The Stanislaus County Hall of Records:
Modesto’s Monument to Modern Architecture

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The Stanislaus County Hall of Records by Russell Guerne DeLappe, Modesto, California. Photograph by author.
Summary

Stanislaus County Hall of Records

Construction began in 1938, completed in 1939

Additions began in 1949, completed in 1950

Address: 1100 I St., Modesto, California

Architect: Russell Guerne DeLappe

Structural Engineer: H. J. Brunnier

Mechanical Engineering: Arthur H. Memmler

General Contractor: Dinwiddie Construction Co.

State Facility Number: 50-A2

Style/Period: International Style, depression era

Status: Building is in use as a Family Law office, clerk’s office, contains improvised courtrooms, vulnerable site, the completion of new courthouse on G, H, 9th and 10th Streets puts it at risk, good candidate for rehabilitation, third and fourth floors currently unoccupied and used as storage

Condition: exterior is in very good condition, basement and first floor occupied daily, current improvised facilities are inadequate for courtroom use

Occupancy: Joint occupancy by Stanislaus County and State of California

Floors: Four floors plus basement level and roof penthouse

Materials: Reinforced concrete, steel and glass

Square Footage: 45,343
Introduction: Behind the Leaves on I Street

The Stanislaus County Hall of Records is a portal into Modesto’s history and the city’s place in a larger national and international narrative. The structure was designed by Modesto’s very own Russell Guerne DeLappe, who was also the son of a prominent local doctor. The Hall of Records is contextualized by the nation’s recovery from the Great Depression, as it was built using New Deal funds. The building is also evidence of a twenty year journey of the modernist Bauhaus architectural style from Germany in 1919 to New York in 1932 where it was repackaged as the International Style. This style manifested in Modesto in 1939 in the Hall of Records. In fact, the building is acclaimed as the first ever International Style county building in California.¹ The building stands on the block demarcated by I, H, 11th and 12th Streets facing the former post office. Its unadorned modernist façade is partially obscured by trees that rival it in height, perhaps a fitting metaphor for Modesto’s partial knowledge of this piece of its cultural heritage. However, the importance of this landmark must become common knowledge to secure its place in Modesto’s future. This report is intended as a step toward that goal.

It is crucial that we understand and appreciate the historical, economic and cultural value of the building now more than ever, since some or all of its current functions will be replaced in the near future when Stanislaus County’s new courthouse complex is built. This upcoming transition, likely to be completed by the early-to-mid 2020s, brings with it an uncertain future for the older court facilities. In a 2015 interview with The Modesto Bee, former mayor Carol Whiteside shared her ideas for what could be built in the future on the I Street block containing the Stanislaus County Hall of Records, as if it were already decided that it and the adjacent Main Courthouse would be demolished once the new court facilities are built on 9th Street.² No official decision has been reached as of yet, but this speculation highlights the

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¹ Ray McDevitt, Courthouses of California: An Illustrated History (Berkeley: Heyday, 2001), 32.
vulnerability of the building. Any 78-year-old building, such as the Hall of Records, naturally has its share of structural issues. Such concerns have been used in the past to support arguments favoring demolition and will likely be used again in the future by those who are already speculating about what could be built in the place of the Hall of Records. But it is important to remember that these arguments have no basis in the real value of the building, which far exceeds its current uses. To lose the Hall of Records would be to permanently forfeit a local icon of modern architecture which helps put Modesto on the map, it would hinder progress toward an increasingly vibrant and lucrative downtown district full of unique and irreplaceable buildings and would erase a great accomplishment of one of Modesto’s notable historic figures. For these reasons and more, the building’s repair and rehabilitation would be more than worth the cost. Demolition must not be considered an option.

The following sections take us a step beyond the trees on I Street to take a good look at the Hall of Records. The first section explains in more detail the contemporary events which have put it in potential danger. Section two explores some benefits of preserving and rehabilitating the building. Section three provides a brief history of the land the Hall of Records stands on, and four provides background on the architect. Finally, section five identifies the key features of the International Style as they manifested in the Hall of Records.

Figure 1: The Hall of Records as seen from I Street. The tree on the left is a pistache and the one on the right is a basswood. September 1, 2017. Photograph by author.
1. The Hall of Records in Limbo

Speculation about the fate of the Hall of Records pre-dates the 2015 interview with former Modesto mayor Carol Whiteside. To understand the current danger the Hall of Records faces, we must go back about twenty years. The 1997 Lockyer-Isenberg Trial Court Funding Act began a decade-long process of transferring the responsibility of county court facilities to the State to assure more equal access to the judicial branch for California citizens across counties. The 1997 act shifted financial responsibility for court facilities to the State, and the subsequent 2002 Trial Court Facilities Act began transferring the ownership of court buildings away from the counties. The transfer of the Stanislaus County Hall of Records and the Main Courthouse was completed in December 2008. Today, the State owns and maintains the majority of the complex which includes the Hall of Records. However, the County entered into a “Joint Occupancy Agreement” with the State, meaning that it still uses and pays for a portion of the space in the building.

Tracing this transfer process highlights the tenuous position of the Hall of Records. The Hall of Records was initially left out of the transfer of county court facilities initiated by the Trial Court Facilities Act due to concerns over its seismic stability. The State had given it a seismic rating which indicated “substantial risk,” and thus would not accept the building. One major reason for this rating was the concern over soil liquefaction and subsidence in the event of an earthquake. However, a subsequent 2007 analysis of the structure’s suitability was funded by the County and conducted by a San Francisco engineering firm. The new report was instrumental in convincing the State to accept the transfer. The firm drew on a previous study of the adjacent block where the Gallo Center for the Arts resides, which demonstrated that the earth underneath did not pose the danger of liquefaction. Ultimately, the seismic rating was upgraded and the State accepted the transfer.

The December 9, 2008 paperwork demarcating the terms and conditions of the transfer of the Hall of Records from the County to the State indicates plans to eventually demolish the building and construct a new court building in its footprint. The document asserted that the age of the building, its lack of updated code requirements and the plans of the Administrative Office of the Court’s plan to build new court facilities makes it impractical to overhaul the infrastructure in the Hall of Records. The document cited that the Administrative Office of the Courts’ “long term facility plan is to level the Hall of Records and Building and replace it with a new court building.”

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6 Board of Supervisors of the County of Stanislaus, “Action Agenda Summary: Board Agenda # B-7,” Modesto: Chief Executive Office, December 9, 2008, 11.
This changed slightly in 2010, however. A document assembled by the Administrative Office of the Courts considered the demolition of the 1939 Hall of Records for procurement of space for new court facilities, but ultimately advocated the consolidation of facilities across the County until a new courthouse was constructed at a different site instead. Nonetheless, the document states that “existing court facilities will remain in use until the new courthouse is completed and then will be disposed of to partially offset the cost of the new courthouse.”

It is not clear whether all or some of the old facilities are to be “disposed of.” Still, this document assembled a detailed case for the demolition of the Hall of Records that future advocates could easily draw on. It should be noted, however, that neither the 2008 nor 2010 documents even consider the historic value of the building.

More recently, land was selected for a new courthouse facility a short distance away, at the block demarcated by 9th, 10th, G and H Streets. The new facilities, to be designed by the notable SOM (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill) architecture firm, were recently projected to be completed by 2021 or 2022. An amendment to the County-State lease agreement made in March 2017, reflects this timeline. The amendment stipulated that the State could terminate the lease on the Hall of Records and old Main Courthouse any time after March 2021, provided they give sixty days’ notice. It remains uncertain what will befall the building in the event that the State terminates its lease and the County reclaims total authority over the Hall of Records and its current function is outsourced to a new and updated site. The Hall of Records is even deeper in this limbo because State funding for the new SOM courthouse project is currently lacking. This throws the 2021/2022 timeline into doubt. Regardless whether the new courthouse is completed on time or a few years later, neither the State nor the County will have much incentive to invest extensively in the repair or rehabilitation of the old existing structures whose current function will soon be replaced.

It should be noted that many of the practical issues with the Hall of Records stem from the fact that its current uses are incompatible with its original intentions. The architect designed the building specifically to meet the needs of specific County departments in 1939. Today’s occupants adapt the older building to uses which were not originally foreseen. Two conference rooms-turned-jury rooms have large 26x26 inch columns obstructing the view from the seats of some jurors and members of the viewing public. Much of the building is also now

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9 http://www.courts.ca.gov/facilities-stanislaus.htm
used as storage space for various County and State departments. In addition, neither the Hall of Records nor the Main Courthouse contain infrastructure for separating the circulation of the public, employees and inmates throughout the buildings. This makes careful choreographing of movement necessary, and puts an extra burden on security staff. Such issues will be solved when the new and up-to-date courthouse is completed. However, the future of the Hall of Records can be secured by finding more suitable uses after it ceases to function as a court building.

2. Preserving a Modesto Landmark

Some of the issues stemming from the inappropriate and unintended uses of the Hall of Records have been sketched above, but the fate of the building should not be decided based on them alone. Economic, cultural and aesthetic benefits will intertwine in any future efforts to preserve and rehabilitate the Hall of Records. Modestans should bear in mind the multifaceted value that such a fantastic example of depression era architecture has for the city and the world. Local architect Barrett Lipomi describes the building as a “Mid-century Gem,” and advocates that we put it to a new and creative uses similar to the neoclassical former post office directly across the street, which now houses a law office.\(^\text{12}\) Admiration for the Hall of Records extended beyond the local level as well. A piece in the *San Francisco Chronicle* asserted that “Beauty and utility were never more neatly combined.”\(^\text{13}\) To quote Lee Davis, founder of Modesto Design Collective (MO.DE) and the Center for Social Design at the Maryland Institute College of Art, “Modesto’s design history is anything but modest.”\(^\text{14}\)

There are many benefits to historic preservation. The rehabilitation of an old building is often a more economical option. Rehabilitating the Hall of Records would spare the expenses of demolition and new construction, for instance. Preservation would also save a massive amount of material resources. The National Trust for Historic Preservation notes that about 25% of all landfill waste originates from construction and demolition.\(^\text{15}\) In an age where environmental sustainability is rapidly gaining in importance, the rehabilitation of historic buildings deserves consideration along with renewable energy sources and products such as reusable grocery


In addition, preservation would direct city resources to already existing infrastructure and breathe new life into previous public investments instead of starting from scratch.

The Hall of Records is a major and unique component of Modesto’s considerable architectural legacy. This legacy includes the 1939 Heckendorf House by John Funk, which was featured on the cover of a catalogue for a 1944 exhibition on modern architecture titled “Built in USA” by the New York Museum of Modern Art. Nationally and internationally notable architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Christopher Alexander also designed structures in Modesto. In addition, the Hall of Records is the oldest structure amidst a veritable skyline of modern architecture in Modesto’s current downtown district. An old aerial photograph shows it as the lone modernist structure a few years after it was completed (Figure 2). Nearest to the Hall of Records today are the 1960 Modesto City Hall by Milton T. Pflueger and the 1960 Stanislaus County Courthouse by Mitchell van Bourg. Other nearby modernist buildings include the 1949 AT&T building, the 1965 Modesto Savings and Loan and the 1971 Stanislaus County Library. While these downtown buildings are currently included in tours conducted yearly during the Modesto Architecture Festival, their potential to form downtown into a cultural hotspot is only beginning to be developed. Maintaining the integrity of this constellation of historic architecture is crucial to such an aim.

Figure 2: The Hall of Records and Old Courthouse from Above. Circa 1943. Photographer unknown.

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Preserving unique buildings such as the Hall of Records can also generate revenue in various forms. Preservationist Donovan Rypkema stated “In economics it is the differentiated product that commands a monetary premium. [...] It is the built environment that expresses, perhaps better than anything else, a community’s diversity, identity, individuality, in short its differentiation.” Modesto benefits from preserving structures built by renowned architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Christopher Alexander since they place the city on the map for investors, heritage tourists and those who are interested in historic architecture. However, Modesto has a unique advantage in preserving the Hall of Records, since the city the childhood home of DeLappe (he was raised in Modesto from the age of one and lies buried in Modesto’s Acacia Memorial Park). Of all the cities DeLappe built in, only one was his hometown. Take, for example, the small city of Richland Center, Wisconsin, with a population of about 5,000. The city has the distinction of being Frank Lloyd Wright’s birthplace. The city boasts one structure built by the famous architect. The Albert D. German warehouse, designed by Wright in 1915, serves as the city’s “differentiated product.” While the warehouse is not as grand as some of Wright’s more famous buildings, it is sufficient to draw heritage tourists to the small city from far and wide. While DeLappe’s is not a household name like Wright’s, Modesto is still in a unique position to benefit from his legacy. For Modesto to save and maintain structures built by notable non-local architects such as Wright’s Walton House but not those of a city native would be the epitome of disregard for local history, culture and would miss a potentially major economic opportunity.

If it is rehabilitated once the new courthouse complex is built, the Hall of Records will stand as a monument to Modesto’s past while actively contributing to its future. This said, a history of the Hall of Records will help clarify how the building differentiates the city of Modesto and makes the experience of downtown completely unique.

3. Origins

Today, the entire block where the Hall of Records is located is packed with physical traces of Modesto history. A collection of war memorials stand on the grassy plot in front of the Hall of Records. Two old and corroded signs are barely legible, mostly engulfed in the trunks of very old basswood trees. One reads “reserved for ladies and their escorts,” evidence of another time when public space was divided more strictly based on gender and marital status (Figure 3). The statue of the Goddess of Justice which once adorned the original 1872 courthouse stands in the main entrance room to the newer 1960 facility. This statue is not the only remnant of the old courthouse, though. The patio adjacent to the current employee parking lot is paved with bricks saved from the original, demolished building (Figure 4). These traces of the past are

relics, largely valuable for what they mark and commemorate, but not for their utility. The Hall of Records, however, can be both a monument to the past and a living part of Modesto’s future economy and culture.

Figure 3: Tree Plaque and Hall of Records. The tarnished letters read: “Reserved for ladies and their escorts.” Photograph by author.

Figure 4: Brick Patio and Hall of Records from Behind. Patio bricks belonged to the 1872 courthouse. Photograph by author.

If it were preserved today, the original, demolished Stanislaus County Courthouse, by architect Albert A. Bennet, would be a living reminder of Modesto’s first years. It was built in 1872 just after the founding of the city of Modesto in 1870 and almost two decades since the
founding of Stanislaus County in 1854 (Figure 5). Another structure, called the Court House Annex or the old Hall of Records was added to the Courthouse in 1901. By this time, Modesto’s population was about 2,000. The annex was a fireproofed extension intended for storing local records. The function of this structure would be taken on by the 1939 Hall of Records by Russell Guerne DeLappe at a time when the city’s population was nearing 16,000 and Stanislaus County’s approaching 75,000. DeLappe was also the architect of the 1950 additions to the Hall of Records which added 3,600 square feet to its footprint.

Figure 5: Old Courthouse. Circa 1940. Courtesy of the McHenry Museum. The 1901 courthouse annex is the section on the left, the original 1872 courthouse is in the middle with the Goddess of Justice on top and a rear portion of the 1939 Hall of Records in on the far right. The original courthouse staircase is missing.

Construction of the Hall of Records was made possible by New Deal funding for public infrastructure. The PWA (Public Works Administration), previously titled the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, paid for $77,049 of its $211,000 cost. During the Depression, the PWA also bestowed Modesto with $380,000 to extend and improve local irrigation systems.

19 George H. Tinkham, History of Stanislaus County, California (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1921), 108.
21 Ibid., 15.
infrastructure.⁸³ Murals inside Modesto’s 1933 Renaissance Revival style former post office across the street from the Hall of Records were also funded during the New Deal, but by the WPA (Works Progress Administration) instead. In total, the PWA allocated $4 billion to over 34,000 public building projects, and almost every county in the US benefited.⁸⁴

Until 1958, the 1939 Hall of Records was neighbored by the original 1872 courthouse. Complaints about the disrepair of the old courthouse, one even taking the form of a poem, led to a vote on County Measure Number 2 in 1956, which was a bond measure allowing Stanislaus County to take on a debt of 1.5 million for a replacement.⁸⁵ Although, one could easily have asked why Stanislaus County did not properly maintain the courthouse. This was potentially a case of “demolition by neglect.” The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines demolition by neglect as “a situation in which a property owner intentionally allows a historic property to suffer severe deterioration, potentially beyond the point of repair. Property owners may use this kind of long-term neglect to circumvent historic preservation regulations.”⁸⁶ In 1958 the old courthouse was demolished. The new Main Courthouse, by Mitchell van Bourg, who was a former partner of DeLappe, was completed in 1960.⁸⁷ DeLappe and Van Bourg’s connected structures still stand today, a testament to the partnership of the two architects.

Modesto’s courthouse history spans the entire life of the city, from the 1870’s to the present. The early part of this timeline exists only in the form of words on paper, photographs and in the small traces of history mentioned above. However, if the Hall of Records is preserved, Modesto’s timeline from 1939 onward will have a real, physical manifestation on that site. Do we demolish what still stands of this timeline and start it again in the 2020s with just pieces of our historic buildings remaining? Or do we keep it intact so that we encounter it during our downtown errands and strolls?

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²⁵ Poem and Bond Measure available at the McHenry Museum.
²⁷ McDevitt, *Courthouses of California*, 33.
4. The Architect

![Figure 6: Russell Guerne Delappe: Circa 1945. Courtesy of McHenry Museum.](image)

Preserving the Hall of Records will also safeguard the legacy of a distinguished Modesto architect. Much of this legacy, once much more ubiquitous in Modesto’s cityscape, can now only be accessed through newspaper articles, history books and old photographs. However, his International Style county building built for his hometown still stands, and it serve as a reminder of his importance. He designed many residences and offices, but also huge county projects and public buildings which shaped cityscapes in seven California counties.\(^28\) Modesto fostered this architect before he went on to build across the state. However, if any city should work to preserve the works of Russell Delappe, it is Modesto.

Russell Guerne Delappe became a Modesto resident in 1898 when he was one year old, having moved with his family from his birthplace, Santa Rosa, California. He graduated from Modesto high school and went on to receive two degrees from UC Berkeley. He received his Bachelor of Arts from the College of Letters and Science in 1920 and his Master of Arts in architecture in 1923. Immediately following his Berkeley graduation Delappe worked under Bay Area architect William Knowles as chief designer from 1923-26.\(^29\) During this time, he worked on large-scale projects, including the $2,000,000 Athens Athletics Club and the 1.3 million dollar Elks Club Building. Both are now demolished, but these projects won Delappe considerable notoriety.\(^30\) Although his main offices remained in the Bay Area, he completed numerous projects in his hometown of Modesto after developing his own practice. A few of these buildings included the 1928 Mellis Brothers grocery store, the Stanislaus County hospital started in 1927, an office for himself and his father on 301 Downey, several private residences

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\(^{28}\) These include Alameda, Humboldt, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Sonoma, Sutter and Stanislaus Counties.


\(^{30}\) “Unit System Adopted by Supervisors in Planning Modern County Hospital,” The Modesto News Herald, Thursday, July 14, 1927, P. 4.
which still stand in Modesto, and the 1928 Elias-Harris building, which once stood where the Gallo Center for the Arts is today.

DeLappe built in both the modernist International Style and in Art Deco. The International Style emerged in the early 1920s and is described by a geometric and utilitarian aesthetic (more on this in the next section). The term Art Deco originated at the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris. However, the first Art Deco style buildings date to before WWI. Famous examples in architecture include the 1913 Theatre des Champs Elysee in Paris and the 1930 Chrysler Building in New York. The style is a pastiche or imitation of a mixture of styles including Cubism, ancient Greek, Mayan and Egyptian architecture and motifs from eighteenth-century French furniture. The style initially incorporated luxurious materials and ornate decorative elements. DeLappe’s buildings in both styles received awards. His International Style Modesto Irrigation District office was the only public building to win an award from the American Institute of Architects’ Continental Competition in 1957. The award was posthumous, however. His Whitehurst-Shannon Funeral Chapel also won an award from the Art Deco Society of California in 1985.31 Despite their acclaim, both buildings were demolished.

DeLappe died in 1955 at the age of 58. By this time he had designed dozens of buildings all over California, and would have undoubtedly designed more if not for his early death. Only a small portion of DeLappe’s buildings are mentioned above. Apart from Modesto and Oakland, he used his skills as an architect to serve the cities of Eureka, Berkeley, Napa, Yuba City, Pleasanton, Fremont, Ceres, Vacaville and more. Those who knew him described him as a man of integrity and compassion. Upon being diagnosed with a heart condition in the 50s, DeLappe devoted himself to researching architecture to accommodate cardiac patients and the mobility-impaired.32 One former employee described DeLappe’s consistent efforts to support the quality of his work above time and profit as his “characteristic decisions.”33

32 Ibid., 840.
33 Letter from architect Fred Dyer-Bennett can be found at the McHenry Museum.
5. Modesto’s International Style Heirloom

“The county Hall of Records from 1939, very modernist, and very progressive. It fascinating that a city the size of Modesto embraced modernism at that time for its public buildings. It’s an extraordinary building, a concrete building but the details of it show that it is not an imitative building at all. The architect really knew what he was doing to fit it to that site.”

--- Allen Hess, Architect, Historian

DeLappe’s Hall of Records signaled the embrace of the modernist International Style in California civic architecture. A 1985 Modesto Bee article expressed that DeLappe’s civic building showcased a modern, simplified materiality reminiscent of the style of the Bauhaus architects and the buildings of Le Corbusier, both of whom were included under the parameters of International Style. The similarities of the Hall of Records and the Bauhaus style can be easily seen when the building is compared to the Bauhaus School building (Figure 7 and 8). The image below, which masquerades the Hall of Records as the Bauhaus School in Dessau, Germany, was crafted and presented by Lee Davis at a 2017 Modesto Design Collective event. This was intended to impart that the often overlooked city of Modesto actually has design connections to one of the last century’s most famous buildings and to an architectural style which shaped cities all over the world.

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The turn toward the International Style, which is marked by the regularity, functional design and lack of ornamentation, was justifiable under the economic straits of the Great Depression and during the New Deal. At this time, the construction of public buildings in imitative, luxurious and decorative styles, as exhibited by the classic revival 1872 Courthouse, was an inefficient use of funds. If the Hall of Records is not appealing or exciting to the eye in the way of a Gothic cathedral or a Las Vegas style casino, it is because the inter-war era conservation of resources and the New Deal’s reliance on taxpayer money dictated as much. The International Style lent itself to such frugality. The term International Style has its origin in a 1932 NY MOMA exhibition titled “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” and its accompanying book, *The International Style*. The central claim of the exhibit and the book was that a new form of modern architecture had emerged during the 1920s which was as pure, cohesive and as characteristic of their times as ancient Greek and Gothic architecture were in theirs.\(^3^6\) The exhibition and its accompanying book also claimed that American architects were slow to realize that a new style had emerged and were stuck imitating the styles of the past.

The New Deal funded county buildings of an architectural style often referred to as PWA Moderne. However, while the Hall of Records was built using PWA funds, it does not exhibit the paired-down Art-Deco influence or imitative elements of many PWA Moderne buildings. Even in its spare, New Deal form, PWA-influenced Art Deco applies the kind of ornamentation which was rejected by the International Style. The 1936 PWA Moderne Alameda County Courthouse features windows and doorways which stretch upward in a manner which exudes Greco-Roman authority (Figure 9). While the expense of imitation columns is avoided, the Alameda Courthouse still features flutes in its load bearing columns, an unmistakable reference to the ancient Greek temple. Various ornamentations encircle the surface of the building, including

Art Deco eagles adorning the side entryways (Figure 10). The Hall or Records, conversely, features the more dominant horizontal elements and the total avoidance of ornament which are characteristic of the International Style (Figure 7 and 8). Thus, the Hall of Records is PWA funded, but not PWA Moderne.

Figure 9: Alameda County Courthouse front entrance. This building is a prime example of PWA Moderne. While the building is angular and utilitarian in form, it still features ornamentations on its doors and windows, and has clear references to ancient Greek architecture, but with Art Deco elements. The building exudes a sense of mass, weight and stability. It was completed in 1936 and designed by William Corlett, Henry Minton, James Plachek, William Schirmer and Carl Werner. Photograph by author.

Figure 10: Alameda Courthouse Art Deco Eagle and ornamental trim. Photograph by author.

While not all of DeLappe’s buildings are International Style, the three principles of the International Style can be seen clearly in the Hall of Records. The first principle was that architecture should express volume instead of mass. “The Prime architectural symbol is no longer the dense brick but the open box,” argued Hitchcock and Johnson, two progenitors of
the International Style exhibition in New York.\textsuperscript{37} The walls of the Hall of Records are precise and angular, displaying their dimensions rather than their weight. Historically, massive structural elements such as Greek columns have been needed to support heavy buildings. However, with the advent of steel, thin metal columns could now support heavier and heavier weights. As a result, gigantic columns and dense masonry arches were rendered increasingly unnecessary, and their presence in new architecture became largely cosmetic. The mass of these older architectural elements actually obscured the shapes of a building’s interior. For example, the massiveness of a Gothic cathedral’s façade creates an emotional impact for those who behold it, but it also conceals the exact shape of the interior spaces seen by outside viewers. The same can be also said for the Alameda County Courthouse. The Hall of Records, however, displays its volumes for all to see. Even from the outside, one can clearly see where interior spaces are located, as evidenced by the horizontal windows demarcating its four floors and basement. This principle is most clearly illustrated by the windowed stairwell visible from the interior patio of the courthouse complex (Figure 4). The windows and walls surrounding the stairwell simply demarcate it and make it visible from the outside.

The second principle, “regularity,” does not refer to normality, symmetry, or familiarity. In short, regularity refers to the physical manifestation of a general rule for a building. For example, contorting the plumbing and air conditioning systems of a building, which have their own locations that are not always symmetrical, to fit into a symmetrical plan, does not create regularity. Regularity can more often be seen in an asymmetrical building, since the various functions of buildings do not usually conform to neat shapes.\textsuperscript{38} DeLappe’s article on his building indicated that he carefully weighed the needs of each of the departments that would be housed in the Hall of Records before determining its shape and floorplan. After polling each department, he established a general rule.\textsuperscript{39} This contrasts with an inverse operation, where the building plan would have been pre-selected and then its occupants made to adapt to the already existing space. As stated previously, the current use of the building in no way reflects the principle of regularity as it originally appeared. The building was not designed with use as a courthouse in mind. This is reflected by the columns obscuring the improvised courtrooms. If the facility is inadequate for current needs, it is through no fault of the architect.

The third principle of the International Style urges architects to abandon superfluous ornamentation. The aesthetic appeal of a building should instead emerge out of the functional structure itself. Many European architects in the 1920s espoused this kind of function-born aesthetics wherein beauty is made possible by first addressing a practical problem. Johnson and Hitchcock state “The fact that there is so little detail today increases the decorative effect of what there is.”\textsuperscript{40} Le Corbusier, in his famous 1923 book \textit{Toward an Architecture}, touted the

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\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{39} Russell Guerne DeLappe, “Functional Design in Modesto County Building,” \textit{Architect and Engineer} 141, April 1940, 48.
\textsuperscript{40} Hitchcock and Johnson, \textit{International Style}, 82.
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beauty of cars, airplanes and ocean liners, which in each case was first made possible by their practicality. The form of an airplane wing is purely a response to the task at hand, he argued. If it were otherwise, and the plane were decorated and adorned out of a misguided sense of beauty, the results would be catastrophic. The demands of flight and the need to outmaneuver the enemy during the Great War had streamlined airplanes in a way that had not yet happened for architecture.\(^{41}\) Without a doubt, the Great Depression provided some architects the motivation to put function above ornamentation.

DeLappe’s building exhibits this third principle in its refusal of the neoclassical elements typically associated with government structures, as in the cases of 1872 Modesto courthouse, the Alameda County Courthouse or even in the national capitol building in Washington DC. DeLappe opened a 1940 article on his Hall of Records in *Architect and Engineer* with the following statement: “In the New county building at Modesto, California, a dearth of Goths, Athenians, Romans, et al., in the community precluded the adoption of any traditional architectural style.”\(^{42}\) This tongue-and-cheek remark is familiar within the architectural discourse of the 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries. The argument is that our contemporary needs, dress and culture are unique in time and history. Thus, it makes as little sense today to build in the style of the ancient Greeks as it does to dress in their garb. Classical building styles and ornamentations have no business in the age of glass, steel and electricity. Evidence of DeLappe’s familiarity with this discourse can be found in his master degree thesis where he quotes a 1907 *Architect and Engineer* article arguing that copying architecture that was beautiful in a prior age but which is out of place today is tantamount to clothing a contemporary politician in a “purple-bordered toga, knee panties, white spats and Roman sandals.”\(^{43}\) This humorous rhetoric dates at least as far back as the Austrian architect Otto Wagner’s 1896 text titled *Modern Architecture.*\(^{44}\) However, similar concerns were expressed far earlier in a more somber manner by the German architect Heinrich Hubsch who denounced the “slavish imitation of a completely alien past” in his 1828 book *In what Style should we Build?*\(^{45}\) As such, DeLappe’s 1940 comments placed the Hall of Records in a lineage of architectural thought that had been developing for over a century.

Pictures of the Hall of Records next door to the 1872 courthouse exemplify the disagreement between imitative classicism and modern architecture (Figure 11). Seeing the two

41 Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 164.
42 DeLappe, “Functional Design in Modesto County Building,” 45.
44 Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture* (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988), 77. Commenting on the importance of a contemporary and up-to-date aesthetics, Wagner asserts “A man in a modern traveling suit, for example, fits in very well with the waiting room of a train station, with sleeping cars, with all our vehicles; yet would we not stare if we were to see someone dressed in clothing from the Louis XV period using such things?”
45 Heinrich Hubsch, “In what Style should we Build? in *In What Style should we Build? The German Debate on Architectural Style* (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992), 85.
side-by-side, it is possible to interpret DeLappe’s remarks as a statement on the imitative style of the older courthouse. One building repackaged past styles in European architecture while the other attempted to embody and express the specific contemporary needs of Modesto, California. In effect, DeLappe edged Modesto and California’s civic infrastructure into the modern age.

Figure 11: The new and the old. Circa 1940. Courtesy of the McHenry Museum. At this time, the Hall of Records was unpainted and its windows were unshaded, making it resemble the International Style more closely than it does today. Its straight, geometric lines contrast drastically with the curves, arches and frills of the 1872 courthouse to its right.

**Conclusion: Past, Present and Future**

Some of the most culturally rich cities in the world boast architecture which corresponds to every moment in their history. Modesto is one of those cities, due in part to the Hall of Records. If we buy the modernist mantra that every era in history has its own architecture, we cannot recover what will be lost if the Hall of Records is destroyed. To recreate the International Style today in a new building would be to misunderstand that central modernist idea. Just as Modesto in the 30s lacked ancient Athenians, and so should not build replicas of the Parthenon, today Modesto has its own particular needs and correspondingly appropriate architecture. However, being surrounded by one’s history is also a cultural need, and building in a manner appropriate to the necessities of the times should not come at the expense of a city’s cultural legacy.

Will the Hall of Records simply be demolished if it no longer serves a clear purpose, or will a new creative use be found for it? Such questions do not only pertain to Modesto, but to human society in general; they pertains to our relationship to our own past and the ways it is recounted in history. The question remains: how do we assess whether or not to preserve a
certain piece of physical history? There is no absolute rule, and not all historical sites should be preserved. However, the Hall of Records undoubtedly should be. I hope that this report will serve as a resource for conscientious Modestans who care about the richness of their local history and built environment. It is my hope that the fate of the Hall of Records will rest not only in the hands of State and County officials, but also in the hands of informed citizens.

Bibliography


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