

MONTCLAIR CIVIC BUILDING/ “THE MOLKERY”: A SWISS CHALET IN THE MIDDLE OF DENVER

What are some design aspects that might be important for a space that serves the public in such varied ways as the Molkery?

The Molkery, also spelled “Molkerie,” is German for Milk House, and was constructed circa 1888 by Baron Von Richthofen as part of his estate in the Montclair neighborhood, five miles east of Denver. It was built as a dairy barn, restaurant and hotel promoting healthy living while serving as one of the original tuberculosis facilities in Colorado until 1893. The land making up the Montclair neighborhood was purchased in 1885, and originally developed as a small suburban community east of Denver. Its co-founders were Matthias P. Cochrane, who originally came from Montclair, New Jersey, and named the new community in its honor, as well as Baron Walter von Richthofen, a German nobleman (The Montclair Neighborhood).

Structure

The 4900 square-foot building is made of massive rhyolite stonewalls and wood framing with a wrapping open wood porch supported on brick pilasters. The porch roof is supported by a series of neoclassical columns and ornamental wood railings with unique diamond patterned balusters. The building originally had four masonry chimneys and an elaborate wood cupola, making the building a landmark form in the neighborhood. The chimneys and cupola were lost sometime between 1912 and 1920, and the decorative porch was enclosed by the City in 1912. The Molkery was eventually restored to its 1909 appearance, which included the return of the chimneys and cupola.

The return to its 1909 state captures a point in history significant to towns of the West. During the late 1800s, it was common for people to travel west for health purposes. The migration played a significant role in the development of Denver. Tuberculosis facilities were prevalent throughout developing cities and they are unique in their design with large porches and access to the dry arid climate of the area. The Molkery restoration is indicative of that period with the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the exterior porch (Montclair Civic Building Fact Sheet).

History

Baron Von Richtofen was the uncle of Baron Manfred von Richtofen, the World War 1 Flying Ace, known as “The Red Baron.” Von Richthofen’s goal was to construct a community of affluent homes intended for living a healthy lifestyle. The Molkery was modeled after German health spas that offered the traditional milk-cure treatment for tuberculosis. “Chasers,” as the locals called the health seekers, lounged on the sun porches, drank mugs of fresh milk, and breathed the supposedly health-restoring effluvia rising from the basement cattle barn.

In 1902, the Molkery was converted to an insane asylum, but was soon after closed due to a neighborhood protest against the supposed nightgown women roaming the streets in early morning darkness. The building filled a variety of other uses before the City of Denver annexed the Town of Montclair in 1903.

In 1908 the City of Denver acquired the property as an addition to Montclair Park, and turned it over to the Montclair Improvement Association as Denver's first community center. The Association remodeled the second story for meetings and dances, converted the first story into reading and lounging rooms and transformed the basement into a kitchen and dining room, which was utilized for banquets and lunches, as well as serving soft drinks and ice cream. It housed wedding receptions, classes, a branch of the Denver Public Library and a Jewish religious school, among other civic related events (The Molkery Denver Landmark Application).

Neighborhood

Montclair was designed to attract wealthier residents, and homeowners were required to purchase and build on lots that were twice the Denver standard size of 25 feet by 125 feet. Homes were required to be at least three stories high and constructed from brick or stone. Additionally, town trustees had to approve all plans, and saloons and alcohol were forbidden.

The community became the incorporated town of Montclair in 1888. In 1893, the crash of the silver market and the ensuing Panic of 1893 brought all development to a halt. Baron von Richthofen began promoting the town as a health retreat, calling it the "Carlsbad of Colorado;" however, due to his sudden death from appendicitis in 1898, it never materialized (Noel and Wharton, 2016).

In 1902, the City and County of Denver began to incorporate the town of Montclair. The town objected strongly to its inclusion, but Montclair was annexed in 1903. Then mayor, Robert W. Speer, eased the transition by beautifying and extending Richthofen's system of parkways and boulevards from the central city into the suburb, planting many trees and erecting fountains and monuments. In 1907, the Montclair Improvement Association was formed to push the City of Denver into providing upgrades. In 1975, residents and the Denver City Council voted to make the central heart of Montclair a historic district, making Montclair one of the first neighborhoods to seek landmark designation, and the district was the fifth city-designated landmark district.

The requirements that made Montclair exclusive at the turn of the century became a driving force behind the establishment of the district: the neighborhood includes grand old trees, large lots and distinctive houses. Some of the homes include 19th century Victorian architecture, Queen Anne style architecture and even "TB houses," which were designed specifically for tuberculosis sufferers. During the 20th century, bungalows, cottages, Tudor Revival and Modern ranch style houses joined these original homes (Noel, 1976).

References

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