

Allan Temko speech 1999 Elks Club ARTT

Only my mother could have done a better job introducing me. The first thing they should do is to get a good architect to redo the lighting in here.

I have a particular love affair with Alameda and it takes me back almost twenty years, I can't remember exactly, when a curious gentleman found me named Gerhard Degemann. And he was terribly upset because this town was thinking of destroying the high school. When I recovered from hearing that news (and I just couldn't believe it, that something so marvelous, with such a wonderful history) (you know that's the high school, in the 1930's in all the Hollywood movies, where June Allyson came tap-dancing out) but the damn place was beautiful. And I couldn't understand why anyone would ever consider destroying it. Well, Mr. Degemann is European and he saw a perfectly good building going to waste, and so I asked him to come up to my house, in deepest Berkeley (grin) and he came bearing a half-gallon of ice cream. And I had a little, but he ate the half-gallon while he was explaining the problems about the high school to me. Obviously the place had to be saved. So fortunately, ... Someone once said a free press is wonderful if you own one. At that time, when Scott Newhall was editor of the *Chronicle*, I did in a way own a newspaper. And we got to work on it. But more than that, I brought Professor T.Y. Lin, the great structural engineer, in to look at it, and he couldn't understand why a new high school was being built. He said, "There's nothing much wrong with this," and I think that there were some city officials or consultants who said, "Well, you know, it will cost \$5 million (at that time, almost an unheard of sum of money) to make it safe from earthquakes," and Professor Lin, who was about that high, with no hair, and designs (?) these huge bridges and all kinds of structures, and Gerhard Degemann, and I and, I hate to describe this person as a bureaucrat, but he was, went through it, and Professor Lin says, "Take away a zero." In other words, not \$5 million, but \$500,000. I may have these figures just a little off, but I remember him saying, "Take away a zero."

And so for relatively little money, one could have a treasure, an architectural treasure, and for relatively little money, one can recapture the great City Hall, from the turn of the century, actually from 1895, as it was meant to be, and have a tower, a vertical element, in this group of magnificent downtown buildings. I don't know anyplace in California where there's such an assemblage of very superior buildings, each with its individual personality, as Alameda. There's not only public buildings such as City Hall, which is truncated, and really needs the tower to assert a certain kind of civic dignity, in the center of the city, but all these marvelous buildings, the Carnegie Library across the way, it's an amazing building and architecturally even better, I think, than City Hall which is a good city hall. (Not as good as San Francisco's City Hall). But it's right in there with superior city halls, including Pasadena, it's not as good as that either, but it is really a wonderful statement of civic government. Happily, the renovations that have occurred are not too bad—they're really quite nice, and structurally, the restoration of the tower has been foreseen in this very decent renovation that was carried out a few years ago. So that permits the tower to be rebuilt at a bargain price and I have no doubt the city will find the means, the energy, the vision, to replace the tower which will put the whole composition in focus, and then go on to all the other buildings downtown that need to be saved, and in fact will be a tremendous asset to the city.

This city is delicate. Just a few big mistakes can do great harm. After we saved the high school, I got a phone call from Mr. Degemann. He said, “Mr. Temko, they want to make a Chuck E. Cheese in the theater.” Well the theater, I knew a great deal about, because it was done by Timothy Pflueger, the great Art Deco designer, a marvelous architect. Incidentally, he died after having lunch at an Elks Club event (?). He’s a very good architect. And this is a treasure, so enough people became alarmed, including the *Chronicle*, and it didn’t become a Chuck E. Cheese. All this is just an indication of what one individual, Mr. Degemann, really almost accomplished single-handedly, even though there were many more people involved by the time the controversies were over.

So now we have this building, the City Hall, the library, some of them are not endangered, others are. And of course there’s a treasure of residential architecture that is unmatched in the Bay Area. There was a time, before the 1922 fire in Berkeley, when Berkeley might have had a group of buildings and especially houses, equal to this, but I don’t know of anyplace where there’s this continued level of excellence, these amazing _____ Victorian architecture. There, we see the owners of these houses, have lately done beautiful jobs restoring them, keeping them up, and so I’m not so worried about residential architecture here. It is superb. People who own these houses, and sometimes there are groups of houses, three in a row, that will just be extraordinarily beautiful in themselves, but when you see three or four in a row, you really have something. And this in a city of families is a wonderful lesson for the children. I don’t know if you noticed the model of the city hall done by the second graders taught by my friend Judy Lynch, and what this means by way of education for children. They will not be satisfied with mediocre things when they have learned to appreciate the fine things in this community.

So Godspeed! Alameda’s on the way. It should, in the next generation, make up for the blunders that were made in the last generation. This is a transitional period for the town, and we’ve seen very bad crimes committed: development where it should not have been on the Bay shore (South Shore), which would have one of the nicest outlooks [in the Bay Area] which has since been filled up. But those things are done. Ten, fifteen, twenty years are nothing in the life of a city! And so you must count urban history in terms of generations. And I think we’re on the way, you’re on the way, in Alameda. I look at this as not merely a question of architecture but of culture. I would like to read you a poem by Judy Lynch’s students, second graders. How old are second graders anyway? Seven years old. My brain has turned to Farina. It’s called *Our Tower*. The kids wrote it at Washington School.

City Hall will really flower
With its magic, red brick tower.
It was built in 1895
When none of us was yet alive.
Now City Hall has been redone
And the parts are back, all but one.
So send somebody, buy some bricks
Then we will tell its secret tricks.
The tower is magic. It takes you all the way back
To the days of steam trains on the Lincoln Street [sic] track.
Go through the tower, and you will know
The town of Alameda, a century ago.

Our City Hall will really flower
With its magic, red brick tower.

And, what does that mean? A new generation is going to come up and let's hope that many of them will remain in this beautiful town as they grow up. They will not be satisfied with compromises; they will demand the best. I'm a little like Oscar Wilde, only in this respect, not in others; he said, "My tastes are simple. I require nothing but the best." That is what should be the guiding principal in this town that has been given so much by the past. And everything new should be good. More than that, culturally, economically, I would be very careful before I let any Texan monkey with the business district. I'm told the developer, whose name is Trammel Crow, is called "Trample Crow." But that's not the way to do this town. Certain places, such as Los Angeles, can be planned mile by mile; this town should be planned, cherished, inch by inch almost. You can't get it back once it's lost.

Therefore, I think, you are at a momentous time in the history of Alameda and even in the history of our country. A new wind is blowing in America, which I think stopped destroying things wantonly partly because there is now a law in place to prevent environmental crime. It still goes on. For example, look at the Oakland Coliseum. And Al Davis, well I would consign him to the deepest place in Hell. And he would shake hands with Satan when he got there. When we see the injuries to what was the noblest sports complex in the United States, and see what's been done there. For example, the view of the hills that was the most marvelous thing about the baseball and football stadium, you had an open outfield and you looked up to the hills and to the sky, was unique among modern stadiums. And of course that's been filled up by an appallingly awkward, stupid, vulgar ... I don't want to be hard on it. But all of us have passed it before it was disfigured, and the adjacent arena with its terrific X-bracing, and now they've put sort of a mud pie entrance. It's not necessary, not necessary.

I remember once a more hopeful time, now forty years ago, 39 years ago, when we had a young, educated president, and I worked for him on Pennsylvania Avenue. And I prepared a memo with Patrick Moynihan, who was not yet a senator; in fact he was a rather junior member of the Kennedy administration. And we set out principles for Pennsylvania Avenue. Does it seem so different from Alameda? No, it's really the same kind of thing, something precious to our people. And we just did principles of what should be done with Pennsylvania Avenue. I wrote in something like, it is foreseen that a certain percentage of total cost of Pennsylvania Avenue buildings, I think I said between one and two percent, should go to fine art, fountains, amenities, this sort of thing. And when Moynihan took this in to the President, he looks at this and he said, "How can I explain to Congress between one and two percent of the total cost for art, fountains, amenities?" And then he wrote in the margin, "Hide it." I still have that. Keep it hidden and don't let these howling wolves in Congress know that such things are important. I think we are past this stage. I truly do.

I remember once looking down on Chicago with the great architect Mies Van Der Rohe. We each had had several Martinis. I said, "Mies, what's wrong?" because at night looking down at Chicago it is the greatest abstract expressionist work of art in urban history. It's just when the sun comes up in the morning that you have a little difficulty. I said, "Mies it's so beautiful. What's wrong?" He said, "Once people wanted the best, especially for important things." What are important things? Cathedrals, temples, town halls are important things. He said, "Now they don't want the best. A three legged horse would be cheaper, but who wants a three-legged horse." Therefore, who wants an incomplete City Hall? And you can do it; it's not too expensive.

If you want to see a good tower restored, it hadn't fallen down, go to Mission High in San Francisco, in the Mission district. There's a wonderful tower there, and if you look carefully, you can see the steel inside it. They didn't dismantle the tower, but they snaked in steel. What an uplifting sight that is for a neighborhood that is gradually fighting its way out of (fighting its way—there are a few gangs there) to become a fully civilized place again. It was more civilized when that high school went up in 1920 than it is today.

But Alameda is not in that pickle. Alameda has advantages: its faith in excellence. Where else do you see such a group of churches downtown, all used? I think it is just on the brink of a quiet flowering. Nothing too demonstrative, but these buildings are rich when you look at them. And so, at the risk of having given you a locker room pep talk, I would say that this meeting should just be the start of everything. You have to recognize, which you are, you have to break in to the unenlightened. There's a mortal sin in the Roman Catholic Church called "Invincible Ignorance." Well there are still people in this fine town who are "Invincibly Ignorant." But they'll come round; they'll see how precious it all is. And we can all have a drink to that when it succeeds. Thank you.

Transcribed K. Brownson from tape 1999