

## Sign of the times, and the times they are a-changin’

By Miltiades Mandros

When the forty-niners rushed to California following the 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill, Lake Merritt was no more than a tidal slough, though it was then much larger than it is today.

Shortly after Oakland was settled in the early 1850s, a wooden toll bridge was erected over the neck of the slough about where 12th Street now lies. This bridge connected Oakland on the west side of the marsh to the communities of Clinton and San Antonio on the east.

A decade later, another bridge was built over where the marsh was dammed, creating what we now now recognize as the lake.

As the 20th century dawned and Oakland grew, a handsome newer Beaux-Arts concrete bridge accommodated pedestrians, vehicles, and inter-urban trolleys. This structure stood until just after World War II, when the demise of the trolleys and the concomitant emphasis on the automobile convinced urban planners to build what became known as “the world’s shortest freeway,” a 12-lane behemoth of overpasses and underpasses dominating the south end of the lake.

Besides occupying so much space, which incidentally was all landfill, this new roadway destroyed the wonderful gardens surrounding Kaiser Auditorium.

The freeway, with its ramps, medians and underground pedestrian tunnels, was named the Frickstad Viaduct after the engineer who oversaw its construction. This paean to the age of the automobile opened to great fanfare in 1950. At that time, it was viewed as an example of the latest in highway planning, and presaged the soon-to-follow interstate highway system. To help motorists negotiate their way through the maze of spaghetti-like road ribbons, two huge signs were raised high on steel pillars on the east and west ends of the lagoon. The one on the east said, “1st AVE E. 14th ST” (with an



MILTIADES MANDROS

**THE ICONIC SOUTHERLY/NORTHERLY SIGNS** that charmed and guided drivers through the morass of lanes on the 12th Street dam, being loaded up to be preserved.

arrow angling to the left) & “E. 12th ST” (with a separate arrow angled to the right). The sign near Fallon Street read, “12th ST AND SOUTHERLY” (with an arrow to the left) and “14th ST AND NORTHERLY” (with an arrow to the right). The 6’ x 22’ signs were fabricated of dark blue porcelain enameled-steel and were pristine examples of highway signage frequently used in the United States from about World War I to the early 1950s. This manufacturing process resulted in an extremely durable and weather-resistant product.

When I moved from San Francisco to Oakland in the late 1990s, I loved passing by the south end of the lake simply to admire the old signs with their language so redolent of a bygone period in our history. The signs spoke nostalgically to me as a reminder of America’s automobile past, of two-lane roads before the advent

of interstate highways. When the Measure DD reconstruction began in 2010, I duly noted their removal, but I always assumed these two mighty beacons would be re-erected once the roadway improvements were complete.

At the beginning of 2012, I moved to the Eastlake area and began daily commutes around the south end of the lake. I continued to look for the signs to reappear. Since they had such an unforgettable presence, it seemed impossible that the traffic engineers wouldn’t be eager to re-erect them. Since that day never came, I called Betty Marvin, the historic preservation planner for the city, to ask about the situation. Betty, with whom I had previously collaborated to save two historic gas stations in West Oakland from destruction, referred me to Naomi Schiff, who shockingly told me that the city had

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## Julia Morgan's legacy of green building, sustainability

By Sandhya Sood

I first heard about fellow UC Berkeley alumna Julia Morgan, the first female graduate of the civil engineering program, when I graduated with a masters in architecture 105 years after Morgan graduated from the same institution in 1894. Word was that she had designed several beautiful buildings in California. That was a rather limited description, as I discovered through my research and as a project partner of Julia Morgan 2012, a statewide collaboration to celebrate her amazing life and work.

**Education:** Morgan's contribution is significant not only to the architectural heritage of California and America, with many local, state and national landmarks attributed to her work, but is also a benchmark of the profession that reluctantly opened its doors to women in the early 20th century. Standing at barely five feet and weighing 100 pounds, she was the first woman in the world to be admitted (in 1898, after several failed attempts) to the sought-after architecture certification program at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Paris. As one of the few women architects in America to establish a private architecture practice in 1904, she worked over four decades with more than 700 buildings to her credit, translating on average to one building every six weeks!

**Practice:** A formidable measure indeed, more so due to the diversity of project types that she undertook: academic, commercial, health care related, humanitarian, governmental, residential and religious including funerary. She was an architect for the common man's simple home, an advocate for women's movements by designing female-exclusive clubs and YWCAs, and a catalyst for ostentatious estates. At William Randolph Hearst's estate at San Simeon (1919 to 1947), now a historical state monument and park, she is said to have diverted spring water to fill the sumptuous swimming pools. Morgan was a versatile and talented architect who embraced every project that came her way.

Rather progressive for her time, she employed an interdisciplinary approach to her practice. Her knowledge of civil engineering, lighting design, landscape and interi-

or design informed her work. A proficient practitioner, she collaborated with contractors, masons, carpenters and clients through long letters, telegrams and site visits, often traveling on weekends to ensure the utmost quality of construction and professional service. Above all, she brought compassion to every commission, providing simple touches and thoughtful details that made each one special. An astute problem-solver, she reused fixtures and old materials for house alterations, keeping a tight rein on budgets. Leading projects from her atelier in the heart of San Francisco, she produced hand-drafted drawings accompanied by specifications outlining methods for testing materials as early as 1907. Colored sketches exploring a variety

To see the original article with gorgeous full-color images, visit <http://www.oaklandheritage.org/files/57833723.pdf>

of design options considered client needs and satisfaction, earning her many referrals and a successful business for almost half a century.

**Environment:** Building in harmony with nature, Morgan oriented her structures to take advantage of desirable views without intruding on the existing topography. Such an environmentally-sustainable approach to architecture was not pervasive at the time nor considered a mainstream philosophy the way it is now. Our recent discourse on the impact of new buildings on the ecosystem is pushing us to reconsider our carbon footprint, choice of building materials, products and methods of construction.

And yet, over 100 years ago, Morgan belonged to an activist group led by women who founded the Hillside Club in Berkeley to protect the natural environment of the North Berkeley hills. Charles Keene and Bernard Maybeck joined as members, and in 1904 Keene presented his book *The Simple Home* at the clubhouse. It described an organic lifestyle with the home as an abode for the soul built with "unadorned" materials and the microclimate as a guiding principle. The idea was inspired, in part, by the ideals of the bur-

geoning Arts and Crafts movement begun by John Ruskin and William Morris as a reaction to the widespread industrialization of England in the late 19th century.

Morgan, who spent her formative years in the East Bay—attending high school in Oakland and later studying at the UC Berkeley—was at heart a nature lover. She was influenced by this ideology as she built in a language termed the "First Bay Tradition," seen in her early homes at Berkeley and the Asilomar Conference Grounds at Pacific Grove (1913–1937), a National Historic Landmark. It is this vernacular building approach that contributed to the Bay Area's distinctive regional tradition and that later influenced the Bay Area Modernist style. Architecture in California in the early 20th century was broadly eclectic and somewhat idiosyncratic, with several influences emerging at the same time. Although client desire and site conditions became Morgan's primary determinants, she also explored the fusion of classical elements owing to her Beaux Arts training.

**Materials:** Supervising large-scale reinforced concrete at UC Berkeley's Greek Theatre while working for John Galen Howard in 1902, gave her abundant experience in using poured in place concrete. She used the material for her own projects at Mills College (1905) and the Hearst Gymnasium for Women at UC Berkeley (1925–1926), both on the National Register of Historic Places, and the Berkeley City Club (1929), a California Historic Landmark. Her palette of low-embodied energy materials acquired locally included quarried stone juxtaposed with rustic redwood planks; brick and thick stucco; cedar shingles and even canvas used to shade sun porches. The elegance with which she assembled materials expresses their integrity, creatively integrating form with function. In the minimalist interior of St. John's Presbyterian Church (1908–1910), a Berkeley landmark (now Julia Morgan Center), the bare wood beams and posts define a human scaled yet spiritually uplifting space.

**Sustainability:** What is truly remarkable, however, is the sense of well-being felt in her warm

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## Morgan

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and calming enclosures that are earthy and magnificent at the same time. Climate-responsive design uses the sun's energy to keep the building comfortable and naturally ventilated. Rooms with shaded windows, clerestory and skylights are still bursting with daylight. Openings are located at varying heights to capture the changing quality of natural light, from diffused in the morning to golden at sunset. Morgan was also adept at designing for flexibility by placing elements such as movable partitions to permit multiple uses within an allocated space. Courtyards, breezeways and verandas connect indoors to the outdoors, gracefully allowing the building to breathe. Morgan's robust and durable buildings have seen several changes in use, adapting to contemporary culture and lifestyles over the decades.

**Conclusion:** Even though we now have established measures rating the "greenness" of new buildings, the passive solar design and healthy strategies such as those found in Morgan's buildings established their own standard over a century ago. These sustainable design interventions are simple, affordable and have no running cost since they are integral to the building design. More relevant today than ever, they facilitate resource conservation and longer building lifecycles, thereby contributing positively to diminishing the pressures of climate change. A ground-breaking study was released by the Preservation Green Lab, a project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It objectively quantifies the environmental benefits of reusing existing buildings over demolition or even new "green" construction.

Morgan's over 700 buildings (though some have been demolished) tread lightly on this

earth, graciously accommodating changes of the 21st century, sustaining their preservation. And that, I believe, is beautiful architecture.

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## Swedish community's history to be highlighted with new funding

*By Kitty Hughes*

The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation has awarded Oakland's Tegner Lodge a \$15,000 grant to study the East Bay's Swedish legacy. The project will research Swedish-American immigration, settlement patterns, customs, and contributions to the arts and crafts in the greater East Bay. Focusing on Oakland, which was the center of the early Swedish community, the study will branch out to explore the spread of Swedish culture through the activities of other local Swedish organizations.

Many records hold clues to the early and evolving Swedish life in Oakland, but they are scattered throughout many documents and files from the City of Oakland's Cultural Heritage Survey, the Oakland Heritage Alliance, the Public Library History Room, the Swedish American Hall in San Francisco, and locally-housed immigration records in the National Archives, as well as other archives and personal collections. The project will integrate and interpret these records and memorabilia, develop a website, and culminate with a celebratory event with a slide show and traditional Swedish music and food.



**SWEDISH-BORN** Erik Lindblom invested in, and later owned, the Claremont.

Although the earliest Swedish-Americans represented a minority in the entire population, they left a permanent mark on Oakland and East Bay Area life and culture. Today, residents of Swedish heritage, as well as the general public, are largely unaware of the legacy of these individuals and their communities.

The public may also not be familiar with the concept of "lodges." Originally, these Swedish organizations served as fraternal societies for the benefit of Swedish immigrants. Oakland's Tegner Lodge is Northern California's second oldest Vasa lodge; Vasa is a Swedish-American fraternal

organization. Tegner formed in 1908, and has always been open to women and men. Tegner has been meeting continuously in Oakland for over 103 years.

Today Tegner lodge is open to anyone interested in learning more about Nordic history and culture. The group meets monthly at the Sons of Norway Bjornson Hall, 2258 MacArthur Boulevard in Oakland at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of the month, except for July and August.

The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation supports Swedish-related cultural and educational projects in North America and Sweden. This project hopes to serve as a model to other ethnic organizations interested in preserving their unique history and contributions to East Bay life. As archives and personal recollections become more dispersed and disappear, our multi-faceted East Bay community history is in danger of being lost and forgotten.

Tegner Lodge seeks photographs, documents and oral interviews for the project slide show. If you have materials to share, please contact project director Marie-Ann Hill via email at [marieannh7@gmail.com](mailto:marieannh7@gmail.com) or writer/researcher Kitty Hughes at [khughes5@earthlink.net](mailto:khughes5@earthlink.net). ■