State of California — The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
PRIMARY RECORD

Primary # _____
HRI # _____
Trinomial _____
NRHP Status Code 3CS
Other Listings _____
Review Code _____ Reviewer _____ Date _____

 *Resource Name or #: (Assigned by recorder) 901 Van Ness Avenue

P1. Historic name of building (if any): Earle C. Anthony Packard showroom
P2. Location: *a: County San Francisco ☐ Not for Publication ■ Unrestricted
*b. USGS 7.5' Quad _____ Date _____ T ___; R ___; ___¼ of ___¼ of Sec ___; _____B.M.
c. Address 901 Van Ness Avenue City San Francisco Zip 94109
d. UTM: Zone _____; _____mE/ _____ mN *e. Assessor's parcel #: Block 719, lot 2

*P3a. Description: (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries)

This three-to-four story reinforced concrete building fills its lot at the northwest corner of Van Ness Avenue and Ellis Street. The building runs for 120' along Van Ness, from Ellis to Olive Street, and west for 247'; and thus occupies almost two-thirds of the half-block bounded by Van Ness, Franklin, Ellis and Olive.

The building exhibits two different styles. On the exterior, the symmetrical Van Ness front, the two adjacent bays along Ellis, and the corresponding bays on Olive are in a rather extravagant Classical Revival style, while the balance of the Ellis and Olive facades are industrial in feeling, with only perfunctory references to classicism. Inside, the opulent showroom at the front of the building and the spare service area to the rear contrast similarly.

(See Continuation Sheet, page 2.)

*P3b Resource Attributes: HP6 – three-story commercial building

*P4. Resources Present:
■ Building ☐ Structure ☐ Object ☐ Site ☐ District ☐ Element of District ☐ Other

P5b. Description of Photo: (View, date, accession #)
View looking southwest
June 2009

*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Source: ■ Historic ☐ Prehistoric ☐ Both
1926-1927; published article

*P7. Owner and Address:

*P8. Recorded by: (Name, affiliation, and address)
William Kostura
P. O. Box 60211
Palo Alto, CA 94306

*P9. Date Recorded: May 2010

*P10. Survey Type: (Describe)
intensive

P11. Report Citation*: (Cite survey report.) William Kostura. *Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures.* San Francisco Department of City Planning, 2009.

*Attachments: ☐ NONE ☐ Location Map ☐ Sketch Map ■ Continuation Sheet ■ Building, Structure and Object Record ☐ Archaeological Record ☐ District Record ☐ Linear Feature Record ☐ Milling Station Record ☐ Rock Art Record ☐ Artifact Record ☐ Photograph Record ☐ Other (List)

Description (continued):

The following three paragraphs describe the Van Ness Avenue façade and the adjacent bays on Ellis and Olive streets (i.e., the areas with a strongly Classical Revival treatment):

The dominant motif in these areas is a series of eight monumental Corinthian columns. Four of these columns are grouped as pairs near the center of the Van Ness façade, two others are found at the corners of the building, and the remaining two are found on the Ellis and Olive facades, where the classical treatment terminates. These columns are clad in red Numidian marble that was painted the current beige color in the 1960s or 1970s. They support a lintel in the form of a molded cornice, and this lintel or cornice in turn supports the top story of the building. In the top story, swirling plaster rinceaux occupies the corners and flank a long window band with replacement metal sash. Two molded cornices top this story, the upper one being recessed behind the lower one.

In the lower stories, very large expanses of glass fill the wall areas between and to either side of the columns. The glass is held in place by steel sash, some of which is original and some of which is not; the pattern of sash and glass closely resembles that shown in early photographs. Two-thirds of the way up the façade, at the second floor level, black spandrels with vertical grooves can be found; these replace original spandrels that were decorated with a Greek key pattern and were apparently colored green.

The remaining wall areas are filled with broad, rectangular piers of travertine that project forward from the glass. The travertine material in these piers dates to the 1960s or 1970s and replaced original slabs of black Belgian marble; aside from the change in material, the design of these piers is unchanged. These piers are capped with bands of classical ornament. Pedestrian entrances pierce the two piers that face Van Ness. Each of these entrances is surrounded by elaborate classical ornament of terra cotta and capped by a shelf molding supported by scroll brackets.

The balance of the Ellis and Olive facades is industrial in character, is devoted mainly to expanses of glass in steel sash, and is divided into bays by paired pilasters with minimalist capitals. The cornice is profiled and is an extension of the higher cornice that tops the classical portion of the building. The westernmost fifty feet (approximately) of the building rises to a higher level than the rest of the building, and is otherwise similar in treatment to the portion described immediately above.

A sheet metal roof with open sides has been raised over the original roof; this recent addition probably serves to protect automobiles stored there.

The showroom interior is highly elaborate, and is primarily Renaissance in character, with some Gothic details. A detailed description of it is beyond the scope of this report. The main alterations to it have been the replacement of the original sheet metal light fixtures with glass chandeliers, and the addition of a second story to the office. To the rear of the first story, west of the showroom, is a service area that is utilitarian in character, and devoid of ornament.

Top photo: Ellis street side
Bottom photo: detail of cornice and frieze area

Top photo: Pedestrian entrance on Van Ness Avenue
Bottom photo: West end of the Ellis Street side, which is mainly utilitarian in character

*NRHP Status Code 3CS

*Resource Name or # (Assigned by recorder) 901 Van Ness Avenue

B1. Historic Name: Earle C. Anthony Packard showroom

B2. Common Name:

B3. Original Use: auto showroom B4. Present Use: auto showroom

*B5. Architectural Style: Classical Revival

*B6. Construction History: (Construction date, alterations, and date of alterations)
Built in 1926-1927. During the 1960s or 1970s the exterior columns of red marble were painted beige; the flat piers of black marble were replaced with travertine; spandrels (probably green) decorated with a Greek key pattern (2/3 of the way up the façade) were replaced by vertically grooved panels; most window sash in the lower stories was replaced with sash of similar pattern; the industrial steel window sash across the top story was replaced with simpler sash of fewer lights; and ornamental metal light fixtures in the showroom were replaced with the present glass chandeliers.

*B7. Moved? ■ No ☐ Yes ☐ Unknown Date: _____ Original Location: _____

*B8. Related Features: none

B9a. Architects: Bernard Maybeck, with Powers and Ahnden, associated architects b. Builder: unknown

*B10. Significance: Theme automobile industry Area San Francisco
Period of Significance 1926-1964 Property Type auto showroom Applicable Criteria 1, 2, 3
(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)

History – The architects and design

This building was built in 1926-1927 for automobile distributor Earle C. Anthony as his Packard showroom for San Francisco. The architects were the firm of Powers and Ahnden working in association with Bernard Maybeck. A short article by Irving F. Morrow published in *Architect and Engineer* three months after the building opened clearly indicates that it was Maybeck who conceived the classical façade and the showroom interior. Powers and Ahnden, however, were listed as the primary architects in Morrow's article. The historian Kenneth Cardwell, who relied on an unpublished manuscript by Maybeck, stated that "Maybeck prepared schematic drawings which his associates used to make preliminary structural, mechanical, and electrical drawings for his approval. Maybeck then concentrated on the decorative features of the design and charged Anthony a straight fee for his 'art work.'" (Kenneth Cardwell, *Bernard Maybeck* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983, pp. 220.) From the above, it seems clear that Maybeck controlled the design process, but it seems likely that Powers and Ahnden performed the larger share of the work. They probably created the plan, made the finished drawings, wrote the specifications, and designed the more utilitarian aspects of the building. It remains unclear which firm supervised the construction of the building. *(See Continuation Sheet, page 6.)*

B11. Additional Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes)

*B12. References:

Polk's city directory listings for occupants of this building, 1927-1964
1928 and 1951 Sanborn insurance map ("3-4 story, reinf. concr., fireproof, showroom in 1st-2nd, service in 3rd, washing in 4th")
Irving F. Morrow, "The Earle C. Anthony Packard Building," *Architect and Engineer*, July 1927, p. 60.
Kenneth Cardwell, *Bernard Maybeck* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983), pp. 220-221, 245.
Sally B. Woodbridge, *Bernard Maybeck: Visionary Architect* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), pp. 177-182.

B13. Remarks:

*B14. Evaluator: William Kostura
Date of Evaluation: May 2010

(Sketch map with north arrow required)

(This space reserved for official comments.)

History – The architects and design (continued)

The exotic effect of the varied historical references in the building was summed up by the owner, Earle C. Anthony, in a booklet that he published in 1927, *A Saga of Transportation*. He wrote, "Maybeck has vitalized with his own dynamic personality the exotic influences which drift in through the Golden Gate from the Seven Seas." Describing briefly the materials and motifs used, Anthony thought the sum of these parts was "an Aladdin's palace in which the gorgeous panoply of the Arabian Nights vies with the luxury of the Middle Ages." (Quoted in Sally B. Woodbridge, *Bernard Maybeck: Visionary Architect*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1992, pp. 180.)

Maybeck's instructions to his builders have been preserved: "Imagine that no cars roar by on Van Ness Avenue and that no telephone will call you from your work. Believe yourselves, instead, working in the gloom of a cathedral of the Middle Ages, your overseer a monk or an artisan who loves, as you do, the work in hand." A photograph of the interior published in *Architect and Engineer* in 1927 shows a man and a woman in Spanish Renaissance costume, leaving no doubt about Anthony's and Maybeck's love of period imagery. (Woodbridge, p. 180.)

Apparently the building was controversial, at least within the local architectural profession and perhaps also to some laypersons, when it was completed. Kenneth Cardwell wrote that the colorful, Mannerist design, with the "brutal" overscaled frieze, was not admired by Maybeck's Beaux Arts colleagues, who expected correct proportions and a decorative scheme that derived logically from the plan and structure. (Cardwell, p. 220.) In his review for an architectural journal the architect Irving Morrow summed up the effect of the building by writing, "Here is a building stalking a main thoroughfare in sports clothes; conduct which cannot but shock the good American sense of propriety." He referred to the building's style as "whimsical pseudo-classicism." (Irving F. Morrow, "The Earle C. Anthony Packard Building," *Architect and Engineer*, July 1927, p. 60-61.)

Morrow, however, went on to vigorously defend the building. In other arts, "whim and fantasy and the joy of sheer irresponsible creation" are accepted; why not in architecture? Morrow noted the similar spirit shared by the Packard showroom and Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts; he thought it odd that people who wanted to save the Palace were "shocked" by the showroom. Regarding the mixed historical imagery that Maybeck used, Morrow wrote, "Of course Mr. Maybeck makes not the slightest effort to conceal that he has peeped into his Fragments d'Architecture Antique.... But he has turned to the sacred books with oh, what deliberately irreverent intent!... The animating force in his building – and it really has one – is his own personality." But there was another force at work, as well. Morrow noted that this was after all, a commercial building, and Maybeck's showroom and façade were meant as "well-calculated publicity" for the products sold there. Morrow seemed to think this was entirely proper. He concluded, "Mr. Maybeck's creation is really a courageous performance; and it cannot fail to ease the way for future architectural adventurers." (Morrow, pp. 60-61, 67.)

Though Morrow credited the "animating force" of the building to Maybeck's personality, Maybeck himself wrote otherwise. In a speech given on the building's opening night, Maybeck said of the design,

(Continued on page 7.)

History – The architects and design (continued)

"it may be good art, it may be bad – but such as it is, it is the outcome of the man who inspired it, and had the courage to bring it into being." In a footnote to the typescript of this speech, Maybeck explicitly explained that this referred to Mr. Earle C. Anthony. Maybeck continued, "The one thing this building does reflect to me is the earnestness, the energy and the hardwork; and it seems to me that everyone from the bottom up worked with a sense of doing something good. Every sensitive heart that can read will feel this spirit of the men who built this place." Maybeck was giving credit to the workmen who applied themselves with a devotion reminiscent of medieval artisans; but perhaps there was also a hint to future readers of his speech that the colorful materials and pop classical style of the building were the result of preferences expressed by its owner.

The principle designer, Bernard Maybeck, is one of the best-known architects in San Francisco history. He trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, worked subsequently as a draftsman for the New York firm of Carrere and Hastings, and came to San Francisco in 1889, where he worked for local firms before becoming an instructor in drawing at the University of California. His personal practice as an architect ran from the 1890s to 1940. He designed principally houses in Berkeley and San Francisco, many of which, such as the Roos house in San Francisco and the Lawson house in Berkeley, are renowned. Two other buildings by Maybeck are also nationally well-known: the Palace of Fine Arts, built for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, and the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Berkeley. He has been the subject of two architectural biographies, by Cardwell and Woodbridge, and was one of four architects covered by Richard Longstreth in his book *On the Edge of the World.*

The firm of Powers and Ahnden, by contrast, is little-known, despite their having designed many fine buildings. John H. Powers was a native of San Francisco; trained as a draftsman, first with Augustus Laver and then with Shea and Shea; and had his own practice from 1907 to 1934. His early commissions were for his family and for his former neighbors on Russian Hill, where he had grown up, to replace buildings that had burned in 1906. He later designed some very fine houses in Pacific Heights, mainly in Classical Revival styles, most notably the Alfred Sbarboro residence at 3015 Pacific (1912), the Romolo Sbarboro residence at 2600 Green (1916), and the Hueter residence at 2930 Vallejo (1919). His house for Percy Morgan in Los Altos Hills (1915) is a sprawling, half-timbered Tudor residence based in part on an earlier design by Bakewell and Brown. In 1922 he joined in partnership with architect John H. Ahnden, who had apprenticed with Shea and Shea, Henry Schulze, and Bakewell and Brown. Together, Powers and Ahnden designed the Insurance Center Building at 200-206 Sansome Street (1927), an extremely fine office skyscraper with Gothic detailing; and the Weinstock, Lubin and Co. department store in Sacramento (1924).

Besides the Packard showroom in San Francisco for Earle C. Anthony, the associated firms of Powers and Ahnden and Bernard Maybeck also designed a Packard showroom in Oakland for Anthony (1928; demolished). A third Packard showroom, in Los Angeles, was designed principally by a Los Angeles firm, with a showroom interior by Maybeck (also demolished). Earle C. Anthony's house in Los Angeles was also designed by Maybeck (extant).

History – Earle C. Anthony and his Packard dealership

For 34 years, from 1927 to 1961, this building was the San Francisco showroom of Earle C. Anthony, the statewide distributor for Packard automobiles.

Anthony had had a long history as an automobile dealer in California before this building was constructed. From 1904 through 1914 he had been the silent head of the Western Motor Car Company, which was based in his home city of Los Angeles and sold the Packard and Chalmers brands of automobile. The company established a branch showroom in San Francisco in 1914, and at the beginning of 1915, when Anthony assumed a more active role, its name was changed to Earle C. Anthony, Inc. From 1914 through 1922 his San Francisco showroom was at 1400 Van Ness Avenue (extant). There, he sold Chalmers, Grant, Reo, and other brands of autos through mid-1917.

Prior to that date Anthony had been selling Packard autos in Los Angeles, Pasadena, and San Diego, and had established over 100 Packard service affiliates around southern California. The Packard company had been impressed with his record in that region, particularly with his emphasis on offering good service, and seems to have been eager to award the northern California territory to Anthony as well. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle* ("Selection of New Dealer Is Surprise," June 3, 1917, p. 45), Anthony was then the leading Packard dealer west of St. Louis. One has to consider this statement in the light of the relentlessly boosterish tone of newspaper articles about automobiles during this period, but it is clear he was a very successful auto dealer. When it was able to, in June 1917, Packard took the northern California agency away from Cuyler Lee (who had sold Packards in San Francisco for the past ten years) and awarded it to Earle C. Anthony.

The Packard brand had been founded in 1899 by James Ward Packard, William Doud Packard, and George Lewis Weiss. When new investors reorganized the company in 1902-1903 they built a huge, 35-acre factory complex in Detroit designed by Albert Kahn. Packard became one of the premier luxury automobiles in the United States. It was known as one of the "three Ps" of luxury autos, the others being Pierce-Arrow and Peerless.

Anthony sold Packards at 1400 Van Ness during 1917-1922, then moved to expansive quarters at 1335-1395 Van Ness (altered). Despite the large space available to him there, this was a temporary expedience, for in 1926-1927 Earle C. Anthony built his own, very large, Bernard Maybeck-designed showroom at 901 Van Ness Avenue.

The building was equipped with radio towers that served the two radio stations that Anthony also owned. On opening night, April 2nd, 1927, an open house at 901 Van Ness was attended by movie stars that Anthony, a Los Angeles resident, had cultivated. The festivities and a speech by Bernard Maybeck were broadcast from the radio antennae.

Anthony continued to sell Packards at 901 Van Ness through 1961. For a few years, 1933-1935, he also sold the Hudson brand of automobile here. As far as is known, Anthony never sold any other brand of automobile from this building. He sold Packard autos in California for 57 years (1904-1961), in San Francisco for 44 years (1917-1961), and at 901 Van Ness for 34 years (1927-1961).

History -- Alterations to the building

In 1962 a new auto dealership, Van Ness Chrysler-Plymouth, moved into 901 Van Ness. Later, in the 1960s or 1970s, that dealership traded buildings with British Motors, then at 1200 Van Ness. Apparently it was British Motors (which remains the owner and occupant) that decided to tone down the color scheme of the building. The Numidian red columns were painted beige, the black Belgian marble piers were re-clad with travertine, and the green spandrels with Greek key patterns were replaced by plainer black spandrels. Some window sash was replaced, albeit in a pattern close to the original sash. Inside the showroom, the exotic metal light fixtures were replaced with the current glass chandeliers.

History – Context

Packard showrooms in San Francisco

Packard automobiles have been sold at seven showrooms in San Francisco during 1903-1961. The first two of these no longer stand. The remaining five include:

1910-1917: sold at 2000 Van Ness by Cuyler Lee; altered through the addition of four stories
1916-1922: sold at 1400 Van Ness by Earle C. Anthony; extant
1922-1927: sold at 1395 Van Ness by Earle C. Anthony; façade altered and a story added
1927-1961: sold at 901 Van Ness by Earle C. Anthony (the building being evaluated here)
1938-1941: sold at 1750 Van Ness by Laurent and Niello; largely altered

Thus, 1400 Van Ness represents an early period of Packard sales, while 901 Van Ness is more important overall for its much greater longevity of use as a Packard showroom.

Architecturally distinguished auto showrooms in San Francisco

The most distinguished auto showrooms in San Francisco that still stand with good to high integrity, and their architects, are listed below, in chronological order by construction:

1001 Polk Street/1000 Geary Street; John Galen Howard; 1912-1913
1400 Van Ness Avenue; Herman Barth; 1912-1912
1699 Van Ness Avenue; Sylvain Schnaittacher; 1919-1920, 1923
1000 Van Ness Avenue; Weeks and Day; 1920-1921
901 Van Ness Avenue; Bernard Maybeck, with Powers and Ahnden, 1926-1927 (the building being evaluated here)
999 Van Ness Avenue; John E. Dinwiddie; 1937, 1950.

A few others are also fine but rank below these in quality. Several others of high quality have been demolished or extensively altered.

Integrity

The changes to the color scheme of the exterior is a substantial alteration; less so are the replacement of the second floor spandrels and the sash in the top story. Overall, the exterior is largely intact, and the showroom interior is almost completely intact. The exterior of the building retains integrity of location, workmanship, feeling, and association; while integrity of design is slightly diminished, and integrity of materials is somewhat diminished. Three nearby showrooms (at 950 Van Ness, 999 Van Ness, and 1000 Van Ness) still stand, and thus integrity of setting is good. The showroom interior retains high integrity.

Evaluation

This is one of more than 100 buildings along the Van Ness Avenue corridor that have a history as automobile support structures, and that are being evaluated for possible historic significance according to the criteria of the California Register of Historical Resources. With a few exceptions, these buildings were auto showrooms, public garages, auto repair shops, auto parts and supplies stores, and auto painting shops. The time period that is being studied is from the initial years of the automobile industry in San Francisco through 1964. Among the factors that have been considered when evaluating a building are its date of construction, its longevity of auto-related use, the importance of its occupants in local auto industry history, integrity, and architectural quality. These factors, and how they apply to evaluations of buildings, are discussed in a cover report, *Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures, 1908-1964*.

Criterion 1

Completed in 1927, this is a moderately early example of an automobile showroom. Counting through 1964 (the end year of the period being studied for this report), this building had 37 years of such use, for excellent longevity. For 34 of these years it was a showroom for Packard, a very important auto brand; and this is the best example of a Packard showroom left standing in San Francisco. For these reasons, the building appears to be eligible for the California Register of Historical Resources under Criterion 1, at the local level, for its use as an automobile showroom. The Period of Significance under this criterion is 1927-1964, the years the building had this use.

Criterion 2

The original owner of this building, Earle C. Anthony, had statewide importance as a prominent automobile dealer, principally of Packards, but also of Chalmers, Reo, and other brands, from 1904 to at least 1961. Anthony lived in Los Angeles, not in San Francisco, during this entire period. His large auto showrooms of the 1920s in Los Angeles and Oakland no longer stand. It is unknown whether showrooms of his in Los Angeles from earlier years (1904-1927) still stand. One of his early San Francisco showrooms, at 1400 Van Ness, which Anthony occupied during 1914-1922, does survive with high integrity. Anthony's house in Los Angeles (also designed by Maybeck) survives, but this house does not represent the work for which Anthony was important nearly as well as his showrooms do. All things considered, 901 Van Ness is probably the best example of an Earle C. Anthony showroom that still stands with good integrity. Accordingly, this building appears to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 2, for its association with Earle C. Anthony. The Period of Significance under this criterion is 1927-1961, the years Anthony used this building as his Packard showroom.

Criterion 3

Architecturally, this building is one of the six best auto showrooms left standing in San Francisco. It is also important as a rare, and fine, commercial building by Bernard Maybeck, one of the most important architects in San Francisco's history. The showroom interior, though not described in detail in this report, is extremely fine, and is almost completely intact. Accordingly, this building appears to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 3. The Period of Significance under this criterion is 1926-1927, the years of design and construction.

Note: This building was designated as a San Francisco City Landmark in 1981, and should also qualify for the California Register by virtue of this designation.

Character defining features

The character defining features of this building are: its height and width; the exterior columns with their capitals; the wide, flat piers with their ornamental caps; the three levels of cornices; the frieze beneath the main cornice, with its plaster rinçeaux and bands of windows within and to either side of the rinçeaux; the tall windows with their steel sash; the ornamental pedestrian entrances in the main façade, with their shelf moldings and supporting brackets; and all features of the showroom interior that are original. The travertine material of the flat piers is not a contributing feature of the historic building, although it is highly compatible with the pedestrian entrances that it surrounds. The simplified window sash in the frieze area at the top of the building is also not a contributing feature, but as mentioned above, the existence of bands of windows here is. Similarly, the simplified spandrels with vertical flutings at the second floor level are not contributing, but the existence of some kind of spandrels here is.

901 Van Ness Avenue at the time of completion. From *Architect and Engineer*, July 1927. The columns were of red Numidian marble, and are now painted beige. The flat piers were of black Belgian marble, and have since been replaced with travertine. In the top story frieze, industrial steel sash windows have been replaced by windows with simpler sash. At the second floor level, spandrels with a Greek key pattern, apparently originally green in color, have been replaced by black spandrels with vertical grooves or flutings. The radio towers on top of the building served Earle C. Anthony's two radio stations.