

**United States Department of the Interior  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections



**1. Name**

historic Berkeley Public Library  
and/or common Berkeley Public Library, Main Branch

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**2. Location**

street & number 2090 Kittredge Street n/a  not for publication  
city, town Berkeley 94704 n/a vicinity of \_\_\_\_\_ congressional district 8  
state California code 06 county Alameda code 001

**3. Classification**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> n/a	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name City of Berkeley, Board of Library Trustees  
street & number 2090 Kittredge Street  
city, town Berkeley 94704 n/a vicinity of \_\_\_\_\_ state California

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Alameda County Courthouse  
street & number 1225 Fallon Street  
city, town Oakland 94612 state California

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

1. State Historic Resources Inventory  
title 2. Berkeley Urban Conservation Survey has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no  
date 1. Sept. 1977  
2. May 1977 \_\_\_\_\_ federal 1. state \_\_\_\_\_ county 2. local  
depository for survey records 1. Office of Historic Preservation, Box 2390/ 1220 K Street,  
2. Berkeley Architectural Heritage Assn., Box 1137,  
city, town 1. Sacramento 95811 2. Berkeley 94701 state California

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed	(little)	

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Library occupies the SW corner of Kittredge Street (170' frontage) & Shattuck Avenue (95'), downtown Berkeley's main street; Kittredge St. side has the main entrance & more elaborate facade. West side, open to driveway & small grassy yard, is a much simplified version of the other two. Building is reinforced concrete, a flat roofed rectangular block 50' high. Interior varies from 1 to 4 stories plus basement. Walls are stucco, painted 2 shades of deep terra cotta, with Mayan-inspired Zig Zag Moderne details in dark blue, brown, & green.

Tall narrow windows begin about 10' up from sidewalk level, & come to points at the top, with a metal asp at the apex & 4 parallel chevrons in relief on the wall above. Windows are separated by narrow projecting ribs or fins which extend about 1' above the roofline, where they are topped with a leaf pattern. Framing the whole groups of windows, near the ends of each facade, are rectangular pylons about 6' wide, topped below the roofline by knobby capitals decorated with rams' heads & Mayan figuration. Under the windows (& at eye level on the street) is a green & pale green sgraffito frieze of Egyptian-like figures making, reading, bearing, & seeking books. Framing the Kittredge St. doors & display window are a lintel panel with BERKELEY PUBLIC LIBRARY incised, & 2 shorter pylons, overlaid on the main ones, with more sgraffiti depicting the steps of knowledge.

Entry is to a ground-level vestibule, with walls of beige marble, wide marble stairway, & bronze & wrought iron floral grilles. Interior throughout (vestibule, lobby/circulation hall, reading room, reference, children's room) has marble baseboards & doorframes, high ceilings (with stenciled beams in reading room), & much of the original oak furniture & shelving. There are 4 public levels of stacks, steel with white marble floors.

Exterior was in the 1950s painted beige & friezes covered up. In 1973 the panels were restored & paint job by Karl Kardel helped set a fashion for deep colors highlighting individual structural & ornamental details.

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1930 Builder/Architect James W. Plachek

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The main Berkeley Public Library is the work of James W. Plachek (c.1885-1948), locally prominent & versatile architect who almost single-handedly shaped downtown Berkeley & its civic center in the period between the World Wars. The library is Berkeley's finest example of Zig Zag Moderne, with the combination of modern materials, economy of construction, & artistic distinction that characterize the style at its best. It is the more notable for its setting in a group of stylistically similar buildings, its excellent state of preservation, & its trend-setting 1973 restoration. The community support which allowed it to be built during the Depression attracted widespread notice, & represents a Berkeley tradition of support for libraries, from Shattuck family donations of 1893 & 1903 to the special post-Prop.13 library tax overwhelmingly passed by voters in 1980.

In 1903 a Carnegie grant gave Berkeley its first public library building, designed by John Galen Howard, Beaux Arts architect of the University of California. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake brought a population boom to the East Bay; by 1913 the library board was (unsuccessfully) asking the Carnegie foundation for another grant—"our building is quite outgrown"—& in 1921 & 1925 Berkeley's citizens voted a special library building tax. Just at the successful expiration of the building tax the Depression struck, but did not change the city's commitment to the new library, & in February 1930 work began with the razing of the Howard building--only 25 years old, demonstrably too small but also, judging by the style chosen for the new one, seen by progressive Berkeleyans as hopelessly dull & old fashioned.

The architect chosen, James Plachek, was a local civic & professional leader--past president of the Chamber of Commerce, subject of a lead article in the 1919 Architect & Engineer, member of the city Planning Commission, & a member of the library building committee since 1921. He had already designed Tudor Revival & Spanish Colonial branch libraries for the city (1924-7). Rivalled only by Walter Ratcliff as virtual city architect of Berkeley from the 1910s to the 1940s, he received city commissions beginning with John Muir School in 1915, 4 libraries, firehouses, school administration building, recreation center, police station, & city hall additions. He designed Berkeley's classical Federal Land Bank in 1922, & moderne Farm Credit Building in 1938; he was a member of the panel that designed the Alameda County Courthouse (1934-6). His commercial buildings still predominate in Berkeley's downtown & Telegraph Avenue business districts. His craftsman & period revival buildings are much like those of his similarly prolific contemporaries Ratcliff & E.L.Snyder, but he was the only one of that group to go on to the moderne style: downtown Berkeley's other major Zig Zag buildings were designed out of town by Kress & U.A. company architects.

At its opening the library was the subject of the 10-page lead article in the January 1931 Architect & Engineer by William I. Garren who praised its responsiveness to community needs, its combination of modernity & meaningful artistry with

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

see continuation sheet

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 0.5  
 Quadrangle name Oakland West

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A	1 0	5 6 4 4 4 0	4 1 9 1 2 5 0
	Zone	Easting	Northing
C			
E			
G			

B			
	Zone	Easting	Northing
D			
F			
H			

**Verbal boundary description and justification**

Book 57, Block 2028, Parcel 17; formerly Lots 1-5, Block 6, Shattuck Tract #2. Southwest corner of Shattuck Avenue and Kittredge Street, extending approximately 95' south along Shattuck, & west along Kittredge about 167' (building) plus 75' open space.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	n/a	code	county	code
state	n/a	code	county	code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Betty Marvin

organization Berkeley Architectural Heritage Assn. date 2/4/81, rev. 6/18/81

street & number Box 1137, Main Post Office telephone (415) 845-6591

city or town Berkeley 94701 state California

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

*K. M. Egan*

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date May 21, 1982

For HCERS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

*K. M. Egan*  
 Keeper of the National Register

Entered in the  
 National Register

date 6/25/82

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND RECREATION SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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economy & structural simplicity. "The stack area...gives one the feeling of being a part of a modern German movie film, surrounded by a labyrinth of steel forms.... A conception of such simplicity would result in sterminess were it not for the softening influence of the sculptural work & the color notes...It was the intention to keep the line between the building & the sculpture indistinguishable." Writers stressed that Simeon Pelenc's sgraffito panels were conceived "in collaboration with the architect": the library was meant as a total unified design, with light fixtures & furniture & hardware all designed by Plachek, & all constructed locally.

Besides being downtown Berkeley's finest Moderne building, the library was nearly its first. In 1932 2 others came to adjoin it on Shattuck--the U.A.Theater & a small tiled store building--which help integrate it into its largely 1910s & 20s (& largely Plachek) Main Street setting. The library forms one end of a de facto civic center, running NW through the post office, municipal offices (Plachek's 1938 Farm Credit Building), Veterans' Memorial, City Hall, & Plachek's police station.

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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James Plachek papers, Berkeley Architectural Heritage archives - photos, clippings, and correspondence.  
Berkeley Public Library clip file - opening program, annual reports, newspaper clippings, et.  
City of Berkeley Housing Dept., property file - building and alteration permits.  
Vera Plachek, interviewed by Anthony Bruce and Lesley Emmington, 1977.  
Architect & Engineer, Jan. 1931, 27-36, "The Berkeley Public Library", Wm. I. Garren; Feb. 1919, 60-85, "Buildings in Berkeley Designed by James W. Plachek", Wells Drury; Dec. 1925, 100-103, "An Essay in Modern Architecture", I.F. Morrow.  
Margaret D'Evelyn, "The Deeply Rooted New Berkeley Public Library", UC art history paper, 1978.  
Hans Ostwald, "Suggested Program for the Physical Expansion of the B.P.L. Main Building", Oct. 1963.  
William W. Ferrier, Berkeley, California, 1933.  
George A. Pettitt, Berkeley, The Town & Gown of It, 1973.  
Berkeley Chamber of Commerce, Berkeley Progress, 1931-36.  
Berkeley Council of Neighborhood Assns. Newsletter, May 1980, "Berkeleyans and Their Library: A Proud Tradition", Henry Paoast.  
Berkeley Chamber of Commerce, Courier, April 22, 1922, "James W. Plachek, Architect and City Builder"; August 30, 1924, "The Need for an Adequate Main Library", Carlton B. Joeckel; Jan. 18, 1930, "Library Plans are Approved - Architect's Interior Sketch"; Jan. 31, 1931, "Berkeley Public Library - New Building Dedication Edition".  
Berkeley Gazette, Jan 31 and Feb. 3, 1931, "Berkeley's First Public Library", W.W. Ferrie Nov. 5 & 6, Dec. 5, 1903; Ap. 19, Dec. 6 1904, Carnegie Library; Dec. 17, 1938, "Architect Plackek's Dream Approaches Reality", Elizabeth Turner; Sept. 15 & 29, 1976, "Berkeley's Architectural Heritage," Anthony Bruce and Mary Ann Beach; May 11 & 18, 1980, "how the City Got Its First Free Public Library" & "How the Libraries Survived Hard Times," Henry Pancoast & Sayre Van Young; July 16, 1980, "An Architect Who Ranged Stodgy to Mother Goose," Charles Marinovich.

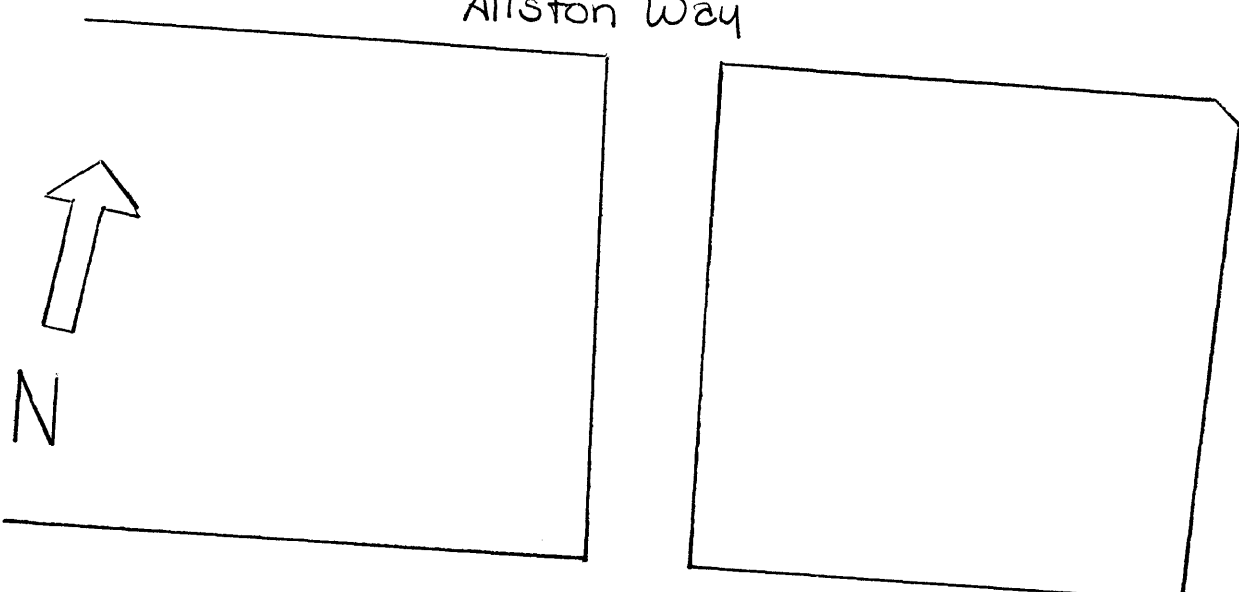
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Allston Way



Kittredge Street



Shattuck Avenue

Bancroft Way

