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***The Earthquake of 1868 and the Birth of Seismically Resistant Architecture
and Engineering in the San Francisco Bay Area***

This lecture presents a revolutionary view of the 1868 earthquake. While popular authors have claimed San Franciscans consistently denied earthquakes and learned nothing from them, this lecture will prove that engineers and architects built earthquake-resistant buildings after the earthquakes of 1868. The earthquake stimulated a wide-ranging discussion of seismically-resistant designs and spawned a series of innovative seismically-resistant patents for insuring the safety of brick buildings in earthquakes. Many of the city's most important buildings, including the United States Mint, the United States Appraiser's Building, the Palace Hotel, the Grand Hotel, and the enlargement of the Occidental Hotel were built to withstand earthquakes, and successfully withstood the earthquake of 1906. The Regents of the new University of California, Berkeley, having experienced the earthquake of 1868, insisted that their buildings be seismically resistant. San Franciscans also saw the effectiveness of wood as a seismically-resistant material and realized how much safer it was to live in wood rather than brick dwellings. Looking back at the history of earthquakes in the Bay Area, it is essential to remember the story of forgotten citizens, engineers, and architects who did not deny earthquakes, but actively intervened to insure a safer San Francisco.

Biography

Dr. Stephen Tobriner is a Professor Emeritus of Architectural History in the Architecture Department at the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught a survey of world architecture and cities for thirty-five years. His philosophy of teaching can be found in an essay he wrote when he received an [award for Outstanding Mentorship of GSIs in 2004](#). He was trained as a scholar of Baroque architecture and Mesoamerican architecture and cities at Harvard, where he wrote a significant paper on the planning of ancient Teotihuacan. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the planning and architecture of the city of Noto, a small Sicilian city rebuilt after an earthquake in 1693. His book *The Genesis of Noto, an 18th Century Sicilian City*, appeared in 1982 and was republished in Italian as *La genesi di Noto, una città italiana del Settecento* in 1989. Tobriner became fascinated by the politics, sociology, and technology of earthquake-resistant engineering. He has written extensively on architecture and cities in Sicily and the history of reconstruction after earthquakes in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. He has lectured throughout the United States and in Italy and was a Visiting Professor at the University of Palermo. He has investigated damage in contemporary earthquakes around the world as a member of teams sponsored by the United Nations, the National Science Foundation, the Earthquake Engineering Research Center, and the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute. His book, *Bracing for Disaster: Earthquake-Resistant Architecture and Engineering in San Francisco, 1838-1933*, along with a guidebook to seismic retrofits on the University of California Berkeley campus entitled [Bracing Berkeley](#) [PDF, 21.3 MB], co-authored with Mary C. Comerio and Ariane Fehrenkamp and published by the [Pacific Earthquake Engineering Research Center](#), appeared in 2006, the year he retired from University teaching. He was a keynote speaker for the joint Earthquake Engineering Research Institute, Seismological Society of America, and Office of Emergency Services meeting marking the centennial of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 on April 18, 2006. In 2008 he was a keynote speaker at the MERCEA convention commemorating the Messina-Calabria earthquake of 1908. In recognition for his contributions to its history, the city of Noto, Sicily, made Tobriner an honorary citizen. In 2008 Tobriner lectured on earthquakes and mythology in the ancient Aegean at a conference on the island of Santorini, Greece. Tobriner, who lives with his wife in Berkeley, California, and Orcas Island, Washington, continues to write papers and give public lectures while also pursuing his passion for sculpting in terracotta.