

THE REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY OF THE CITY OF SAN JOSE

MEMORANDUM

TO: REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY BOARD	FROM: HARRY S. MAVROGENES EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SUBJECT: SEE BELOW	DATE: MAY 30, 2008

SUBJECT: FORMER MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., LIBRARY HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the City Council decline to proceed with landmark designation of the former Martin Luther King, Jr. Library building as a City Landmark.

ANALYSIS

Regarding the Historical and Architectural Evaluation prepared by Archives & Architecture for the former Martin Luther King, Jr., Library building located at 180 West San Carlos Street, while the report contends that the building may be significant, this significance is not supported in the Evaluation. The report is long on information, but short on facts sustaining the finding that the building "does...appear to qualify for designation as a San Jose City Historic Landmark..." (p. 6).

Walter S. Rask, AIA AICP, Principal Architect, and Dolores Mellon, Historian and Sr. Development Officer for the Redevelopment Agency have reviewed Archives & Architecture's Evaluation and offer the following comments and reasons for recommending to decline a landmark designation of this facility:

1. The building is less than 50 years old, an inadequate time to objectively determine whether the library is a good example of its architectural style.

The library's architectural style, "Brutalism", is today much derided. The consultant's report (p. 24, sec. 3-1) mentions Boston's State Government Center by Paul Rudolph and others (1968-70), but omits the most important element of that

complex and the prime example of the style in the U.S., Boston City Hall (Kallman McKinnell and Knowles 1968). It is so reviled that Boston's current mayor has vowed to tear it down. In this climate, it is impossible for anyone to objectively determine whether the former Martin Luther King, Jr. Library is a good example of the style.

In terms of the building's "architectural distinction," in the city of San Jose, there is a collection of similar concrete buildings just a few blocks away from the former Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, located on the campus of San Jose State University. Even one of the Historic Landmarks Commissioners, during the May 7th HLC review of the nomination, noted that Brutalist architecture was commonly constructed on California's community college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s. As to whether the building's Brutalist architecture is significant, the authors of the report admit that "at this time, [the Brutalist] style of architecture, along with much Modern design, is not widely accepted as important to the general public" (p.35).

2. The defining characteristic of Brutalism is unpainted, raw concrete, but the library was painted in 1990, thereby compromising the building's integrity, perhaps irreversibly.

The consultant's report (p. 24, sec. 3.2) states that Brutalism is characterized by unpainted, raw concrete (béton brut, in French), but notes that the building was painted in 1990 (p. 21, sec. 2.6). Painting the former library building destroyed this essential element of the style and damaged the building's integrity. Therefore, the most distinct characteristic of the architectural type has been compromised. The painting may be irreversible because removing the paint would likely permanently damage the original surface.

3. The library's architect, Norton S. "Bud" Curtis, is not well known, even locally, and has had little influence on other architects.

While the report has much information on his buildings and career, it does not place the former library building in this context. There is no information on where the library building falls in Curtis's body of work—is the library an important work of Curtis's, or is any of Curtis's work noteworthy (p. 23)?

Norton Curtis may be a locally significant architect for a body of work, but he was not influential. Others working in the same style referred to its originators (Le Corbusier, the Smithsons, Paul Rudolph, I.M. Pei, Kallman McKinnell), not to local practitioners like Curtis. Also, it is no praise to say that Curtis was picked on the basis of price: "Newspapers at that time indicate that Curtis 'made a very

attractive offer' to Hamann regarding to the cost for the final design" (p. 17), perhaps because he may have adapted plans for the Seattle Central Library (p. 17, footnote 10).

Several older architects in the county were asked what they know of Norton Curtis and the answer was invariably: little or nothing. An architect develops a reputation among other architects when they work for him, are influenced by him and establish their own practices that continue his tradition. There is no indication of any such evidence in Curtis's case.

4. The library's association with the City's major growth period and its location as the "main" or "central" library in the center of San Jose are too weak to justify landmark status.

"Main library," or "central library" are terms employed to identify a library located in the city centre (p.9). It is not uncommon that cities throughout the United States locate their main libraries in the city centre with its typically large concentration of citizens, and that these buildings would "house the primary circulation and reference collections of the City" (p. 5). This was true in San Jose since the late 1800s, and this fact is less indicative of significance than it is of a simple matter of convenience.

It is a weak link to imply that a functionally obsolete and architecturally mediocre building should be retained as the symbol of an expanding library system during the City's major growth period. A "symbol" should be recognizable, like the New York Public Library or the Golden Gate Bridge. One wonders if many San Joseans could identify the building from a photo and whether anyone from outside San Jose would associate it with the City, much less with its library system.

As to the building's "significance for being both a major library building constructed by the people of San Jose within a special municipal bond election, and as a distinguished structure constructed within the period of rapid urbanization after World War II," within that narrow list of qualifiers, it would be impossible to find another building the equal of the former Martin Luther King, Jr. Library (p. 32).

As regards to the building's significance due to its association with the City Librarian of that era, Geraldine L. Nurney, in fact the librarian "retired shortly after the completion of the building in 1970" (p.33). Ms. Nurney had as much influence in the building of San Jose's branch libraries, as she did the Main

Library. Even the report admits that “no one building could represent [Ms. Nurney’s] contributions,” so an argument that the building’s significance is partly derived from its association with Ms. Nurney is a weak one.

CONCLUSION

A Historical Evaluation is not only an information document. Findings on the significance of the resource must also be made, and those findings must be supported by facts within the document. While there is a great deal of information in the Evaluation on the former Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Main Library, at this time the document lacks facts to support its nomination to the local register. Based on the discussion above, it is recommended that the City Council decline to proceed with landmark designation of the former Martin Luther King, Jr. Library building.



HARRY S. MAVROGENES
Executive Director