

PRESERVATION ARCHITECTURE

February 22, 2010

St. Matthew Catholic Church
1 Notre Dame Avenue
San Mateo, CA 94402
Attn: Brian Swartz

Brian:

Here's are my historic architectural observations in response to your inquiry about the St. Matthew School's Auditorium.

The St. Matthew School (SMS) of San Mateo originated in 1931 on the site of the former residential estate of Charles W. Clark, first occupying the former Clark residence, thereafter adding proper school buildings to the property. The first set, an auditorium and classroom building, were constructed in 1936. In 1938, another classroom building was added, followed by additional classrooms in 1948, all the while retaining the original residence, presumably for administration purposes. That former residence was removed and replaced in 1953 by a convent, which is today the Parish House and administration building. Lastly and most recently, the St. Matthew Catholic Church (SMCC) was constructed on the site in 1966, rounding out the St. Matthew Parish complex as it stands today.

There is, to date, no identification of the SMS Auditorium building – or of any of the buildings of the SMS or SMCC – as an historic or potentially historic resource, and there is no evidence of any motion in that direction.

The SMCC did not originate on this property, but was housed in two previous church buildings, the first dating to the 1860s and the second to the late-1800s, both located in downtown San Mateo. Its second home was utilized until their move to the current church building on the subject site. In 1982, the second SMCC was demolished.

The 1966 SMCC is documented in a book about its creation, and which acknowledges some information about the history of the institution. However, but for the general information noted above, apparently little about the SMS property and buildings has been recorded. There is, at this juncture, no known architect or builders of the original SMS buildings, and no original documentation about the SMS has been located. So the historical evidence about the SMS is scant.

The 1936 SMS Auditorium building stands at the center of the overall property and facing east to El Camino Real, with a secondary, internal frontage to the south. The Auditorium is a building of simple nobility. Its overall form and characteristics distinguish it as an auditorium structure of the Spanish Colonial Revival Style. This style was an important one for civic and school buildings of its period and locale. It is also, apparently, an all-concrete building, so – given its timeframe – has the potential to be of good quality construction.

On the basis of its age and of its being the oldest structure of St. Matthew Catholic Parish in San Mateo, the Auditorium building appears to have potential historical importance. Its architectural style and character, while modest, reinforce its potential importance (as does the further assumption that it is of construction worthy of retention).

The Auditorium building is not a freestanding structure, but is partially incorporated into associated

SMS buildings of the 1930s and 40s. In this respect, despite its relative scale and prominence, it is difficult to isolate the Auditorium for the purposes of individual identification. Since it is part of a larger grouping, it has limited individual recognition. Moreover, the overall setting of the original SMS buildings has been compromised, beginning with the Auditorium's placement and façade on El Camino Real. It can easily be assumed that the Auditorium's façade once had a more gracious relationship to its frontage. Today, its presence on El Camino Real is diminished both by the intensity of that roadway and by the character of the perimeter of the church property, which is strictly and somewhat unpleasantly bound by undistinguished masonry walls. (In fact, for example, a fenced, central trash area adjoins the Auditorium building directly along the El Camino Real frontage.)

The issue of the importance of context extends to the original SMS group of buildings. Based on extant conditions, with areas of the site shared by these buildings dominated by paved drives and parking areas, it is very hard to imagine what the original site would have been like upon the school's completion in the 1940s. The current site and setting provide no clear evidence of an original planning concept. Given that it was a school, there were undoubtedly open areas of outdoor use.

Today, such open and possibly landscaped areas are not identifiable, with the exception of the open landscapes to the north of the Auditorium. Presumably, when the new SMCC was added to the site, landscape and site patterns were significantly affected. As a result, while the original school complex stands, the original, physical setting and context changed to the extent that the site and setting are merely circumstantial, thus compromising the overall character of the property and of its consideration as a potential historic resource.

On first glance, the Auditorium building and, by extension, the adjoining school buildings appear to have potential historical significance. Yet, upon further consideration, potential significance appears somewhat compromised by changes to the immediate setting and context.

Current considerations lie in the balance between these two perspectives.

Nonetheless, I must conclude that the Auditorium building has historical potential, as it is the oldest structure of the SMS and SMCC, and as it is an apparently good quality Spanish Colonial Revival school building.

And yet, even if its potential significance is confirmed and formalized, adding to this structure is possible. There are no standards of historic preservation practice that prohibit adding to an historic structure or property. Even highly significant properties such as National Historic Landmarks have been added to. The more relevant question is what constitutes an appropriate addition to an historic building and/or property. A baseline consideration is that building additions to historic resources should not adversely impact any identified basis for significance. In this instance, the building's primary and secondary facades are obviously its most important architectural characteristics, whereas its north façade is relatively undistinguished. This basic premise would suggest that a building addition to the north would be the more appropriate (also presuming that that portion of the property does not constitute any kind of a significant piece or pattern of landscape). Likewise, the Auditorium's west facing exterior also does not constitute an area of primary significance, notwithstanding that there are of course existing buildings that adjoin the Auditorium to the west, one of which was also an original structure to the 1930s SMS. However, the other building was a convent added in the 1950s. From an historic resources perspective, it can be suggested that the original grouping of SMS buildings, with the Auditorium building front and center, are the more historically interesting and relevant structures, and that the convent is of lesser importance. On that basis, preservation priorities further suggest that the current location of the Parish House could be an appropriate site for a building addition to the SMS Auditorium.

While understanding that there are pros and cons to possible building additions and their respective sites and effects, the point is that additions to historic buildings are acceptable if appropriately planned and designed with specific respect to the historic resource.

On the other hand – specific to the question of whether the Auditorium building may be removed – the answer at present is also a conditional yes. At present, there are simply no specific prohibitions against any proposal to do so, as the structure has not been identified as a potential historic resource at any jurisdictional level – local, state or national. Nor, in the course of the recent process proposing to add a new SMS building does it appear that any outside suggestion was raised about historical potential. So it seems that there is a possibility of removing this or another structure from the campus (while also understanding that a proposal to do so may trigger consideration of whether the proposed demolition has any historic resource consequences).

It may also be demonstrated that removal of a structure would have several overriding benefits, including mitigating density of the built environment, retention of open space, as well as the possibility of beneficially resolving the site plan. Such planning consideration is not entirely separate from the historic resources issue. Still, given the relative prominence of the Auditorium building, the question of building removal should also be balanced by consideration of buildings other than the Auditorium.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Hulbert". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "M" and a long, sweeping underline.

Mark Hulbert
Preservation Architect