

# Survey and Research

## Report On The

### Coffee Cup Soda Grill



*Note: The Coffee Cup Soda Grill was demolished on September 24, 2009.*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Coffee Cup Soda Grill is located at 914 South Clarkson Street in Charlotte, N.C.

**2. Name, address, and telephone number of the current owner of the property:**

Beazer Homes Corporation

c/o Jade Eastridge

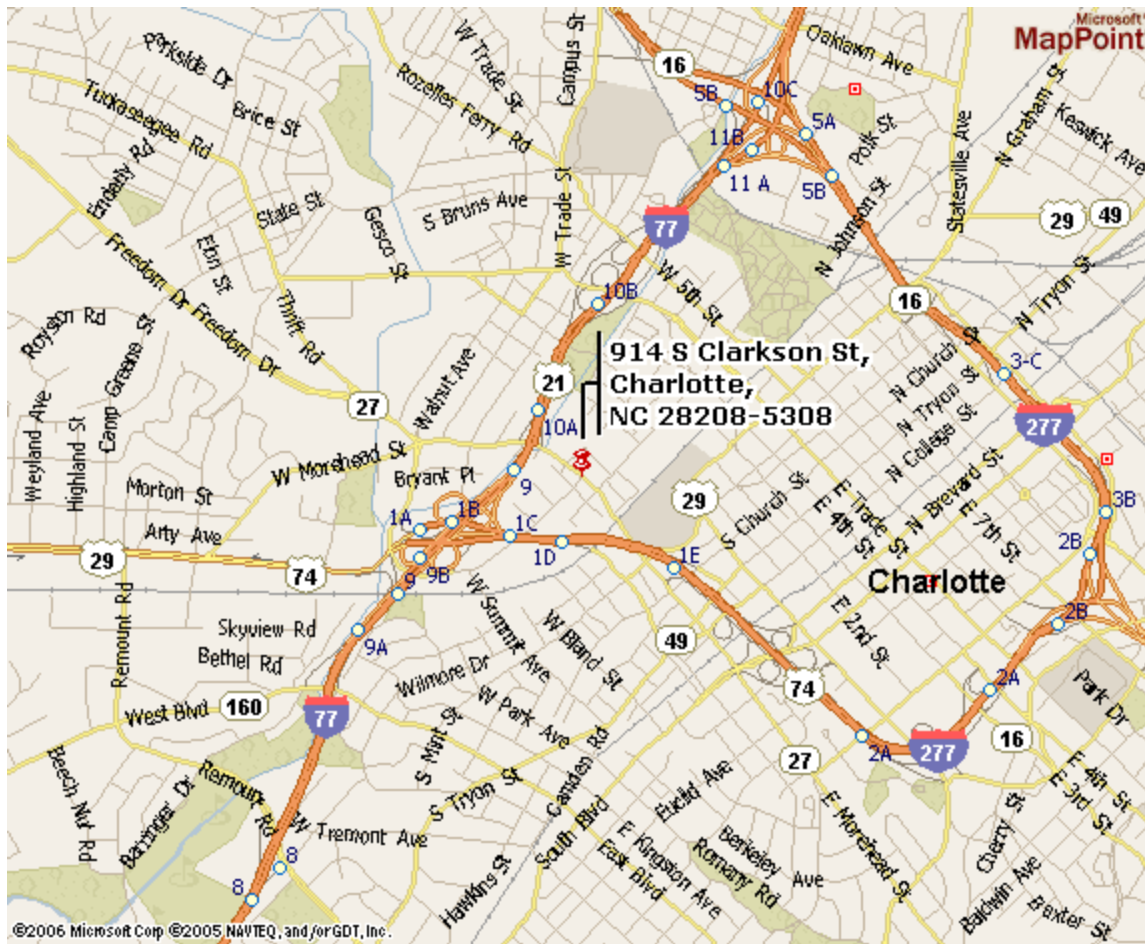
1300 South Boulevard, Suite K

Charlotte, N.C. 28203-4265

Telephone: (704) 363-4824

**3. Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains representative photographs of the property.

**4. A map depicting the location of the property:** This report contains maps depicting the location of the property.



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The most recent deed to the property is located in Mecklenburg County Deed Book #19653, page 944. The tax parcel number of the property is 073-252-09.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S 160A-400.5.**

**a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture and/or cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the

Coffee Cup Soda Grill possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The Coffee Cup Soda Grill is the only roadside food stand in the central business district of Charlotte that survives from the 1940s.
- 2) The Coffee Cup Soda Grill documents how local eateries responded to Charlotte's emergence as an industrial and regional distribution center in the mid-twentieth century.
- 3) The Coffee Cup Soda Grill has become an icon of racial harmony and understanding in Charlotte and a symbol of African American cuisine.
- 4) The Coffee Cup Soda Grill has special significance architecturally as a distinctive local example of unaltered Modernism.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association:** The Commission contends that the architectural description prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill demonstrates that the Coffee Cup Soda Grill meets this criterion.

**9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the building is \$3000. The current appraised value of the 1.17 acres of land is \$814,800. The property is zoned MUDD.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** September 20, 2006

### **A Brief Historical Sketch Of The Coffee Cup Soda Grill**

The Coffee Cup Soda Grill, which opened in 1948, is the sole surviving example in Charlotte's central business district of a type of roadside food stand that began to appear in cities throughout the United States in the early 20th century with the advent of the automobile age and the onset of widespread industrialization.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the Coffee Cup Soda Grill functioned primarily as an "alternative to the lunch pail" for factory and warehouse workers.<sup>2</sup> In such establishments the menus were limited; the prices moderate; and the service quick. Located one block south of West Morehead St. at the intersection of Dunbar St. and S. Clarkson St., this eatery was well

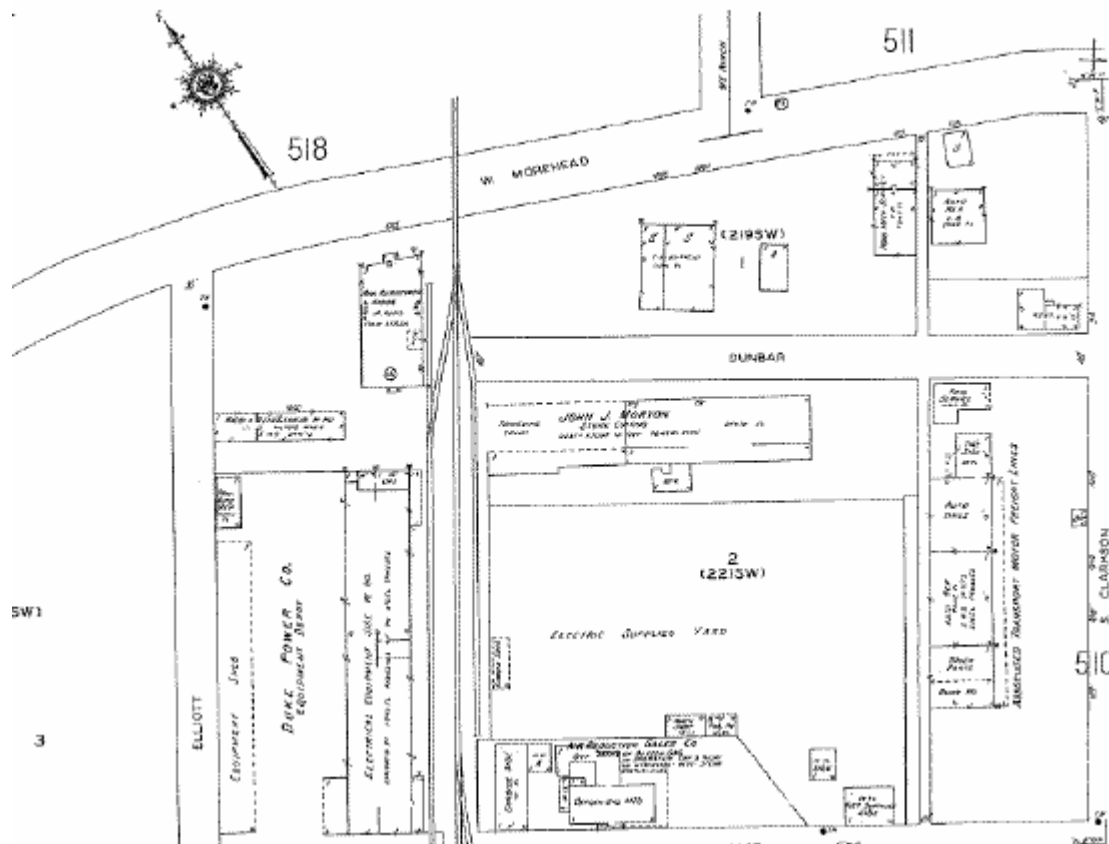
situated to serve men who toiled in nearby distribution warehouses and manufacturing plants, including the Charlotte Pipe and Foundry Company, Akers Motor Lines, and Associated Transport Motor Freight Lines, to mention just a few.<sup>3</sup> Having a bit of change in their pockets, blue collar laborers would stop at the Coffee Cup Soda Grill to grab a quick bite to eat at a shift change. The West Morehead Street corridor was a fast-growing industrial district in the 1940s. Morehead St. was the route of U.S. Highway 29, and tracks of the Southern Railroad and those of the Piedmont and Northern Railroad bisected the corridor.



**This early 1900s photograph of Brown's Restaurant in Charlotte reveals what eateries were like before the advent of the automobile.**

The founder of the Coffee Cup Soda Grill was Withers Turner, nicknamed "Butch" or "Red." Turner began his culinary career by operating a sandwich stand on land at Clarkson St. and Morehead St. owned by Max Powell. In 1947, Turner and Powell worked out plans for a small restaurant that would provide hot meals to the workers in the nearby factories and

warehouses. Turner's daughter suggested the name "Coffee Cup."<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the racial mores and segregation ordinances of 1948, the Coffee Cup Soda Grill only allowed whites to dine inside the building. Blacks were allowed to order and pick up meals at the pick-up window but had to sit on the curb or at a picnic table to eat.<sup>5</sup> "Restaurants are symptomatic of our times and lessons can be learned from them about who we are as a people," state John Jackle and Keith Sculle in their book, *Fast Food. Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*.<sup>6</sup> This is certainly true of the Coffee Cup Soda Grill.



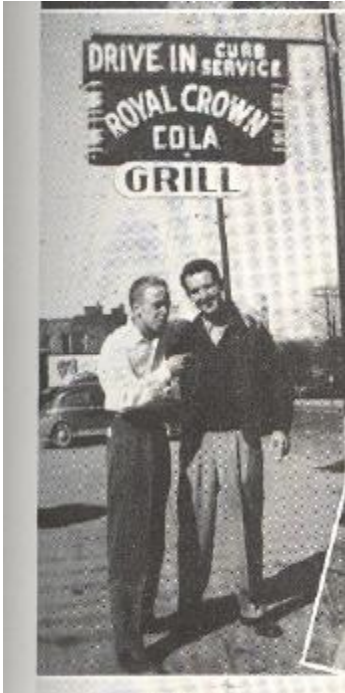
The 1953 Sanborn Insurance Map of Charlotte reveals that the Coffee Cup was surrounded from its inception by warehouses and factories, not houses. It was a roadside restaurant, not a walk-in, neighborhood restaurant.





**This recent photograph shows that the setting of the Coffee Cup is essentially unchanged from the original. That circumstance is scheduled to end.**

Another major clientele for roadside food stands like the Coffee Cup Soda Grill were "recreational diners," some of whom came into the restaurant to sit on stools or in booths and others who preferred curb service. Driving automobiles to restaurants became a favorite pastime for individuals and families after World War One. More and more women worked outside the home as the twentieth century progressed, and females sought relief from the rigors of routine domestic duties. Also, teenagers hopped in their cars, congregated at roadside food stands, and "played around" far away from the watchful eyes of their parents. These habits persisted into the 1940s and even until today. One visitor to the Coffee Cup in its earliest days writes: *"For me, the Coffee Cup was just another place to stop for a late night snack after an evening of dating or dancing at the Old Fireman's Hall. It was one of maybe eight to 10 drive-in diners uptown in the late 1940s. I didn't go there for the good Southern food (we got that at home) but because it was a drive-in."*



**"Playing Around In The Parking Lot" in Charlotte.**



**Charlotte Central High School students gather in Anderson's Restaurant in 1950. It opened in 1946 and closed in November 2006.**

Typically, quick service eateries had a lunch counter behind which a combination cook-and-server prepared simple meals for customers sitting on a row of stools or in nearby booths. Arrangements for patrons who remained in their automobiles varied. Curb service originally meant literally pulling up to the curb and having someone come out of the restaurant to take and deliver your order. Another scenario was to have parking spaces for every car, sometimes equipped with speakers through which customers could communicate with the attendant. Other roadside food stands, including the Coffee Cup Soda Grill, had a curbside pick-up window and door at which pedestrians stopped to pick up an order or from which an attendant emerged to deliver the meal to a parked car.



**This projection on the Dunbar St. side of the Coffee Cup (1947) served drive-in customers.**



**The Bar-B-Q King (1961) has speakers and individual parking spaces.**

A major transformation of the Coffee Cup Soda Grill occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Owner and Monroe native Mary Heath embraced racial diversity and opened the door enthusiastically to African Americans, an uncommon occurrence in Charlotte in those days.<sup>8</sup> In 1980, Christine Crowder, a former African American waitress in the restaurant, partnered with her white friend, Mary Lou Maynor, in purchasing the business from Heath. They also encouraged everyone to feel welcome at the Coffee Cup.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent owners have continued that practice.





**Charlotte has lost many of its older center city eateries, including the lunch counter in the F. W. Woolworth Store on N. Tryon St. (above) and the S. & W. Cafeteria on W. Trade St. (below). Both demolished.**



The Coffee Cup Soda Grill has emerged in recent decades as an icon of racial harmony and reconciliation in Charlotte and as a symbol of African American cuisine. A major contributor to this process was Bank of America executive Joe Martin, who frequented the restaurant. Afflicted with

amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, Martin was forced to retire in 2001. He had his retirement lunch at the Coffee Cup. Martin was a strident advocate for tolerance and acceptance of diversity. For example, in December 1997 he turned down an award from the Mecklenburg County Commission in protest over what he regarded as the Board's anti-homosexual policies. "He's been a tremendous force for good in our community," said Bank of American president Hugh McColl about Martin.<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Purvis, Food Editor for the *Charlotte Observer* writes: *What's so extraordinary isn't the food on the plate. It's who put the food on the plate, who ate it, and where they sat.*<sup>11</sup> At this writing the future of the Coffee Cup Soda Grill is in doubt.



**Joe Martin and his son David eating in the Coffee Cup in March 2001**



**Joe Martin receiving honorary degree from Davidson College.**

## **A Brief Architectural Description Of The Coffee Cup Soda Grill**

The architecture of roadside food stands like the Coffee Cup Soda Grill was an important component of their success. To overcome public concern about the level of hygiene in so-called "greasy spoons" and to attract the attention of passing motorists, proprietors of roadside eateries selected designs that communicated an aura of cleanliness and neatness. Historian Chester Liebs explains: *Tile, and later porcelain-enameled and stainless steel, covered as many surfaces as possible. These materials looked so appealing when sparkling clean, and made even the slightest stain or smudge so obvious, that employees, like sailors polishing the bright work on a ship, must have felt impelled to keep the surfaces shiny.*<sup>12</sup>

Among the favorites for commercial establishments in the years immediately before and after World War Two in Charlotte was the Art Moderne style. Originating in the Bauhaus movement in Germany in the 1920s, Art Moderne sought to capture the spirit of a new, technological age. Geometric in form, buildings of this type were generally sleek, unornamented, and painted white. Charlotte's best extant example of the Art Moderne style is the Dairy Queen on Wilkinson Boulevard. The Coffee Cup Soda Grill is a more vernacular expression of Modernism, but it does exhibit many of the features associated with Art Moderne, including smooth white walls, little ornamentation, a cube-like or rectangular shape, and a flat roof.





Dairy Queen, Wilkinson Boulevard (1947)



### Coffee Cup Soda Grill, Clarkson St. (1948)

The Coffee Cup Soda Grill is a street level, one-story, rectangular, masonry building with a flat roof and tile coping that faces eastward on a treeless lot with a gravel parking area on the right side and to the rear of the building. A low hedge runs along the right side of the building and across the front. The exterior walls are smooth and painted white. The building's most distinctive decorative elements are three large octagonal windows, two on the right side of the building and one on the front. Metal grates, no doubt installed for security purposes, have been placed on the windows and on the windowless front entrance door, which is most likely a replacement, and on the door to the women's bathroom. A sign shaped like a coffee cup projects from the front of the building and reads "Coffee Cup." A large rectangular sign adorns the north exterior wall of the building and displays the emblem of the Carolina Panthers. A shed-roof projection on the south side of the building was once used for curbside service. By 1953, two additions had been made to the building. A concrete block projection on the right rear of the building contains two bathrooms with outside entry doors, and a large storage and kitchen area is at the rear. The latter is now covered with artificial siding and has lost its historic integrity.







**These photographs illustrate the diverse nature of the Coffee Cup's clientele.**

The main dining area of the Coffee Cup Soda Grill conforms to a pattern typical for roadside food stands. A series of booths lines one wall, and a counter with stools is opposite. Behind the counter is a flat grill with a large stainless steel backsplash. A final row of free-standing tables extends down the center of the dining area. The building has a drop ceiling, ceiling fans, and florescent lighting.

**Special Note: The owner destroyed the Coffee Cup Soda Grill on September 23-24, 2009.**

Endnotes:

1. The Coffee Cup Soda Grill first appears in the Charlotte City Directory in the 1948-49 edition (see *Hill's Charlotte City Directory 1948-49*, Hill Directory Co., Richmond, p. 39.) It is assumed that the building was constructed in 1947. There were approximately 250 restaurants in Charlotte in 1948. Only a handful survives. Food stands should be distinguished from fast-food restaurants, such as McDonald's. McDonald's is essentially a food factory, meaning that it produces food in anticipation of the arrival of customers and depends fundamentally upon large volume for its economic success.



**This was the first McDonald's in Charlotte. It opened in the 1950s on East Independence Boulevard. It was a prototypical fast-food restaurant.**

2. Liebs, Chester H. Main Street To Miracle Mile. American Roadside Architecture. Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 194.

3. Sanborn Insurance Map of Charlotte, Vol. 3, p. 509.

4. Charlotte Observer, September 7, 1994.

5. Charlotte Observer, February 14, 2001.

6. Jakle, John A. and Sculle, Keith A. Fast Food. Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age. Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 2. Another favorite roadside restaurant, Anderson's, closed in November 2006 (Charlotte Observer, November 10, 2006).



7. Charlotte Observer, September 18, 2006.
8. Charlotte Observer, March 21, 1986.
9. Charlotte Observer, February 14, 2001.
10. Charlotte Observer, December 6, March 3, 2001.
11. Charlotte Observer, August 30, 2006.
12. Main Street To Miracle Mile. American Roadside Architecture, pp. 207-208.