

## A WOMAN'S WORK

*Julia Morgan: Architect of Beauty*

(Mark A. Wilson, Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2007, 232 pages, \$60, hardcover)

by Barry Moore

### THOSE REARED OR EDUCATED IN THE BAY AREA MIGHT

dimly remember Julia Morgan as the architect who assisted William Randolph Hearst in designing San Simeon, his great monument to his ego, and for very little else.

But the record of her achievements is stunningly rich and varied. Living from 1872 to 1957, Morgan, as a sole practitioner, designed over 750 buildings over forty-two years, famously working eighteen-hour days. Her output was greater than any other major architect of her generation—about twice the output of Frank Lloyd Wright, in fact. That she almost slipped from memory is more due to her dislike of publicity rather than the quality of her work. “Let my buildings speak for themselves,” she often said.

Now we can revel in the richness of her work in *Julia Morgan: Architect of Beauty* by Mark A. Wilson. The first major publication on Morgan, this is one of the most handsome and most beautifully illustrated volumes on my architectural shelf. Wilson has combined readable research with exceptional color photographs of Monica Lee and Joel Puliatti,



and collected historic drawings and photos. The result is a visual feast.

Julia Morgan was a true feminist pioneer. Interested early in architecture at the University of California, she enrolled in Bernard Maybeck’s descriptive geometry class. After working in his office for two years after graduation, he persuaded her to attend the Ecole des Beaux

Arts in Paris, where he had studied. The obstacles were formidable: a woman had never been admitted before. After three attempts at the admission exams, she was admitted, and distinguished herself by claiming first prize for her final design thesis.

While in France, she attracted the attention of Phoebe Apperson Hearst, one of the wealthiest women in America, and a great promoter of the University of California. When she offered financial assistance to Morgan, the young student declined, preferring to live on her limited funds.

From that time, Mrs. Hearst became a lifelong mentor and friend.

Back in Berkeley in 1902, Morgan accepted a position with John Galen Howard to work on a new Hearst-inspired campus plan. She might have stayed there indefinitely had she not overheard

her pompous boss say, “The best thing about this person is I pay her almost nothing, as it is a woman.” Deciding immediately to move on, she passed her licensing examination in February 1904 and opened her own office the following month. She was the first woman with a full-time independent practice to become a registered architect.

The ensuing work of Morgan placed her firmly in the First Bay Tradition, which was characterized by the following:

1. Use of local, natural materials
2. Combination of historic motifs with modern materials and methods
3. Careful integration with surroundings, bringing the outdoors indoors
4. Each building a unique design, fulfilling the needs of client and community

Julia Morgan’s first large commissions came from her champion, Mrs. Hearst, for five buildings for the Mills College campus in Piedmont, California, over the years 1903 to 1909. “El Campanil,” the iconic bell tower, was the first reinforced concrete building west of the Mississippi. Her reputation as the best structural engineer on the West Coast earned her the task of redesigning the Fairmont Hotel after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

Shortly after these very public projects, Morgan’s reputation soared. She undertook the Oakland YWCA in 1915, and its success led directly to eighteen more assignments for the “Y,” including Hollywood, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Honolulu, and Tokyo. The Berkeley Women’s City Club, 1928–29, her second largest building, in many ways best demonstrates the skill and finesse of the architect. This book is especially generous with photographs of the Conference Grounds at Asilomar, adjacent to Pacific Grove on Monterey Bay.

Phoebe Hearst died in the Influenza Epidemic of 1918, and Morgan was asked to design the Hearst Memorial Gymnasium for Women at UC Berkeley in 1924—still one of the most elegant classical structures on campus.

Morgan’s client relationship with William Randolph Hearst began when he asked her to design a new headquarters and printing plant for the Los Angeles Examiner in 1915; he thought it would be a good idea to work with his mother’s favorite architect. Four years later he began to redevelop his father’s ranch, San Simeon, into a personal Shangri-La, with Julia Morgan collaborating every step of the way—one of the great client-architect partnerships in US history. The site was an enormous 250,000 acres, with fourteen miles of Pacific coastline. She began working on the site when she was forty-eight years old, and continued until her seventy-fifth year designing 165 rooms, 127 acres of gardens, and a Neptune pool holding 245,000 gallons of water.

*Julia Morgan: Architect of Beauty* is a long-deserved tribute to one of America’s most talented and prolific architects. In the words of Kit Ratcliff, an architect in Emeryville, “She created structures in which people continually experience a sense of well-being—even a century after they are built.” 🏡