

DRAFT: Letter to UC regarding the proposed plans for the Anna Head School
Prepared by Luke Leuschner, November 2025

To the University of California,

Discussion surrounding historic preservation typically operates under the assumption that advocates and bodies like the Landmarks Preservation Commission are anti-development. As the LPC sees it, proscribing the development of a city would be contrary to the very processes which give the built environment a sense of narrative, one that traces the evolution of its people, their buildings, priorities, and predispositions. Still, the LPC and the greater public remains animated by a belief that certain buildings deserve protection for their potential to convey a story about a place. Sometimes the stories are small, and sometimes they are quite big, but at times we don't want to merely surrender them to economy.

It is coming from this perspective that the LPC writes to express their support for preserving Channing Hall of the Anna Head School as part of the University of California's ongoing effort to redevelop the site into student housing. While current plans call for the demolition of three of the historic structures, including the foremost Channing Hall, we believe that the UC is missing out on a opportunity to develop a project that remains in dialogue with the site's history.

The history of the Anna Head School hardly needs to be emphasized. Established in 1887 by its namesake, the school was a progressive leader in the education of young women and sought to embody many of its values in its architecture. The first building of the campus, Channing Hall, opened in 1892 and was imagined in the Shingle style, a distinctly American take on the English Arts & Crafts that sought to embody nature and connection to place. Channing Hall was the first shingle style building in Berkeley, among the first on the West Coast, and a nationally relevant example of the style. The building's history has been recognized by its designation as both a local and national landmark.

Although the structure's condition has deteriorated over the past few decades, it is certainly not beyond restoration. The LPC supports any route which involves the preservation of Channing Hall, but especially any plan which can preserve the structure on its site and as part of a new housing project. The UC has demonstrated an ability to handle difficult restoration projects throughout the city. In addition to the routine preservation of many historic campus buildings, other recent projects include the relocation of Girton Hall (Julia Morgan, 1911) to the UC Botanical Garden in 2014, the transformation of the Kellogg House (Julia Morgan, 1909) into the Haas eHub in 2025, or the partnership which saw to the reopening of Bowles Hall (George Kelham, 1929) in 2016. Each of these projects is not only a restoration but a successful integration of cultural resources and contemporary needs. Of course, the most obvious example of this would be the restoration of the Alumnae Hall (1927) on the Anna Head campus in 2011, now continually activated by campus events.

The LPC understands that preserving the entire Anna Head site is not feasible given the UC's overwhelming demand to add student housing units. However, to lose Channing Hall, the original and most representative structure of the campus, would be among the most significant losses to the architectural and cultural history of the West Coast in recent years. These two goals — building much-needed housing and preserving Channing Hall — are not incompatible. In a study completed in 2024, the UC recognized that the structure could be preserved as part of a 850-unit housing complex. Since then, local groups like Save Anna Head have further demonstrated that such a project is economically feasible. In fact, the group previously held productive conversations with the UC and have committed to a fundraising campaign which would make the project feasible.

This letter is anything but an over-simplistic or unrealistic appeal against the redevelopment of the Anna Head campus. The LPC recognizes and supports the UC's push to increase housing in the city. As the primary governing body of Berkeley's historic resources, however, we do advocate for the preservation of Channing Hall. The loss of this historic resource would be among the most significant in the city's history. We understand that it is a challenging endeavor, but certainly one that is not insurmountable nor unrewarding.

Signed,

The City of Berkeley Landmarks Preservation Commission

Dear members of the Landmarks Preservation Commission,

My name is Cameron Danesh and I am the former president of the Historic Preservation Club at UC Berkeley. I write to you once again regarding the Anna Head School and your proposed letter regarding it.

I am thrilled to hear that Mr. Leuschner is taking action on encouraging the University to preserve Channing Hall. Saving Anna Head has always been open to compromises on this issue, and their proposal presents an optimal one that can satisfy all sides. The fact that the entire community of preservationists can agree on this issue is a sign of progress on it. As such, I am cautiously optimistic about the possibility of the University changing course.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission exists because as citizens, we all believe that the city and University's other needs do not necessarily conflict with that of celebrating our heritage. There are many universities that have successfully managed to balance the two. For instance, across the Bay, our rival have managed to maintain their buildings beautifully. They realize that built heritage is an essential part of every university and educational institution's mission to preserve their history.

Contrast that with the wanton actions at the White House recently. The East Wing was destroyed without any meaningful review or study of the alternatives. If the University goes ahead with their plans as is, they will be on the same side of this issue as the White House in terms of destroying public heritage. I am sure that is not a reputation that most of this city wishes to have.

You may feel like there is little you can do in this situation, and that your voice and actions have little say in what the University does. However, I want you to know that we have only made progress on this issue and similar ones by speaking out and explaining why responsibly preserving our heritage is important. It will take all of us doing that to save Channing Hall and get the University to support historic preservation. In other words, I urge you to speak out in whatever manner you can to those unaware of the issue. Writing a letter of support to the University will only be the first word on this matter, not the last.

Sincerely,
Cameron Danesh