallery. In 1903 John Butler Talcott established the first purchase fund for art. The first curator, Fanny J. Brown, began expanding the exhibitions to include current art. In 1934 New Britain philanthropist Grace Judd Landers, widow of a prominent industrialist, gave the Institute her house. There, the Art Museum of the New Britain Institute opened to the public. It was renamed New Britain Museum of American Art (NBMAA) in the 1950s. Sanford B. D. Low (1905-1964) became the first museum director in 1939. Robert Macbeth, a New York gallery owner, advised the museum to focus on American art, initiating its unique niche in the art world. The museum also committed itself to local talent and to education, with art classes for all. Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) was among the young students, and he

exhibited at the museum in a 1949 show. The museum considers that it has the most comprehensive collection of LeWitt's work, beginning with a painting from his college years, through his entire career (Hyland 2012).

Sanford B. D. Low (1905-1964), born in Hawaii, was the son of Eben 'Rawhide Ben' Parker Low (b. 1864), a rancher, and Martha Kekapa Fuller who was ethnically native Hawaiian. At age 16, 'Sandy' Low was sent east to the Loomis School in Windsor; he stayed only three months. Low enrolled at the Museum School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where he found his love of art, and demonstrated his gregarious nature. He graduated in 1927, and went on to the Art Students League. Low worked as a commercial artist in New York, and met his future wife, Virginia Hart, an artist and daughter of the head of the Stanley Works in New Britain. The couple moved to her home town, where he organized an exhibit of his paintings for Fanny Brown at the New Britain Library. He also spearheaded the creation of the Art League of New Britain (also known as 'The Studio,') in the barn at 30 Cedar Street. 'The Studio transformed the social life of New Britain by bringing together in moments of camaraderie, probably for the first time, artists and people from all walks of life ...' (Sam Low, 2000). Sanford Low became the first director of the NBMAA in 1939 when it moved to Lexington Street. With his charisma and connections to both artists and the wealthy of New Britain, Low made the museum a cultural center.

Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) was born in Hartford, and grew up from age six in New Britain where the LeWitt family ran a successful jewelry store – where now a LeWitt work is painted on the Columbus Avenue side (Cotter 2012). He took classes as a child at both the Wadsworth Atheneum and NBMAA. LeWitt studied at Syracuse U., served in the Korean War, then worked in New York at the office of Architect I. M. Pei as a graphic designer. He began to find his direction when as night staff at the Museum of Modern Art, he met artists including Dan Flavin. In the late 1960s the Conceptual art movement took shape, with the first LeWitt wall drawings in pencil. The concept of art works as a set of instructions that could be executed by others was realized in these. LeWitt went on to create multiple series of wall drawings in bold colors, sculptures in concrete block masonry and in steel. Prominent wall drawings greet visitors in both the NBMAA and Wadsworth Atheneum. LeWitt maintained a close relationship with the NBMAA, and donated many works to the museum.

Sources:

Interview by C. Hitchcock with Douglas Hyland of NBMAA, 11/04/2014, at 56 Lexington St., New Britain.

City of New Britain Assessor's Records and GIS viewer: http://newbritain.mapxpress.net/ags_map/default.htm?MBL2=946 .

Connecticut Artists Project. UConn Library accessed at: <http://lib.uconn.edu/services/collections/connecticut-artists-project/>

Cotter, Sara. 2012. 'City Canvases, New Britain: Sol LeWitt.' New Britain Museum of American Art blog. Accessed at: <https://nbmaa.wordpress.com/2012/07/06/city-canvases-new-britain-sol-lewitt/> .

Faude, Wilson H. 2010. 'New Britain Museum of American Art.' Hidden History of Connecticut. Charleston: History Press.

Hyland, Douglas. 2012. 'Sol LeWitt: an Appreciation.' Unpublished manuscript.

Kimmelman, Michael. 4/09/2007. 'Obituary: the artist Sol LeWitt dies at 78.' New York Times.

Low, Sam Hart. 2000. 'Present at the Conception: A celebration of the [NBMAA's] first director Sanford B.D. Low.' Talk at the NBMAA, October 25. Accessed at <http://www.samlow.com/forbears/SanfordBDLow.html>.

NBMAA web site, museum history. Accessed at: <http://www.nbmaa.org/museum-of-american-art/nbmaa-history> .

New Britain Public Library local history room, clipping files, maps, exhibit catalogs and museum histories.

Youngken, Richard C. 1998. West End Historic District National Register Nomination No. 98001542. National Park Service.

Photographer: Charlotte Hitchcock Date: 10/08/2014

View: West view

Form completed by: Charlotte Hitchcock Printed On: June 1, 2016

Organization: Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation

Address: 940 Whitney Avenue, Hamden CT 06517-4002

Threats: None known

Subsequent field evaluations:



Landers House at New Britain Museum of American Art

FOR OFFICE USE:

Town # _____ Site# _____ UTM _____
 District ☐ S ☐ NR If NR, specify: ☐ Actual ☐ Potential