



Morgan, Julia (1872-1957)

by Ira Tattelman

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Pioneering California architect Julia Morgan designed more than 700 buildings, including many commissioned by women's groups, but she is most remembered as the architect of San Simeon, the Hearst Castle north of Los Angeles.

Morgan was born in San Francisco to an upper middle class family on January 20, 1872. She was reared in Oakland, California.

She earned an undergraduate degree in civil engineering from the University of California, Berkeley in 1894 and was the first woman accepted into the architecture program at L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. (Although Morgan arrived in Paris in 1896, it took her two years to convince L'Ecole that women should be allowed to study architecture.)

After serving stints in the offices of Paris and San Francisco architects, Morgan opened her own architectural firm in San Francisco in 1904. By then, she was living in a remodeled Victorian home.

The first woman architect to be registered in California, Morgan designed many residences in Berkeley, Claremont, and Piedmont and such institutional buildings in Berkeley as the Baptist Divinity School, Phoebe Apperson Hearst Memorial Gymnasium, St. John's Presbyterian Church, and Women's City Club.

She also designed a large number of buildings commissioned by women's groups in California, Hawaii, and Utah, including social clubs, sorority houses, and YWCAs. Commissions from women's organizations provided financial and professional support for Morgan while she designed the spaces that helped promote the women's movement.

As Sara Holmes Boutelle writes, "Morgan understood women's organizations, their goals, and limitations, not just because of her gender, but also because she shared their determination to improve the lives of individuals and groups who could not take social action on their own."

An expert in such construction methods as reinforced concrete, Morgan gained a reputation for excellence in both engineering and aesthetics.

Her style, which developed from the Arts and Crafts movement and a local northern California tradition in the use of wood, is characterized by red and brown tones, horizontal lines that lead the eye into the landscape, exposed support beams, and plenty of shingles. The Asilomar Conference Center in Pacific Grove, founded in 1913 as the western conference center of the YWCA, is typical of her work in that it grows comfortably out of its site.

Morgan's sense of proportion and harmony distinguished her from other designers in the Bay area. She was also sensitive to the needs of her clients and the purposes of the buildings she designed.



Merrill Hall, a building designed and built by Julia Morgan on the grounds of Asilomar Conference Center in Pacific Grove, California in 1928.

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In 1919, newspaperman William Randolph Hearst hired Morgan to build San Simeon, the elaborate Hearst Castle north of Los Angeles. La Cuesta Encantada (The Enchanted Hill) consists of over 150 rooms in the main building and guest houses, 127 acres of gardens, terraces, indoor and outdoor pools, and a private zoo.

The extraordinary scale of the project entailed an eclectic array of architectural details and decoration that necessitated the collaboration of hundreds of workers. Artisans carved, cast, wove, plastered, and painted the surfaces of the buildings that comprise the complex.

For 25 years, Morgan collaborated with Hearst on the design of buildings, the purchase of art, and the placement of antiques for San Simeon.

She designed not only San Simeon, but also Wyntoon, Hearst's northern estate, built on 50,000 acres of forested land near Mount Shasta, along the McCloud River in California. "The effect of the 'village' is Bavarian," Boutelle writes, "But the symmetry of each building and the careful siting around the central green are more Beaux-Arts. . . . Morgan's use of the local stone and wood is characteristically sensitive."

When Morgan retired in 1951, she had designed more than 700 buildings. Her popularity as an architect can be attributed to her attention to detail and craftsmanship, and her ability to design projects that met the needs of her clients.

At a time of emerging feminism, she could hardly avoid becoming a role model for younger women. Known for her compassion and pragmatism, she treated her employees as an extended family, sharing profits and helping with education loans.

Morgan led a private and quiet life. Little is known for certain about her emotional and affectional attachments, but she is believed to have been a lesbian. She was part of a network of accomplished professional women, many of whom were her clients.

Morgan was devoted to her profession and insisted that her projects speak for her. Perhaps as a self-protective gesture and a means of preserving her privacy, she maintained that architecture should be part of the visual, rather than verbal, world.

Morgan died on February 2, 1957.

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Ira Tattelman is an architect, artist, and independent scholar living in Washington, D.C. He has published in such books and journals as *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies*, *Genders and Generations*, *Public Sex*, *Gay Space*, *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, *The Best of The Harvard Gay*

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