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Labor and the Historic Preservation Process



Fund for Labor Culture and History Occasional Paper No. 2

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Foreground

Historic Preservation programs, beyond just house museums and nostalgia for crinoline, offer a useful opportunity for Labor to bring its story to a broad public. This paper will relate one recent precedent setting example of how this can be done —the creation of San Francisco's first labor landmark, the Garcia & Maggini warehouse— and explore how doing so benefits the labor movement.

The epic of the 1934 San Francisco Waterfront and General strikes is well known in labor history. It is the foundation narrative for the ILWU, and by extension for militant progressive labor on the West Coast. It was recognized as such at the time of its occurrence and continues to be understood as a dramatic and seminal event. The earliest comprehensive published account, Paul Eliel's *The Waterfront and General Strikes of San Francisco* was in print within months of the incidents taking place. Since then, the story has been told, analyzed, documented, and celebrated many times—most recently and most excellently by David F. Selvin in his *A Terrible Anger*. The details of the narrative, sometimes in mythologized form, are familiar to students of labor, ILWU members, and to radicals in general. But the great majority of the public remains ignorant of the basic story, unfamiliar with its historic context, and unconnected to its legacy.

Of course, this corresponds with a much broader insensibility to the history of work, how it has been arranged in the past, how that has been contested, even how it is organized currently. In fact, the structure of work, the major point in contention in 1934, probably appears to most people a given—unpleasant—but immutable. This is at least partially because the urban landscape they walk has been cleansed of any lingering reminder of the past, has in fact been edited as a text of the hegemonic view of an orderly, classless society. Few distracting errata intrude on the morning walk to work.

That rewrite is happening today on the San Francisco waterfront, the very ground on which the battles of the 1934 strikes took place. In the process, the identity of the area is being transformed from what was originally a quintessential working class zone of employment and related social infrastructure to a playground primarily for people who identify themselves as middle class. The physical plant, built explicitly to contain, regulate and support the distinctive work that originally defined the area, will be changed relatively little. However, its meaning will be drastically revised—discarding or

bleaching out the values attached to it by workers. This process is pandemic throughout the post-industrial world, as waterfronts metamorphose from gateways— somewhat risky arenas of cultural mixing and productive labor— to promenades for social preening.

Background

On July 3, 1934—the eighth week of the Waterfront Strike and the date announced for “Opening the Port”—business forces, under the banner of the Industrial Association and its hastily formed Atlas Trucking Co. began moving scab-manned trucks from Pier 38 to the Garcia & Maggini warehouse at 128-136 King Street, where space had been rented. A mass of several thousand strikers and supporters on the Embarcadero at the head of the pier had been forced back from the entrance that morning, clearing a path for the slightly over one quarter mile distance between pier and warehouse. Trucks emerged from the pier shed at around 1:30 in the afternoon under heavy police guard, and proceeded toward the warehouse. Strikers attacked, but were knocked back by tear gas and shock tactics from heavily armed police. They regrouped near the warehouse and fought for several hours to oppose the movement of the trucks, which according to triumphalist newspaper accounts continued throughout the afternoon, ending promptly at 5 o'clock after eighteen round trips.

For all their raw physicality, that day's events were mainly symbolic, and from the beginning the terms of the narrative were major points of concern. The term to “open the port,” a euphemism for “break the strike,” was chosen and insistently repeated by business forces to describe a dribble of unmarked trucks making short, heavily contested sorties from one pier among dozens affected by the strike to one destination chosen mainly for its proximity—this requiring the protection of essentially the entire available police force. Trucks, drivers and warehouse all were tokens, put in play to represent actual components of the distribution system under blockade. The Atlas Trucking Company was a dummy corporation, created specifically to “open the port” at minimal risk to real companies and their assets. Its drivers were moonlighting businessmen, its cargo worthless sacks of birdseed or empty cartons.

Yet strikers were willing to risk their lives against armed police to prevent sacks and cartons from reaching their symbolic destination—while the five o'clock quitting time, one of the more surreal claims of the business forces, was surely meant to evoke images of contented workers heading home to their families, well satisfied with a good day's work. In passing, let us note that eighteen round trips in three and a half hours, an

average of less than twelve minutes apiece, suggests either a lack of substantial cargo or an exaggeration of the number of trips. In actuality both sides were battered, bloody and committed to further combat by the time the imaginary plant whistle blew.

In another simulacrum of normalcy, the Industrial Association suspended trucking operations for the following day, the Fourth of July holiday, presumably so that all parties might properly celebrate the American dream. On the fifth of July, in renewed and more widespread conflict, at least two workers were shot dead near union headquarters at Mission and Steuart. The events of this day, Bloody Thursday, and the subsequent mass funeral march down Market Street, have since overshadowed those of the third of July in public memory. Annually since 1934, the ILWU has commemorated the deaths with a solemn Bloody Thursday ceremony. Until recent years, the observance was held at the site of the fatal shootings, where the outlines of two bodies were drawn on the sidewalk, as had been done in 1934. The annual rites have now been relocated to the Local 10 Hall on North Point. Although attendance has greatly increased, the memorial has become less public in nature. Labor has withdrawn itself from a landscape it once fiercely contended for.

Historic Memory

Lacking a public commemoration, as well as the tragic elements of Bloody Thursday, the events of the third of July have receded from public consciousness. Historians have continued to note them in their narratives, but with a curious habit, repeated over the years, of never naming the Garcia & Maggini Warehouse. Although the Atlas Trucking Co. was an *ad hoc* creation, a *nom de guerre* chosen by business forces, one with connotations of heroic individualism later exploited by Ayn Rand, that name has not only survived in Labor histories, but in some instances been applied also to the otherwise enigmatic "warehouse on King Street," the actual focal point of the day's conflict. However, no contemporary source refers to the building as the Atlas warehouse. Newspaper accounts readily and correctly identified the Garcia & Maggini warehouse by name and address, even publishing photos of the dramatic arrival of the trucks at its doors.

Over time, memory of the building and its important role in the narrative was lost. Yet providentially, the structure survived. The neighborhood and the building itself declined in economic importance along with the port of San Francisco, and with shifts in cargo handling operations. In 1990, the building was included in the locally designated South

End Historic District. That district was nominated on the basis of its architectural qualities, primarily its grouping of low rise brick warehouse buildings such as this one. The District nomination also discussed the original owners of some of the buildings, though most of these people were decidedly absentee landlords with only a tenuous financial connection to the structures. The nomination makes no mention of the events of 1934 or any other relationship of the buildings to Labor history.

For several years more, the area remained as it had become, economically lethargic and slightly seedy. Then, in the Spring of 2000, Pacific Bell Park, new home of the San Francisco Giants baseball team opened directly across the street from the old warehouse. This, along with the cresting "Dot-Com Boom," signalled a dramatic shift in the fortunes of the neighborhood. A frenzy of development took place, including a proposal to rehabilitate and convert the old Garcia & Maggini Warehouse to restaurant and office use.

The building's prior inclusion in the Historic District meant the rehabilitation project required approval from the San Francisco Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board. This author, then serving as a member of that Board and aware of the history of the strikes, undertook what proved to be a simple investigation in newspaper archives that quickly identified the building under review as the one central to events of July 3, 1934. Several advocates for Labor history, including Archie Green of the Fund for Labor Culture and History, Ed Mackin, and Lynn Bonfield of the Labor Archives, officially brought this information to the attention of the Board as it considered approval of the rehabilitation work.

Marking the Spot

With the fate of their multi-million dollar project held briefly at risk, representatives of the property owner readily agreed to support a Landmark nomination for the building based on its role in Labor history—and to provide a suitable plaque on the façade—text and design to be mutually agreed upon with Labor History representatives. Those terms were finalized at a public hearing on May 3, 2000.

The Fund for Labor Culture and History, a newly organized non-profit group, coordinated efforts for the landmark nomination and plaque. First, rights were acquired to the photo published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on July 4, 1934. This picture, which had actually been printed reversed in the paper, is a tense, dramatic shot of the

first truck arriving at the warehouse under protection of clearly anxious police officers. The building is identifiable in the background by two means. First, the truck is shown backing in to a distinctive deeply recessed entry, formerly a rail car entrance into the building. That recess, wedge shaped to accommodate the original railroad spur tracks, is still a prominent feature on the King Street facade. Secondly, a large painted sign above the ground floor gives the name of the warehouse. That sign had been painted over with another name sometime in the 1940s or 50s, but the 1934 Garcia & Maggini sign was still partially visible beneath the added paint.

In order to create the strongest possible visual identification of site and historic event, the Fund for Labor Culture and History insisted on two points. First, the historic photo must be reproduced as a prominent feature of the eventual plaque, and second, the plaque should be placed in or near the wedge shaped recess depicted in that photograph. Negotiations with the owner's representatives, though slow, went without serious problems at first. At their expense, a graphic designer was hired to create the plaque. At first the designer called for use of additional graphics. One group of historic photos was rejected by owner's representatives as displaying violence that did not occur at this site. These showed some of the conflict of Bloody Thursday, as well as a dramatic shot of dead and wounded strikers on the sidewalk at Steuart and Mission streets. Memorably, and predictably, the owner's comment was "I want a restaurant in that space, corpses don't help." Eventually, the use of supplemental graphics was abandoned. However, the designer was induced to include a small Labor Landmark logo intended to be used on future plaques.

Knowing the plaque text must be mutually acceptable to both parties, the Fund for Labor Culture and History attempted to emphasize themes of the important effects of the 1934 strikes and of the independent agency of workers in achieving them, rather than the violence of the events or the perfidy of the Industrial Association. The target audience was seen as the general public passing by on its way to a baseball game, completely unwitting of the events of 1934. This required the text to include a good deal of explication, including the basic chronology of events.

What could spiritual descendants of the two opposing sides from 1934 agree to say about those events at the turn of the new millenium? As it turned out, after several iterations, the owners agreed to a narrative statement that mentions, but does not dwell on the historic violence, and features strike events that occurred at this location above

those at other places along the waterfront. The result is a compromise, oddly obtuse at certain points, as when no mention is made of the accepted belief it was police who shot the workers. At the close of the negotiations, the principal owner's deep anti-union feelings came further into play. Last minute adjustments foreclosed mention of specific gains resulting from the strike, but substituted more general statements of its importance.

Both parties focused a great deal of attention on the visual characteristics of the memorial. The owners clearly wanted to control the appearance of their building for commercial purposes while the Fund for Labor Culture and History wanted to create a strong eye-catching display that was also informative. Size and location of the plaque, as well as its basic form, were agreed upon early on. Initially, it was planned to use a baked-enamel-on-metal medium found in other displays along the Embarcadero. However, at the last moment the principal owner withdrew agreement because he felt "A plaque just has to be bronze." The enameled medium had been chosen because of its suitability for reproducing the important historic photograph, which has a wide range of tonal qualities, as well as the possibility of introducing color to the design. The last minute switch in medium was agreed to on the condition that the photo could be adequately reproduced in bronze. In the end, the image was etched onto a thin bronze plate, which is mechanically fastened to the cast body of the plaque— a more expensive medium, but one preferred by the owners, who were paying all costs.

During the lengthy rehabilitation project, the question of refurbishing the brick building façade arose. The owners wanted to blast it clean, a procedure generally discouraged by Historic Preservation practice because it can easily damage the existing brick and lead to serious moisture infiltration problems. However, in this case the Landmarks Board agreed to permit an innovative process using a non-destructive water washing technique, followed by application of a subsurface polymer to create a moisture barrier. As a condition of that permission, the Board required the owners to restore the painted Garcia & Maggini sign from 1934, still partially visible under added paint. Since it proved impossible to remove the offending paint without also removing the underlying sign, a full size template of the historic sign was made in place prior to cleaning the façade and removing the sign. Using the template, the historic sign was then recreated. The result is a strong reinforcement between plaque, sign and building, as well as a restoration of the 1934 appearance and a public reintroduction of the historic building name.

On July 3, 2002, the sixty eighth anniversary of the "Opening of the Port," the new city Landmark was dedicated by the Fund for Labor Culture and History, the Landmarks Board, and a wide representation of labor leaders from throughout the Bay Area. A mockup of the plaque was used for the ceremony, since the actual plaque was not yet available. It was finally installed a few weeks later.

Bottom Line

What has this undertaking accomplished? How does it help in "Rebuilding the Labor Movement?" Foremost, Labor has claimed a visible place in the public streetscape, and the public narrative, solidly based on a bit of history of which it is rightfully proud. Second, that claim has been legitimized and is protected by government action. Third, it has been implemented by capital, however willingly.

The prominence of the Garcia & Maggini warehouse as a Labor Landmark is greatly enhanced by its proximity to Pacific Bell Park, which provides heavy seasonal foot traffic, and also creates a resonance between two sites perceived— one of them rightly— as working class. The building's continued presence, one of only two older structures in a streetscape nearly awash in the high tide of dot-com building, is now assured. Its interpretation will continue to be strongly influenced by the legally protected plaque and painted sign.

In fact, the ubiquitous post-industrial gentrification of industrial and working class areas actually creates many similar opportunities to insert Labor oriented passages in the evolving urban text— like free ads in a high-circulation glossy magazine. To take advantage of this, Labor advocates must come to understand the legal and political institutions of historic preservation, and equally importantly must reconsider their own narratives in terms of the built environment. In many cases abandoned industrial structures have now acquired a new commercial value based on physical characteristics such as the large size of floorplates, the great volume of enclosed space, and provisions for natural light. Originally intended to facilitate the organization of work, these attributes now identify the buildings to developers as vast blank slates on which can be written a profitable script of leisured consumption and/or professional class display. It is up to Labor historians to assert an alternate reading.

Even in the case of less trendy areas with less pernicious transformations in the offing, Labor connotations undefended tend to peel off and fall away like old paint. For in



American culture, the default meaning of any building is always a greater or lesser jewel in the crown of capitalism. In their aggregate, the structures become terms of a seamless text of Progress. But by using existing Historic Preservation institutions, Labor can interject its own counter-hegemonic message, and piggyback on the very mechanisms of power that carry the dominant story. This is the lesson of the Garcia & Maggini warehouse.

Preservation Programs

Key to the ability to capitalize on Historic Preservation programs is some familiarity with them on the part of Labor advocates. A full discussion of the programs in this country is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief introduction is in order. Official Preservation programs nationwide stem from the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which established federal policies to protect buildings, structures, sites, objects and districts considered historically significant. Subsequent amplification has resulted in programs for preservation at the Federal, State and Local levels of government. At the Federal level, listing in the National Register of Historic Places can provide tax incentives for the owners, as well as some protections against demolition, although the safeguards are relatively weak.

The same is true of State programs, which generally model themselves along Federal guidelines. In California and many other states, listing on a State Register of Historic Places means review under environmental laws for any project that might have a negative impact on the historic value of the listed resource, somewhat analagous to the better known protections for endangered species. Importantly, California environmental law also places a burden on developers, both public and private, to investigate the possible historic significance of any properties that could be effected negatively by a proposed project. That investigation must take into account any credible evidence that the property has historic value.

Many localities also have their own preservation programs, which often include specific restrictions on the issuance of building permits for projects that could affect a designated historic structure. The San Francisco Planning Code requires all exterior alterations of a designated landmark or contributor to a historic district to receive Landmarks Board approval prior to issuance of permits. This was the mechanism used to leverage owner's cooperation on the Garcia & Maggini project.

But in order to take advantage of the opportunities these programs provide, a property in question must first be recognized as historically significant. It is at this point that Historic Preservation has failed to serve the Labor community, for in the nearly forty years Preservation programs have been in existence, with tens of thousands of structures listed on registers or designated as landmarks, the overwhelming majority of properties involved have been chosen purely on putative architectural merit. Of the remaining, almost all are represented as monuments to “great white men,” usually architects or owners. In other words, Preservation has been used to create a reactionary hegemonic text.

However, the selection criteria for all Preservation programs also call for the recognition of properties associated with historically important events—such as the strikes of 1934—and with cultural groups important in our collective history —such as Labor—without regard to the building’s architectural qualities. At present, unfortunately, most Preservation professionals have no training in social or cultural history, while most social historians are not engaged in Preservation issues. In the case of the Garcia & Maggini warehouse, Preservationists were ignorant of the history of the 1934 strikes, while Labor Historians had lost sight of, or never focused on the identity of the warehouse. Yet to merge the two sensibilities, as was finally done, can result in the history of Labor taking its place in the publicly recognized and enshrined narrative.

Once a property is recognized as historically significant, developers are required to take that into account when planning a project. This provides the pressure point at which advocates can suggest appropriate measures to mitigate any threat to its historic integrity. Given the time pressures under which they work, developers are highly sensitive to any possible hindrance in their public approval process, and so are usually willing to listen. They are apprehensive about major obstacles that could delay or sink their project. Given that fear, a historic plaque can seem an easy price to pay, especially if it can gain the support of an articulate constituency.

Of course, if the proposed project is to demolish a highly significant building, a plaque may simply not be adequate compensation—for the building’s continued material presence lends enormous power to the message. Tactical questions such as this can be resolved as they arise. The important strategic consideration, and the prime intent of this paper, is to establish a Labor presence in the dialogue of the urban streetscape.



THE GARCIA & MAGGINI WAREHOUSE

SAN FRANCISCO LANDMARK NO. 229

At this location, on July 3, 1934, a dramatic clash occurred, one that eventually touched the nation. Longshoremen, sailors, teamsters, and other waterfront workers had closed down Pacific coast shipping since May, in what came to be known as "The Big Strike." Business interests and employers, attempting to break the strike, or "open the port," formed the Industrial Association, and created the Atlas Drayage Company, which then rented space in this building, the Garcia & Maggini Warehouse. On July 3, trucks under heavy police guard began to move goods from Pier 38 to this entrance. The photo shows the first truck arriving. Although their picket line had been pushed aside at Pier 38, the strikers regrouped here and resisted the movement of trucks during a five-hour pitched battle. Violence continued at the waterfront. On July 5, known as Bloody Thursday, two workers were shot. On July 9, a massive Market Street funeral march honored the martyrs. A three day general strike followed, leading to a new role for labor. *Fund for Labor Culture & History*



Garcia & Maggini Warehouse Plaque