

## A Moment for Anger

It is rare for anything to be built in San Francisco without first passing through controversy and obstacles. The controversy and the obstacles grow denser in some parts of town. The northern waterfront is one of these. Little wonder, then, that the project at 110 the Embarcadero has had such difficulty in becoming entitled for construction.

The greater wonder is that our politicians would not consider our work an important enough part of the City's economic recovery to put a little sweat into making a project like 110 the Embarcadero happen. That they would not consider our growing suffering enough to merit their sweat deserves more than our wonder; it deserves our anger.

Most of the objections raised against the project have been clear from the day its concept was made public. At 123 feet tall, it would exceed height limits in that part of the waterfront by 39 feet, or about 46%. This has stirred up the members of the Telegraph Hill Dwellers. Even though the building won't be visible from their aerie, they fear that it will set an ill precedent for parcels farther north on the waterfront and closer to them, where they do not want the forty foot height limits passed by an inch. With the opposition of the Telegraph Hill Dwellers comes always the opposition of Aaron Peskin, termed out of the Board of Supervisors but not out of the political life of the City. Someone has also hired Sue Hestor, a land use attorney who specializes in opposing development, to work against the project.

The project sponsor, Hines, has claimed that the extra height is necessary to make possible for the building a LEED platinum rating (the highest possible environmental rating). Some environmentalists have flipped this argument: They say that a building should not be allowed to exceed height limits just to obtain a LEED platinum rating.

Under the California Environmental Quality Act projects are required to file an environmental impact report (EIR) or in its place a negative declaration, which states that the project has no significant environmental impact, or a "mitigated negative declaration," which admits limited environmental impacts and pledges measures to reduce them to an insignificant level. The sponsors of 110 the Embarcadero filed a mitigated negative declaration.

Ms. Hestor appealed this to the Board of Supervisors. The appeal said that the sponsors should file instead a full EIR, more costly and time-consuming than a mitigated negative declaration. To require a full EIR in place of a mitigated negative declaration delays construction by months. The appeal stated that the height of the building was an environmental issue for the project in three regards: Its relationship to the buildings around it, its effect on migratory birds, and its shadowing of the plaza east and northeast across the Embarcadero.

In relationship to the buildings around it, 110 the Embarcadero would be no taller than the YMCA building at the other end of the block. It would sit at the edge of a thicket of taller buildings to the south, west, and northwest; these would steer even the most bewildered of birds east over open areas. Any shadowing of the plazas would be minor and late in the day.

The height was at any rate to be the subject of a separate Board of Supervisors hearing if the Board denied the appeal and accepted the mitigated negative declaration.

Environmental filings must also address the history of a site. Here 110 the Embarcadero met a controversy from labor itself. The site of 110 the Embarcadero goes through the block. On its opposite, western face its address is 113 Steuart. From 1933 to 1935 the existing unreinforced brick structure on the site housed Local 38-79 of the International Longshoremen's Association, a predecessor of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The building was thus directly involved in the longshore and general strikes of 1934. At the urging of Ralph Schoenman, a Marxist activist, and Bradley Wiedmaier, an architectural historian, two ILWU locals, numbers 10 and 34, took stands against the demolition of 113 Steuart and therefore against 110 the Embarcadero.

The ILWU was not all of the same mind on this matter, however. Much of the union was not opposed at all to the demolition. The ILWU had taken no steps at all since 1934 to preserve the building. It had built other union halls in the City and an office building on Franklin Street, where our Council's office is now located. The strike is memorialized publicly in at least four locations already, most importantly to the ILWU by a sculpture at Steuart and Mission Streets. A plaza on the Embarcadero is named for Harry Bridges, who led the strike. The developer had offered to place two displays on the strike in the new building.

Mr. Schoenman and Mr. Wiedmaier knew this.

They did not mention the differences within the ILWU when they came before the Labor Council 9 March. They did not say that the façades of the building had been altered since 1934 and that its interior had been stripped. It was well known that I would be away in Washington, DC that day as part of a delegation seeking federal stimulus funds for the City, and I assume Mr. Schoenman and Mr. Wiedmaier knew this as well. With no one present to speak in opposition, they obtained a vote from the Labor Council that declared the existing building an historic resource. This enabled them to claim that the Labor Council was opposed to the building's demolition.

They took this message 17 March to the Board of Supervisors, where the appeal of the mitigated negative declaration was heard. In public testimony at the hearing the project's opponents were asked to speak first. Mr. Schoenman spoke of the Labor Council resolution. Mr. Wiedmaier waved in the air a sheet of paper that he claimed held the signatures of labor leaders opposed to the demolition. At the subsequent start of the testimony of the project supporters, however, Supervisor Chris Daly, whom I discussed in this column last month, asked Board of Supervisors President David Chiu to remind speakers that testimony should restrict itself to the specific subjects of the appeal. Despite the reminder, most of the many Building Trades members present testified about their need for jobs. I testified also about the Labor Council stance that the project's opponents had first brought up and about the division in the ILWU on the subject. Supervisor Daly, who had not questioned the relevance of Mr. Schoenman's or Mr. Wiedmaier's testimony, questioned the relevance of mine.

Supervisor David Campos pursued a legalistic questioning of city staff that pointed sharply toward a desire to grant the appeal. Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, in response to photographs of the present building that showed bare ceiling joists and rafters and temporary wooden guard rails at stair openings, said that this did not prove to him that the building's interior was not as it was in 1934, as he had been in very plain union halls before. Supervisor Daly moved that a full EIR be required of the project. The Board concurred eight to three.

The project, then, is at least delayed for months. There is a good chance it will be killed altogether.

Consider what the Board might have done if it had taken our dire needs seriously. Consider what it might have done if it had thought private sector construction necessary to the economic recovery of the City. Consider what it might have done if its members who have insisted with us on opportunities for the underprivileged in our apprenticeships had been as insistent on providing work for apprentices.

Even prior to the hearing, Board members concerned about the building's height might have signaled to the developer that it must be reduced. The developer was open to this.

Some Supervisors &ndash; maybe all &ndash; knew of the labor controversy prior to the hearing. I had placed calls and left messages for most to tell them its true nature. They might have made a few calls themselves to confirm the truth of what I had told them. They might even have brokered an agreement between the developer and the ILWU on the displays on the strike. If reaching such an agreement required a continuance of the matter for a week or two, this would have been preferable to a delay of months.

The Board could have had a project acceptable to the ILWU and even to Telegraph Hill, and it could have given work to some of us and hope to others in a time approaching desperation.

I do not know the true motives of the nine individual members of the Board whose vote so hurt us. Maybe it was allegiance to Mr. Peskin on the part of some, maybe a desire to appear environmentally conscious, maybe pique at the audacity of the project as originally proposed or at the mayor's support for it. Certainly opposition to development is a default mode for many a politician. "Progressive" politics in San Francisco, never well defined or articulated, have often relied on opposition to development as a unifier; easier to resort to that opposition than to make development work.

But we should not let it be so easy.

We are fast approaching the point where we must make our voices heard more loudly than in well-modulated testimony in an orderly hearing. There is already too much suffering among our members. This will only increase in the months to come. We are approaching the point where we must make our voices heard on the steps and in the corridors of City Hall.

Some of us will remember the numbers in which we appeared before Moscone Center on Rat Monday in 1988.

We are approaching the point where we need to appear at City Hall in those numbers, and to shout as loudly.