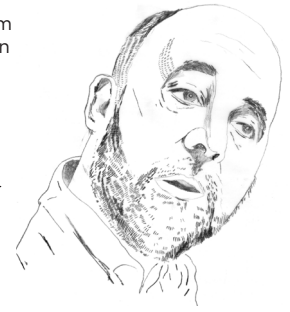


Ask

an Urban Historian

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Q: San Jose, Calif. and London, England find themselves in a similar historic preservation predicament: Both cities are deciding whether to save or demolish large libraries built in the Brutalist style. While London has a significant number of architects and activists united to try to save its Brutalist library, San Jose struggles to get any support to save any of its midcentury buildings, let alone a tough sell like the old Martin Luther King Library on San Carlos. The midcentury time period is very important to telling the story of San Jose from its beginnings as the state capitol to its status as the birthplace of high tech ... every year we lose more and more structures. How do we make it stop?

— Dionne Early, San Jose, Calif.

The Brutalist period from the middle of the last century can be a hard one to love. It's like gin — an acquired taste.

Despite the acclaim for its most famous practitioners — French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier, the British couple Alison and Peter Smithson, and for a time, the American Paul Rudolph — poured-in-place concrete doesn't have as many fans as other midcentury architectural styles.



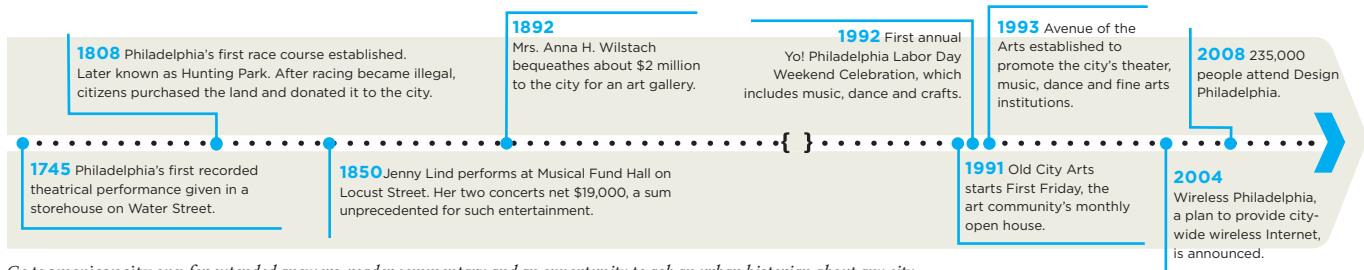
Concrete gave architects the opportunity to create fluidity with forms, yet unlike steel, the material did not give the users much flexibility for future modifications. In addition, the material's heaviness resulted in fortress-like buildings, such as Boston's City Hall by Kallman, McKinnell and Knowles, and the Art and Architecture Building at Yale University by Rudolph. On the other hand, some of Marcel Breuer's buildings, such as the Whitney Museum in New York City, are widely appreciated.

In California many Brutalist buildings are no longer considered safe in a seismic event. So even delightful examples, like Mario Ciampi's Berkeley Art Museum, will likely be torn down. It's too bad, because cities can afford the occasional bold, Brutal insertion; it adds to the collage. Diller Scofidio + Renfro's recent intervention at Alice Tully Hall in New York City has garnered near-universal praise and provides an inviting third option besides restoration or demolition.

Regarding the former Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library on San Carlos Street in downtown San Jose, we may have a disagreement over definitions. I don't think the library you mention is a fine example of the Brutalist period, to judge by the photos I found on the Internet. I think it falls more in the neo-romantic lineage of Edward Durrell Stone's and Minoru Yamasaki's work from the early '60s. The petal-like columns and fluted window frames recall some of their institutional work. However, a close reading of the San Jose Redevelopment Agency's analysis from May 2008 doesn't make a strong argument against landmarking the building. But between the lines you can read why it won't be saved. There isn't the political will. One senses the city feels the land is too valuable for an outdated library that isn't yet 50 years old.

Landmarking buildings is not an objective process based on unbiased information — it is a political process. The demolition of the modest but handsome Daphne Funeral Home by A. Quincy Jones in San Francisco a decade ago led to a wider appreciation for modernism in the region, including an effort to document and conserve buildings of the modern movement by the advocacy group DOCOMOMO. My advice to any preservation advocate would be to become active in the Northern California chapter of DOCOMOMO U.S. ✕

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