Jessie Street Substation Recommended for Preservation

The Mayor's Select Committee on Yerba Buena Center has recommended in its final plan for the YBC Redevelopment Area that the Jessie Street Substation be retained as an historical structure. The recommendations that have been forwarded to the Mayor and the SF Redevelopment Agency say, "The Jessie Street Substation is to be devoted to a feasible combination of office and retail uses, possibly including a retail arcade, visitors center and restaurants offering outdoor dining in adjacent plazas as now being studied and developed by Heritage."

SF Landmark status for the Substation has been approved by the Landmarks Board and the Planning Commission. Designation awaits final action by the Board of Supervisors.

Site plan of the Jessie Street area drawn by W.A. Werner, architect for the Heritage-sponsored Jessie St. Substation feasibility study. The paving pattern running through the Substation indicates the route of the pedestrian walkway; the roof of the Substation has been cut away for illustration purposes. The completed report analyzing the reuse of the Substation will be published in late 1976.

KEY:
1 Bart Station
2 Jessie Street Substation
3 Saint Patrick's Church
4 Mercantile Building
///Existing Buildings
///Proposed Development

Tax Reforms Help Preservation

The Tax Reform Act of 1976, which takes effect Jan. 1, 1977, contains several important amendments to the Internal Revenue Code concerning the tax treatment of "certified historic structures." Briefly, the amendments disallow deductions for expenses incurred in demolishing an historic structure; permit a 5-year write-off of rehabilitation expenses for historic structures used in trade or business or held for the production of income; limit depreciation allowed on buildings constructed on the site of demolished historic structures to the straight-line method; permit persons buying and rehabilitating historic structures to use accelerated depreciation methods on the pre-existing basis in the property; and provide for a charitable deduction for gifts of facade or historic preservation easements to organizations like Heritage.

Call or write Heritage for detailed information.

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The Bank of Tokyo: Two Projects

The Bank of Tokyo has completed a regional headquarters on lower Broadway in New York City and is constructing a similar headquarters on the NE corner of Sansome and California Streets in San Francisco. These two projects have been used recently to illustrate an apparent shift in the Bank's attitude toward historic architecture.

For in New York, the Bank has retained a building, designed by Bruce Price and built between 1894 and 1907, which occupies a favorite site on Broadway opposite Trinity Church and its yard, literally at the visual heart of the Wall Street district.

And in San Francisco, the Bank has torn down the much-loved Alaska Commercial Building, designed by Henry N. Meyers and Clarence Ward and built in 1907-1908, in order to build its new California First Bank Building.

In the building of bank headquarters and prestige offices, location is everything. For this reason, the Bank of Tokyo in December, 1972, assembled three lots at California and Sansome, of which the Alaska Commercial Building occupied one. Together, the three parcels averaged $571 per square foot of land, surely one of the highest prices ever paid for real estate in California. Though it is almost certain that at the prices the Bank was willing to pay, other assemblages might have been made near Bush and Montgomery or Montgomery and Clay---assemblages which did not contain the Alaska Commercial Building---these other addresses would not have been on California Street, and to join the parade on that street seems to have been as necessary to the Bank as facing Trinity Church in New York.

One suspects that the decision to renew an old building in New York and to remove one in San Francisco were born of a variety of economic considerations. The New York building occupies a site of some 14,000 square feet and, since designed before the 1916 setback law, rises without setback 21 of its 22 stories. Even taking into account an airshaft on upper floors, it can be assumed that the total gross square footage in the building totals 18 or 19 times the lot area. This is no less than could be built today in New York on the same site, and in order to obtain as much total floor space today, it would be necessary to provide a plaza, arcade, covered pedestrian space, or some other series of amenities prescribed under the city's complicated special zoning provisions for lower Manhattan.

Unfortunately for the Alaska Commercial Building, it did not fill the site available to the Bank for building, having floor areas of 5,000 square feet and rising only some 13 stories. Building for the site in San Francisco will allow a height of 500 feet and a total square footage of nearly 17 times the lot area. Indeed, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the architects of the new building, have produced a square floor plan of 21 floors, each with a floor area of about 16,000 square feet (each floor covers somewhat less than the entire site), so that they come close to building as densely on the site as current San Francisco zoning allows.

This is not to say that zoning and planning requirements alone forced the two projects to differ. Other factors could include the availability of adjacent programming needs for individual floors, optimum site per floor, necessary floor-to-floor heights, and the condition of the original structure. But in New York all these factors did exert a powerful influence on the Bank to keep its original building shell, and in San Francisco similar considerations allowed a much larger building on the Bank's site than the Alaska Commercial Building.

The only way for the designers of the present California First Bank Building to have kept the Alaska Commercial Building and to have added square footage on the assembled site would have been to add another, taller building bulk behind the Alaska Commercial Building housing new elevators and some additional office space. This could have been done, with difficulty, but it would have created an accretive composition on the site, not the inclusive one that architects Kajima International faced in New York.

Certainly a mixture of old and new construction on the Alaska site would have represented a collage, a grouping, a strange composition which both retained an old form and added new ones. There are architects who want to design just such grouping today, but they are few. The opportunities are increasing, however. It is precisely such a possibility which exists at the site of the Fitzhugh Building on Union Square, where Heritage advocates the construction of new department store space to the north of the existing Fitzhugh slab, with an interlocking of interior retail and office spaces in the older structure. The successful old-new solution is not always immediately apparent for each site, but it generally exists.

And the exciting thing about a good old-new composition is that it can be unique, related only to its site.

Consider finally the building which is now replacing the old Alaska Commercial Building. It is definitive; it is organized; it contains some of the ambiguous geometric discontinuities which an old-new combination would have created. Interior floors are nearly column-free---economic for both bank use and rental tenants. No doubt interior spaces devoted to bank use will be richly adorned with fine materials in true "modern banker" tradition. There are only occasional hints that the designers of the new building realized that they were creating a facade of rich, hand-carved variety, and that they were losing something in the process. It is at these points that the real poverty of present-day design and building methods (governed always by cost) becomes apparent. It just does not answer the challenge of the older building to replace carved walrus heads or inter-twined salmon with a sea of molded hemispheroids. Nor is it sufficient to recall the earlier structure with a few nicely placed fragments within. The new building is workaday; the old was unique. The new one competent, the old more than competent. These things were known to the builders of the new structure before any demolition occurred. They chose an easy, but a destructive course.

It is enough to make one wish that they had turned again to the difficult, old-new alternative, and struggled with it some more.

Jay Turnbull
Downtown: Response to SF Chronicle Editorial

In a July 29 editorial in the SF Chronicle, Abe Mellinkoff laments what he characterizes as a strangling embrace between "environmentalists," presumably Heritage, and its ilk on the one hand, and the "Honest Dollar" represented by Saks Fifth Avenue, of Fitzhugh fame, on the other. After reciting Saks' line as the one and only truth, Mellinkoff goes on to suggest that San Francisco's downtown is in danger of dying because of misguided fanaticism of folks like us. This amazing point of view was summarized in the last paragraph of the editorial as follows:

"Meanwhile the war of attrition over the Manhanttanization of San Francisco may end with...no victors. The builders will go elsewhere and the environmentalists will be left with a series of deserted highrises paying no taxes. That has happened to sections of New York City, a major factor in its bankruptcy."

Deserted highrises which pay no taxes cannot exist, of course, if they are not built. A major factor in New York's problems is that too many highrises were built. The real villains are fiscal mismanagement, myths about growth, inadequate regulation of land uses and development, and real estate speculation—not environmentalists. This is not to say that no growth is the answer, but that growth must happen after intelligent consideration of social and environmental as well as economic impacts. What's best for Saks is not necessarily best for San Francisco.

The recognition of environmental values as legitimate and important considerations in the cost-benefit analysis of public decisions is well established in both law and political practice. Unfortunately, proponents of the "more is better" concept of urban growth persistently exaggerate economic benefits and try to discredit non-monetary factors. The poverty of the Mellinkoff view is particularly ironic in this city, where superior environmental quality is a principal economic resource. Historic buildings have aesthetic value far beyond their economic worth. San Francisco's appeal for visitors and residents alike diminishes as the structures and patterns of our cultural heritage are removed from the cityscape.

What role does Heritage play in the conservation of our commercial (and residential) historic buildings? Essentially three. First, we try to identify important buildings and to make people aware of them and the character and charm of our unique city. Second, we try to promote explicit public policies and priorities which will encourage the retention of important buildings and direct new development to the most appropriate and least destructive sites. And third, we defend and advocate adaptive reuse of important buildings which are endangered, like the Alaska Commercial Building, the Jessie Street Substation, the City of Paris Building and the Fitzhugh Building.

Regrettably, we lost the Alaska Commercial Building on Sansome at California. Its fate was decided when the Bank of Tokyo (now California First Bank) paid the highest price ever reported for SF real estate. The shame is that the loss of this unique monument might have been avoided, at no cost to the bank or the city, with explicit public conservation policies and stronger controls over demolition.

The Jessie Street Substation has an excellent chance to survive and become an exciting part of the city's future. Carter-Hawley-Hale (Neiman-Marcus) has just announced its plans for the City of Paris. The future of the Fitzhugh Building still hangs in the balance. Owner Saks Fifth Avenue has submitted plans which call for the demolition of the Fitzhugh and the construction of an almost windowless 5-story box in its place. Because the Fitzhugh Building serves as the visual anchor for the NW corner of Union Square, Heritage has been trying to save the building since early 1974.

We developed a plan and cost estimates for the retention of the Fitzhugh, nominated the building to the National Register of Historic Places, submitted extensive materials to the City Planning Department in connection with the Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR), made slide presentations to generate community support, and supported the Fitzhugh for SF Landmark designation. Ultimately, a decision will be made by the city on the basis of information contained in an EIR. We will continue to advocate the retention and reuse of the building, and ensure that the environmental consequences of its demolition and replacement receive a balanced, objective assessment by the public agencies responsible for making a decision.

Perhaps the single most important effort underway at Heritage is the planning, funding and initiation of a comprehensive survey of the historical and architectural resources of San Francisco's downtown. Estimated to take a year to complete and cost more than $45,000, the survey will identify and document significant buildings, building groups, and streetscapes. The evaluative, mapped and illustrated results will provide a rational information base for planning, land use decisions (public and private), design considerations, and conservation priorities. Identified buildings and areas can be taken into account by planners and developers from the outset, rather than after commitments and initial steps have been made. A $10,000 grant for the survey has already been received from a local foundation. The additional funds are being sought.

Change and economic development are facts of contemporary life. San Francisco will experience as much change and new development in the next twenty-five years as it has in the last two hundred. An important determinant of the city's future is the extent to which new development can be sensitively integrated into the urban fabric. Heritage's mission is to help save the significant pieces of this fabric and to try to influence the shape of development so it will enhance--not destroy--the character and charm of our unique city.

We believe that through identification of resources, public awareness, and energetic and intelligent advocacy, we can influence the choices that are being made every day so that the heritage that has been left to us may be protected, conserved and enhanced for the benefit of the people of San Francisco and its economy.

Anyone can make a mistake, Mr. Mellinkoff. Won't you reconsider?

Robert Berner
North Waterfront Designations

The North Waterfront (NWF) of San Francisco—that area bounded by The Embarcadero, Telegraph Hill, and Broadway—retains the character of old San Francisco as a port town.

To preserve the flavor of this area, the San Francisco Landmarks Board has begun the slow, cumbersome process of creating a NWF Historic District, a move that will protect structures within the boundaries from demolition or unsympathetic alteration as well as ensure that new construction be compatible with the district’s dominant architectural characteristics.

While working toward the broad protection of Historic District status, the Landmarks Board separately initiated the designation of three particularly important buildings within the zone on August 25, 1976: the Italian Swiss Colony Building and the two Gibb Warehouses. All await the approval of the Board of Supervisors.

ITALIAN SWISS COLONY

The Italian Swiss Colony Building is on the SW corner of Battery and Greenwich. The pressing need for official recognition of the historic Italian Swiss Colony Building was clearly seen when Travelers Insurance Company announced that it had hired Livingston and Blayney, a professional planning firm, to investigate the development alternatives for five NWF blocks which include the site of the Italian Swiss Colony Warehouse. The Landmarks Board has asked that Travelers instruct the planners to consider the feasibility of reusing the building.

GIBB WAREHOUSES

The Gibb Warehouses, built on Front at Vallejo in about 1855, are fine brick companions which evoke images of SF’s bustling Gold Rush port. Having enjoyed a variety of uses, they are now up to code and their owners support designation.

Lobbying for Preservation

Preservationists are formally lobbying for laws and government money. PRESERVATION ACTION in Washington and CALIFORNIANS FOR PRESERVATION ACTION (CPA) in Sacramento are two recently organized groups that concentrate on initiating, shaping, and pushing legislation favorable to architectural conservation. Because the tax status of groups like Heritage prohibits them from substantial legislative activity, lobbying groups are vital.

Preservation Action was organized in 1974 as a national citizens’ lobby, dedicated to the protection and improvement of America's man-made environment and to the preservation of our historic, cultural, architectural, and environmental heritage. Since it engages in full-time lobbying, contributions to it are not tax-deductible. However, Preservation Action depends upon the support of individuals and community organizations like Heritage.

Californians for Preservation Action was formed in 1975 to actively encourage and support laws advancing historic preservation and neighborhood conservation, particularly at the State level. CPA’s Newsletter is already communicating much-needed information on State-wide legislative issues concerning preservation. Recently, CPA organized the successful fight to defeat SB 1514, bringing together spokesmen from groups like Heritage to present analysis. CPA is seeking members (minimum $15); dues are not tax-deductible.

A workshop on Victorian Restoration and Reuse is being sponsored by CPA on Saturday, Dec. 4, in Los Gatos—morning sessions, afternoon tour, and CPA meeting: $2. If interested in joining CPA or attending the workshop, call Judy Waldhorn (415) 647-7470, or write Californians for Preservation Action, P.O. Box 2169, Sacramento, CA 95810.

SB 1514 Defeated!

SB 1514 would have required the consent of the owner before a building could be designated a California Landmark or listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The bill would have crippled the National Register program to such an extent that California's federal funding for preservation would have been in jeopardy. In addition, it would have undermined local and State preservation efforts, making official recognition spotty and eventually meaningless. The bill died on August 2 in the Assembly Sub-committee on Parks and Forestry.

Parapet Ordinance Study Completed

Advance copies of the 60-page study entitled "San Francisco's Parapet Ordinance" are available for reference. The book was written and compiled by Heritage intern Paul Newman, with assistance from graphics consultants Sarah Haugh, under the direction and editing of J.G. Turnbull, Heritage architect. Containing the ordinance, enforcement history, and cost analysis obtained from the SF Planning Department, the study analyzes the threatened parapets of four significant buildings: the Old Mint, the Hobart Building, the Fairmont Hotel, and the Fitch. Heritage is seeking funds to publish this study for distribution to professionals, building owners, public officials and others concerned with SF’s parapet ordinance.

Drawing at the right, the Fairmont Hotel parapet, is from the study.
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Heritage Board Actions

At its June meeting, the Heritage Board elected officers and directors for the coming year (listed at the bottom of page 1). Three new directors elected were Newton Cope, SF businessman; James M. Gerstley, SF civic leader; and Helen Tavernetti, Heritage's former membership chairman.

Recently the Board authorized the following:

- seek funds for an inventory of SF's downtown buildings
- sponsor the Goodman Group's grant from the National Endowment for the Arts
- reactivate efforts to secure tax-exemption for part of the Haas-Lilienthal House (One director pledged funds for attorney's fees.)
- personally seek memberships and contributions, to meet the 1976 operating budget
- contract with the City Planning Dept. for Community Development Act funds for Heritage's Preservation Loan Program
- continue efforts to save the Fitzhugh and participate in the environmental review process

Goodman Building Study

$10,000 for a study to determine the feasibility of retaining the Goodman Building as a community art center has been granted by the National Endowment for the Arts. This matching grant resulted from the Goodman Group's application for the study to be done by the architecture and planning firm of Marquis Associates and administered by Heritage.

The Goodman Building at 1117 Geary is a SF Landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Acquired by the SPRA in 1973, demolition of the building has been prevented by its artist-residents, the Goodman Group, and allies.

The feasibility study began in August and has included community planning sessions, and code, structural, and architectural analysis. The study team hopes to develop a plan for the Goodman Building's rehabilitation by February 1977. Heritage is accepting donations to match the NEA's $10,000 grant.

Coming Events


now to Jan. 30 Exhibit As We Were, As We Are: A Century of SF Life in Architecture. Early and contemporary photos. Slide/sound narrative. de Young. 10-5 daily.

Sats. to Jan. 30 Programs As We Were, As We Are. Slide-lectures on today's issues and yesterday's events—from the Victorians to the Waterfront. de Young Museum. Free.

Wed. Lecture Series SF Arch. of 20's & 30's. Timothy Pflueger, by Daniel Gregory.*

Wed. Lecture Series SF Arch. of 20's & 30's. The Movie Theatres, by Steven Levin.*

Tues. Monthly Program Prophetic Patterns in Nov. 16 SF's Past, by Kevin Starr. 7:45 pm. $1 Haas-Lilienthal ballroom. Members free.

Wed. Lecture Series SF Arch. of 20's & 30's. Sleek Yearnings: Streamline Moderne Architecture, by Jeremy Kotis*


Sun. Walking Tours feature John Galen Howard Buildings at and near UC Berkeley. $4 for Fund to Save the Naval Architecture Building. Call 843-3741.

Wed. Lecture Series SF Arch. of 20's & 30's. Wurster ~ Schindler: Influence of Fashion on Regional Designers, by J. Beach.*

Workshop in Los Gatos. Victorian Rehabilitation and Reuse. Call CPA (see p. 3.)

Thurs. Heritage Holiday Open House at Haas-Lilienthal. 5:30-9. Members. No RSVP.

*Lecture Series 8 pm, Fireman's Fund Forum, 3553 California. Tickets still available at the door. $4, $3 for members per lecture. Parking.