

HISTORIC WATERFRONT BUILDING BECOMES AN “AWKWARD” ONE

The Commonwealth Club’s new headquarters building is open and John King labeled it “[awkward](#).” They destroyed one of the most historic buildings on the waterfront. It was built in 1910, was designed by an accomplished local architect, and served as Harry Bridges’ union headquarters during the historic 1934 waterfront strike. The police fired tear gas through its windows as wounded strikers were being treated inside. CSFN expressed concerns about the club’s plans, but city leaders did not listen. Specifically:

- The club did not restore the Steuart Street side as they repeatedly claim.
- The new modern glass façade facing the Embarcadero is unappealing and clashes terribly with the historic pre-1906 Audiffred Building immediately next door.
- This modern new façade makes it impossible to create an historic district and save the rest of the buildings on the block, most of which are from the post-1906 era and need restoration.

CSFN members may want to speak up and correct the record when they read false claims about the building. John King buried his criticism in an [article](#) about the architectural firm. That’s probably to be expected because of the *Chronicle*’s “partnership” with the Commonwealth Club. Read the full story on [csfn.net](#).

Submitted by Dave Osgood (RHNA)

STEUART FAÇADE:

The Commonwealth Club’s wildest claim is that they “restored” the Steuart Street front. They neither restored it to the architect’s original 1910 design, nor did they replicate what the building looked like during the 1934 strike. In fact, they removed some of architect Etienne Garin’s significant features that had survived for over 100 years. All they really did was put fresh paint on the mishmash of remodelings that evolved over the decades.



At least the Steuart side is not modern, but they did add a modern third floor which clearly clashes with the lower part. Restoration guidelines call for any modern new floors added on top of an historic building to be set back far enough so they are less apparent. The club asked for, and of course got, an exemption to this sound rule. So the Steuart Street side a complete disaster.

EMBARCADERO FAÇADE:

The club knew an elegant and dignified façade was appropriate for the Embarcadero because that's what their original plans called for. They changed to a modern glass design because they wanted to install an experimental window contraption that might cool the building some. (It's very unlikely such a system will cool their large meeting rooms.) The design does not compliment, nor contrast successfully with, the Audiffred Building next door.



EFFECT ON THE BLOCK:

What's most unfortunate is that this block of mostly (75%) post-1906 era buildings facing the Embarcadero, including the YMCA, now has a modern façade stuck in it. There is no other block like it remaining on the waterfront, and it should have become an historic district. That is no longer possible thanks to the Commonwealth Club.

(Two buildings on the block were built in the 1980s, but they do not clash so badly with their neighbors. Bayside Plaza at the south end of the block looks modern, but it is actually a nautical [Streamline Moderne](#) style which existed at the time of the waterfront strike.)

Most of the world's great cities have restored and protected waterfront blocks of historic and dignified buildings. Think of Amsterdam, St. Petersburg, [The Bund District](#) of Shanghai (shown), and other cities all over Europe. They put their best face forward. Now that cannot happen on San Francisco's waterfront.



ANY LESSONS LEARNED?

Probably not. Seems to be just another example at City Hall of special treatment for special people. As Hiroshi pointed out during his testimony on this project, the owners of older homes are seriously restricted from replacing wooden windows with new metal ones. The Commonwealth Club might only installed cheap replacement windows on the Steuart facade...they tore down the rest of the building! Will planning atrocities like this continue in the future? Probably so.

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Links for more info:

King article (about two-thirds of the way in):

<http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/place/article/Architects-nail-design-of-San-Francisco-Art-12279878.php>

Streamline Moderne style:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Streamline_Moderne

The Bund District:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bund