

National Post Office Collaborate



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November 10, 2013

Carol Roland-Nawi
State Historic Preservation Officer
Tristan Tozer, State Historian
Office of Historic Preservation
1725 – 23rd Street, Suite 100
Sacramento, CA 95816

RE: Section 106 Consultation for the Berkeley Main Post Office
 2000 Allston Way, Berkeley CA 94704

Dear Ms. Roland-Nawi and Mr Tozer:

This letter will represent the National Post Office Collaborate (NPOC) submittal as a participating party in the Section 106 consultation process with regard to the potential sale of the Berkeley Main Post Office. The National Post Office Collaborate is urging that the State Historic Preservation Office reject the finding of no adverse effect in the matter of the sale of the Berkeley Main Post Office and of every other historic (or eligible) post office in our great State. The justification for such finding follows.

Our organization has been successful in obtaining a preliminary injunction in the matter of the sale of the historic Stamford CT post office (reference Attachment #2 City of Berkeley letter dated November 7, 2013). As such, the Section 106 process should not be concluded until all National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation and considerations have been met. Section 106 process is only a prelude to the full obligation to comply with NEPA. However the Post Office(s) may be preserved for future usage in compliance with Section 106, it should be fully discussed in accordance with NEPA, fully analyzing the environmental impacts of all potential project proposals and/or alternatives on behalf of the public good, before USPS may or may not dispose of federal historic property(s). And alternatives should include remaining in the building and out-leasing the excess space.

Most importantly, in addition to this consideration, the NPOC compels the California Office of Historic Preservation to consider the impact of this sale *combined with* the cumulative impact of all other proposed post office sales throughout the State of California and the Nation within the context of NEPA obligations.

The overarching issue of this mass disposition of historic properties is the *intent* of their original construction and use, the *context* in which they were constructed and how this disposition impacts the legacy of our country's history in architecture, art and public service.

At the time of the construction of the Berkeley Main Post Office, the Federal government promoted the concept that government buildings should be monumental and beautiful, and should represent the ideals of democracy and high standards of architectural sophistication in their communities. The supervising architect of the Treasury Department, John Knox, believed that Federal buildings should be built to last and also emphasized the use of high quality construction materials.

From authors Marlene Park and Gerald Markovitz, who wrote about why post offices were built the way they were: "The post office was 'the one concrete link between every community of individuals and the Federal government' that functioned 'importantly in the human structure of the community.... [The post office] brought to the locality a symbol of government efficiency, permanence, service, and even culture.'" These buildings were built in the manner they were because we considered self-government, for all its faults, to be something precious that belonged to all of us, and that it should be housed in places that looked as though we valued it enough to celebrate it and protect it at the same time.

This was further emphasized by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal cultural programs. These programs marked the U.S. Government's first and large, direct investment in cultural development. The goals of these programs were clearly stated and democratically inspired; they supported artistic endeavors not already subsidized by private sector patrons; and they emphasized the interrelatedness of culture with all aspects of American life, not the separateness of a rarefied art world.

The cultural impact of this democratic initiative was far-reaching, as summed up by Holger Cahill, director of the Federal Art Project, in a 1939 speech: "... the Project has discovered that such a simple matter as finding employment for the artist in his [sic] hometown has been of the greatest importance. It has, for one thing, helped to stem the cultural erosion which in the past two decades has drawn most of America's art talent to a few large cities. It has brought the artist closer to the interests of a public which needs him, and which is now learning to understand him. And it has made the artist more responsive to the inspiration of the country, and through this the artist is bringing every aspect of American life into the currency of art."

Artists, too, envisioned a future for the projects. Stuart Davis, then secretary of the American Artists' Congress, stated "The artists of America do not look upon the art projects as a temporary stopgap measure, but see in them the beginning of a new and better day for art in this country."

In an era when the local post office was a place of some leisure and conversation among townsmen, pleasant, easy-to-understand murals and sculpture did affect the art consciousness of many patrons. Residents of small towns brought their out-of-town guests into the post office to view the art, and in rural America, ladies' clubs traveled from post office to post office on art tours. The post office mural or sculpture was the first work of original art in many communities. In a letter from Postmaster Basil V. Jones of Pleasant Hill, Missouri, he states his appreciation for bringing art to small town America: "In behalf of many smaller cities, wholly without objects of art, as ours was, may I beseech you and the Treasury to give them some art, more of it, whenever you find it possible to do so. How can a finished citizen be made in an artless town?"

The intent for the art that was created during the New Deal era and the vision for its enduring legacy were eloquently stated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his dedication of the Nation Gallery of Art on March 17, 1941:

There was a time when the people of this country would not have thought that the inheritance of art belonged to them or that they had responsibilities to guard it. A few generations ago, the people of this country were often taught by their writers and by their critics and by their teachers to believe that art was something foreign to America and to themselves – something imported from another continent, something from an age which was not theirs – something they had no part in, save to go to see it in some guarded room on holidays or Sundays.

But recently, within the last few years – yes, in our lifetime—they have discovered that they have a part. They have seen in their own towns, in their own villages, in schoolhouses, in post offices, in the back room of shops and stores, pictures painted by their sons, their neighbors – people they have known and lived beside and talked to. They have seen, across these last few years, rooms full of painting and sculpture by Americans, walls covered with painting by Americans, - some if it good, some of it not so good, but all of it native, human, eager, and alive – all of it painted by their own kind in their own country, and painted about things they know and look at often and have touched and loved.

The people of this country know now, whatever they were taught or thought they knew before, that art is not something just to be owned but something to be made: that it is the act of making and not the act of owning that is art. And knowing this they know also that art is not a treasure in the past or an importation from another land, but part of the present life of all the living and creating peoples – all who make and build; and, most of all, the young and vigorous peoples who have made and built our present wide country.

New Deal cultural projects, exemplified in the Berkeley Main Post Office and many of the historic post offices being offered for sale by the USPS, took responsibility for our cultural commonwealth. They took on the task of recording history – and creating a cultural legacy that was intended to endure for centuries.

How can our State and National Historic Preservation organizations allow these American cultural legacies to fall into private ownership? No individual covenant can ensure perpetual care of a national asset. Who or what will ultimately enforce the covenant? What is the enforcement remedy if care is not maintained? What is the impact to the asset if we allow it to deteriorate before the malfeasance can be observed and saved? Since the USPS claims to own these works of art, what will happen to the art if it goes out of business?

The demise of such assets is occurring throughout America. In Bethesda MD the post office has been sold and stands vacant after almost 2 years. The front doors are chained but the lobby is exposed to the elements – and it contains murals. In Ukiah, the main Post Office was closed despite massive community oppositions and now stands derelict, its mural removed “for restoration” with no assured return. Elsewhere murals and sculpture have been removed for “restoration”, consigned to storage, or have been effectively sold with the building rendering them inaccessible to the public for which they were intended. In many instances, site-specific works have been removed from their contexts. In the case of Stamford CT, the developer was going to demolish the New Deal addition and construct two new high-rise condominium buildings. He stated that he “didn’t know” what he was going to do with the historic post office building in the front - “maybe a restaurant”. Following the closure on September 21, 2013 one of the historic bronze lanterns has been vandalized – torn off its pedestal and smashed – because the postal service has abandoned its responsibility to maintain this historic property. A listing on the National Register is no impediment to the desecration and even major demolition of many of these buildings.

The State of California is facing the greatest number of potential historic post office sales and stands to endure the greatest impact to our cultural legacy. Once again, the National Post Office Collaborate urges the State Historic Preservation Office to reject the finding of no adverse effect in the matter of the sale of the Berkeley Main Post Office and of every other historic (or eligible) post office in our great State. Let us send a message to the entire country that these buildings are part of our national legacy and should be honored and maintained as such.

We appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,



Jacquelyn McCormick
Executive Director
National Post Office Collaborate

cc: Mayor and City Councilmembers, City of Berkeley
Ann M. Yarnell, USPS Facilities Department
Austene Hall Chair, Berkeley Landmarks Preservation Commission
Christina Morris, National Trust for Historic Preservation
Cindy Heitzman, California Preservation Foundation
Susan Cerny, Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association
Citizens to Save the Berkeley Post Office
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