

# Alameda PRESERVATION Press

NEWSLETTER OF THE ALAMEDA  
ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## Rescuing a Forgotten Facade: The 2152 Central Avenue Restoration Project

By Miriam Fox

It was by accident that I walked into the building at 2152 Central Avenue. I live across the street and since the space was being used as the voting office at the time, I was just dropping off my ballot. That's when I chatted with the staff about the building, who told me some of its history and showed me old pictures. So when I recently saw them working on the facade my interest was piqued, I wanted to learn more!

This unassuming building, once a bustling telephone exchange, had been obscured by a concrete facade for decades. Its original character, a testament to the city's early growth at the turn of the 19th century, had been all but hidden from view. That's when the California Historical Radio Society (CHRS), a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the history of radio and broadcasting, comes in. They purchased the building in 2014 and immediately recognized its architectural importance and its restoration potential.

Built in 1900 to house the Sunset Telephone and Telegraph Company, the Mission Revival two-story building cost about \$10,000 (approx. \$363,000 today). The main floor featured a 16 ft. high ceiling. The switchboard was initially operated by fifteen women. The exchange served about 1,000 subscribers but was built to have the capacity of 10,000. By 1926, there were more than 7,000 telephone subscribers in



*The impressive Mission Revival structure was built in 1900 to house the Sunset Telephone and Telegraph Co.*

Alameda and many more would be coming. In 1939 Pacific Bell (Now AT&T) constructed new facilities just down the street at 2100 Central Avenue, so the old exchange at 2152 Central was phased out.

In 1946 the building was purchased by the Church of Nazarene, who in 1956-1957

"modernized" the facade by covering up the original. The new facade was comprised of a wood frame covered in stucco with two columns of decorative concrete blocks, its appearance consistent with mid 1950s architecture. Then, in 1974, the renovated building was acquired by

*Continued on page 2...*

**Forgotten Facade...***continued from page 1*

Garner Pre-School Inc., and underwent further changes to accommodate children.

Fast forward to 2014 when the building was purchased by the current owners, the CHRS. After initial repairs to bring the building up to standards – such as replacing the electrical system and addressing seismic upgrades – they were ready to bring the building back to its original glory. Under the direction of Steve Kushman, the Project Manager, and after some exploratory incursions, the bold decision was made to restore the facade to its original Mission Revival look, a gamble that would either reveal a hidden gem or expose a crumbling ruin.

As I watched the project unfold, I was struck by the meticulous care and innovative techniques employed by the restoration team. Beneath the concrete shell, they uncovered a treasure trove of original features: ornate columns, intricate moldings, and even remnants of the original mosaic floor. Each discovery was a small victory in the battle against time and neglect.

One of the most significant challenges was replicating the missing elements of the facade. The team carefully measured the outline left by the concrete and used historical photographs to recreate the original design. The result was a seamless blend of old and new, a testament to the skill and artistry of the restoration team.

Another challenge was ensuring the structural integrity of the building. The concrete facade, while unsightly, had served as a protective layer, and removing it would expose the underlying structure to the elements. The team carefully



*The Sunset Telephone and Telegraph Company's switchboard circa 1930s.*

assessed the building's condition and implemented necessary repairs to ensure its long-term stability.

The restoration of 2152 Central Avenue was more than just a cosmetic makeover. It was a rescue mission to save a piece of history from oblivion. The building, once a forgotten relic, has been given a new life. It stands as a testament to the power of preservation and the enduring value of our architectural heritage.

**Beyond the Facade:  
A New Chapter for 2152 Central Avenue**

CHRS's vision for the building extends far beyond its exterior. They want to create a dynamic cultural center that will celebrate the history of communication and technology, and

to give new life to this historic space and make it relevant to the community. The restored facade is just the beginning. Inside the building, the team carefully preserved the original architectural features while adding modern amenities to make the space functional and welcoming. The result is a stunning blend of old and new that is both inspiring and informative.

The CHRS is a thriving community hub. It hosts a variety of events, including lectures, workshops, and exhibitions. And soon, guests will walk up the newly restored stairway, across the restored mosaic on the threshold to enter into the great room of the Museum, which will encompass much more than the history of radio and broadcasting, it will also include displays on electronic communications of all kinds, with a variety of operational exhibits, a recording studio and a listening room.

The restoration of 2152 Central Avenue is a shining example of the power of preservation. By investing in the past, we create a brighter future for our communities. This historic building, once forgotten and overlooked, is now a vibrant center of culture and education.



*2152 Central Avenue with the false front in April 2024.*



2152 Central Avenue  
Alameda, CA 94501  
(510) 522-1974

[californiahistoricalradio.com](http://californiahistoricalradio.com)



*Forgotten Facade...continued from page 2*



Removal of the false front begins exposing the original entrance and details on the facade.



The details were measured for recreation.



Raised ornaments are carefully measured and attached.

A model of two arches and four dentils were recreated in foam, wood, and cardboard.



Aquilles of Bay Area Foam Shapes shows off the completed design.



Outlines of the original reliefs were revealed.



After 60 years the details were replaced on the front of the building.



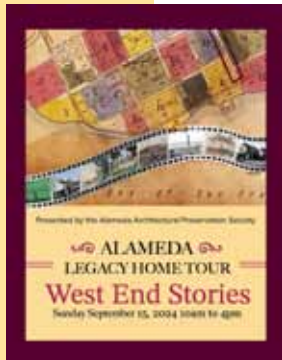
Facade remodel as of November 1st. Waiting on the entrance door, which will be a solid oak door with a beveled oval glass from 1900 that has matching dentils as the windows. Running down the side, the fascia will be exposed and 18 corbels installed to match the front.





# THE ALAMEDA LEGACY HOME TOUR,

for the first time in its 50 year history, focused exclusively on Alameda's West End. On Sunday September 15th over 500 attendees walked a neighborhood steeped in history and explored the interiors of six unique homes including the oldest house, a Gothic Revival cottage known standing in 1866. Described in detail in Woody Minor's opening essay in the keepsake guidebook, the West End developed as the center of industry and has had an incredible influence on Alameda's growth and development to this day.



The cool breezy morning didn't tamper the excitement at Longfellow Park, where the ticket booths, the well-appointed café and the AAPS pop-up store were filled with enthusiastic tour goers ready to walk the neighborhood and discover its architectural gems and interesting stories.

From the homeowners who generously shared their restored historic homes, to all the docents and volunteers who brought their energy and enthusiasm to create an unforgettable experience for everyone,

the Alameda Legacy Home Tour proves again its great community building success.

*The original flower arrangements were created by Francesca Ricci.*

**A very special thank you to everyone who participated in the West End Tour!**



*It was a busy morning at Longfellow Park. Preserve Alameda merchandise takes center stage in the pop-up store.*



*Liz Farrar and Brenden Sullivan sell tickets.*



*Patrons wait to enter the oldest house on the West End, a Gothic Revival cottage built in 1866.*

**Photos:**  
Mike Van Dine,  
Abigail Alcalá, &  
Linda Weinstock.



*Judith Nychay*



*Karen Espinoza*



*Nancy Gordon, Ken & Linda Weinstock and Susan Benko-Rainwater.*

*House Captain and Home Tour Chair, Conchita Perales.*

*Doree Miles and Vicky Bell tend the Café.*



## PRESERVATION ACTION COMMITTEE REPORT

# PAC's Planning Input Assists City's Preservation Efforts *by Christopher Buckley*

The Preservation Action Committee (PAC) workload has diminished considerably this year, since there has been no major changes proposed to planning and zoning regulatory documents that could impact historic properties and need AAPS review. Such documents included the Alameda Strategic Plan, the Objective Design Review Standards, and the Housing Element upzonings. Proposals for potentially intrusive new development that is enabled by the Housing Element upzonings have not yet been submitted, probably due to increased interest rates and other economic constraints on new construction nationwide. However, such development is likely once economic conditions relax, and AAPS should be prepared to respond when such developments are proposed and continue working to adjust the City's development regulations to address new development that is intrusive within historic areas.

However, the PAC has continued to comment on smaller projects and regulatory changes impacting older properties. Since January, these projects have included: 2111 San Antonio Ave., 451 Haight Ave., 2247 Buena Vista Ave., 471 Haight Ave., 1209 Court Street and 1512 Everett St.

AAPS comments have included such topics as requiring that: (1) cement fiber siding as a wood substitute is smooth with no synthetic-looking imitation raised wood grain; (2) windows on street-facing elevations are wood or have a wood-like appearance as set forth the City's Guide to Residential Design and that a window schedule and window details are provided that verifies this; and (3) porch railings are no more than 36 inches in height or no taller than the building's historic railings and which, if required by the building code to be 42 inches in height, to use inconspicuous metal booster railings to obtain the 42 inch height or use the California Historical Building Code to justify a lower height. In most cases, the Planning Department included these recommendations in the project approval.

AAPS has also commented on the following larger scale projects/proposals:

**1. Replacement of missing or deteriorated mostly copper gutters and downspouts on the Big Whites at Alameda Point.** This project required Historical Advisory Board (HAB) approval. Many of the missing downspouts had been stolen by copper thieves, but the copper gutters are mostly intact since stealing them is more difficult. Staff proposed replacing the missing downspouts with a different material to discourage theft. AAPS did not oppose this proposal, subject to requiring that: (1) the new gutter and downspout configurations match the historic configurations; and (2) the new gutters and downspouts be painted with a color that visually match the patinated copper. The HAB approval required, among other things, that the copper gutters be replaced in-kind and replacement downspouts be made of a durable material such as galvanized steel with a white finish and square profile to closely match other existing downspouts.

**2. Guidelines for Infill Development within the NAS (Naval Air Station), Alameda Historic District.** The proposed guidelines supplement existing design guidelines, zoning requirements and other provisions intended to preserve the historic district's architectural character. The guidelines were specifically required by the Alameda Point Project EIR



*5' tall fence that does not meet the City's current transparency requirements and obstructs the front of the house.*

certified in 2014. AAPS was generally supportive of the proposed guidelines, but submitted several minor comments, including use of "character defining features" rather than "sympathetic design elements" and clarifying the role of "Streamlined Moderne" vs. "Federal Moderne" architecture. The AAPS recommendations were generally accepted by the HAB.

**3. Revised Zoning Ordinance Fence Provisions.** These changes required approval by the Planning Board. Staff proposed relaxations in the existing rules, including: (a) changing the requirement that the entirety of a 5' high front yard fence (the maximum height for front yards) be "see-through style" to only the top 2' for a 5' fence and the top 1' for a 4' fence; and (b) changing the definition of "see-through style" from at least 25% transparent to no more than 75% opaque. AAPS recommended that the existing see-through style requirements be retained. This included the 25% transparency requirement to prevent installation of translucent fences, which are arguably not "opaque". The Board generally supported AAPS's recommendations and even suggested increasing the level of transparency. Staff will be revising the proposal to reflect Planning Board input and send it back to the Board for consideration.

AAPS comment letters, the City's decision letters, and other information concerning the above projects can be accessed on the AAPS website.

Historic Building Study List Correction Project. Some of the addresses on the Historic Building Study List are incorrect, and some study list properties are not shown accurately on the City's GIS map layer. AAPS has therefore proposed to the planning staff and HAB that AAPS undertake a survey of study list properties using volunteers to identify possible inaccuracies and recommend corrections. Planning staff and the HAB are both very supportive of the project and at least one HAB member has volunteered to help.

**If you would like to volunteer for this project, please contact Christopher Buckley at 510-523-0411 or [cbuckleyAICP@att.net](mailto:cbuckleyAICP@att.net)**



# TRAVELOGUE



An illustrated architectural travel story inspired by places visited and experiences encountered.

## Thinking Inside the Box The Cube Houses of Rotterdam

Text and images by Conchita Perales

A recent trip to Rotterdam opened the door into an innovative and unforgettable architectural experience. This incredibly modern city in the Netherlands has become world famous due in great part to its unique and groundbreaking architecture.

Its center was bombed in 1940 during the early stages of World War II by the German Luftwaffe, killing over 30,000 people, destroying historic buildings, and upending the quality of life for years to come. However, through its unstoppable reconstruction, Rotterdam has become the site of ambitious new architecture. It's well known as a platform for architectural development and education through the Berlage Institute, a postgraduate laboratory of architecture, and the NAI (the Netherlands Architecture Institute) offering exhibitions on architecture and urban planning issues. The lively city is also home to leading international architectural firms.

### THE BLAAK-FOREST

Structuralist local architect Piet Blom designed the Cube Houses as a complex of innovative high density housing structures. Based on the concept of "living under an urban roof" the complex offered a creative solution to high density housing. Blom's original 1977 plan proposed mixing cultural facilities with houses, including a theater as the centerpiece amidst a 55 house "forest". In 1984, after multiple plan iterations, 38 connected cube houses and two so-called 'super-cubes' were built in one of the best locations still available at the time facing the old harbour on the east part of Rotterdam's city center.

Blom's innovative idea tilted the cube of a conventional house 45 degrees resting it upon a hexagon-shaped pylon. Its main purpose is to better distribute the rooms inside, optimizing the use of the space inside and out. His design created a unique village within a city, where each house represents a tree and all the houses together, a forest.

The 38 small cubes are all attached to each other. Each cube house contains three floors, all accessible through steep stairs: a ground floor entrance; on the first floor a living room and an open kitchen; on the second floor two bedrooms and a bathroom; and the top floor has an uninterrupted view of the urban canopy through expansive windows that meet at the peak of the tilted cube.



▲ The complex, also known by its nickname "Blaak Forest", is a modern architectural icon that cannot be missed when visiting Rotterdam.

Inside the house the space is cleverly designed, each nook and cranny thoughtfully placed with built-in storage and shelves. All the walls and windows are angled, so it takes a moment to understand how one fits within the rooms and their perspectives. The total area of the house is around 1,100 sq.ft., although the space where the angled ceilings and walls meet is quite unusable.

All the houses are occupied with very little turnover. And visitors like us are so curious about them, that a homeowner decided to open his own cube home to the public and make a living at it. Known as the "Kijk-Kubus Museum-house" it is decorated and finished as a regular house would be –albeit a reception area selling postcards and small tchotchkes—and open to tour for just over three dollars per person. You can also stay the night in one! In 2009, the two larger cubes were converted into a very cool hostel run by the Dutch chain Stayokay.

The cube houses are located right above Blaak Metro Station, and just a few steps from the impressive Market Hall (Markthal) and the Main Library.





▲ Aerial view of Piet Blom's Blaak-forest, built on Rotterdam's Old Harbour in 1984. Image: Wikipedia.



▲ A bright private corner on the top floor overlooks the glassy urban canopy.



▲ The streamlined and fully integrated kitchen's open plan includes a dining table that sits four.



▲ The clever design incorporates a center plaza with stores and community areas and covered and open areas that allow for easy pedestrian flow and natural light.



### Piet Blom, Architect

Born in Amsterdam in February of 1934, he grew up in the Jordaan area where his parents ran a vegetables-potatoes store. He studied at the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture between 1954 and 1959 under Aldo van Eyck, one of the most influential protagonists of Structuralism. This architectural movement had a strong influence on social housing in the Netherlands. The structuralists advocated integration, coherency with surroundings and the "humane size". The idea behind the cube houses was to create small-scaled spaces connected to each other in an open manner, which when combined with bigger inner courts, they invite social interaction.



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## PRESERVATION ACTION COMMITTEE

**Get Involved & Make a Difference!**

We maintain a Google Group list to advise AAPS members on ongoing issues that could affect historic properties.

Please contact  
**Christopher Buckley at**  
**510-523-0411**  
or **[cbuckleyAICP@att.net](mailto:cbuckleyAICP@att.net)**

# Don't Miss Our Annual Holiday Party!



**December 7th from 6 to 9 pm**



**Pasta Pelican**  
**2455 Mariner Square Dr.**  
**Alameda 94501**



*Check your email for your  
invitation and make sure to RSVP  
no later than November 21st!*

## RENEW TODAY!

Is your Alameda Architectural Preservation Society membership up-to-date? You can renew for the upcoming year by visiting **[alameda-preservation.org](http://alameda-preservation.org)**