The Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation

Landmark Designation Staff Report

May 8, 2012

The Shelley House

3849 Roland Avenue
Baltimore, Maryland

Summary

The Shelley House is the oldest documented concrete house in Baltimore City, built in 1905-1906. Designed by Baltimore architect John E. Lafferty for Dr. Albert Shelley, this Colonial Revival home is an early example of reinforced concrete used in domestic architecture, predating many other concrete homes locally and nationally. Concrete was an early 20th century "miracle" building material that was versatile and fireproof, and gained popularity as an architectural material throughout the 20th century.

Property History

The concrete Colonial Revival house located at 3849 Roland Ave. in the Hampden neighborhood of Baltimore, was constructed in 1905-1906 for Dr. Albert Shelley, at a cost of $4,500.[1] The architect John E. Lafferty designed the Colonial Revival home, constructed entirely of reinforced concrete.[2]

A Baltimore-based architect, John E. Lafferty designed several buildings in Baltimore that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places individually or as contributing to historic districts, including the Paca Street Firehouse, the Erlander Buildings, and dwellings in Reservoir Hill and Harlem Park. This house is different from the rest of his surviving buildings in materials, style, and scale. It is presumed that the house was constructed to meet the requirements of Dr. Shelley in aesthetics as well as materials.

Dr. Albert Shelley, for whom the house was built, received his M.D. in Medicine at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. He was a general physician in Baltimore for over twenty years.[3] His medical office was located in his home, which was typical for a general practitioner at that time.[4] Numerous *Baltimore Sun* articles credit him for attending to the needs of citizens in Hampden.

Dr. Shelley travelled to England in 1903, the home of the Arts & Crafts movement that touted concrete as a domestic architectural material.[5] This is arguably where he learned about it, and the timing of his trip also explains why his house is such an early example of concrete housing in Baltimore and Maryland at large. Dr. Shelley did not own the property at 3849 Roland Ave. when he built the house in 1905-1906, instead he had a 99-lease with the owners. He purchased the property from them in 1910.[6]

Shelley died in 1923, and his wife and later his son owned the property until 1944.[7] Following the death of Shelley's wife, Anna, in 1924,[8] the house was offered for sale in the *Sun*, advertised as a "large, 10-Room-and-Bath 2-Story, extra well built house in fine condition, and suitable for a physician".[9] It didn't sell, and was likely converted to two apartments soon after. After 1944, when Harry Shelley, Albert's son, sold the house, it has been owned by a half-dozen entities. The property is still divided up into two apartments, and is currently for sale.

Contextual History

The Shelley House is an early example of reinforced concrete housing, and is the oldest documented example in the City of Baltimore. Concrete has been used as a building material since Roman times. Reinforced concrete was developed in the mid-19th century, and was made by pouring wet concrete into molds or casts. It was occasionally used in both industrial and domestic contexts in the U.S. and Europe throughout the 19th century, but was largely an anomaly. It only became a common building material at the turn of the 20th century with the improvement of reinforced concrete.[10] Concrete was commonly advertised as a good material for industrial or commercial buildings, and the benefits of concrete were published in the major US newspapers in the early 20th century, including the *New York Times* and the *Baltimore Sun*.

The use of concrete in domestic architecture was due largely to the Arts & Crafts movement, which began in England but quickly became an international movement. The Arts & Crafts movement embraced this material in part because it had long historical precedent, and because of its versatility, high quality, and durability. The leaders of the Arts & Crafts movement touted the benefits of concrete in domestic architecture in the journal *The Craftsman.* Several pattern books published in the early 20th century helped exhibit the versatility of concrete for domestic architecture, whether for a grand villa, a modest bungalow, or even farm outbuildings. One of these books, published by the Atlas Portland Cement Company in 1906, *Concrete Country Residences,* exhibited the "superiority of CONCRETE from the viewpoints of economy and comfort" through images of grand villas and estates made of concrete.[11] A 1905 article published in *The Craftsman* by Charles De Kay, entitled "Concrete in its Modern Uses", explains the benefits of concrete as a fireproof building material for homes, specifically country houses.[12]

While the Shelley House was not a country house when it was built in 1905-1906 along Roland Avenue in the northern outskirts of Hampden, it had a large yard, undeveloped land behind it, and the large property of St. Mary's Church across the street. Thus, while it was in the midst of suburban development, its setting was more pastoral than it is today. Albert Shelley was likely inclined to use fireproof concrete in his home due to the devastating Great Baltimore Fire that occurred in 1904. The area of the city that was destroyed, the Burnt District, was quickly rebuilt with concrete and other fireproof materials.

Generally, reinforced concrete was an expensive method of construction, so it was largely marketed to and used by the wealthy, who valued the "durable, high-quality material, consistent with the fine materials promoted by Arts & Crafts theorists and designers."[13] The first American home constructed with reinforced concrete was the Ward House in Port Chester, New York, in 1873-1876.[14] One of the finest and largest examples of a reinforced concrete home is Dr. Henry Chapman Mercer's concrete castle, Fonthill, constructed in 1908-1910 in Doylestown, PA.[15] Mercer was an archaeologist, collector, and producer of Arts & Crafts pottery and architectural tiles.[16] Fonthill contributes to a National Historic Landmark District along with two other poured concrete buildings constructed by Mercer.

Although concrete was first marketed to the wealthy, its most famous champion wanted to use it for the poor. Thomas Edison teamed up with philanthropist Henry Phipps in 1907 to solve the tenement problem by quickly and cheaply constructing cities of concrete homes affordable for the working class.[17] Frank Lloyd Wright was also an early proponent of concrete, constructing the slab-concrete Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois in 1906, and later using the material in many of his other seminal works, including Fallingwater.[18]

Another domestic concrete construction method, concrete block, became popular beginning in 1900. Concrete block machines allowed people to cheaply and easily manufacture their own concrete blocks, and concrete block quickly dominated the domestic concrete construction market.[19] However, reinforced concrete later regained its popularity as a building material for domestic and commercial Art Deco and Moderne architecture in the 1920s-1950s.

Architectural Description

The Shelley house is a detached two story, symmetrical three bay Colonial Revival house constructed with reinforced concrete, and located in the Hampden neighborhood. The lot measures 70 x 160 ft, and contains 0.26 acres of land. The property is the only detached house with a large yard on the block, with the rest of the block comprised of Italianate or Victorian Eclectic rowhouses. The house sits on the northwestern portion of the lot, and the remainder of the lot is planted with grass, trees, shrubs, and the remnants of a garage at the rear of the property. The façade of the building faces west on the 3800 block of Roland Avenue, abutting the sidewalk. Located to the north of the house is a narrow alley almost two blocks in length. According to neighbor Kelley Tracey who is a fourth generation resident of Hampden, this alley was known as Shelley's Alley.

The three bay, two story façade of the Shelley House has a central doorway with double doors and a rectangular transom. Located on the second floor above the door is a single 1/1 sash window. The right and left bays on the first and second floors all hold two 1/1 wooden sash windows, separated by a wooden mullion and supported by a concrete sill. All of the windows and doors feature decorative incised jack arches. The façade also has large quoins on the corners of the building, a slightly projecting band near the base of the building that is reminiscent of a water table, as well as a cornice with dentils located below the roofline. The building has a flat roof. The rear of the building is irregular in shape.

This Colonial Revival house possesses many details that echo the Georgian architectural style common in the 1700s, even in its concrete construction. Concrete is evocative of stucco, which was sometimes used on 18th-early 19th century homes because it was an affordable imitation of ashlar stone and allowed the builder to easily create delicate architectural details. One notable example of a stuccoed colonial house is the main house at Hampton National Historical Site in Towson.

Staff recommendation

The Shelley House meets CHAP Landmark Designation Standards:

B. A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:

3. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represents the work of a master, or that possesses high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

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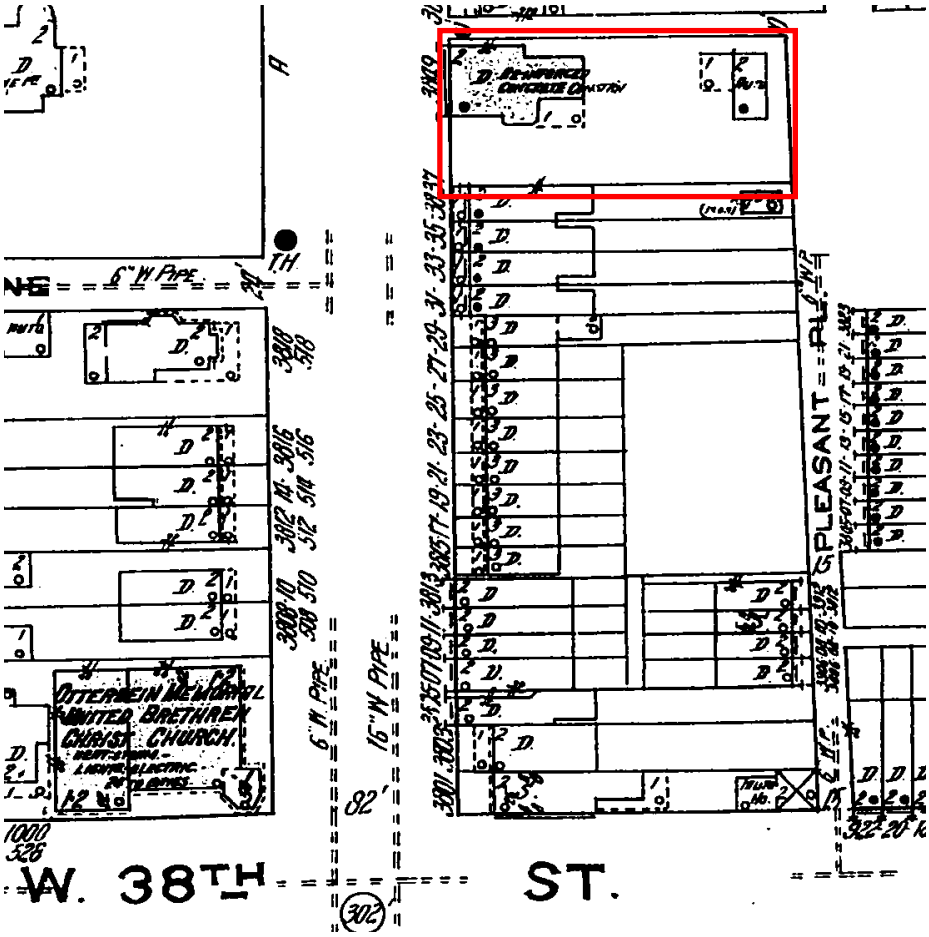
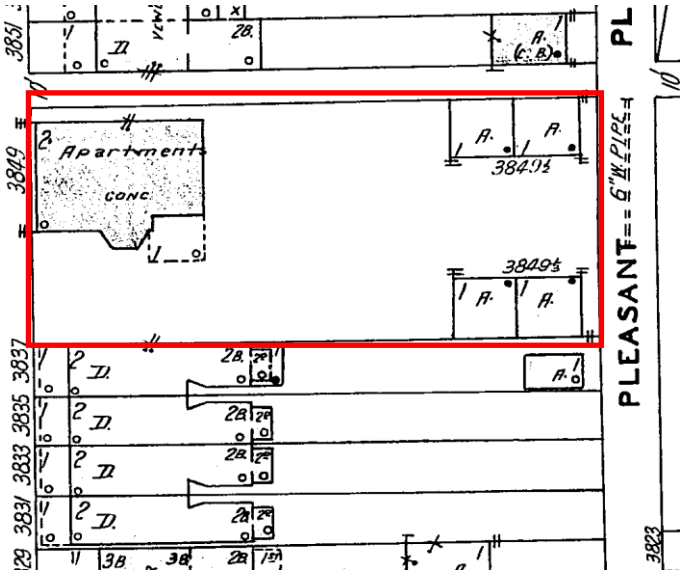
Locator Map


N
Overview Map
ROLAND
39TH
40TH-38TH
RECTORY
RECTORY-38ST
HICKORY-ROLAND
38TH
PLEASANT
PLEASANT-ELM
40TH-38TH
Legend
Shelley House
Streets
Major Street
0 40 80 160 Feet

Historic Map



1915 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, with the Shelley House circled in red, and marked with the words "Reinforced concrete construction". (Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps 1914-1915, Vol. 7, 1915, Sheet 736)



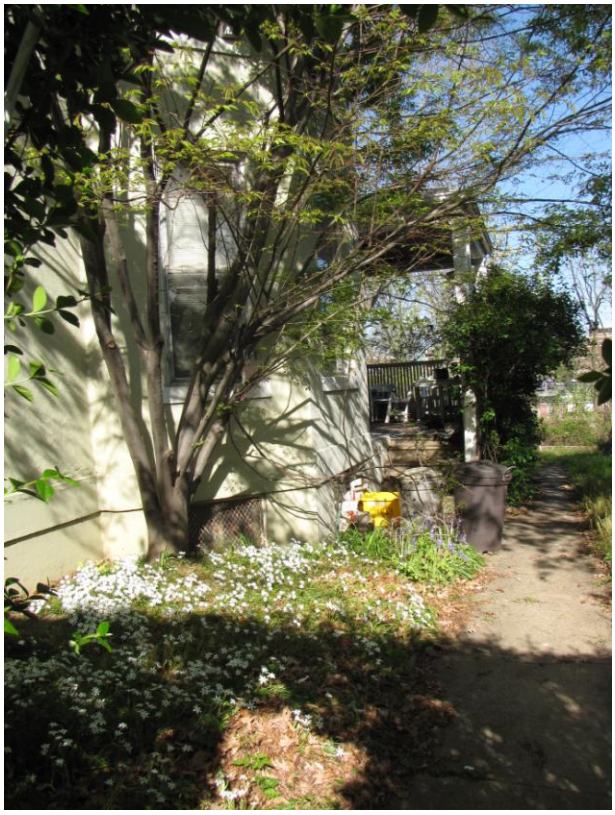
1928 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, showing that the property had been converted into 2 apartments. (Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps 1928-1936, Vol. 6, 1928, Sheet 677)

Current Photos

View of Shelley House and yard; facing east.

Detail of quoins and decorative jack arches.

Front door of the Shelley House.



View of the south side of the house and yard.


View of the rear of the Shelley house from "Shelley's Alley"; facing west.

[1] "43-ACRE TRACT IS SOLD: Is On Park Heights Avenue And Williamson Estate Owned It" *The Sun (1837-1986);* Oct 31, 1905; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), 9; "PERMITS TO BUILD", *The Sun (1837-1986);* Oct 31, 1905; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), 9; R.L. Polk City Directory, 1907

[2] "43-ACRE TRACT IS SOLD: Is On Park Heights Avenue And Williamson Estate Owned It" *The Sun (1837-1986);* Oct 31, 1905; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), 9

[3] *The Johns Hopkins University Register, 1901-1902* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1902), 40. Available as a Google e-Book.

[4] "AUTOMOBILE RUNS HER DOWN: Miss Costello Badly Bruised As She Alights From Car" *The Sun (1837-1986);* Jan 2, 1910; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), 12

[5] *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. Vol. XLI, No. 11, September 12, 1903, (Chicago: American Medical Association), 663. Available as a Google e-book.

[6] Deed, 1910, Elizabeth T Brayshaw &c. to Albert Shelley &c. Baltimore City Superior Court Land Records, Liber SCL 2590, Folio 120.

[7] "SHELLEY", *The Sun (1837-1986);* Jan 9, 1923; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), 14; Deed, 1944, Harry S. Shelley &c. to George Ross Veazey &c., Baltimore City Superior Court Land Records, Liber MLP 6563, Folio 250.

[8] Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Baltimore City, 1928-1936, Vol.6. (1928), Sheet 677; "SELING", *The Sun (1837-1986);* Jan 18, 1924; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), 16

[9] "Classified Ad 6 -- No Title", *The Sun (1837-1986);* Oct 12, 1924; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), CA4

[10] Paul Gaudette and Deborah Slaton, "Preservation of Historic Concrete: Preservation Briefs # 15", (National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, n.d.), 1-2. Accessible at: http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief15.htm

[11] Atlas Portland Cement Company, *Concrete Country Residences,* (New York: Atlas Portland Cement Company, 1906), 5. Accessible as a Google e-book.

[12] Charles de Kay, "Concrete in its Modern Form and Uses" *The Craftsman,*

[13] Maureen Meister, *Architecture and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Boston: Harvard's H. Langford Warren* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2003), 129.

[14] Cecil D. Elliott, *Technics and Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 165.
[15] Massey and Maxwell, 51.
[16] Roger A Moss, *Historic Houses of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press,1998), 192.
[17] "To Solve Tenement Problem: Edison And Phipps Plan City Of Concrete", Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun, *The Sun (1837-1986);* Nov 14, 1907; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), 12
[18] James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell "The Case for Concrete Houses" *The Old House Journal,* May-June 1994, Vol. 22, No. 4, 53.
[19] Pamela H. Simpson, *Cheap, Quick, & Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 11.