

April 28, 2025

Historical Commission
Regular Meeting April 28, 2025

RE: Request for a Historic Resource Assessment of
the **Ernest J Kump** Civic Center Buildings

Dear Historical Commissioners and Sean Gallegos,

I am writing to respectfully request that the Los Altos Historical Commission undertake a Historic Resource Assessment (HRA) of the Los Altos Civic Center buildings designed by Ernest J Kump: City Hall, Library, Los Altos Youth Center (LAYC) and Police Station.

Per the Chattel Inc letter submitted to you on February 6, 2025, the Civic Center buildings had not yet met the age requirement to be evaluated as part of the last Los Altos Historic Resource Inventory adoption in 2012. Now, 13 years later, these 1960-1964 buildings and their campus setting are 10 years beyond the fifty-year recognition date and qualify for historic recognition.

With the recent office conversion of the Los Altos Youth Center (LAYC) with no public review, and the “private” development of a discordant Library courtyard (both projects initiated without recognition of the historic buildings they are impacting), it is imperative that an HRA be initiated immediately.

An HRA of each building is required to understand its significance and evaluate its eligibility as a historic resource. Further, the HRA should also evaluate the potential for a historic district that includes these four Ernest J Kump Civic Center buildings together with Heritage Orchard and J Gilbert Smith House.

Specifically:

- As dictated by Los Altos Municipal Code and Certified Local Government agreements, the Historical Commission has the advisory authority to identify historic resources in Los Altos.

- As the de facto guardian of historic resources belonging to the City of Los Altos, the Historical Commission cannot abdicate their duty to protect properties identified as historically significant.
- The Historical Commission has the responsibility to assess properties brought before them as historical resources can be impacted by substantive changes, triggering potential legal vulnerabilities if the changes are made without proper environmental and public review.
- As a Certified Local Government (CLG), the City of Los Altos is obligated to maintain a credible and participatory historic preservation program.
- Under CEQA and the California Register of Historic Resources (PRC 5024.1), cultural resources, including buildings, structures, and landscapes are considered an integral part of the environment.

Furhter:

- The Civic Center is representative of a significant period in Los Altos and California history known as Midcentury Modernism, a time of transition from agricultural to suburban characteristics with a unique and universally recognized vernacular.
- The Civic Center is an example of “Western Living” with a quintessential indoor outdoor design and the use of natural materials that fit harmoniously in a natural setting.
- The Civic Center was designed by Ernest J Kump who is acknowledged as being a major influence in American and International architecture.

- Ernest J Kump designed, with merit, the Foothill College Campus and other buildings in Los Altos that together with the Civic Center present a comprehensive story of an architect's work.
- Renown architect Frank Lloyd Wright participated in decisions related to the Civic Center site and design, and like Richard Neutra's presence, speaks to the then-burgeoning and broad interest in Los Altos.
- Previous upgrades to the Civic Center have always been conducted with sensitivity to its architecture and the setting of the campus buildings within an orchard: alterations have always included public review.

Please proceed with a Historical Resource Assessment of the four Civic Center buildings and their campus setting, and make your results known to city leadership as any additional work without recognition adversely impacts these historically significant buildings.

Please help ensure transparency, public participation, legal compliance, and stewardship of what are among the most significant buildings in Los Altos.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Maria Bautista

PALLA Preservation Action League Los Altos

*Please see the attached two memos on Ernest J Kump



ABOUT Ernest J Kump

Ernest Joseph Kump was a Bakersfield-born architect who became an international expert in school planning and designed the landmark Foothill College in Los Altos Hills as well as dozens of other buildings in the Bay Area.

"(Kump) was one of the most extraordinary, innovative and provocative architects to come out of California," said noted architect Hiko Takeda in London. "He leaves a legacy of distinctive architecture of enduring dignity and informality with some of the best examples of built-environment that is in harmony with the aspirations of people and its natural setting."

Ernest J Kump received his Bachelor of Arts in Architecture from UC Berkeley in 1932. After receiving his master's degree at Harvard, Kump's career began in Fresno with Charles Franklin in 1934. Early works that established him as a brilliant and innovative architect included Bakersfield's Sill Building, the Fresno City Hall and Acalanes High School in Lafayette, hailed by critics as outstanding examples of innovative open plan modular construction. His ideas on modular and prefabricated construction also produced, with engineer Mark Falk, the Naval Ordnance Building at Hunters Point in World War II, which was one of the world's first totally transparent multi-story buildings.

After the war, Mr. Kump designed internationally, including the U.S. Embassy in Seoul, elements of American University in Beirut and campus development for Colleges of the Virgin Islands on St. Thomas and St. Croix and Bendigo College in Victoria, Australia.

A prolific inventor who held 59 international and U.S. patents, he created Tekkto Systems in 1970 to explore the potential of space age technology for mass production of low-cost housing. He was an early proponent of "envirotecture" - the notion that housing for families and whole communities, relying on advanced technology, could co-exist in harmony with the natural environment. "Don't let the buildings interfere with architecture," Kump said.

Along with architects Masten & Hurd and landscape architects Sasaki and Walker, Kump designed Foothill College - called by Pulitzer Prize-winning Chronicle architectural critic Allan Temko the "Acropolis of the West." It became a landmark for the community college movement in the United States, and Kump's firm designed a dozen new community college campuses in Illinois, Texas, Massachusetts and California. In California, campuses bearing his distinctive imprint include Cabrillo College in Aptos, Ohlone College in Fremont and San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton.

Kump also was a consulting architect for UC Santa Cruz, and his firm's designs for major universities include more than 100 buildings at Stanford, Mills College, the University of New Mexico, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York, San Jose State University and Pine Manor College in Massachusetts.

In 1970, the American Institute of Architects named Ernest J Kump Associates in Palo Alto as the nation's most prestigious architectural firm. "The hallmark of this firm is an architecture without ostentation, but an architecture of excitement that recognizes human values," AIA said, praising Ernest J Kump as "a pioneer of modular practices and systems concepts in architecture."

Author of several books, including the noted "A New Architecture for Man," Kump served on President Ronald Reagan's Task Force for Arts and Humanities and taught at many universities, including Harvard, Columbia, Stanford and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was a fellow of the AIA, Royal Institute of British Architects, Royal Society of Arts in London, Akademie der Künste in Berlin and the International Union of Architects and International Arts and Letters in Switzerland.

Per the archives of the College of Environmental Design at UC Berkeley, Ernest J Kump designed the Los Altos Civic Center comprised of City Hall, Library LAYC, and Police Station from 1956-1961.

(Information excerpted from an article by Larry D Hatfield of the SF Examiner, Jan 6, 2000)

(Work in progress, PALLA)

Ernst J. Kump and the Los Altos Civic Center

Ernst J. Kump Jr. was an American architect born in Bakersfield, California in 1911 . Kump established his practice in Palo Alto and became internationally known for innovative modernist designs, especially in educational architecture. Over his career he designed more than 100 public schools in California and 22 college campuses worldwide . His notable projects include the Fresno City Hall (1940), the U.S. Embassy in Seoul (1957), and Foothill College in Los Altos (1961).

Kump's architectural style was rooted in Midcentury Modernism, emphasizing functionality, human scale, and harmony with nature. Contemporary architects praised his "architecture of enduring dignity and informality" that remained in tune with people's needs and with natural settings . He rejected ostentation in favor of clean, modular designs that integrated indoor and outdoor spaces.

In 1970 the American Institute of Architects honored Kump's firm as "an architecture without ostentation, but an architecture of excitement that recognizes human values," applauding him as "a pioneer of modular practices and systems concepts in architecture." This philosophy can be seen throughout Kump's work, which often features low-slung forms, repetitive structural modules, and the use of natural materials. Kump's mastery of campus planning and civic design made him a sought-after architect; for example, San Francisco critic Allan Temko lauded Kump's Foothill College as "the Acropolis of the West," highlighting its landmark status in modern campus design . Kump continued practicing internationally into the 1990s and remained devoted to researching affordable, modular building systems until his death in 1999 .

History and Context of the Los Altos Civic Center

By the early 1950s, the newly incorporated City of Los Altos (est. 1952) needed to establish a permanent civic center. Initially, the city operated out of a small cottage in downtown Los Altos at Third and Main Streets until funds and land could be secured for a purpose-built city hall. In 1954, Los Altos purchased the 10-acre apricot orchard owned by J. Gilbert Smith, one of the area's early orchardists as the location for its city hall. As part of the deal the City made a remarkable commitment – it agreed to preserve the majority of the orchard as a working orchard in perpetuity. This arrangement allowed the city to acquire a picturesque site while honoring the agricultural heritage of the town. Smith was granted the right to continue harvesting fruit from the remaining trees for his lifetime, and he stipulated that after his and his wife's passing, their farmhouse on the property would be given to the city for use as a museum . When the first apricot trees were uprooted to make room for the new buildings, Smith reportedly cried at the loss, underscoring the emotional importance of the orchard.

Around the same time, famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright visited Palo Alto and was invited to advise Los Altos on its civic center plans. Wright toured the Smith orchard site in February 1954

and, according to local accounts, “fell in love with this spot for its beauty and its heritage.” He strongly urged the city to build its civic center on the orchard land, recognizing the special character of the site. Wright’s endorsement bolstered the idea of a civic center that would blend into the rural landscape. Although Wright, then in his late 80s, did not end up designing any structure for Los Altos, his influence is part of the project’s lore.

Instead, the City hired Ernest J. Kump Associates, a Palo Alto-based firm, to design the new civic center. Project records indicate that by 1957 Kump’s firm had developed plans for City Hall and adjacent civic buildings. The design work was led by one of Kump’s associates, architect Carol Rankin, under Kump’s supervision. Construction took place in the late 1950s, and by 1960 the Los Altos Civic Center – including a new City Hall and library – was complete and open to the public. Kump’s firm also designed a separate Los Altos Youth Center (LAYC) on the site around 1960, providing a recreation hall for local teens near the City Hall.

The context of the Los Altos Civic Center’s development was one of balancing small-town values with the post-War suburban boom. Los Altos in 1960 was transitioning from an orchard town to a suburb, and the civic center project symbolized the city’s coming of age. However, city leaders were deliberate in keeping Los Altos’s rural charm: the preserved apricot orchard was literally at the center of the civic center plan, rather than cleared away. This was quite unusual for a Midcentury civic project, and it reflected Los Altos’s desire to “keep a semi-rural feel” even as it built modern facilities. The City Hall and Library were positioned at the edge of the open orchard, and only the minimum number of trees were removed for construction. In 1961, after the buildings were in use, the city officially dedicated the remaining orchard as “Civic Center Apricot Orchard,” affirming that the grove of fruit trees would be a permanent public feature of the site. The Los Altos Civic Center thus opened around 1960 as a unique blend of modern civic architecture and preserved agricultural landscape.

Architectural Style and Notable Features



Figure: View of Los Altos City Hall (background) set behind blooming apricot orchard trees at the Civic Center. Kump's design kept the one-story civic buildings low and understated, allowing the heritage orchard to remain a dominant feature of the site.

Architecturally, the Los Altos Civic Center is an example of Midcentury Modern civic design adapted to a small-town setting. Ernest J Kump's approach for this project emphasized low profile buildings, modular planning, and integration with the landscape – all hallmarks of his style. The City Hall itself is a single-story, horizontally oriented structure with a long low-pitched roof originally covered in wood shakes, and wide overhanging eaves. This horizontal emphasis was deliberate: it ensured the new civic buildings would not dominate or overshadow the adjacent orchard or the residential scale of Los Altos. Large expanses of glass in the building's façades provide natural light and frame views of the apricot trees, reinforcing an indoor–outdoor connection. In fact, approaching City Hall from San Antonio Road, one sees the orchard in front of the building giving the impression that the civic buildings “grow” out of the orchard landscape rather than impose upon it and reflecting Kump's philosophy of keeping architecture in harmony with its setting and “not interfering” with the environment.

Design influences for the civic center included both the Bay Area's regional modernism and the organic architecture ideals of Frank Lloyd Wright. As a Bay Area modernist, Kump favored natural

materials like wood, brick, and concrete, and simple finishes; although detailed descriptions of the City Hall's materials are scarce, period photos and records suggest the use of wood framing and board and batten details that matched the orchard's rustic context. Wright's influence is evident in the idea of preserving the site's "beauty and heritage" – essentially an organic design principle where the buildings defer to the landscape. Moreover, Kump's experience designing educational campuses around the same time likely influenced the civic center's layout. Foothill College, which Kump's firm was designing concurrently just a couple of miles away, was organized like a cluster of pavilions with landscaped courtyards and pathways rather than monolithic structures. Similarly, the Los Altos Civic Center was planned as a campus-like civic space: City Hall, the Library, and the Youth Center were separate low buildings arranged around the open green space of the orchard, instead of being one large building. This campus layout encouraged an informal, park-like atmosphere for visitors conducting city business or attending community events.

Notable architectural elements of the Los Altos Civic Center include its overhangs, which provide shelter and shade- a practical response to the California climate and a nod to the region's indoor-outdoor lifestyle. The broad eaves on City Hall create a shaded transition space at the building perimeter, allowing people to walk along the building's edge or gather in partial shade. Some guided walking tours even direct visitors to stand "in the shade of the building" while viewing the orchard. The overall aesthetic is one of simplicity and transparency: the glass-walled community buildings open up to the surroundings, and there is little ornamental detail aside from natural wood trim. Kump's modular design principles are also at play. The City Hall and library were designed on regular structural grids, allowing for flexible interior layouts. This modularity was a signature of Kump's, stemming from his belief in adaptable, human-centered spaces. In Los Altos, that translated to straightforward, functional interiors for city offices and library use, enclosed in an unpretentious modern shell.

Importantly, the heritage apricot orchard became a defining feature of the civic center's design. Instead of a formal civic plaza or grand steps, the open orchard serves as the civic center's "commons." Spring blossoms, summer fruits, and rows of gnarled apricot trees create a changing natural backdrop to the Civic Center buildings. This is both a design feature and an intentional preservation of landscape. The choice to retain the orchard influenced the placement and scale of the buildings which were kept to the periphery of the orchard and limited in height. The resulting character of the Los Altos Civic Center is distinct from many other city halls of the era: it feels informal and park-like, consistent with Kump's goal of architecture that has "dignity and informality" and is in harmony with its community. The Civic Center's style can be described as Midcentury Modern meets agrarian California, blending modernist architecture with orchard vernacular in a way that has proven both functional and endearing to the community.