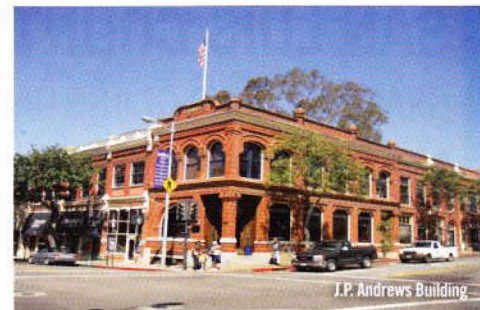




PALM STREET PERSPECTIVE

WHY PRESERVE THE HISTORIC RESOURCES OF SAN LUIS OBISPO

By SLO City Councilman, John Ashbaugh



SAN LUIS OBISPO IS NOT A “MUSEUM” – BUT OUR history is a vital part of our present vitality, and of our economic future

In 1951, William Faulkner wrote: “The past is never dead. In fact, it’s not even past.” When it comes to historical buildings and sites, however, much of our Nation’s history has indeed “died” – lost to neglect, demolition, or natural disasters.

Fortunately, San Luis Obispo still retains hundreds of fine, historic buildings that showcase our colorful history. We see these historic buildings every day, in almost every neighborhood – particularly our celebrated downtown.

Let’s take a look at some of San Luis Obispo’s historic resources:

- 177 buildings are on our “Master List of Historic Properties,” including several that are already on the Secretary of Interior’s National Register of Historic Places, such as Jack House, Carnegie Library, the Mission, and the Myron Angel house.
- 517 “Contributing historic properties,” due to their age and distinctive architectural character, contribute to the architectural charm and character of their neighborhoods.
- Five designated historic districts, including the Downtown (62 acres, 98 designated historic structures); Chinatown (4-½ acres, 11 resources); Old Town (86 acres, 121 historic structures); Mill Street (20 acres, 84 listed properties) and the Railroad District (81 acres, 38 historic structures).

All of this adds up to a wonderful cultural mosaic and a physical manifestation of the great story of this 154-year-old city. Everywhere one looks, these buildings are telling us this story. If we just know where to look, there are innumerable opportunities for planned or impromptu “sidewalk scavenger hunts.” You don’t need to be a historian or an architecture buff; all you need is to feel that “sense of place” created by these historic treasures.

But it’s one thing for us to enjoy the aesthetic gifts of these buildings from the street; it is quite another to be an owner, resident, or tenant in a designated historic building. How do people who live in these old

homes, or who work in the historic commercial buildings, feel about them? For the most part, people who own these properties are fully aware of the character of these buildings; in fact, most owners are fiercely proud of the heritage that their buildings embody.

For example, let’s look at the 1894 Andrews Building at Monterey and Osos Streets. For over three decades now, the Richardsonian Gothic façade of the Andrews Building has been lovingly maintained by its owners, Vintage Properties of San Luis Obispo. There are rarely any vacancies in the building, and the corner is occupied by one of SLO’s best restaurants, Koberl at Blue. (Full disclosure: My wife’s law firm of Maguire and Ashbaugh has been located there for 30 years, and I also housed my planning firm there for 17 years through 1998).

Even more than the aesthetic and emotional value of these historic resources, the entire city benefits from the vital economic role these buildings play. It is unlikely that any historic buildings would still be here, if they did not also play an essential role in San Luis Obispo’s unique mix of retailing, tourism and hospitality, office space and quality residences.

People today are searching for authenticity, not “Disneyland.” The historic buildings of San Luis Obispo help to provide that – a genuine integrity that is appreciated not only by environmentalists and preservationists, but also by business owners, professionals, and visitors from all over the world.

Right now, the City’s Cultural Heritage Committee is working on a draft Historic Preservation Ordinance and Historic Preservation Program Guidelines. Together, these documents are intended to guide the City as well as property owners in decision-making about historic preservation. This spring, the City Council will consider these proposed standards to govern the process of preserving, restoring, and adaptively re-using historic resources throughout the City. Adoption of a historic preservation ordinance would enable the City to become a “Certified Local Government” and eligible for preservation grants and other benefits.

If we do this right, we might even look to the possibility of another milestone for San Luis Obispo’s famous downtown: Designation as a National Historic District. The process for this designation involves several complex steps beyond adoption of our updated historic preservation ordinance, but that is the first key step.

You’re invited to help us shape our historic preservation program. To learn more, visit slocity.org/communitydevelopment/longrange.asp, or call the Community Development Department at 781-7176 and ask to join the list of people interested in our historic resources. You could also check out the latest exhibits at the SLO County Historical Society in the old Carnegie Library at Monterey and Broad Street. Check out the gift shop, join the Society, or even volunteer as a docent.

In San Luis Obispo, we’re truly fortunate that the past lives on, and is still with us. Let’s do our best to keep what we have, for as long as we can, while we still have it.