

# Women's Networks: Julia Morgan and Her Clients

Sara Holmes Boutelle

Clients are the catalysts of architecture; they enable the architect's thoughts on paper to exist in three dimensions, and they may often play a creative role in the design process. Yet the crucial relationship between designer and client and the manner in which an architect receives a commission have largely been kept in the wings of architectural history. In the case of women architects and designers this relationship is of particular complexity. For women, entrée into traditional centers of power and influence, in an economic and political sense—the milieus that afford the contacts which develop clients—is largely closed.

An examination of the clients of Julia Morgan, the most prolific independent woman architect in American architectural history, provides an understanding of how a woman functioned as a professional within the restrictions inherent in being a woman before World War II. Approximately half of Morgan's clients were women or institutions for women. She determinedly avoided publicity and self-promotion. Most of her important clients developed not as a result of accounts of her work in popular and professional journals but from social connections and recommendations from former clients and a network of both women of wealth and women professionals of more modest economic means.

In 1902, after completing a first degree at Berkeley in engineering, Julia Morgan completed a course in the section of architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. She was the first woman in the school's history to be accepted for this course. For 40 years she headed her own architectural firm in San Francisco, and when she died at age 85 in 1957 she had designed some 700 buildings. She designed within an eclectic vocabulary, drawing on both the academic Beaux-Arts and traditional California vernacular architecture for inspiration. She practiced in this mode with close attention to the desires of her clients and to sound construction. Many of her commissions were the result of earlier ones for the same clients.

From the beginning of her career, Julia Morgan was encouraged by women. Morgan's very first client, while she was still in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, was Mrs. Harriet Fearing, an expatriate from



Julia Morgan.

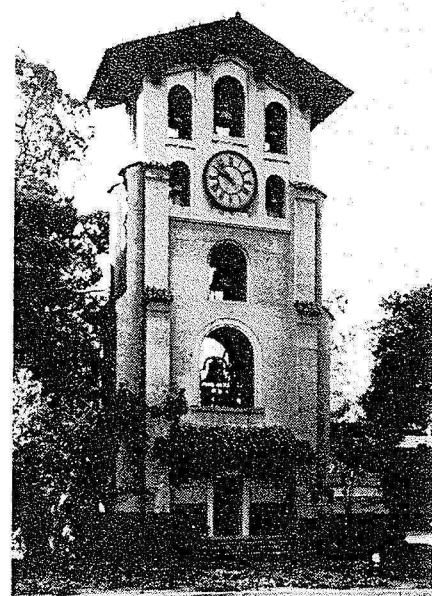
New York and Newport. Fearing asked Morgan to add a grand salon to her 17th-century house in Fontainebleau, where she could present musicales and exhibitions by her young protégées in the arts. The room was built in 1902 and was used as it had been intended until at least the middle of World War I, when Mrs. Fearing had to return temporarily to Newport. The specifications, including bills from masons, chimney-builders, locksmiths, and ornamental plasterers—all addressed to "Mlle. Morgan, Architecte"—were saved with her Beaux-Arts drawings and are in the Documents Collection at Berkeley.

Shortly after her return to California Morgan managed to set up her own office in San Francisco. Her first major building project was the Mills College Campanil of 1903-1904, the first college bell tower in the West. Susan Mills, the president (and co-founder) of this college for women, found a benefactor for the project in Frank Smith, the husband of one of her trustees. Undoubtedly Mrs. Mills liked the idea of an Oakland woman being the architect in charge of the project, but Mr. Smith listened to the complaints of the contractor, Bernard Ransome, who did not believe any young lady could understand rein-

forced concrete. Yet the tower withstood the earthquake of 1906. After quite a controversy, which almost makes it seem that Smith rather than Mills was the client, the completed tower was dedicated, with Ransome's name ahead of Morgan's in the program. (The plaque on the tower said: "Erected by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Smith.") The Mills commission brought others. Susan Mills commissioned Morgan to do the library, the gymnasium, the social hall, and the infirmary at the college, while Mr. Smith hired her to build a large "cottage" as a refuge for young women in whom his wife took a charitable interest.

Among Morgan's significant clients, Phoebe Apperson Hearst was one of the earliest. The connection with Mrs. Hearst was vital to Morgan's career. It was through Mrs. Hearst that Morgan became the "house" architect for western YWCAs. Phoebe Hearst's example led to the commission for San Simeon, the William Randolph Hearst estate, which in turn led to an association with Marion Davies, the presiding hostess at San Simeon, who later commissioned important works from Morgan.

"El Campanil," Mills College, Oakland, 1904.



Morgan's involvement with Mrs. Hearst began in her student days at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Mrs. Hearst provided stipends for all California students at the Ecole. In Paris Morgan had an apartment in the same house as Bernard Maybeck, who designed Hearst Hall for the University of California. This was first used as a reception pavilion for Mrs. Hearst's Berkeley house and later moved to the university. Morgan worked on some of the drawings for Hearst Hall. In 1910 Mrs. Hearst, or "the Empress" as she was called in certain circles in San Francisco, commissioned Morgan to enlarge and embellish her home "The Hacienda" in Pleasanton. The house became a social center for entertaining not just the family and personal friends, but beneficiaries of the various good works promoted by Mrs. Hearst. This included especially the women students of Berkeley and workers in the YWCA movement all over the West. The Hearst connection is obviously the key to understanding how Julia Morgan obtained her most important institutional client, the YWCA.

The Pacific Coast Field Committee of the National Y had conferred annually since 1900 at the old Hotel Capitola near the beach at Santa Cruz. When the hotel was destroyed by fire in 1912, Phoebe Hearst invited the conference to "The Hacienda," where she had a tent city

erected on the grounds, with facilities for 300 (including 300 pairs of rubbers and 300 umbrellas when a rainstorm came up). The camp equipment became the basic furniture for the conference grounds, established the next year in Pacific Grove. Here a tract of 30 acres along the ocean was given to the YWCA by the Pacific Improvement Company, with the stipulation that improvements worth \$30,000 be made within 10 years. This became Asilomar (refuge by the sea). Mrs. Hearst provided funds for the first Assembly Hall, now the Hearst Administration Building. The architect to plan and supervise the whole enterprise (built throughout the '20s) was Julia Morgan.

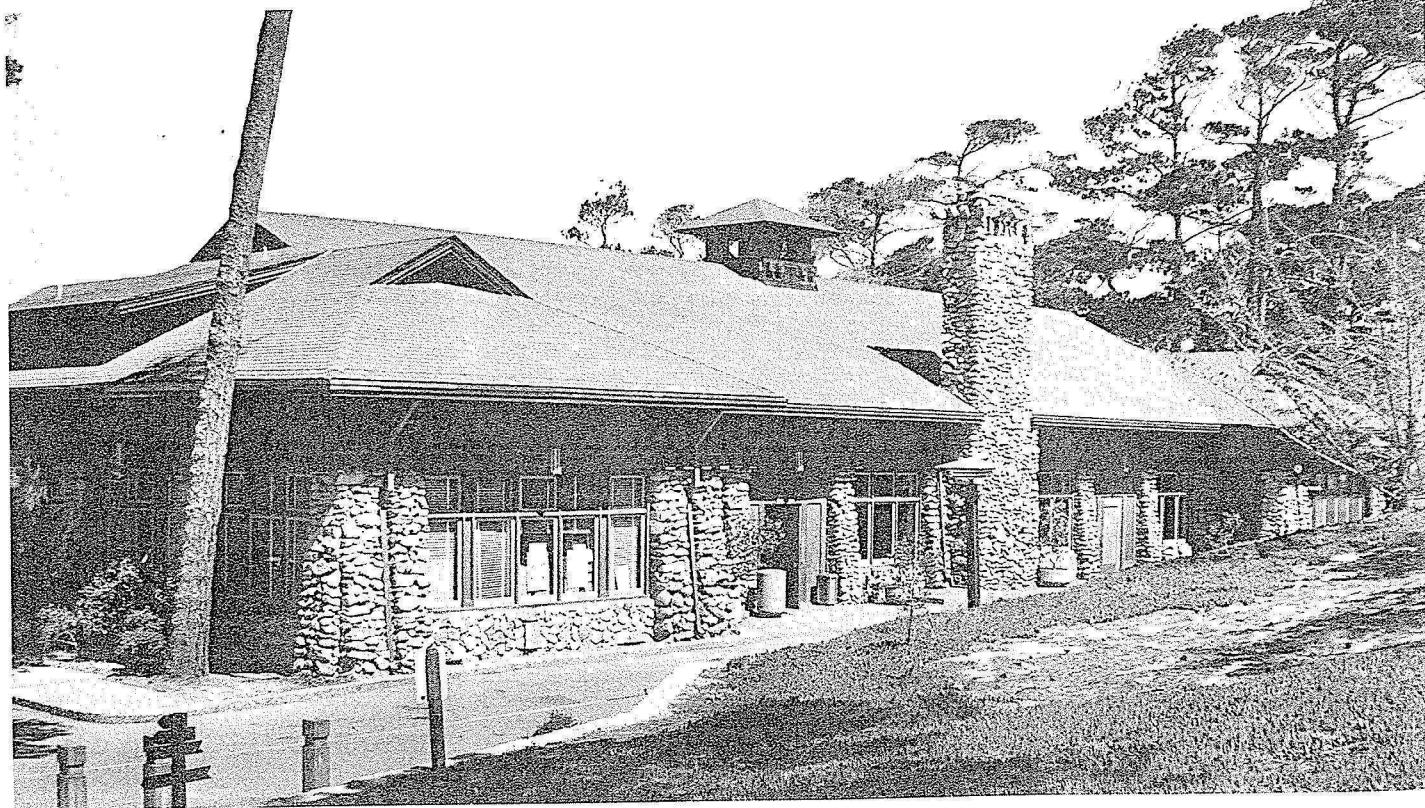
Between 1913 and 1915, she was also engaged in constructing large urban YWCAs in Oakland and San Jose, only the first of many Ys Morgan would design. Commissions for those two structures may have come at least in part from the influence of Morgan's sorority sister Grace Fisher, who was a YWCA board member. Julia Morgan wrote to Phoebe Hearst in 1919, saying how much she appreciated what had grown out of the "General Plan" of Asilomar—the relationship with the New York National YWCA Board, and in fact the offer to work there permanently to oversee building plans nationally (which she did not undertake). Morgan continues: "And so through it all

is the thread of your kindness since those Paris days when you were so beautifully kind to a most painfully shy and homesick girl."

The YWCA work naturally brought other institutional and private commissions from those associated with the Y. Hettie Belle Marcus, who was a board member of the YWCA when Morgan was building the high-rise YWCA residence in San Francisco in 1932, retained her to build a penthouse atop her own residence on Lombard Street in 1935. Elsa Schilling, also a member of the residence board, had Morgan build a Lake Tahoe house for her in 1939, which remains even today, a showplace. Miss Schilling was one of the founders of a scholarship in the architecture school in Morgan's name when she died.

Morgan's work at Mills College also brought her new and important commissions. Dr. Mariana Bertola had been the college physician at Mills when Morgan was engaged in building there. Immediately after the earthquake, when Dr. Bertola's house and office were destroyed by fire, she commissioned a new set of two buildings, one for offices and one for her residence on Jackson Street in San Francisco. These still stand, converted to apartments. Dr. Bertola's role as a client became more significant as she herself took on expanding leadership in the city.

Phoebe Hearst Administration Building, Asilomar, Pacific Grove, Cal., 1913. Photo credit: James H. Edelen.





Susan Mills, Julia Morgan's first client.

As President of the Federation of Woman's Clubs when they were engaged in their "Save-the-Redwoods" campaign, she saw to it that Morgan built the memorial to the efforts of the clubs at Humboldt Park. Then, as the chief mover in the Native Daughters of the Golden West, she arranged for Morgan to be the architect for the new state headquarters and residence on Baker Street in San Francisco.

The late 19th and early 20th century witnessed the growth of important women's institutions such as clubs and colleges. Morgan was often chosen as the designer for California women's clubs. Morgan designed a number of women's clubs, although the state federation does not seem to have served as a client, since each local group was well under way and usually in a clubhouse before affiliation with the federation took place. At any rate, the Foothill Club in Saratoga, organized in 1907, chose a building committee which asked Morgan for plans in 1914. The local newspaper reported that the architect submitted four possible designs, and in 1915 brought in the completed building unanimously chosen by their committee, for the sum of \$4500. This clubhouse was insured for \$150,000 in the '70s. The chairman of the building committee of the Minerva Club in Santa Maria had lived in Berkeley, where she had admired Morgan's residences and churches; Morgan was chosen as the architect for the new building. In Sausalito in 1918 the Women's Club met with some skepticism from fathers and brothers who heard of their choice of a woman architect. One concerned husband left a trust fund for repairs for this club, which he believed would inevitably fall apart. They were never able to touch that fund, so solid was the building, until a friendly lawyer made a case for refurbishing it for the nation's Bicentennial to qualify for the repair fund!

Morgan's own membership in the Century Club of San Francisco afforded her still another client. The club owned a building, but with growing membership, their headquarters seemed inadequate. They called on their own member, Julia Morgan, to enlarge and remodel it, and her work stands as a source of pride to the group. The Monday Club in San Luis Obispo and the Friday Morning Club in Los Angeles testify to many a busy week for this architect.

As for Berkeley, here would naturally assemble a sizable force of vigorous, educated women who wanted a club building which would rival anything in the city or in the state. This they secured in the Berkeley Women's City Club (now co-educational), a castlelike six-story structure designed around two courts, with a large daylighted swimming pool and flexible arrangements of dining rooms, drawing rooms, ballroom-auditorium, several kitchens, even a flower-arranging room. Magnificent ceilings, fireplaces, the grand staircase, all bespeak an elegance and sophistication for urban users. Every detail, including the lighting fixtures, the dishes, the linen, was of Morgan's design, and she also chose the furnishings.

Institutions for the education of women increased rapidly during the first part of the 20th century. The original "Theta" building (1908), the "Zeta" sorority (1910), and the Women's Social Hall, Girton (1911), all at the University of California, were commissions that surely came because Morgan was an alumna. Private secondary schools she designed include the Barnard School in Berkeley, Ransom and Bridges in Piedmont, the Burke and Hamlin Schools in San Francisco. All were founded by women, to provide an education of the highest quality for girls.

Many of her domestic commissions also came from women. Mrs. Elsie Drexler, who was listed as "Capitalist" in the San Francisco Directory, commissioned a redwood residence with pergolas, in Woodside; it is still one of the great houses of the Peninsula area. Mrs. Livermore of Livermore had Morgan build her a small house in the country and another on Russian Hill in San Francisco, behind the Willis Polk house at the crest. In 1916, when materials were scarce, the architect used windows salvaged from the Panama-Pacific Exposition, and the house for Mrs. Livermore, on three levels with a footbridge to the path uphill, is almost austere, although the extravagant views of city and bay make a strong appeal to the senses. Mrs. Starr, whose family had two Morgan houses in Piedmont, commissioned one in the hills above Fremont. Mrs. Brayton of Oakland had Morgan design a house suitable for entertaining on a large scale (her son recalls lavish masked balls with butlers pouring champagne for



Interior courtyard, Berkeley City Women's Club, 1929-30.

the dancers while the children watched from a balcony). She then commissioned another house in Piedmont with a theatre upstairs, and a "cottage" at Pebble Beach, designed around a Della Robbia plaque brought back from a European trip. Clara Huntington Perkins assisted Morgan with the designs for the tiles for her hilltop aerie in Los Gatos. Mrs. David Gamble was the head of the building committee for the Pasadena YWCA. Mrs. Cecil B. deMille was head of the building committee for the Hollywood Studio Club, a temporary residence and club for young women aspiring to become part of the movie industry.

At the same time Julia Morgan was designing simple, compact houses of redwood for teachers and doctors who did not have a lot of money. Drs. Elsa Mitchell and Clara Williams had a small redwood house built on a steep hillside falling away to the bay in Berkeley. The office and garage were in front at the upper level, while the living space was oriented to the rear, where the view of the bay is still awe-inspiring. Dr. Ruth Huffman of Petaluma had an earlier house remodeled to serve as both residence and lying-in hospital. Dr. Emma Wightman Pope, a college friend of Morgan's, had her build a retirement cottage on the hill overlooking the Mission at Carmel. Jessica Peixotto, a classmate at the University of California in 1894 and the first woman to gain a Ph.D. from Berkeley as well as the first woman professor there, commissioned a modest house near the campus. Miss Mollie Conners, an Oakland journalist, also turned to Morgan for a simple house in Piedmont, as did Annie Caroline Edmonds, a high school teacher of mathematics (one of five women in Berkeley's class of 1882). She wanted a larger income-producing house in Berkeley. The latter redwood structure, finished in 1904,

shows a sophisticated handling of space and details of craftsmanship which would continue to characterize the work of this architect.

No account of Morgan clients would be complete without mention of some of the families who called on her more than once for domestic and commercial buildings. Mrs. Glide of Sacramento commissioned her friend to build the Public Market, presently offices for the Secretary of State, and a fine house on the outskirts of her city. Then, as each Glide daughter married and settled in Berkeley, each had a Morgan house in a different style, one Tudor, one Georgian, and the third a handsome California original which now belongs to the university. Julia Morgan also built huge hay barns at Clarksburg, near Sacramento, for the Glide family. Mrs. Glide once asked Morgan to design a Methodist Church for a Glide memorial in San Francisco, but when she saw the

plans, she said it would be too expensive (a notoriously frugal lady, Mrs. Glide) and suggested that the entrance should be changed to economize. Morgan said that if she wanted it that way she should find another architect. She did.

Social connections and past clients as the key to commissions is not a phenomenon particular to women. What is unusual is that it is unlikely that any male would have a roster of clients that was 50 percent institutions for women or women commissioning domestic buildings. This is as revealing about women architects and Morgan as it is about women themselves. These women's institutions and the women clients had a consciousness about their womanhood and about the support of other women that led them to patronize a woman when a qualified woman was available. It was in large part because of this that Morgan was able to execute so many buildings.

Julia Morgan is not well known even among those interested in architecture. There are many reasons for this. She shunned publicity, her work was designed in an eclectic mode which 20th-century historians are just beginning to appreciate, and lastly it is possible that, as much of her work was done for women, it may have been ignored as out of the mainstream.

*Sara Holmes Boutelle, an architectural historian, founded the Julia Morgan Association. Her biography on Morgan is scheduled for publication in the new Encyclopedia of American Architects.*

Study for a country house (?), ca. 1900.

