

## Old and New Intertwined

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**By Eve Kushner**

Beneath his painting of a pipe, surrealist René Magritte wrote, “This is not a pipe.” The dissonance sends one’s brain into a loop: “It’s a pipe. It’s not a pipe. It’s a pipe that’s not a pipe. It’s ... huh?!” At 2211 Rose Street in Berkeley (between Oxford and Spruce Streets), Berkeley architect David Trachtenberg has achieved a similarly fascinating dissonance with an adaptive reuse project.

A prominent old-timey sign says “Rose Grocery.” But rather than the glassy exterior of a market, you find copper garage doors whose red-brown patina recalls soft leather. The visual evidence tells you, “This is not Rose Grocery.” Yet the sign says otherwise, and because words shape perceptions, the brain keeps looking for groceries. Passers-by have even entered this residential property, hoping to buy wine.



*Hunrick Grocery, 1908.*

A store did stand on the lot for years. German immigrant George Hunrick built Hunrick Grocery in 1908, operating it until 1923. The structure then served as a convenience store. Abandoned in 1966, it subsequently endured “any imaginable abuse that could happen to a building,” says Trachtenberg, citing fires, roof collapses, rat infestations and homeless encampments. Berkeley conferred landmark status on this unsalvageable wreck, so Trachtenberg was both unable to preserve the building and forbidden to alter it much. For a while, he says, “It was not at all clear that there was a project.”



*Eve of demolition, 2004.*

But he found a clever solution. In 2004, he salvaged the “Rose Grocery” sign hand-painted on the siding, as well as smaller features, then razed the structure. Townhouses went up in the rear of the lot. In front, where the store once stood, Trachtenberg built a structure containing garages and an upstairs studio. To satisfy Landmark Preservation Ordinance demands, he reconstructed the store’s Mission Revival parapet and facade. Salvaged corbels and wooden pilasters returned to their original positions. And after minimal touch-up, the Rose Grocery sign became the centerpiece of the facade. But Trachtenberg also made several changes (e.g., switching the windows and transom to create upstairs space).

In combining vintage and updated features, Trachtenberg didn’t hope to minimize their differences. Instead, he aimed for a bold juxtaposition, preserving the feel of the old building while enabling it to serve modern needs. With the Rose Grocery sign above retractable garage doors, old and new coexist in a kind of zen koan.

The anachronistic tension lends tremendous vitality to the facade, partly explaining its visual appeal. But from an emotional standpoint, why does it feel so good to look at this building?

Trachtenberg asserts that architecture is a “healing art,” particularly when it fills in a city’s “missing teeth.” He finds it quite gratifying to see how the Rose Grocery project has “healed that neighborhood, a place of tremendously negative feelings.”

He's not the only architect to view adaptive reuse as healing. "There's a certain neighborhood texture," says Redwood City architect John Hermannsson, "and when a structure falls out of this network, it's like a person getting sick. An architect patches it up and brings it back into the web of life."



*Rose Street Townhouses, 2005*

Photo credit: Muffy Kibbey

Such aesthetic improvements, he says, demonstrate great caring. When people express themselves with such feeling, he believes it touches the rest of us deeply.

So does creativity, especially the trash-into-treasures kind. Hermannsson cites an example in Cherry Hill, NJ, where architect Malcolm Wells once built an underground office beneath ruined land near a highway, thus turning a wasteland into productive space.

Healing blighted land also appeals to Trachtenberg, who says, "I like the difficult sites, the problematic sites, the sites that are unbuildable, because for me that's where all the opportunities are." Of course, he says,

ramshackle buildings can present unpleasant surprises, from electrical and plumbing problems to failing foundations. Architects should budget time and money for such discoveries. But Trachtenberg finds tight parameters stimulating: “The constraints given by an old building force one to imagine solutions that just wouldn’t come forth otherwise.”

Old buildings also connect us to the past. “Reusing something historical sustains our culture and our heritage,” says Hermannsson, who believes that we long for this sense of continuity: “People like to feel connected to their pasts. Most people want to know who their parents and grandparents were.” Sensing this link to the past “gives meaning to your life,” showing you that “you’re part of a much bigger picture.”

His words got me thinking. Adaptive reuse can transform a place while simultaneously bottling something essential from an earlier era. When buildings capture the best of the past and also meet modern needs, they become frozen spectra of time, bridging past and present in a 4-D way. It’s no wonder that Trachtenberg’s Rose Grocery wields such power. It says, in effect, “This is not the past or the present. This is both at once.”