

# Highland Park preservation project

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Michael Justice/Matrix Herald

Highland Park's Mason Building is now listed as a historical/cultural landmark.

## Masonic Temple restoration

By Richard Tuber

**E**xactly where is Highland Park, anyway?" That question has stumped many Angelenos — even those who work downtown, just a few miles south of this unique community annexed to Los Angeles at the turn of the century.

The answer to that question may also unlock the key to another question more relevant to downtown — that of successful coexistence between the needs of commercial development and historical preservation.

Located between the city of Pasadena and downtown Los Angeles, just off the Pasadena freeway, Highland Park is bisected by Figueroa Street and bracketed by Avenues 41 and York Boulevard. Its residential neighborhoods radiate from there, and include the Mount Washington area.

That may be the geographic description, but architecturally Highland Park belongs to Southern California's yesteryears and contains many of its historic treasures. A recently organized Highland Park Heritage Trust recognizes the value of the community's landmarks, and is actively trying to preserve much of that history.

Yet, today's economic need to attract new business, and the commercial requirements it entails — such as constructing high rise office buildings and shopping centers — are often incompatible with historic preservation programs.

Fortunately, one of Highland Park's more enlightened businessmen is finding a way to have it both

ways: revitalize and attract new businesses, while not only maintaining, but enhancing the area's unique heritage. And nothing exemplifies his objectives more than one of the community's landmark buildings he is presently renovating.

Allen Golden, together with his partners Jerry Sullivan and Jerry Manpearl, are staking their futures on Highland Park's past. They recently purchased and are restoring a building which has just been declared a historic-cultural monument — the Masonic Temple at 104 North Avenue 56. (It is one of three Highland Park buildings recently designated by the Cultural Heritage Board of Los Angeles.)

The building, now known as the Mason Building, is a three story brick structure built in 1922 by Lodge 382 of the Masonic Order. What makes the building significant is its style — commercial/renaissance revival. It was a style common throughout Los Angeles during the 1920s, and featured detailing done in the Mediterranean manner.

Golden plans to renovate the 62-year-old structure and make the 20,000 square feet of space available for what he considers to be the best tenant mix for the community — custom built offices, ranging from 500 square feet to 8,000 square feet for business and professional clients.

The building originally was designed to accommodate retail businesses on the first floor, income from which was intended to help pay for the lodge activities on the upper two floors: dining and kitchen facilities and a huge paneled lodge meeting room.

"We'll have 9,000 square feet of ground floor space which will be divided into a number of stores to create an attractive situation for up market clientele — small businesses such as health food and art shops, walk-in and carry-out food concessions, a coffee shop, a wine and cheese facility. Places where people can relax and shop," Golden said. "We will be extremely competitive, and we'll be cooperative with tenants with the right attitude," he added.

The upper floors account for an additional 18,000 square feet of space, much of which will be developed for professional offices — doctors and lawyers, for example.

But achieving his overall objectives won't be that easy. For one thing, Golden is not trying to buck a trend, he is trying to initiate one. "There has been a good deal of resistance to Highland Park on the part of major tenants," he observed. "It took 10 years to put the Alpha Beta shopping center together."

Golden feels, however, that the attractions are there. "A lot of people don't think of Highland Park when they're looking for a business location. But we have a lot of people here, and the demographics are varied — and growing. We have Latinos, Orientals, influential young professionals with substantial disposable income. This is the last affordable commercial area adjacent to the city (Los Angeles)," Golden stated.

The business potentialities of the area, however, are not his sole concern. There is a special problem that stems from Golden's dedication to preserving the historic building while complying with the city earthquake ordinance.

"If we had not bought the building, it would have been leveled to a vacant lot," Golden said. "Other historic properties are subject to the same fate."

He feels that the city's earthquake ordinance, as it is drawn up and enforced, works against the interests of certain groups and the older buildings they own.

The ordinance applies to buildings constructed prior to 1933 which hold more than 600 occupants. It requires, among other things, structural re-enforcement of exterior brick walls with steel anchor bolts and tying together of roof and other structural members.

"The (earthquake) ordinance affects the disadvantaged more than advantaged groups," Golden claimed. In referring to the original Masonic Temple, he pointed out that it was built to hold 600 occupants — 350 in the meeting hall and 250 in the dining room. But in the ensuing years membership declined, the young moved away and those remaining were in the older age brackets.

Yet, Golden contends, the city's computer merely looked at its data banks and cited the Masonic building for rehabilitation. It was that citation that spelled the end of Lodge 382's meeting place.

"They simply could not afford to fix up the building to meet earthquake standards," Golden said. He characterized many older buildings as belonging to older, disadvantaged groups of people. And because of their age and finances, they are not in a position to do rehabilitation.

"So their choices were to demo-

lish the building at their own expense, thus creating a vacant lot; do nothing, in which case the city would demolish it and assess them; or sell the building to a fixer."

The lodge, of course, chose the latter course, and Golden became the "fixer."

"The system is not logical," Golden continued, "because next door (across the street) the building is just as old and has more people occupying it. Yet it has not been cited. Buildings are cited for conformance to seismic safety standards at the rate of one or two a day."

While Golden agrees with the philosophy of seismic standards — if a life is saved it's the right thing to do — he questions the uneven application of those standards across the board by means of computer printout. "This building has been here for 62 years and has withstood all the earthquakes we've had during that time," he said.

"The engineering has already been completed to keep the exterior facade of the building, and we're prepared to accept that cost because we're privately financed. But for others, the ordinance has an unfortunate domino effect." Golden went on to cite the case of the carpet business that formerly occupied the Mason building's ground floor. The firm was forced to move to smaller facilities, at higher rent, employing fewer workers. It hurts the economy all around, he feels.

Golden estimated that labor accounts for 80 percent of rehabilitation costs. "An anchor bolt used to re-enforce the walls costs \$10 for materials, but can range between \$7 to \$21 to install it. That makes a big difference if you're a small businessman."

Another unrecognized difficulty is that rehabilitation requires uncovering the building's foundations and stripping the walls and ceiling to their basic structures. This not only interferes with normal business activity, but is time-consuming. That often requires suspension of business activities while the work is being done — another hardship on the small businessman.

"Security Pacific Bank, on the otherhand, didn't experience that problem," Golden pointed out. "They were able to rehabilitate their building across the street in a short time — they paid a premium

for evening and weekend labor. It's a luxury many smaller businesses cannot afford," he said.

Nevertheless, with his private financing in place and his dedication to his ideals of improving the business climate of Highland Park while retaining its heritage, Golden has already started earthquake rehabilitation and anticipates completion within 60 days.

"We'll be ready for the first tenant occupancy on the ground floor by April 1," he said. He expects professional offices to be ready in about 90 days.

"I'm hopeful that my investments will have a positive impact on the local community, beyond the bounds of the property itself, that it will have a fallout on the neighborhood and encourage other investors to come here," Golden said. "I believe this area will be like the Melrose and Silverlake districts. I'm still disposed to the grass roots concept, that small shops can still afford it."

Golden has already participated in acquisition of other properties for rehabilitation, and wants to serve as a catalyst in the revitalization of the community. With his attitude, and with the success of his Mason Building venture, few people will have to ask "Just where is Highland Park anyway?"