

Alison Locke Perchuk  
1 University Dr.  
Camarillo CA 90405

21 April 2022

To the Members of the City Council:

In an e-mail sent on March 31, 2022, Ward 3 City Councillor Ben Ewen-Campen called to my attention the submission of a video recording of a talk I delivered at the Institute for Advanced Study in March 2019 to the Somerville City Council. This video was shared with the Council in the context of discussion of development project currently before the Council. Part of this project entails the demolition of the First Universalist Church of Somerville (1916–23, architect Ralph Adams Cram), a building inscribed on the National Register of Historic Places (added 1989); my talk was presented to the Council by a supporter of the project.

The primary argument that the buyers of 125 Highland Avenue have presented in favor of demolition is the need to disavow the “horrible history of supremacist racism” of its architect and to avoid preserving “a tribute to such a horrible person.” They contend that “restoring the building would contradict Somerville’s progressive and inclusive culture.” Their letter to the Council cites two sources. The first is an undergraduate research paper on the architectural history of the University of the South, written by student Taylor Jetmundsen in 2016; the second is a graduate research paper by Cameron Macdonell, since published as *Ghost Storeys: Ralph Adams Cram, Modern Gothic Media, and Deconstructive Microhistory at a Canadian Church* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2017). I have briefly reviewed these items. Their research is generally sound and their conclusions are in line with my own: that Ralph Adams Cram’s views on architecture and society were shaped by a vision of the United States as a White Anglo-Saxon nation, that his development of the Collegiate Gothic style was intimately connected to that vision, and that his refusal to deploy that same style in certain contexts was an indication that those contexts were less worthy. This position creates a fraught legacy within all of his buildings, not merely the Somerville First Universalist Church.

Presenting a historical analysis, however, is not the same as advocating for the demolition of the buildings discussed in that analysis. Here it seems important to point out that racism and White supremacy are not the only lenses through which we should see neomedieval buildings like the First Universalist Church. They were also connected to architectural eclecticism, a type of architectural modernism that drew freely from historical styles of many cultures. Neomedievalism and eclecticism were the architectural language of the global West during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; a building like the First Universalist Church connects Somerville to a broader architectural movement that was the precursor to modernism. Many eclectic buildings used advanced technology, like steel and concrete, masking it with historicizing finishes.

There may be circumstances in which a building’s continuing message makes its survival inappropriate, but I do not find that the First Universalist Church reaches that bar. Demolition would deprive residents of a site for discussion of the historical legacy of Somerville, religious and architectural. It is also important to note that our own relations to these structures change with time. The element that I find most interesting about the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles, one of the structures I discuss in the talk, is the capacity for contemporary society to reclaim and reinterpret architecture of the past. This is, of course, what Cram and his contemporaries did with medieval architecture and it is what the builders of many state

Perchuk, p. 2

capitols, courthouses, and Congregational churches did with Classical architecture; nothing prevents us today from doing the same. The buyers of 125 Highland Avenue contend that Cram was marginalizing Unitarianism by providing the church community with a Romanesque church rather than a superior English Gothic one; perhaps this architectural marginalization can become a site for resistance and inclusion.

The National Register of Historic Places has not yet digitized the records for Somerville; I recommend that the Council request the file on the First Universalist Church as part of their considered decision. It may also wish to seek the records for the original commission, as this will bring clarity as to who requested the Romanesque style. I have found in my research that often it is the entity commissioning the building who decides on the style. While this may not change the evaluation of a building as (partly) White supremacist in intent, it does make it clear that the problem is much greater than the vision of a single architect alone.

Pardon the length of this message, and the academic nature of its writing; these are both occupational hazards. I hope that you find my perspective useful as you deliberate the merits of the development project before you.

With my best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alison L. Perchuk". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alison Locke Perchuk  
Associate Professor of Art History  
California State University Channel Islands