“Every Story Told”: Centering Women’s History
On June 22, 1972, architect Julia Morgan’s Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument, also known as Hearst Castle, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Since then, 19 more places—including approximately 26 buildings—that Morgan designed or was otherwise closely associated with have been listed individually or as part of historic districts. (Hearst Castle and Asilomar Conference Grounds are also National Historic Landmarks.) No fewer than 15 of those National Register properties are associated with organizations of, by, and for women, underscoring how closely the architect’s career was intertwined with the pre–World War II California women’s movement.

This might suggest that Morgan’s legacy is well understood and that the spaces of women’s activism of Progressive Era California have been well documented and preserved in the landscape. But a closer look reveals significant gaps and weaknesses in our understanding of Julia Morgan’s career and its significance. It also exposes, more generally, the challenges of recognizing and preserving the history of gender and women—and other underrepresented groups—in the built environment, as well as the opportunities to improve.

A VARIED BODY OF WORK
No single building on the National Register could capture the breadth of Julia Morgan’s architectural significance, but when her contributions are considered collectively, certain themes emerge.

Several properties—including St. John’s Presbyterian Church, Asilomar, the Sausalito Woman’s Club, and Girton Hall (now Julia Morgan Hall)—are excellent examples of the Bay Tradition style, an expression of the Arts and Crafts movement in the San Francisco/Berkeley region. Bay Tradition is characterized by the use of
unadorned natural materials, such as redwood and river rock, inside and out; sleeping porches; and the informal arrangement of interior spaces. The use of these features was idealistic and moralistic, evoking a close relationship with nature and, through simplicity of forms and materials, critiquing political corruption,
mass consumption, and urban ills—real and perceived—of the industrial capitalist age.

The exposed structural systems of these buildings—particularly the roof trusses with large iron brackets—both reflect how adept Morgan was at designing on shoestring budgets and, through the beauty and visual interest that she created with these elements, belie the engineer at heart. Morgan’s innovations in engineering and technology are typically both underappreciated and largely unexamined. Walter Steilberg, Morgan’s longtime engineer and a highly respected structural engineer in his own right, has called the Berkeley City Club possibly the most complex reinforced concrete building in California as of the mid-1970s. The club showcases Morgan’s enthusiasm for the infinite plasticity and aesthetic possibilities of technology.

The Oakland YWCA, meanwhile, adheres most closely to the architect’s formal Beaux-Arts education and training. Its exterior recalls the palazzo form of the Italian Renaissance, while the interior nearly replicates the cloisters of Donato Bramante’s Santa Maria della Pace in Rome. Morgan was no slave to historical purity, however; indeed, her mentor in Paris, François-Benjamin Chausseemiche, lamented his protégée’s tendency toward historical eclecticism. This could be subtle, as in the case of the North Star House in Grass Valley, which combines Bay Tradition with the Californio ranch house. Morgan’s extensive use of stone and unpainted redwood celebrates the Sierra Nevada landscape, while the U-shaped plan and the abundance of covered porches and rooms with direct access to the courtyard evoke the ranch house and romanticized Californio culture.

Other examples are not so subtle, like Hearst Castle, which combines a pastiche of styles—not to mention relics—of Mediterranean and Western European architecture from ancient Greece through the Renaissance to create a fantastical landscape. It was much maligned by classical purists and modernists but later embraced by late-20th-century postmodernists.
THE LENS OF GENDER
As enlightening as a purely architectural analysis might be, no building is created outside of a historical and cultural context, and one of the most important contexts in relationship to Julia Morgan is gender. Applying the lens of gender to San Francisco’s Fairmont Hotel—an important example of Renaissance-style architecture by James and Merritt Reid with interior designs by the New York firm of William Baumgartner & Co.—reveals its significance as a critical commission early in Morgan’s career. Following the earthquake and fires of 1906, she was hired to oversee the reconstruction of the palatial hotel, which stood above the rubble and ashes as a symbol of hope and survival. Under the watchful eyes of wealthy property owners, fellow architects and men in the building trades, and the press, Morgan managed a crew of 400 men who repaired minor exterior damage and an interior mess of twisted rebar and concrete, wavy floors, collapsed ceilings, and buckled columns. The task would have been challenging for anybody, but if Morgan had failed, she easily could have been made a poster child for women as naturally unfit for the architectural profession. Instead, despite organized labor strife and another fire, the building was ready for a grand re-opening on the one-year anniversary of the natural disaster. A workman at the site commented that Julia Morgan’s name might as well have been “John,” signaling that she had gained the respect and authority she would need to build a remarkable career in an overwhelmingly male profession.

In spite of all this, the Fairmont Hotel’s National Register nomination specifies that the building is not significant in association with Morgan because it does not reveal her hand. Had the writers of the nomination displayed a better understanding of women architectural professionals in 1906—and of the degree to which Morgan’s professional reputation hinged on the success or failure of that commission—the building would surely be listed as significant in relationship to Julia Morgan.

Morgan is well known for going on to design dozens of buildings for women’s clubs and institutions. She was able to thrive in this niche not because she was a woman but because she had a
minute understanding of the needs and desires of modern women’s institutions—and no building exemplifies that ability better than the Phoebe Hearst Memorial Gymnasium at the University of California, Berkeley. Bernard Maybeck designed the original plans for this monument to the Hearst matriarch, who was a fervent champion of women in higher education and of the University of California. When her son, media mogul William Randolph Hearst, saw Maybeck’s plans, he commented that they reeked of pleurisy and lacked grandiosity. He wanted to see a pool. The university president and the head of women’s athletics, on the other hand, did not like the design because it failed to address most of the programmatic needs that had been presented to Maybeck. Julia Morgan came to the rescue.

While the romantic, Neoclassical design of the building bears Maybeck’s aesthetic signature, Morgan made sure it would serve the women who used it. By this time, she had designed many YWCAs with complex programmatic needs fit into relatively compact spaces. For this project, she planned a two-story-over-basement, U-shaped building with lockers, dressing rooms, and showers all located on the ground floor. Concrete ramps lead to the main floor above, which features three large gymnasia and two smaller ones. Perhaps knowing from experience that swimming and aquatic sports were of paramount importance to young women of the 1920s, she included not one or two pools, but three. When it was completed, the Phoebe Hearst Memorial Gymnasium provided more dedicated space for the social, recreational, and educational interests of women undergraduates than anywhere else in the country.

UNEXPLORED HISTORIES
Regrettably, few of Morgan’s residential buildings are on the National Register. Residential buildings can be particularly tricky for preservationists to document and protect—their quantities are vast; survey work is expensive and time-consuming; and, for a variety of reasons, few owners want their properties placed on the register. But exploring these spaces reveals a complex new world, often shedding light on the history of women and gender. Among
the hundreds of houses that Julia Morgan designed is the Berkeley home of doctors Elsa Mitchell and Clara Williams (which is not listed on the National Register). While the exterior looks like any other brown-shingle bungalow in the Berkeley hills, Morgan came up with one of her most innovative and modern domestic designs to accommodate the needs of these two physicians. The house is divided into three distinct spaces: public, private, and work. Immediately to the left of its front entrance lies the door to a small office and bathroom, ensuring that the women could work from home without work crossing the threshold into their domicile. Double doors lead from the front hallway to the first floor, which follows an unusually open floor plan that removes all hierarchy of space. Downstairs, the clients requested some atypical features. Two of the four bedrooms contain a wash basin, while the master bedrooms share one basin. The toilet and bathtub, shared among all the bedrooms, reside in separate chambers. No extant documents explain this unique organization of space, but we can hypothesize. As doctors and busy professional women, hygiene and efficiency likely ranked high on their list of concerns. The
personal basins for guests may have been provided and parts of the bathroom may have been separated to contain germs. The shared basin between the two master bedrooms renders them only semi-private, suggesting that Mitchell and Williams may have been romantic partners, trying to create a private space for their relationship to thrive within a world that would have rejected it.

One other feature of the Mitchell-Williams house underscores their particularly modern life: the garage. Early automobile ads played up freedom; independence; and, above all, masculine virility. As historian Virginia Scharff has argued, though, women also wanted to drive and, indeed, learned to drive as soon as cars were available; they embraced independence, freedom of mobility, strength, and speed as much as men did, signifying a new era of gender relations. While an attached garage was a rare feature for any home in 1915, doctors were most likely to have them in order to make emergency calls easily. The doctors’ garage was indicative not only of their professional lives but also of women’s escape from domesticity. Contemplating the Mitchell-Williams house invites us to consider the distinction between domestic and non-domestic spaces, women’s use of the built environment to facilitate their move into the professional sphere, and LGBTQ people’s construction of their homes as safe spaces.

**RACE AND CLASS DIMENSIONS**

One of the few Julia Morgan–designed residences on the register, the [Charles and Mary Glide Goethe House](#) (now the Julia Morgan House) in Sacramento, underscores the class and race dynamics of both the Progressive Era women’s movement and the preservation movement. Not much is known about Mary Goethe, except that she was a daughter of Joseph and Lizzie Glide; her father earned a fortune speculating in land, cattle, sheep, and infrastructure, and Lizzie managed and grew that fortune after his death while also doing charitable and missionary work. Charles Goethe was a businessman, land developer, conservationist, and education advocate who donated generously to the future Sacramento State University. But Goethe was also a eugenicist and unabashedly
outspoken white supremacist until the day he died. This house, which is a fine work of architecture, made it onto the register without a single mention of the racist ideas and actions of its owners.

While the Goethe house might be a particularly egregious example of historic preservation turning a blind eye to racism, it is emblematic of the challenge inherent in attempting to capture the complex tapestry of the past. The same themes are present in the rest of Julia Morgan’s oeuvre, as many of her clients were white, affluent women who did not particularly question the hierarchy of race and class. Virtually all of the YWCA buildings that Julia Morgan designed, for example, represent contested spaces of class and women’s morality. The Emanu-El Sisterhood Residence, now the San Francisco Zen Center, is the manifestation of a power struggle between men and women in the German Jewish community. In the aftermath of the earthquake and fires of 1906, organizations led by Jewish men exerted increasing control over social and recreational services within San Francisco’s Jewish community, thus diminishing the influence of the Emanu-El Sisterhood, a settlement house-like institution founded by Jewish women in 1894. In an act of defiance, however, the women hired Morgan—a woman architect—to design a residence for the sisterhood. When the men demanded that a Jewish architect design the building, Morgan devoted resources to helping Dorothy Worsmer,

In a nod to Chinese cultural tradition, Julia Morgan designed an iris keystone to hang above the entrance of the Methodist Chinese Mission. Believed to ward off evil spirits, the iris also symbolizes health and hope.

PHOTO BY KAREN MCNEILL
a Jewish employee, obtain her architectural license and lead the
project design. And the Methodist Chinese Mission, or “Gum Moon,”
in San Francisco’s Chinatown; the disinfectant annex of the hospital
building at Angel Island Immigration Station; the Joseph and Rose
Shoong House in Oakland; and the Chinatown YWCA in San
Francisco all invite questions about power dynamics and cultural
identity when considered against the backdrop of the Chinese
Exclusion Act. Alas, neither the Emanu-El Sisterhood Residence nor
any of the buildings related to the Chinese American community,
apart from the hospital annex, is on the register. The Nihonmachi
Little Friends House, which was originally built in San Francisco’s
postwar Western Addition neighborhood for the Japantown YWCA
and later served the African American community, is the first
Morgan commission to be nominated to the register for its
association with underrepresented groups.

WOMEN’S SPACES PRECARIOUSLY PRESERVED
Among the ongoing efforts to document and preserve the history
of Julia Morgan’s remarkable career, and the built environment for
20th-century women that she and her clients created, two
buildings stand out, though in vastly different ways. Julia Morgan
Hall opened in 1912 as Girton Hall, the senior women’s hall at
UC Berkeley, and has always represented the liminal space of
women at the university. It took years for the administration to
decide on a place for the hall—the university’s very first purpose-
built women’s space—and the administration finally gave the
women a bucolic spot overlooking Strawberry Canyon, but just
east of the campus boundary. In contrast, the senior men’s hall had
been built a few years earlier just behind the men’s faculty club,
where it still stands today. Girton Hall has been moved twice—first
to make way for Memorial Stadium, and then to accommodate the
expansion of the business school. In both cases, the building could
have been demolished and, notably, was not. Thanks to the
herculean efforts of many people who raised funds for the second
move, Julia Morgan Hall now stands in the botanical gardens and is
open for public and private events and educational activities.
The Phoebe Hearst Memorial Gymnasium, on the other hand, is rusting, cracking, leaking, and crumbling under the weight of deferred maintenance. It is arguably the single most important building related to women’s history at the University of California—as well as a monument to the woman who almost single-handedly catapulted the university to international acclaim; funded by her son, the most powerful media mogul in the country at the time; and one of the few collaborative efforts of two California architectural giants, Maybeck and Morgan—and yet there is no urgent effort to preserve it.

EXPANDING THE NARRATIVE

When Hearst Castle was nominated to the National Register in 1972, Julia Morgan was listed second to William Randolph Hearst as the architect of the elaborate estate. Nowhere else in the narrative description or statement of historical significance was Morgan mentioned, let alone credited for having made sense of Hearst’s ever-changing mind and the cacophony of architectural styles and elements that he wished to combine. Today, we cannot imagine writing a nomination of Hearst Castle without recognizing the architect, which speaks to Morgan’s rise as an important historical figure as well as more appreciation for the history of women and architecture.

There are still countless opportunities, however, to build awareness and understanding—and to expand and enhance the register by exploring gender, race, and class as they apply to architecture and historic preservation. This calls for a better understanding of gender dynamics in the architectural profession, and of the particular impacts that women pushing the boundaries of opportunity, power, and influence had on the built environment. It is essential to examine spaces that functioned as alternatives to institutional buildings, to document a more representative range of people, trends, themes, and events that have shaped history—venturing beyond the realm of affluent white people. And women’s spaces, like those of other underrepresented communities, face a precarious existence; they tend to be fewer in number, smaller in
scale, and not as obviously associated with grand themes in U.S. or regional history as spaces created by or for white men. There are no explanations sufficient to excuse the lack of documentation and preservation of spaces associated with women and historically underrepresented people, and although revising our historical record to tell a more inclusive story can be challenging, we must nevertheless persist. FJ

KAREN MCNEILL, Ph.D., is an independent historian based in Oakland, California, and a leading expert on Julia Morgan.

MAP
See Julia Morgan’s design masterpieces plotted on an interactive map.

TAKEAWAY
Read about Julia Morgan’s architectural legacy.