



COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT MEMO REPORT OF FINDINGS FOR CERTIFICATE OF DEMOLITION ELIGIBILITY

January 3, 2022

Address: 1255 19th Street

Legal Description: EAST DENVER B65 L17 TO 24 & E/2 VAC ALY ADJ

Current Building Name: Sakura Square- commercial building

Construction Date: 1971-1973

Source of Information: Denver Assessor's Office; *Denver Post*

Architectural

Architectural Style: n/a

Architect/Builder: Bertram Bruton/Titan Construction

Source of Information: *Denver Post*

Historical

Original owner: Tri-State Buddhist Church Apartments, Inc

Original use(s): Commercial

Current use(s): Commercial

Historical background:

This two-story commercial building is part of the Sakura Square development undertaken by the Tri-State Buddhist Church (name changed to Tri-State Denver Buddhist Temple in 1977) in response to the Denver Urban Redevelopment Authority's (DURA) Skyline project. The Skyline redevelopment project encompassed 27 blocks in the downtown area bounded by Speer Boulevard, Market Street, 20th Street and Champa Street. DURA acquired property, relocated residents and businesses, demolished existing buildings, and sold the cleared land to developers. The goal was the modernization and revitalization of Denver. Block 65 of the East Denver subdivision was located within Denver's Japantown area. The Tri-State Buddhist Church was located on the block along with a variety of small businesses including retail, restaurants, and lodging. DURA purchased and cleared most of the block and offered the Tri-State Buddhist Church the opportunity to redevelop the rest of the block. The church took on the challenge and developed the block into Sakura Square, which included a high-rise residential tower, a two-story commercial building, and an expanded home for the Tri-State Buddhist Church. The history of the three structures is closely intertwined, but this posting is specifically for the two-story commercial building.

The first Japanese immigrants came to Colorado in the late 19th century seeking work in farming, mining, and railroad construction. The 1910 census recorded 2,300 Japanese living in

Colorado, with 585 Japanese living in Denver. The Denver Buddhist Church was established in 1916 to serve Denver's small Japanese American community. Rev. Tessho Ono, a graduate of Kyoto Imperial University, conducted the inaugural service with 250 Japanese immigrants in attendance. In the early years, the Denver Buddhist Church was located at various locations around downtown. Ministers also traveled around the region to serve the Buddhist community and perform memorial services for the dead. By 1934, the Denver Buddhist Church had fourteen branch temples and a membership of around 300 families. In 1938, the church purchased lots on Lawrence St. (25-28 of block 65) for the construction of a new building for the church.

The Japanese American population in Colorado increased during World War II as those who could left the West Coast to avoid incarceration in internment camps, drawn to by Colorado Governor Ralph Carr's proclamation of sanctuary. From 1940 to 1945, Denver's Japanese American community grew from around 800 to 5,000. The population grew further after the war as internees were released from camps with about half of Colorado's 11,700 Japanese Americans living in Denver. Japanese residents and businesses clustered in the blocks around Larimer and Lawrence Streets. They helped grow a Japantown or "Little Tokyo" that had been developing. It was located "between 18th and 23rd Streets on Larimer and contained restaurants, Asian merchandise stores, small businesses, a laundry, barber shops, and several hotels. It was situated in an impoverished section of town—surrounded by pawn shops, second-hand clothing stores, flop houses, missions, saloons, and cheap hotels." (Discover Nikkei)

The new Denver Buddhist Church building on Lawrence St. was completed in 1949. In 1962, the church established Tri-State Buddhist Church Apartments, Inc., a non-profit corporation with the goal of providing affordable housing to around 200 elderly members of the Japanese American community. When DURA decided to redevelop the block as part of the Skyline project, there was an opportunity to achieve this goal. The church decided to work with DURA to develop the block, purchasing the remainder of the block from DURA for \$188,000. In 1970, the *Denver Post* announced that the "Tri-State Buddhist Church plans to keep its religious building at 1947 Lawrence and incorporate it into a \$3 million development with apartment and commercial facilities in the full block bounded by 19th, Lawrence, 20th and Larimer Streets."

Bertram A. Bruton was selected as the project architect. Bruton moved to Denver in the late 1950s, working for various local architects including Paul W. Rader, James H. Johnson, Fisher & Davis and James Sudler Associates. He received a license to practice in Colorado in 1960, the second Black architect to be licensed in Colorado. Much of Bruton's work was community focused, designing buildings to serve disadvantaged groups. This included a focus on subsidized and affordable housing. During the 1960s and 1970s, many of these projects were associated with Urban Renewal efforts and the DURA. He established his own firm in 1961. According to the *Denver Post*, "Bruton said the design of the full block complex will have some Oriental motif but will be fully compatible with the rest of the modern architecture expected in the Skyline project." The exteriors of the building were concrete, swept with a broom to achieve a strong brushed texture, a feature that referenced contemporary Japanese architecture as well as the Brutalist style popular at the time. According to the website for Bruton's firm: "Since the character of the complex was to be essentially Japanese, our job became one of expressing the Japanese architecture and developing building techniques that would not increase the sq. ft. cost. Studies showed a six-inch flat plate structural system to be the most economical. Panel of rake finished concrete are used as fillers within the concrete skeleton."

Groundbreaking for the project occurred on March 27, 1971. The new Sakura Square development included Tamai Tower (a residential tower with affordable housing that also included commercial and community space), a commercial building, a garden, and a memorial. Tamai Tower was named for the Rev. Yoshitaka Tamai who served the Denver Buddhist Church for 40 years. He came from Japan to Denver to take over the church in 1930.

On October 22, 1972 *Denver Post* columnist Joanne Ditmer praised the church's redevelopment project: "This tiny fragment of another culture gave Denver an added and richer dimension for me and thousands of others when the Buddhist church announced its plans for developing the whole block, it was encouraging that the spirit of the Japanese area wouldn't be diluted and scattered all over town. . . . The open plaza ... will be developed into a Japanese garden by members of the church, which probably guarantees it to be one of the most attractive public areas in the city. . . . cities need all the variety in people and buildings and cultures that they can get. This in an admirable start."

Sakura Square was dedicated in 1973. Initial businesses included Pacific Mercantile, Granada Supermarket, Sakura Beauty Salon, Nakai's Gift Shop, Haws and Company, and Akebono Restaurant. Many of the businesses were relocated from the buildings demolished by DURA. On January 28, 1973, the *Denver Post* announced: "A \$4 million monument to the energy and artistry of Denver's Japanese-American community has risen without fanfare on a full block which only two years ago was part of the slum that constituted lower downtown Denver." The project goal is "a living symbol of modern Oriental culture in what, under urban renewal, is becoming Denver's skyscraper showplace. The Tri-State Buddhist Church is the driving force behind the transformation of the block . . . its temple remains on the block and will be enlarged and renovated soon to blend with the new elegance of the Sakura Square base of retail shops and the Tamai Towers."

DURA identifies Sakura Square as one of its urban renewal successes: "The Skyline Project was undertaken in conjunction with other City and Downtown Denver Partnership efforts such as developing the 16th Street Mall, creating a business improvement district, and improving traffic flow via a one-way street grid. Together, these far-reaching plans supported development of such Denver landmarks as Skyline Park, Writer Square, Halcyon House, Sakura Square, Tabor Center, and the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, among others. In total, the Skyline Project resulted in the development of more than 1,700 residential units, 6.3 million square feet of new or rehabilitated office space, 840,000 square feet of retail or commercial space, and 800 new hotel rooms." (*50 Years of Revitalizing Denver*)

The Denver Buddhist Temple and Sakura Square LLC is currently planning another redevelopment of this block. A post on the Sakura Foundation website in May 2021 describes the proposal: "Sakura Square LLC (owners of 3/4 of the block) and the Tri-State/Denver Buddhist Temple (owners of 1/4 of the block), have been actively working together with numerous consultants and real estate development professionals to investigate various development options for the block. As the aging structural and mechanical systems of Sakura Square and the Temple will soon reach the end of their economic lives and require replacement, the goal of the redevelopment is to reposition Sakura Square and the Temple for current and future generations. The key component of the redevelopment is the construction of a new Temple and Community Center facility to be located on the block. The overall project will consist of a variety of uses which may include residential, retail, commercial, parking venues, along with community uses which will highlight our Japanese American heritage and culture. In addition, an

open plaza area will be located on site for enhanced cultural and community programming. Sakura Square will continue to remain a hub for organizations to participate in Japanese and Japanese American cultural and community programming.”

Source of Information:

- Denver Assessor’s Office
- Sanborn Insurance Maps
- 50 Years of Revitalizing Denver* by Denver Urban Renewal Authority
- Denver Post* articles
- “Japanese” in Encyclopedia of the Great Plains
(<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.asam.014.xml>)
- “Japanese Americans in Colorado” in Discover Nikkei
(<http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2008/1/30/enduring-communities/>)
- “Resettlement in Denver” in the Densho Encyclopedia
(https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Resettlement_in_Denver/)
- “Sakura Square” in the *Colorado Encyclopedia*
(<https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/sakura-square>)
- Sakura Square website (<https://sakurasquare.com/about/>)
- Tri-State Denver Buddhist Temple website (<http://tsdbt.org/web/>)

Designation Eligibility Assessment

Landmark Designation Criteria:

A structure or district may be designated for preservation if, due to its significance, it meets the criteria listed in subsections (1), (2), and (3) below

- (1) The structure or district maintains its integrity;
- (2) The structure or district is more than 30 years old, or is of exceptional importance; and
- (3) The structure or district meets at least 3 of the following 10 criteria:
 - It has a direct association with a significant historic event or with the historical development of the city, state, or nation;
 - It has direct and substantial association with a recognized person or group of persons who had influence on society;
 - It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style or type;
 - It is a significant example of the work of a recognized architect or master builder;
 - It contains elements of design, engineering, materials, craftsmanship, or artistic merit which represent a significant innovation or technical achievement;

- It represents an established and familiar feature of the neighborhood, community or contemporary city, due to its prominent location or physical characteristics;
- It promotes understanding and appreciation of the urban environment by means of distinctive physical characteristics or rarity;
- It represents an era of culture or heritage that allows an understanding of how the site was used by past generations;
- It is a physical attribute of a neighborhood, community, or the city that is a source of pride or cultural understanding;
- It is associated with social movements, institutions, or patterns of growth or change that contributed significantly to the culture of the neighborhood, community, city, state, or nation.

Integrity: If a structure maintains its integrity, it may be designated for preservation.

- Has integrity
- Does not have integrity

Does the structure have potential for designation?

- Has potential for designation
- Does not have potential for designation

The two-story commercial building at Sakura has the potential to meet three of the designation criteria:

First, Sakura Square has a direct association with the historical development of Denver, particularly Urban Renewal in downtown Denver. The Denver Buddhist Church sponsored the redevelopment of the block, part of the Skyline Urban Renewal project. The City and County of Denver established DURA in 1958 to redevelop and revitalize blighted areas of Denver. Though the extensive demolition of buildings in the urban core by DURA during the 1960s and 1970s is now often criticized, DURA did play an undeniable role in shaping the development of the city. DURA's work was part of a larger national Urban Renewal movement at this time which promoted the clearance of many older (and generally poorer) neighborhoods in urban cores to create a blank state for redevelopment. This rebuilding was promoted as the way to reverse the damage that decades of white flight and suburbanization had caused to urban cores. Across the U.S., Urban Renewal efforts led to the destruction of many immigrant and non-white neighborhoods. As the residents of these neighborhoods were dispersed, cultural and economic centers were often lost. The action of the Denver Buddhist Temple in sponsoring the redevelopment of this lot preserved the heritage and economy of the Japanese American community in downtown Denver, creating a commercial, residential, religious, and cultural center for the community. Floyd H. Hyde, assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing

and Urban Development, attended the topping out ceremonies for the project, calling the development “a significant example of solving community problems though relating all the physical, social, economic and environmental factors in a single package.” (*Denver Post*, 1/26/1972)

Second, Sakura Square is a significant example of the work of a recognized architect, Bertram A. Bruton. Receiving a license in 1960, Bruton was the second Black architect licensed in Colorado. Bruton’s firm played a major role in shaping Denver from the 1960s into the 2000s. Bruton was an advocate for the development of high quality subsidized and affordable housing. Bruton played a significant role in the Urban Renewal movement in Denver, working on many projects with the Denver Urban Redevelopment Authority (DURA). According to his obituary in the Kappa Alpha Psi Journal, was responsible for “the creation of more than 50 housing developments with nearly 4,000 units of low-income housing.” Bruton’s firm focused on project types with a public benefit including subsidized housing, recreational facilities, and medical offices. The firm also worked on many large-scale public projects in Denver: including Wellington Webb Municipal Building, Mile High Stadium, the Colorado Convention Center, and Denver International Airport. Bruton worked in a variety of contemporary styles during his career. Design influences included Formalism (Sakura Square and City Park Manor), Brutalism (Sakura Square and East Side Health Center), Neo-Mansard (Payne Chapel Apartments and Whittier Apartments), and Neo Traditional (Park Hill West). Bruton also volunteered his time extensively to organizations working to create more equitable housing, health, and professional opportunities for all. Bruton was an active member of Kappa Alpha Psi, the American Institute of Architects, Urban League of Metropolitan Denver, National Organization of Minority Architects, Kiwanis, the Griffith Home for Boys, the East Denver YMCA, and the Denver Chamber of Commerce.

Finally, Sakura Square is significant as a physical attribute of a neighborhood that is a source of pride for the Japanese American community in Denver. Sakura Square is widely referred to as the unofficial center of Japanese culture in Denver as well as Colorado. Due to Urban Renewal demolitions, Sakura Square is all that remains of a larger historic Japantown neighborhood in this area. “Often called Japantown, J-town or Nihonmachi, these communities sprang up in America after Japanese immigrants began to arrive at the turn of the 20th century, often working as farmers in places such as California and Colorado. They filled social and economic needs, with Japanese language schools for kids, Japanese-language newspapers, and Christian and Buddhist churches” (*Denver Post*, 7/22/2012). The decision of the Tri-State Buddhist Temple to sponsor the redevelopment of this block through DURA created a recognizable center for Japanese American community at Sakura Square.

Sakura Square retains sufficient integrity to convey its significance. No significance alterations have been made.