

Tracing culture through a historic building: Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, Oakland

By Selena Chau. Presented at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Conference, February 21, 2024 in Albuquerque, NM

My name is Selena Chau. I'm a librarian and a retired performing artist. I performed with a dance company that held rehearsals and concerts at this building, the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, at 14th and Alice Street in downtown Oakland. This building is over 90 years old and is now a city-managed arts center.

- [slide - bullet points of the building]

Through continued care of its theater and studio spaces, civic and performing arts companies have drawn audiences to dance and theater concerts held in this building at 1428 Alice Street. For the first forty years, the building's ownership and uses were exclusively for White Protestant society—first by the Women's City Club and then by the Oakland Moose Lodge. Eventually, this building became a significant location for Black and African-American performing arts companies.

- [slide - video still]

It was renamed the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in 2004 to honor a master drummer and teacher who dedicated his life to promoting African culture in the East Bay. The building was designated as an Oakland landmark a year later.

- [show video clip, stay on slide after clip]

This building has stood through wars, recessions, an earthquake, and gentrification. It allows us to reflect on how the built environment is maintained, and how vital public services like the arts contribute to a resilient cityscape. Contributions by two companies in particular, the Oakland Metropolitan Ballet Company and the Oakland Ensemble Theatre, have been less lauded for their role in allowing the idea of an Oakland performing arts home to prevail. Their renovation and upkeep of the building, and their presenting activities initially created the identity of 1428 Alice Street as a theater and dance space. Support from the city and advocacy from arts groups to preserve this downtown arts center demonstrate how community values have shaped this building's history. It furthers the possibility that the era of the Malonga as a cultural arts center will continue, as it has for the past 38 years.

[Original Uses]

- [slide - 1928 image]

The original purpose of this seven-story building was for the operations of the Oakland Women's City Club. Its construction in 1928 was described "as an epoch in the history of Oakland's development."¹ The Oakland Women's City Club was positioned near the business district of Oakland. Its central location and residential rooms provided easy access for out-of-town modern women to visit nearby shops. For women who did not own property independently, the purchase of a bond to finance the club's construction was a form of stockholding, and power.²

- [slide - pool, stairs]

The building featured a pool, tennis courts, a library, a basement gym, a dining room, residential rooms,

- [slide - club library]

gatherings spaces with names like the Gold Room and the Italian Room, and a ground-floor theater auditorium.

- [slide - building directory]

While the women's movement was born from the discrimination of women, these mostly White, Protestant women perpetuated an exclusion of citizens from its membership based on race, religion, and class. Women drew upon their existing networks to propose names for membership and reserved the right to blackball undesirable candidates. Clubs that admitted Catholic and Jewish women usually capped the number allowed at any given time.³ The high cost of maintaining this large building was too great of a challenge as the Oakland Women's City Club experienced the 1930s economic stagnation of the Great Depression. Many members could no longer afford dues, let alone civic philanthropy.⁴ The Oakland Women's City Club retained ownership of their building through an economic recession but, in 1939, succumbed to financial pressures and sold their building to commercial hotel developers. This building was an accomplishment representative of the progressive era, when women had more job opportunities and could hold individual identities. However, the dissolution of organized womanhood around 1930 also led to the downfall of most women's clubs.⁵

- [slide - CA state library moose lodge image]

The next long-term owner of the 1428 Alice Street building, the Oakland Moose Lodge, recruited members in a similarly exclusionary manner. In an antithetical sequence of events, this women-run and fundraised building for use exclusively by women became the organizational home of the Moose Club, a staunch fraternal organization.

¹ "Women's City Club Lays Cornerstone of New Home." *Oakland Tribune*, August 20, 1928.

² Amelia Ritzenberg Crary. "Women's Clubs in California: Architecture and Organization, 1880-1940" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2016), [put page]

³ Crary, "Women's Clubs," p. 3

⁴ Crary, "Women's Clubs," p. 10.

⁵ Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), 174.

[1969 ~ 1974 OMBC]

- [stay on moose club slide]

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, the Moose Club building's theater had been generally dark aside from church services. It was described as "a nondescript rooming house in an ever-more-neglected downtown."⁶

- [slide - vern nerden's studio]

At the time, Vern Nerden's Oakland Metropolitan Ballet Company (OMBC) had grown from modest beginnings to become the largest regional ballet company in the Bay Area. The Metropolitan Ballet Company, like the majority of dance companies without a home theater, performed in various venues around the Bay.

- [slide - orphan no more]

But in 1968, it was announced that the Metropolitan Ballet Company had secured its own permanent home with a multiyear lease of the theater at 1426 Alice Street. The Metropolitan Ballet Company was the first to ambitiously stamp the presence of a ballet company in downtown Oakland with its own eponymously named home: The Metropolitan Theater. The theater had presented touring shows, little theater, and art films, but never before was it used exclusively for ballet.

- [slide - met theater men ladder]

Thomas F. Gieryn writes: "Buildings stabilize social life. They give structure to social institutions, durability to social networks, and persistence to behavior patterns. What we build solidifies society against time and its incessant forces for change."⁷ This building had already stabilized a pattern of presenting performances in downtown Oakland.

- [slide - nutcracker]

Despite never being used for ballet, Nerden built on the success of his company's large-scale productions of *The Nutcracker* to draw audiences to see ballet in its new downtown Oakland theater home.

- [slide - met theater women ladder]

In the late 1960s, the Metropolitan Ballet Company had an opportunity to name its place, and with it came some amount of power. When the Metropolitan Ballet Company gave the theater its name, the identity of the old Moose Club building began to shed and a new one gained acceptance - one as a performing arts locale.

- [slide - gala program]

The Metropolitan Ballet Company redefined its Metropolitan Theater as an updated and welcoming location to see dance. It organized a black-tie, grand opening gala to celebrate the completion of

⁶ *San Francisco Bay Guardian* April 7, 1986

⁷ Thomas F. Gieryn, "What Buildings Do," *Theory and Society* 31, no. 1 (2002): 35–74.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/658136>.

renovations which included a \$2,500 red carpet, a \$5,000 expenditure on a modern lighting system, and an intermission bar.⁸

- [show clip through 2:04 community/local]

[1960s demographic changes, OET]

- [slide - population graph]

In the 1960s, at the same time that Nerden was building his ballet company in its new home, California surpassed New York as America's most populous state, and new Black migrants arrived in the Bay Area for job opportunities. "Merritt College [then in North Oakland] was one of the birthplaces for Black theater. Bay Area theater artists and activists produced socially engaged productions that benefitted from and were shaped by the progressive political climate of California.... Black people were writing, speaking, and celebrating Blackness."⁹ The theater activity of Merritt College cultivated an environment that led to the creation of the Oakland Ensemble Theatre, the next resident organization of the Alice Street building.

- [slide - early OET members]

The Oakland Ensemble Theatre was created by Merritt College theater students and their teacher Ron Stacker Thompson in 1971. OET grew and became the city's first resident theater company. The company was described as an interracial ensemble and built a reputation for presenting works by Black Arts Movement playwrights and local talents.

- [slide - to be young gifted]

It provided opportunities for non-white actors in works such as *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* by Lonne Elder III, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* by Lorraine Hansberry, and Maya Angelou's stage production of *And Still I Rise*.

- [slide - and still i rise]

In the early 1980s, OET's new artistic director, Benny Sato Ambush, led the company in its growth to professional status. It was poised to become a national demonstration arts model as a theater company with planned inclusion in Oakland's overall downtown City Center development project."¹⁰

- [slide - willis sketch of facade]

Beverly Willis, known for her architectural design of the San Francisco Ballet building, was brought in to conduct the theater renovations for OET's ground floor space for Oakland's first arts center—the Alice Arts Center—at 1428 Alice Street.

- [slide - willis sketch of theater]

⁸ *Oakland Tribune* October 15, 1968

⁹ Akinyele Umoja, Karin L. Stanford, and Jasmin A. Young, eds. *Black Power Encyclopedia: From Black Is Beautiful to Urban Uprisings* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, an Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2018), 79-80.

¹⁰ Oakland Ensemble Theatre. "OET Information Portfolio." March 1984. From Beverly Willis Architectural Collection, 1954-1999 (Ms1992-019), Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Willis expressed her excitement in an interview saying “It is a pioneering project, a new concept. It will house several arts groups, [with] OET occupying the largest amount of space.... The diverse activities of each arts group will create a synergy that will benefit all. Each group can reach a wider audience through sharing the building with others.”¹¹

- [slide - oet moving in]

Artistic director Ambush said, “Getting into that new space will be the beginning of a period of stability such as the Oakland Ensemble Theatre has never known before, in a facility such as we’ve never had before.”¹² The space held promise for East Bay arts organizations who saw the building as a way to provide more stability for their own companies.

- [slide- solos - alive and kicking]

The creation of the Alice Arts Center represented a major shift in the ownership and uses of the Alice Street building, from a string of individual and commercial owners to a city-owned building in 1987 with a theater company as an anchor tenant.

- [slide - renovation in progress]

After two phases of development, before and after the Loma Prieta earthquake, the total renovation of the building included 11,000 square feet of dance studio space, 6,000 square feet of office space, and a 500-seat theater.¹³

- [slide - alice arts center]

OET’s role as the anchor tenant was core to Oakland’s comprehensive strategic plan for cultural development. In reality, many arts organizations were involved in discussions, advocacy, and community organizing that were necessary for the culmination of an Oakland multi-tenant arts center that still stands today.

[The history that lasts: an Oakland landmark]

- [slide - entrance, yanvalou]

This building had to survive before being recognized. The original architectural design by Miller & Warnecke was overshadowed by other Oakland buildings but the conglomeration of gathering spaces, stage and auditorium, residential rooms, and recreational sports facilities made the building extremely versatile to owners and may be a reason it is still standing. Jeanette Bicknell noted that a building’s **adaptability** may be a factor in ensuring its durability, as much as engineering and building materials.¹⁴ Unlike some historic buildings that are well known for maintaining one identity, the uniqueness of this building is in its transformation.

¹¹ OET Newsletter, September 1985. From the Oakland History Room

¹² 9/14/1986 SF Examiner

¹³ Fall Oakland Artscape. From the Oakland History Room

¹⁴ Jeanette Bicknell, “Architectural Ghosts,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 72, no. 4, (November 2014), 435–441, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12123>

- [slide - malonga]

Only after the building was renamed the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts did it become an Oakland landmark, and start to be listed in architectural guidebooks. The landmark status is important for the building's historic preservation. Traditionally, historic landmarks have been more heavily weighted for architectural beauty and significance, a factor that has been criticized for being elitist.¹⁵ The field has moved toward recognizing cultural importance from a diversity of perspectives. How a building conveys meaning and holds value is relative to the people who give it meaning and value over time. It places more focus on how societies have engaged with the building, and what it has allowed people to do. For the Malonga, its survival will rely on the belief that culture belongs in its local community, which was demonstrated by the Oakland Metropolitan Ballet Company and the Oakland Ensemble Theatre.

- [slide - building from documentary]

As a building with a mix of identities, the value of this building is represented in the sum of historical events and the diversity of people who advocated for its use as a cultural arts center. This building holds an identity for me and thousands more, who have experienced culture within its walls: whether from class, rehearsal, or seeing a performance. Winston Churchill said: "We shape our buildings and afterward our buildings shape us."¹⁶ In buildings, and through them, we find social structures in the process of becoming.¹⁷ The histories of this building that have lasted, and what is continually preserved, show what culture is important to a community and what its path may be in the future.

Process and Resources

- [slide - historic building resources]

Ownership records research process

- [slide - description of building property from deed]

UC Resources

- [slide - UC Resources]
- California Digital Newspaper Collection from UC Riverside - free
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers - licensed
- Ancestry Library edition - licensed
- UC Berkeley 1974 dissertation on Black theaters - free

Others & Thanks

¹⁵ Max Page and Marla R. Miller, eds. *Bending the Future: Fifty Ideas for the next Fifty Years of Historic Preservation in the United States*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016) and Daniel M. Bluestone. *Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation*. 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011).

¹⁶ Gieryn, "What Buildings Do," Spoken at his October 28, 1943 speech to Parliament as part of the discussion over authorizing a committee to rebuild the House of Commons

¹⁷ Gieryn, "What Buildings Do," 35–74