

ADVANCING THE PRESERVATION OF GOOD (NOT GREAT) GARAGES

Mark Kessler  
University of California, Davis  
Design Program

This essay documents the application and dissemination of research conducted under the auspices of the 2008 AIA Research Program. A paper describing the research, *Educate, Preserve, Reuse: The Good (Not Great) Garage Buildings of San Francisco*, appears in “The AIA Report on University Research, Vol. 4.”

The research award funded the implementation of an undergraduate studio class devoted to the historicist garage buildings in San Francisco. Built in the 1910’s and 1920’s, these buildings combine historically derived facades with industrial sheds. These are good-but-not-great buildings that contribute to urban character, yet are vulnerable to demolition.

My students and I collected baseline data on 150 buildings and organized them into types. The typology serves as a standard against which the present state of the building type can be assessed. Comparisons between the original garages and the current structures reveal that the building type possesses architectural significance that is incrementally eroded through demolition and neglect. For this reason, dissemination of the research to government agencies that can protect these buildings is especially important. My initial archival searches have resulted in action research. After amassing information on the buildings, the research supports advocacy for their preservation.

The typology is a unique repository; it is currently (as of December, 2009) the single-most authoritative source of information on the buildings. Even so, this research is inherently ongoing and open-ended. The archival research has been enhanced by student involvement. This essay provides one example in which the students’ identification of a particular garage builder leads to the unearthing of an influential archival photograph.

This class project culminated in a presentation to the San Francisco Planning Department (SFPD). The event fulfills a pedagogic goal noted in the original grant, and remains a landmark in disseminating the research. In addition to raising the awareness of city planners who exercise authority over the buildings, the presentation opened up new opportunities for student engagement. These include (1) the invitation of the SFPD to collaborate in future typological investigations, and (2) the SFPD’s hiring of student interns to carry this methodology forward.

In June 2008, the author presented the research to the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission. As a result, he was invited to write an article for the San Francisco Architectural Heritage newsletter and to present before the San Francisco Planning Commission.

Also, an academic paper was delivered at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture. This paper builds on themes first articulated in the AIA research project.

The AIA award facilitated research that continues in scope and application. The author has completed four chapters of a book on the historicist garages. In the short term, this research is useful to planners and preservationists who want to save these particular buildings. In the long term, this research provides a theoretical framework that city planning departments can rely upon to justify the protection of lowbrow historicist buildings.



Advancing the Preservation  
of Good (Not Great)  
Garages

Mark Kessler

University of California, Davis  
Design Program



## Introduction

**My research creates architectural typologies of lowbrow buildings** with historically-derived facades. These are good-but-not-great buildings that contribute to urban character, yet are vulnerable to demolition. The buildings' vulnerability is a function of economic underutilization, neglect and anonymity. Through a typological classification based on readily apparent visual characteristics, relationships are established among buildings. I believe that awareness of these connections enhances the buildings' value and lifts them out of anonymity. The application and dissemination of this research is key to effecting a heightened awareness. Ultimately, the goal is to broaden the scope of preservation codes so that these types of buildings are protected.

Under the auspices of the 2008 AIA Research Program, I was awarded a grant that enabled me to create the first architectural typology devoted to the historicist garages of San Francisco, built in the 1910's and 1920's. Archival research produced baseline data on 150 buildings, including their locations, designers, date of construction, the reasons they were built, influential architectural precedents, and original appearance. Buildings are now classified by facade, because the outward appearance of these buildings facilitates the observer's perception of commonality.

The typology is a unique repository; it is currently (as of December, 2009) the single-most authoritative source of information on the buildings. Even so, this research is inherently ongoing and open-ended. There are many gaps in the historical data, and it is impossible to know whether some sought-after information exists. (Later, I will provide an example that illustrates the impact of a new archival discovery on the typology.)

The project connects archival digging with action research. While I amass information on the buildings, I advocate for their preservation. The typology serves as a standard against which the present state of the building type can be assessed. The comparison brings to light patterns in demolition locations, building alterations, programmatic changes (to buildings that are still garages), and conversions to new uses. These comparisons form the basis of subsequent papers and presentations that apply this research to new settings. In my view, the research reveals that the building type possesses cultural and architectural significance that is incrementally eroded through demolition and neglect. For this reason, presentation of the research to government agencies that exercise authority over these buildings is especially important.

## The Project

Specifically, the award funded the implementation of an earlier proposal to integrate teaching and research through a design studio class devoted to these same buildings. In a paper delivered at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), I proposed an undergraduate-level course in which archival research provides the subject matter for typical studio activities, including formal analysis and design.<sup>1</sup> My intention was to invigorate the study of history through research and design assignments that mandate students' engagement with local architecture in the city. A related goal, one that corresponds to the action-orientation of the research, is the presentation of the work in a public forum.

The class was offered in the fall of 2008 to twenty-four undergraduate design majors at the University of California, Davis. Students (1) surveyed and documented assigned garages, (2) analyzed the composition of building facades, (3) classified their garages into pre-determined typological categories, (4) conducted archival research, (5) researched influential architectural precedents, (6) studied the San Francisco Planning Code, and (7) prepared original designs for the adaptive reuse of the buildings.

The results were organized into a booklet and slide presentation. At the conclusion of the quarter, the students and I presented these results to a panel of city planners, preservation architects and architectural historians assembled at the San Francisco Planning Department (SFPD). Students discussed the merit of each garage individually and in relation to other garages in the same typological classification. (In a sense, the students' reliance upon typological comparisons to support their arguments implicitly called for acceptance of the method itself.)

The event afforded me the opportunity to assess the receptivity of city planners and preservationists to the typological method. While classic city planning regulates geographic areas like districts and streets, I am proposing an overlay based on building types. Thus, a garage may be regulated on the basis of its relationship to other garages widely distributed throughout the city, and not solely in relation to proximate buildings. The idea offers an alternative criterion by which garages and other building types can be evaluated for architectural significance and governmental protections.

Following the presentation, I engaged in conversations with panelists, all of whom expressed enthusiasm for the work and the typological approach. For example, Mark Luellen, former Coordinator of the Historic Resources Survey Team, proposed future collaborations between UC Davis and the SFPD. Luellen proposed that the next class be devoted to early 20th-century movie theaters, another threatened lowbrow historicist type. He said that while the approach is valuable, the SFPD lacks the resources to pursue this form of research. A few months later, two students were hired as SFPD interns to carry this methodology forward.



Figure 1: Garage at 650 Divisadero Street. Baumann and Jose, Architect.  
Source: *The Architect and Engineer*, January 1924.



Figure 2: Garage at 650 Divisadero Street.

## New Venues

Two panelists suggested that I present this research to the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission (formerly, the Landmarks Board). In June 2008, I addressed the Commission, presenting an encapsulated version of my AIA-funded paper, *Educate, Preserve, Reuse: The Good But Not Great Garage Buildings of San Francisco*. The work was well received, and Commissioners (some of whom are pro-development) asked several questions about the history of the buildings. At the conclusion of the Commission meeting, I received two additional invitations: (1) to write an article for the newsletter of San Francisco Architectural Heritage, the leading preservation society and (2) to present my research before the San Francisco Planning Commission.

I also disseminated the research in an academic setting. In March 2008, I delivered another paper at an ACSA Annual Meeting, *Sowing Seeds of Diversity: The Influence of Sustainability on Adaptive Reuse*.<sup>2</sup> The paper builds on themes first articulated in the AIA research project. I argue that the adaptive reuse of existing buildings is the most effective means of accommodating change while preserving urban character, enhancing diversity and practicing sustainable design. The possibility that the sustainable dimension of an adaptive reuse project is its primary source of architectural expression is examined through an analysis of several converted garages.

The universally positive response of preservationists, city planners, government officials and fellow academics suggests that efforts to preserve good, common buildings is timely, and that research providing a theoretical framework to expand the mandate of historic preservation is welcome. The invitation to continue the relationship between the Design Program and the SFPD implicitly affirms both the quality of the student work and the validity of the teaching methods.

## An Example of Archival Research

My research involves archival research of photographic collections, government files, surveys, permit histories, Sanborn maps, newspapers and journals. Photographs of demolished buildings bring to light the depth of the typology and the scope of the loss already sustained. Photographs documenting a garage's original condition confirm the harm done by neglect and modifications. Records, permits, maps and journals are sources used to identify a building's original use, architect, builder or date of construction.

I utilize archival photographs to document and to persuade. For example, the archival photograph of the facade at 650 Divisadero enables me to classify it as a classic five-bay composition, an assignment I could not make on the basis of the building's present state (Figs. 1-2). The archival photograph increases the accuracy and scope of the typology. However, in a presentation, I use the same two photographs to demonstrate that garages sustain horrific modifications that obscure their architectural merit. The photographs' different roles correspond to the dual spheres within the research: Historical architectural inquiry and action research.



Figure 3: Garage at 1745 Divisadero Street. Joseph A. Pasqualetti, Builder, 1922.



Figure 4: Garage at 550 Turk Street. Joseph A. Pasqualetti, Builder, 1924.

Let me offer an example that illustrates how the AIA project expedites archival research:

I identified several facades that present five bays of second-story windows symmetrically arrayed above four bays of ground floor openings (Fig 3). The two middle ground floor openings are wide, and converge on a structural pier that coincides with the center line of the facade. The awkwardness of this syncopated rhythm is evident in the relationship of the three middle spandrel panels to the two wide-bay openings.

I considered the possibility that the ground floor was originally a five-bay composition that aligned with the bays above, and that the door openings were subsequently widened. In this scenario, the central pier is a structural addition that supports the widened openings. However, I was reluctant to make this assertion without proof, for the following reasons: (1) the facade compositions, however awkward in localized areas, are still symmetrical overall; (2) the five-over-four composition is universal on garages of this type; and, (3) there is a related garage type with two arched openings on the ground floor, that does focus on a central structural pier (Fig 4).

During this period of irresolution, the students were researching these buildings. They requisitioned copies of original permits, which revealed that many garages were built by Joseph A. Pasqualetti. Armed with this name, I located his granddaughter, who graciously agreed to be interviewed.<sup>iii</sup> She has a few photographs of her grandfather's work, one of which documents this type of facade in its original condition. It confirms a rational five-bay composition from top to bottom (Fig 5).

Now I can assert authoritatively that these facades were modified. The discovery of the photograph was expedited by the work of the students, who functioned as my agents. This is a structural benefit of the teaching method and one that I hope to harness in the future.

This single discovery increases my understanding of the garages, contributes to the integrity of the typology, and supports the argument that the buildings' merits are obscured by modifications. The photograph's existence confirms that there are indeed needles waiting to be found in haystacks. Every unearthed bit of information increases the accuracy of this typology; a well-developed model demonstrates the reliability of typologies generally as a means of organizing architectural data.



Figure 5: Garage at 1745 Divisadero Street. Source: Kaaren Tank Collection.

## Future Applications

The AIA research grant gave me the opportunity to organize and launch my research agenda. I have written four chapters of a book on the historicist garages, a project that expands upon ideas developed in the course of conducting this research. A publication proposal was sent to presses in January 2010. In addition to the specific venues for future dissemination that I referenced above, I believe that this research has both short- and long-term applications. In the short term, the research is useful to planners and preservationists in San Francisco who want to save these particular buildings. In the long term, I hope that this research provides the theoretical framework that city planning departments rely upon to justify the protection of lowbrow historicist buildings.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Mark Kessler, “Fix the Car, Save the City: An Alternative Approach to Architectural History,” in *Seeking the City: Visionaries on the Margins, 96th ACSA Annual Meeting*, Eds. Dietmar Froehlich and Michael Pride, 750-757 (Washington D.C.: ACSA Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Kessler, “Sowing the Seeds of Diversity: The Influence of Sustainability on Adaptive Reuse,” in *The Value of Design: Design is at the Core of What we Teach and Practice, 97th ACSA Annual Meeting*, eds. Phoebe Crisman and Mark Gillem, 510-517 (Washington D.C.: ACSA Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Kaaren Tank, Personal Interview, November 12, 2009.