

WEMPE BROTHERS PAPER BOX COMPANY BUILDING  
(Western Paper Box Company Building)  
1155 Fifth Street  
Oakland  
Alameda County  
California

HABS CA-2806  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
PACIFIC WEST REGIONAL OFFICE  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1111 Jackson Street, Suite 700  
Oakland, CA 94607

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
WEMPE BROTHERS PAPER BOX COMPANY BUILDING  
HABS NO. CA-2806

**Location:** 1155 Fifth Street, Oakland, Alameda County, California

USGS 7.5 minute series – Oakland West, Calif.  
UTM Coordinates: 10 . 562710 . 4183940

**Date of Construction:** 1905

**Architect:** Unknown

**Present Owner:** Madison Park Partners II  
1155 Fifth Street, #101  
Oakland, California 94607

**Present Use:** Artists' Lofts

**Significance:** The building is significant as an exceptionally early use of reinforced concrete construction, and for its semi-mill structural system. The building was determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1990, under criterion C.

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## I. DESCRIPTION

The Wempe Brothers Paper Box Company Building, at 1155 Fifth Street, is a four-story factory loft building converted in recent years to artists' studios. It is about 100' square in plan, 55' high to the roofline, of semi-mill construction with heavy timber columns and beams and large, closely spaced joists for heavy factory loads. Its exterior walls are of concrete block masonry construction reinforced with poured concrete and Ernest Ransome's patented cold twisted square steel reinforcing bars. The timber frame extends to the perimeter of the building where the columns are about half as large as in the center and the joists are notched into the exterior walls. Thus it appears that the exterior walls carry some of the floor loads. There are four rows of wood columns on each floor and in recent years, for strengthening the building against earthquakes, heavy diagonal timbers have been inserted. These are about the same size as the building's original wood columns and beams.

Each exterior wall is organized in five bays, with three double-hung windows in each bay. Each of the street facades has a two-part vertical composition, with a one-story base separated from the three-story upper zone by a simple band course. The bays of the upper zone are articulated by flat piers and slightly recessed spandrels. The original cornice has been removed. Apart from these features and a modest door surround of Classical style at the main entry, there is little ornamentation on the building. Its appearance is distinguished by the visibility of the individual concrete blocks whose joints and slightly varied alignments produce richly textured walls.

Inside, the original loft spaces have been partitioned for individual studio and residence spaces. The original details of the timber framing and the wood floors are visible in many areas. A one-story warehouse adjoining the building on the south is an addition dating from 1932. It is corrugated metal on wood frame, with a stepped parapet and stuccoed front. A similar addition on the Fifth Street side of the lot was demolished in 1967.

The building's setting is generally industrial, with recent (post-1965) and heavily modernized 1920s warehouse and light industrial buildings in the vicinity. To the north are the elevated tracks of the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system and the elevated freeway.

## II. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The building was constructed in 1905 for the Wempe Brothers Paper Box Company factory. It served briefly as the "temporary emergency factory" of Schmidt Lithograph Co. of San Francisco following the 1906 earthquake, and by 1907 Oakland city directories also list it as the Western Paper Box Company, which it remained until 1965.

The Wempe Brothers Paper Box Company was founded in 1866 by William and Gerhard Wempe in San Francisco. The Oakland factory was built for fine box and carton making, leaving heavy box manufacturing in San Francisco. In 1901 the general manager of Wempe Brothers, Frederick W. Kewell, left to start his own company, the Western Paper Box Company. When the Western Paper Box plant was destroyed in 1906, the two companies evidently merged in the new building under Kewell as the Western Paper Box Company. By 1911 the promotional publication "Greater Oakland" stated that "The Western Paper Box Company manufactures a greater variety of packages, and does a larger business by far, than any other concern of its kind on the Pacific Coast," and called it "one of the biggest institutions on this side of the Bay."

The 1910 census for the Bay View Homestead Tract, a few blocks west of the factory, shows that a large number of teenage girls worked here as "box makers." The principal products of the factory included pill boxes, jewelry boxes, robe boxes, and millinery boxes. Paper box manufacturing was a service to a wide variety of manufacturing and retail industries and thus this plant was an element of the general industrial development of the Bay Area in the early twentieth century.

With its four walls of almost continuous windows on each floor, the factory was a well-lit and ventilated building where, according to press accounts, there was a concern for "clean and sanitary conditions" for the more than one hundred employees. Typical of factories of the period, it was organized for a gravity production process so that paper and cardboard were first brought to the skylit top floor for cutting, dropped down to the "factory" on the third and second floors for painting, shaping and gluing, and to the first floor for shipping. There were also offices on the first floor. Machinery was run on belts from overhead shafts. Power and lights were electric and the building had gas for heating the glue pots.

As a factory building it was characteristic of its period in many ways: it was of semi-mill construction for support of heavy loads and resistance to fire; it was amply lit and ventilated for the comfort, safety, and efficiency of the employees; and it was attractively designed. In one important respect it was extremely rare: as a pre-1906 reinforced concrete block factory, it was among a handful of factory buildings in the world at the time to utilize the technology of reinforced concrete. Although many people had begun to experiment with concrete block construction in the years between 1900 and 1906, most of these efforts were for houses or small commercial buildings and few were reinforced. (Many of these unreinforced masonry buildings in the Bay Area must have been destroyed in the 1906 earthquake. This building apparently survived intact although surprisingly it was not well publicized.) No other concrete block factory buildings – or reinforced concrete buildings for any purpose at this scale – are known to exist in Oakland from so early a date. While concrete block was normally permitted anywhere as a form of masonry construction, most building codes did not recognize reinforced concrete until after the experience of the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco.

### III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Blake, Evarts J. *Greater Oakland, 1911*, p. 143-45.

City of Oakland and Alameda County tax rolls and block books, 1869-1960.

City of Oakland building permit records.

*Eminent Californians*, 1956, p. 210.

*Husted's Oakland-Berkeley-Alameda Directory*. 1905 through 1910.

Kewell, Frederick II, interview by Gary Knecht, June 28, 1990.

Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey. Historic Resources Inventory forms for the Wempe Brothers Paper Box Company Building, 1990. In *Historic Property Survey Report for the Proposed I-880 Reconstruction Project* (Volume 3). Oakland: California Department of Transportation, 1990.

*Oakland Tribune Yearbook*, 1930. p. 121.

*Polk's Oakland-Berkeley-Alameda Directory*. 1911 through 1965.

Sanborn Map Company, *Oakland, California*. New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1889-1901, 1902-11, 1912-51.

United States Census. Oakland, California, 1910.

"Wempe Brothers Paper Box Factory." *Oakland Tribune*, December 23, 1905, p. 46.

#### **IV. PROJECT INFORMATION**

The collapse, in 1989, of the Cypress Structure portion of Interstate 880 during the Loma Prieta earthquake has led the California Department of Transportation to replace the collapsed facility with a new freeway on a new alignment. The new freeway will be much closer to the building on the north side, and will constitute an adverse effect to the historic building due to the visual intrusion and alteration of the building's setting. This documentation is intended to comply with part of the mitigation requirements for the construction of the new freeway, in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

V. LOCATION MAP

