

## CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

### PROPOSED SCARAB CLUB HISTORIC DISTRICT

#### Final Report

The proposed historic district which has been under study by the Historic Designation Advisory Board consists of a single building designed expressly for the Scarab Club by the architect Lancelot Sukert in 1928. That organization has occupied the building since its opening in October, 1928. The building is located at 217 Farnsworth.

**BOUNDARIES:** The boundaries of the proposed historic district are as follows:

1. *On the west, the west line of Lot 81 of Farnsworth Subdivision of Park Lots 38 and 39, extended north and south.*
2. *On the north, the centerline of the alley between Farnsworth and Frederick.*
3. *On the east, the east line of Lot 82 of Farnsworth Subdivision of Park Lots 38 and 39, extended north and south.*
4. *On the south, the centerline of Farnsworth.*

**HISTORY:** The Scarab Club was originally founded about 1909 as the Hopkin Club, named in honor of Robert Hopkin, the famous Detroit artist of the late 19th and early 20th century. When Hopkin died later that same year the name was changed to the Scarab Club. Thereafter, the organization took an increasingly important role in the artistic and cultural life of the community.

After almost twenty years in buildings not constructed for the club's purposes, a decision was made to build a clubhouse specifically for Scarab Club use. The architect for the club building, Lancelot Sukert, was unanimously chosen by the ten architect-members present at a meeting on January 24, 1927. While the club's membership records are not complete, and it is not known who was present at that meeting, architects of note who have been members of the Scarab Club include Albert Kahn, Eliel Saarinen, William Chase Straton, and Maxwell Grylls, among others. Sukert was a native of Detroit, born here in 1888. He studied architecture at the University of California, Columbia University in New York, and the University of Pennsylvania. During World War I, he was a first lieutenant in the aviation section of the Signal Corps and erected aerodromes at the front; he worked for two years in the office of Albert Kahn before starting his own practice. Among his works are St. Columba Church, Boulevard Congregational Church, Trinity Church, St. Paul's Memorial Church, and St. Matthew's Church, all in Detroit. He also did store fronts and interior work for commercial firms such as Tuttle and Clark and Wright-Kay.

Sukert served a two year term as president of the Michigan Society of Architects beginning in 1928. In 1939, he went to Washington, D.C. as chief architect for the Federal Housing Authority, and remained in that position for fifteen years. He died in Washington in 1966, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

The Scarab Club founded the first Michigan Artists Exhibition in 1911 and sponsored it until 1928 when it was taken over by the Detroit Institute of Arts. During the club's entire life, but more particularly since its present club house opened in 1928, it has been the scene of all types of art exhibitions featuring every sort of media. Although many of the exhibitions have been sponsored by the club itself, many have had the sponsorship of a wide variety of community art groups who have no other place to present their exhibitions (the Institute of Arts does not have the space or facilities for these groups). All such exhibitions, either Scarab or otherwise sponsored, are open to the public free of charge. In addition, the club sponsors social events which are also open to non-members. The most famous of these entertainments has been the Scarab Ball which was the great social event in Detroit in the first thirty years of this century. Such Detroit greats as General Knudsen, the Edsel Fords, the Fred Algers, the Horace Dodges, the Ralph Booths, and others spent much time and money on the selection of their costume for these lavish masquerade beaux-arts balls. Although some of the Scarab Balls were held at outside ballrooms or hotels, many were held at the clubhouse which was suitably decorated for the occasion.

Though the Scarab is an artists' club, membership has been open to those who, though lacking such skills, wish to support the arts. Among other notable Detroiters who chose to support the arts in this way were Robert Tannahill, Dexter M. Ferry, Jr., William Valentiner, and Clyde Burroughs.

The scarab was selected as a symbol and name for the club because of the sacred and regenerative aspects of this beetle, which was revered by the ancient Egyptians. The power of renaissance of the scarab apparently appealed to the club's founders and has been evident on a number of occasions, particularly when the bank holding the mortgage on the club almost foreclosed in the early 1930's. The club's cultural importance and the unique character of the building influenced the bank's decision not to foreclose. Through the generosity of the heirs of one of the club members and hard work by the membership, the club building is free of any mortgage encumbrances.

The only artists' society in Michigan older than the Scarab Club which is still in existence is the Society of Women Painters, which was founded about three years earlier than the Scarab Club. However, that society does not have a clubhouse and its membership is much smaller than that of the Scarab Club. The Society of Women Painters has held its annual exhibition at the Scarab Club for many years.

Over the 51 years of the club's existence in this clubhouse, the building has proved its versatility and adaptability to a wide variety of uses. The Scarab Club continues to play a very vital role in the art and cultural life of the greater Detroit Community. It is truly a focal point for organized artists' activities.

The club seldom commissions works from artists, lacking budget to do so, but does offer prizes in most of the exhibitions it sponsors, thereby encouraging local artists. Because of these prizes, the club now houses a significant collection of works of Michigan artists. One work which was commissioned from a member is the "Phoenix" mounted on the west wall of the building; the copper was furnished by a donor-member, and another member provided space in which this large work could be created.

*PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:* The Scarab Club is three stories high on a basement, with a tall third floor that contains fourth-floor level balconies. The exterior is of orange-brown buff and steel grey low-fire red brick. Although early renderings by Sukert indicate window openings and architectural detail on the west wall, the building as built has both west and east walls blank, much in the manner of a building in a commercial row, although the brick used is the same throughout. The major architectural interest is, therefore, in the Farnsworth facade, and secondary interest in the rear, or north, facade, which is much more simply articulated.

The entrance is at the west side of the facade, with a decorative brick surround containing above the door the words "Scarab Club" in a pierced limestone grille. Above is a single narrow window, and above that a ceramic medallion containing a scarab, designed by William Chase Stratton and made by Mrs. Stratton in her famous Pewabic Pottery. The first floor has no windows as such, but does have three groups of three small grilles made of tile, which supply some light and air to the first floor gallery. Above the grilles are three set-back window bays, containing large tripartite windows on the second and third floor levels. The walls surrounding these recessed bays end at the top of the third floor level and are capped with spanish tile; the facade above is on a plane with the recessed window bays. A gable roof above is set crosswise on the front of the building, covering only a few feet of the building's depth; behind that, there is a flat roof. There is a band of decorative brickwork at the first floor level, and the cornerstone is placed just below it at the east end. The window mullions and reveals on the second and third floor are of molded brick; the frames are of steel containing leaded glass. A large awning has been installed over the entrance door, and a large sheet copper sculpture, "Phoenix" by Steve Veresh, has been installed on the west wall of the building.

In the rear of the building is a walled garden, an unusual urban amenity, with slate walks forming a greek cross centered in the space. Niches in the wall on each side contain statues of the apostles, plaster models for Samuel Cashwan's carved stone figures on the facade of St. Aloysius Church on Washington Boulevard.

The interior has space for classes and crafts in the basement, as well as boiler space and an apartment formerly used by the manager. On the first floor, most of the space is taken by the gallery, with an office, serving kitchen and women's rest room taking up the remaining space. On the second floor, the banquet hall runs across the front of the building. Behind it to the east is the kitchen, and to the west a smaller dining room. Behind the stairwell in the southwest corner is a coatroom and men's room. The third

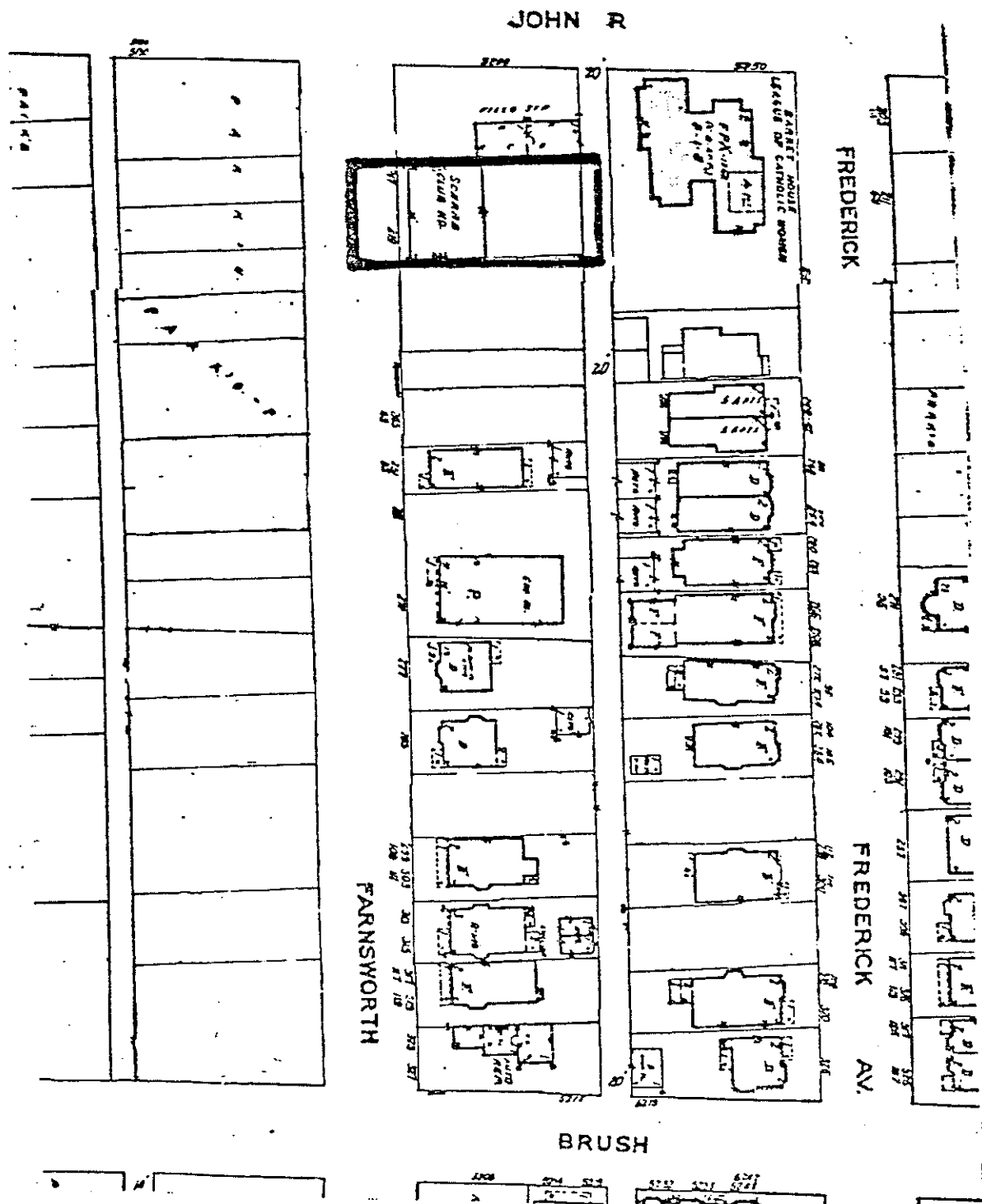
floor is largely given over to six studios who large windows face either north or south. These spaces are reached by a hallway running crosswise in the building, and are two stories in height, with a balcony in the hallway end of each studio reached by small staircases within the studios. The floor also contains a small men's room with shower, since many of those who occupied the studios in the early years lived in their studio space.

In style, the building as a whole reflects the Arts and Crafts movement which began in England in the nineteenth century with such architects as Voysey and Webb. This movement emphasized simplicity and handwork in design, and many buildings derived from the movement have a medieval character that is created by the materials and handwork rather than any specific stylistic references in design. The Scarab Club comes rather late in the Art and Crafts movement, and so influence can be seen from the then-emerging Art-Deco style, and also from the techniques of massing originated by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue. While Arts and Crafts is no doubt the most accurate description of the style of the Scarab Club, the building also represents a "modern" movement among American architects led by Goodhue who hoped to create a valid twentieth century style without a complete divorce from tradition. Goodhue's early death and the spread of the "International Style" ended this movement, and the value of such buildings is being increasingly recognized today.

*RECOMMENDATION:* The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council designate the Scarab Club as an historic district with the design treatment level of rehabilitation.

*OPINIONS RECEIVED:* The Advisory Board has received written comment from the Medical Center Citizens District Council supporting the designation of this building. The University Cultural Center Association supplied a letter which took no specific position, but commented that the plans for the area called for the club building to remain. Mr. Dexter Ferry appeared at the Advisory Board's public hearing on the Scarab Club and expressed opposition based on his opinion that the site should be cleared for parking (statement attached). The Historic District Commission supplied comment, which was taken into account by the Advisory Board in this recommendation to Council.

This designation was requested by the Scarab Club, and two members of the club designated by the club to represent the organization have served as ad hoc members of the Advisory Board for this study. They are fully aware of the implications of designation and are in support of designation.



Proposed Scarab Club Historic District  
 (Outlines in Heavy Black Lines)