



Where's Wurster? : Three buildings in Niles, California; 1940 - 1944.

No kidding! His work can be as illusive as Waldo: First you have to find it, to preserve it.

For fifteen years I drove by this building: always wondering, and aware of rumors that there may be more - but no proof. This historic mystery hadn't crossed my mind for some time, but when the City became interest in demolishing the building, I felt it was time to really know. If this building had any local historic value, the City of Fremont didn't to want to hear about it - they had their historic "round-up" out, and were anxious to spray.



*Dr. Grau Medical Office Building,
Plan, 1941*

First, a comment about preservation, or do I mean conservation. In the practice of giving new life to old buildings, it is better to consider the word - conserva-tion. Preservation implies financial assistance from sources other than the property owner (the public), used to preserve a building, and its use - to the "way it was"; even when the original use of the building no longer relates to present day needs. Preservation projects are few, but there are a lot of buildings ready for a second life; so we create new uses for them while retaining the the shell - adaptive reuse: conservation! In this case, considering the works of the architect, perhaps William Wurster would have preferred conservation over preservation.

It is also best to know you grandparents before you burry them: Who were they, What were their beliefs, passions, accomplishments and loves?

But, what if it is not your time to be buried; What if, there is more to be done; What if, no one remembers who you were!

Well, that simply doesn't happen with valuable historic resources: But when it comes to Modernism - beware; all is not equal, fair and just. Inflammatory words are muttered everyday: its not Victorian, its not Spanish, I do not like it, I think its ugly - how can it be historic!, it's modern.

The Hunt

Why was it so hard for the City to do a little investigation? A simple visit to the Cal Berkeley, Environmental Design Archives was all it took. The Assistant Curator Carrie M. said the research could be easy, as the cataloging of the Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons (WBE) collections was recently completed, but not yet available on the internet.

"What was the name of the town?"

"Niles."

"Let's see what's in the data base."; Bingo!

1. Dr. Eugene Grau Residence, 1941
2. Dr. Eugene Grau, Medical Office, 1941
3. Schuckl Plant No. 1, 1944

After a return trip to research all the documents in the archives, I now had all the information needed to prove, to who ever was interested in listening, that there are in fact - three!, Wurster buildings in Niles; one of which the City wanted to demolish - the Dr. Grau Medical Office Building.

Would Anyone Listen?

Knowing that cities sometimes are seemingly uncontrolled machines of unaccountable civic madness, I called a City Council member to discuss the “find” over a cup of coffee - in person. Hopefully a little newfound history, and pride, could have a positive affect on stopping the demolition plans. Not surprising, the Council Member had never heard of William Wurster, but when I mentioned Sunset Magazine and California outdoor living... the the door was opened, connections were made, the School of Architecture and Environmental Design, Dean at MIT and Cal Berkeley; all the architect’s achievements were discussed, and the Council Member became aware - a grand smile appeared.

Now, the need to demolish this Wurster building was related to a new fire station. The perplexing part of this City project was the selected site. Niles has at least 5 empty lots large enough to accommodate the new neighborhood fire station, and these other sites were actually better situated to serve the community, within this redevelopment district. Niles has a very active community group and the public design meetings on the new fire station were well attended: Three to four meetings, over a few months with approximately 60 attendees.

Every time the community requested the Fire and Planning Departments to look at the other empty lots in town, they returned to the next meeting with the same project on the same lot, no additional research, and no good reason. What was going on?

During the Council meeting where the City staff was presenting the site selection and their community outreach process: It all became clear. After the public input was over, and during the Councils deliberation, I joined members of the Fire Department, at the back of the Council Chambers and asked, with great concern, “Why are you so bent-out-of-shape to build on a lot were know one wants you to, and destroy this building?”

Silence... a sincere gaze - an answer (in a whisper), “It is not us!”; then an inconspicuous gesture towards the City Council: Betrayed!

So, who do you trust, who can you talk to? Thank goodness for CEQA.

Remember... Its Modern!

To be clear, all of the debate around the new fire station did not revolve around the Wurster building. If fact, many within the community were stupefied that it could be considered historic - remember, “It’s Modern”. But since the City had publicly become aware that it had potential historic significance, CEQU required an historic evaluation. Three months later, the architectural historians Page and Turnbull, Inc. of San Francisco deliver their findings - It was “Red Hot Historic”. Beyond reporting on the significance of William Wurster, additional historic issues surfaced: Dr. Grau (1901-1971) was a prominent leader in the Niles com-



Grau Residence, 2006



Dr. Grau Medical Office, 2006



Schuckl Plant No. 1, 1944, Photo Courtesy of Environmental Design Archives, WBE Collection, UC Berkeley.



View of Grau Pond, circa 1940.
Courtesy of ED Archives, UC Berkeley



View of Grau Pond, 2006



Dr. Grau Medical Office
Building , 2006

munity, a member of, the University of California Art Council, the Stanford Alumni Association, the Alameda-Contra Costa County Medical Society, and company doctor for the Pacific States Steel Mill. The Office Building was basically a one-man-hospital, as it was the only medical facility between Oakland and San Jose, and could be considered the predecessor to the Washington Hospital system in Fremont.

His wife Ethel (1905-1988), was daughter of Manuel Valencia (1856-1935) a tonalist landscape painter from San Francisco. Her uncle was General Gabriel Valencia the administrator at the San Francisco Presidio. Ethel studied art at the California School of Fine Arts, the California College of Arts and Crafts; became known for her watercolors, and exhibited her work at the Oakland Museum, the San Francisco Art Association and the De Young Museum.

Wow!

The City Council, immediately changed their story.

What's it Worth?

What just happened? Who suffers and who gains? Has something been preserved, conserved or worse? Does the general public actually care? What about the property owner? What happens to piece of property when it gets identified - "Historic"; the City walked - who else will?

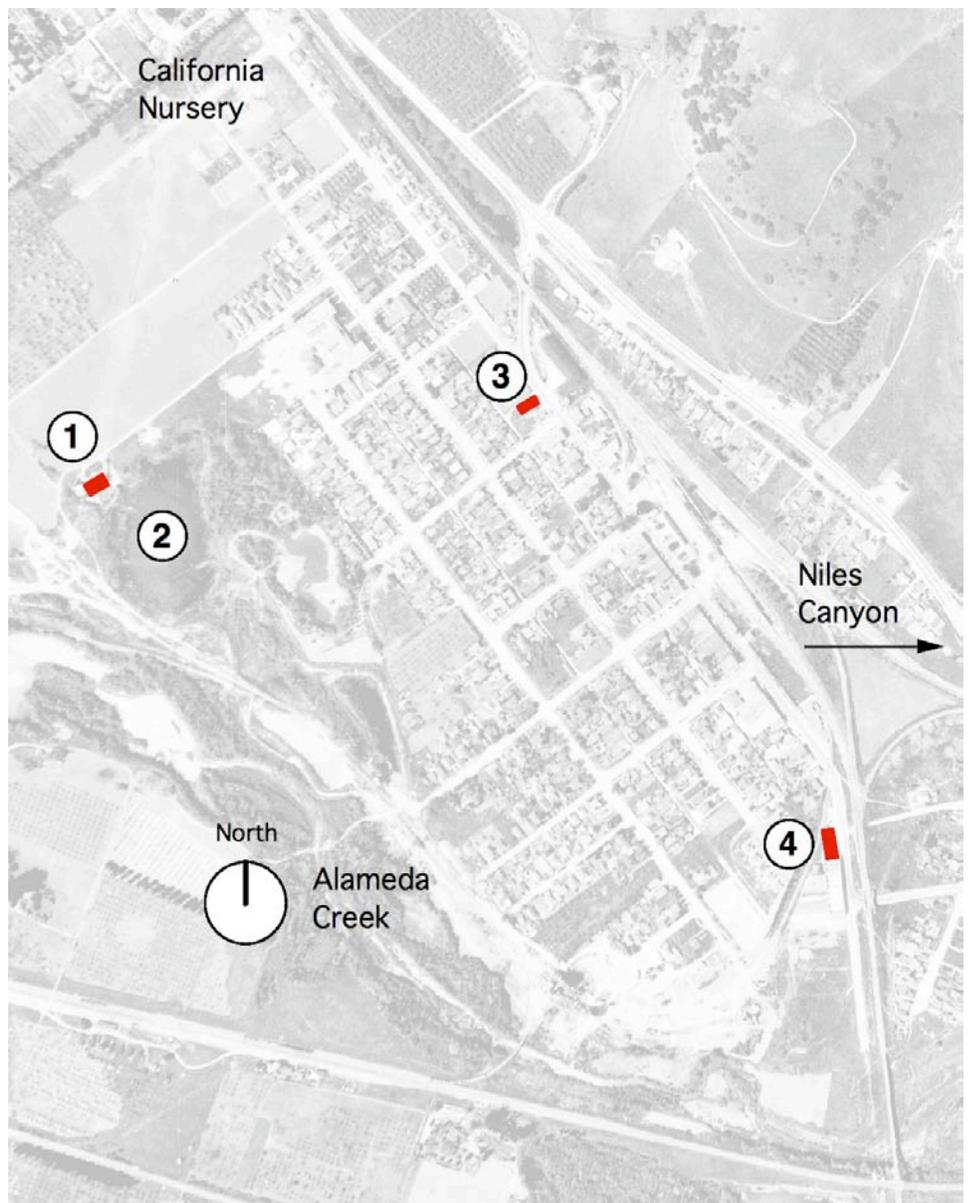
At the onset of this discovery, and acutely aware of the pitfalls of owning a historic structure, I took the time to get to know the building owner; I explained the history. Not much of a reaction, a little ambivalence; wondered what all the fuss was about, and actually didn't know any more than anyone else. He also didn't mind selling it to the City - at a fair market price!

Then one day (at 11:30 PM) I received a call from the David, the owner of the Wurster Building,

"Paul, I've been on the internet for the past three hours - its amazing! - it didn't sink in when you told me; I can't believe it - I just, can't, believe it! - I know who this guy was. I remember... all that outdoor living stuff: I own a Redwood Bill building, I actually own a Redwood Bill!"

Pride comes in many forms, and that is worth preserving.

Paul Welschmeyer, AIA
2006



Wurster in Niles - Aerial Photo Source: Pacific Aerial Photos, 24 March 1947

Resources and Photo Credits

1. Numerous Conversations with Richard C. Peters, Professor of Architecture emeritus, University of California at Berkeley.
2. Environmental Design Archives, Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons collection, University of California at Berkeley.
3. Historic Resource Evaluation, Office of Dr. Grau, Page & Turnbull, Inc. April 2005.
www.fremont.gov/NR/rdonlyres/enip5tcj2zucnrwdynlpyn6xyom4rd7nkak6rv75opm4w4j3zmdo2hlpkotiryaacnxbw3jswuyjsn67vtygweldd/FINAL+HR_37275+niles.pdf
4. Manuel Valencia Biography, www.askart.com
5. All photos and drawings by Paul Welschmeyer Architects except as captioned.