

# *The ALLIANCE Review*

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*Oakland's St. Francis de Sales Cathedral constructed  
in 1889 has uncertain future.*

[It was demolished after this was published]

## **LANDMARKS AND EARTHQUAKES**

### **THE IMPACT OF THE LOMA PRIETA EARTHQUAKE ON THE CONSERVATION OF LANDMARKS IN OAKLAND CALIFORNIA**

*By Randolph Langenbach*

On the day following the Loma Prieta Earthquake, a visit to downtown San Francisco and Oakland seemed anticlimactic. Except in a few places like the San Francisco Marina and the collapsed freeway in West Oakland, the evidence of the earthquake's visitation on the cities was subtle - a pile of broken glass here, a thin crack in the masonry above, a fragment of broken

masonry there. A few walls collapsed, but when compared to the views of Mexico City in 1985 or those of San Francisco in 1906, or even to downtown Santa Cruz which stood near the epicenter of the Loma Prieta Quake, the damage did not seem the least bit catastrophic, despite news reports to the contrary. One could sense the ironic disappointment of some of the engineers and researchers who had rushed to study what they had expected would be wide spread devastation.

What has happened during the two years since has changed this perception altogether. While the scene in downtown Oakland on October 18th was unduly quiet and unimpressive, the aftermath of the Loma Prieta earthquake has indeed been catastrophic for the city. It is now time to begin to explore some of the reasons why this has come to pass.

The Loma Prieta earthquake affected different places in different ways. While the city of Santa Cruz lay almost on top of the zone of rupture, San Francisco and **Oakland** are 60 miles away. But, rather than diminishing the shaking caused by the earthquake, this distance can actually cause an increase in the damage to certain types of buildings. The greater distance causes the waves of the earthquake shaking to be longer, and those longer waves resonate with the taller or less stiff buildings.

The situations in Santa Cruz (and other cities near the fault), and that in San Francisco and Oakland are important for what they reveal about the shortcomings which exist in Landmark preservation in the aftermath of a natural disaster. City Landmarks Commissions often first discover that the powers which they previously have been accorded are ineffectual, or worse, temporarily set aside in the aftermath of an earthquake. For example, in California, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and many local ordinances were suspended during the emergency following the earthquake, making it possible to carry out demolitions of damaged buildings without the ordinary review procedures for historic buildings.

On the positive side, the State, in consultation with local appointees, enacted emergency legislation, known as SB3X, which mandated that historic buildings listed on state and local registers could not be demolished unless the State officials **had reviewed the situation** and given their approval. This helped to protect historic structures by subjecting some of the **hasty** demolition decisions to a second opinion. In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was required under Federal Law to review the designs of FEMA funded projects, including demolitions, under Section 106. Ironically, the large scale of the damaged buildings in central Oakland made demolition a very expensive option, which itself retarded the demolition impulse.

Despite the positive effects of SB3X and Section 106, the preservation conflicts following the earthquake have been contentious and will continue well beyond the second anniversary of the event. In Santa Cruz, the demolition of historic buildings for the most part happened during the weeks immediately following the earthquake. In Oakland, very little immediate demolition occurred except for some of the damaged single family homes. What makes the situation in Oakland so unusual is that the fight over the demolition of some of the city's most important and conspicuous downtown landmarks continues with increasing intensity into the 3rd year following the earthquake.

The Oakland experience is significant in a number of ways:

- In Oakland the most significant damage was concentrated on major downtown steel and concrete frame buildings constructed in the early part of the 20th century, instead of the unreinforced masonry bearing wall buildings which hitherto had been thought to be far more vulnerable.
- The commercial economy of the city, especially the downtown area, is not strong enough even before the earthquake-to justify the reinvestment necessary to repair and strengthen (or replace) the damaged buildings after the earthquake.
- Several of the damaged buildings are of key historic significance, which define the character of downtown Oakland and whose loss would remove a significant part of the historic character of the city.

### **THREE EXAMPLES**

Three buildings in Oakland whose fate is still in dispute provide examples of issues which have involved Oakland's Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board since the Loma Prieta Earthquake. The first is the Broadway Building, a 1912 office building facing City Hall. The other two are Roman Catholic churches: The Saint Francis de Sales Cathedral constructed in 1889, and Sacred Heart Church constructed in 1902. All three are still standing, but each of their futures is still in doubt.



*The Broadway Building, Oakland, California*

The Broadway Building was the first building to become the subject of a preservation fight following the earthquake. The owners filed for a demolition permit within 3 weeks of the earthquake, claiming that the building was damaged beyond repair. Because they were also the owners of the adjacent parcels, suspicions rose that they wanted to consolidate the Broadway Building's corner site with the rest of the parcel for a new development project. The controversy which ensued is interesting because it shows how economics and technology take on a critical role in the debate over whether a building damaged in an earthquake should be designated a landmark.

While Oakland has typical legislation for the protection of city landmarks, the Landmarks Board is only advisory to the City Planning Commission and Landmark designation only provides a 270 day delay in the issuance of a demolition permit. The city government in Oakland has never been strongly favorable towards the protection of historic buildings, and in this climate the protection of earthquake damaged buildings is particularly difficult.

When the battle began in the month following the earthquake, the Landmarks Board was in a state of suspension. The entire city government was in disarray because City Hall had itself been closed because of earthquake damage. The community effort to have the Broadway Building designated a landmark was scheduled to be heard directly by the City Planning Commission, skipping the Landmarks Board completely. A 60 day delay in the issuance of a demolition permit was about to expire, and as Landmark Board members had become involved in the political debate, the Board scheduled its first meeting following the earthquake to coincide with that of the commission. In January of 1990 both the Commission and the Board met side by side for the first time to decide on the issue.

Both boards heard testimony on the architectural merits of the building, but the focus of the debate quickly turned to the damage and thus to the credibility of the owner's claim that it could not be feasibly repaired. No one on either board was qualified to make a judgement of this kind, but what was needed was for them to hear serious questions raised about the credibility of the owner's engineering claims. The debate ended with a compromise: The owner agreed to withdraw the demolition permit application and the Board and Commission agreed to delay voting on Landmark designation, until a more thorough and impartial engineering and financial feasibility study could be prepared by the owner and submitted to the city.

The debate reopened again before the Landmarks Board in October of 1990. A new engineer's study had been prepared which provided a more balanced assessment of the damage. The cost estimates, however, were produced by the owner rather than the engineer. These estimates claimed that the rehabilitation and retrofit of the Broadway Building would result in a \$10 million loss to the owner. In opposition to these figures, the author presented an analysis which showed that, with site and building cost based on market value instead of purchase cost and with more realistic upgrade expenses, and more appropriate rental income projections, the \$10 million "loss" would instead become a \$1 million profit! The real estate and business experience of the Board members provided the basis for the proper understanding of the hard headed number crunching in favor of preservation. The Board voted in favor of Landmark designation. The Building remains at this date vacant and vandalized with its future uncertain. What this and other earthquake damaged buildings have demonstrated is that the economic and technical engineering issues

dominate the Landmarks Board discussion. Since the buildings are damaged, and not in use, these issues necessarily rise to the forefront of the discussion, and the Board and the City Council has had to become informed.

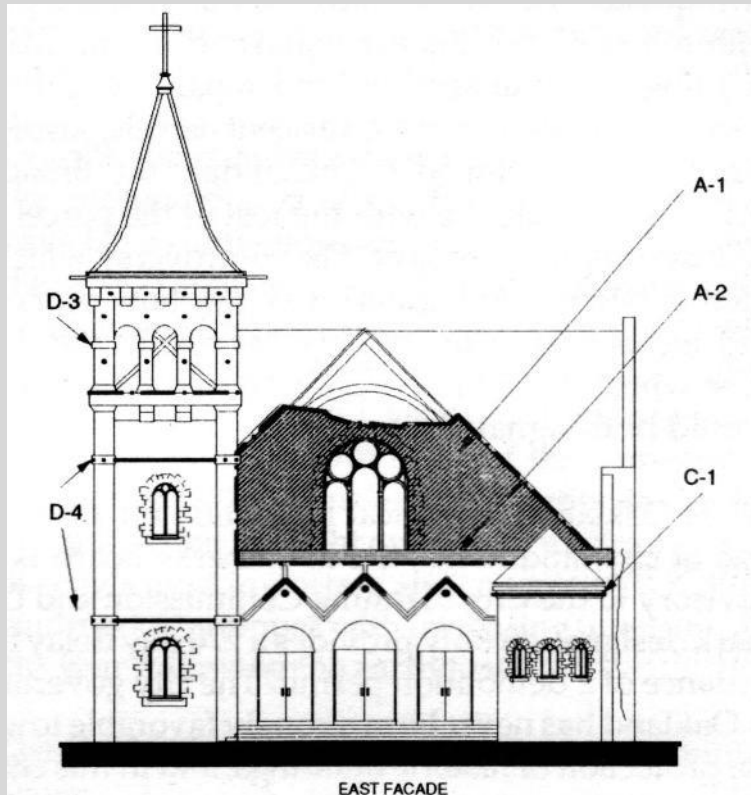
For the two Catholic churches the story is slightly different. Neither church had been designated a city landmark, but one, the Cathedral, was accorded the official protection under provisions of the Earthquake Damage Repairs Ordinance enacted by the city following the earthquake because of its high rating in the local survey. Sacred Heart Church lay outside of the previously surveyed area and thus failed to be protected by this ordinance. However, the Planning Director had the building placed on the city's landmark "study list" when he learned of the possible threat, which accorded it a 60 day delay in demolition. This step proved to be crucial, as it made the demolition permit "discretionary" rather the "ministerial", requiring an Environmental Impact Report before its demolition.

Both churches came before the Landmarks Board. In the case of Sacred Heart, the board, afraid to oppose the Diocese, failed even to vote on the landmark designation. This left the building vulnerable to immediate demolition. In the case of the Cathedral, which already had a greater degree of protection, the board did vote to deny a demolition permit. This was followed by a series of meetings during which the Diocese met with the author, the Oakland Heritage Alliance, and with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Diocese agreed to have a National Trust sponsored Preservation Advisory Services Team (PAST) study the Cathedral to see if alternatives existed to the Diocese's own cost estimates for restoring and seismically strengthening the building.

The National Trust study of the Cathedral was completed in July 1990. This study concluded that alternatives less expensive than the Diocese's projected \$6 million for the repair and upgrade exist, but it did not develop either an alternative design or estimate. The Diocese still remains unconvinced of the merits of an alternative to demolition and, at this time, the next round in the debate promises to come during the public hearings following the preparation of an Environmental Impact Report.

For Sacred Heart, the process has been more dramatic. As with the Broadway Building, the debate was again over money rather than the legal technicalities or architectural merits. The Council, not wanting to require the Diocese to go through the EIR if no alternative appeared to exist gave the preservation group one month to do a pilot study. The technical portion of this study was prepared by the author with Sven Thomasen, a local engineer, together with a team of consultants. The cost for the alternative presented in this study is \$1.1 million, less than one third of the original estimate.

As a result of the presentations before the city on Sacred Heart, a strong group of parishioners has emerged. From what had been an uninformed acquiescence to the Diocese's decision has turned into an active opposition. Indeed, in the space of three weeks, this informal group has raised almost \$40,000 in pledges for the restoration of Sacred Heart Church.



*Sacred Heart Church study drawing.*

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION**

The debate on these buildings has served to educate not only the civic officials, but also the community at large and the preservation activists themselves. Ultimately, at least in Oakland, the legal protections are only going to be useful if this kind of educational process takes place.

In conclusion, three suggestions for landmarks commissions can be derived from the experience in Oakland following the earthquake.

Preservation Commissions need to become involved with the emergency process from the very beginning. Particularly in areas near the fault such as Santa Cruz, much of the demolition was carried out within the first four weeks--without consideration either for the historic resources or the long term effects on the city's economy. Better local governmental review procedures, set in place before the next natural catastrophe which cannot be set aside by a declaration of emergency, would bring some reason into the chaos.

- Preservation Commissions need to have access to technological advice on engineering and financial issues relevant to the kinds of problems which arise in a natural disaster. Because of the existence of unoccupied damaged historic resources and public safety issues, these technical and financial issues are of particular importance, and commissions need to be able to sort out facts from self-serving hyperbole.

- Preservation Commissions need to develop methods to deal with the economic arguments within the context of its duties to protect historic landmarks. While strictly speaking, a landmark should be designated and protected on its historical merits, within constitutional limits, a natural disaster transforms the issue into one of requiring an owner to repair the building instead of allowing its destruction.

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*Professor Langenbach will be one of the speakers at the National Park Service's SEISMIC RETROFIT OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS CONFERENCE.*