

BERNARD RALPH MAYBECK, ARCHITECT

A talk accompanying an exhibition of photographs of Maybeck work.
The School of Design, North Carolina State University,
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I am going to show slides of only a few buildings because the gallery is full of pictures of Maybeck buildings. Instead, I am going to try to tell you what Maybeck was like and why the buildings as a whole look the way they do.

I hope this will dissolve a prejudice, --- a prejudice your first look at these pictures may have aroused. If you are the way I was, you will begin by insisting on today's architect finding his forms in the present. Or, if you are a history-minded architect and believe in using forms from the past, you will probably insist on all forms in the same building being from the same period of the past. Purists hate conglomerations. But Nature is not pure as Maybeck knew so well.

①
PORTRAIT

This is Maybeck in about 1914 when he was about 50. I like this portrait because it shows him among his beloved Redwoods, genial as always, and at the peak of his powers. It places him at a time when California Regionalism also was at its peak, I want to come back to California Regionalism and the role it played but let me first give you some facts about Maybeck's early life.

Maybeck was born in 1862 in New York City. Let's compare this date with some other dates.

Louis Sullivan	-	born 1856,	died 1924	at age 68
Frank Ll.Wright	-	" 1869,	" 1959	" " 90
Charles Greene	-	" 1868	" 1957	" " 89
Henry Greene	-	" 1870	" 1954	" " 84
Bernard Maybeck	-	" 1862	" 1957	" " 95

Bernard Maybeck's father was German-Swiss, an accomplished wood carver who left Germany for the United States in 1848. This was the Year of Revolution in Europe. The Revolution sent large numbers of refugees to America. Many of the refugees came to California which was a new land, and it was where gold had just been discovered. But Bernard's father came to New York City, and it was here Bernard was born. It was not until 1889 that Bernard Maybeck reached California. However, it was here Bernard Maybeck spent the remaining 68 years of his life.

Bernard's mother had wanted her son to become an artist but she died when Bernard was only 3 years old. His father was unable to keep Bernard interested in art for long so he sent him to Paris to learn fine woodcarving, and it was in Paris that Bernard discovered architecture. With his father's permission he enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Attendance at the Ecole was coming to bestow more and more prestige on its students, --- ever since the first American

there, Richard Morris Hunt, had returned home to pick up commissions from the Marquands, the Belmonts, the Goelets and the Vanderbilts. The second American at the École was Henry Hobson Richardson. Like Maybeck, Richardson was to become a great romantic but, unlike Maybeck, Richardson returned to secure the design of Boston's Trinity Church; --- also to design railroad stations and libraries for the Ames family whose great fortunes came largely from the Union Pacific; --- also to design for Marshall Field the great trend-setting whole^{SALE} store in Chicago; --- also to design a great townhouse in Chicago for John Glesner of International Harvester Company; --- also to design that greatest of his domestic works; the house in Newport for Watts Sherman whose fortune came from Far Eastern trade.

Maybeck found no such clients when he came home, so he began by working for Carrere and Hastings in New York. It was on that firm's first commission, the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, Florida. If no other Renaissance-inspired building was ever like this, it must be due to Maybeck because Carrere and Hastings never again did anything so exuberant. A little later Carrere & Hastings called Maybeck back to work on the design of their Edison Building in New York City. But Maybeck could never work for long for any firm not his own. Nature had design^{ed} him to work for himself. He refused to be merely a partner,--even in firms for which he had executed brilliant designs. But he lacked the connections and the

manners that enabled Hunt, Richardson, Carrere & Hastings, and others like them to get the really good commissions. However in California things were different. Maybeck was made for California, — OR MAYBE CALIFORNIA WAS MADE FOR MAYBECK.

Logically, this is the place to talk about the regionalism that made California the best of all ^{possible} spots for Maybeck. But I know you would prefer to see some pictures for a change. So I am going to show you some slides and make a few comments about them before going on with the influence of the region.

PHOEBE APPERSON HEARST
② I am beginning with a building in Berkeley for Phoebe Apperson Hearst. It belongs to the same time as —

→ The International Competition for the Design of a Plan for the Campus of the University of California. The competition had been suggested to Mrs. Hearst by Maybeck; then planned and executed by him for her. Mrs. Hearst was now a regent of the University. This building for her is far more remarkable than this picture at first suggests. It is remarkable in its plan, in its lighting, in its acoustics, and it is remarkable in its structural innovations --- including the first laminated wood arch.

As a new regent of the University, Mrs. Hearst wanted to learn more about the University. She was interested in the welfare of the students, and of the women students in particular. So she decided to spend six months in Berkeley in order to enter into the life of the students and see for herself the needs of the institution. She took a house near the campus

and commission^{ED} Maybeck to design a building next door to it in which she could entertain large groups of students. It was to be used for music, dancing and private theatricals. When she was done with it, it was to be moved to the campus and become the headquarters for the women students. The presence of women on the campus was still resented by the men, and the women's interests were being overlooked.

3 To erect a ballroom for a single night's use was not new in San Francisco. Such a building was really temporary. This building was different. It would later be picked up and set down in another location. Realize^{PLEASE,} that 1899 was before the age of helicopters; Maybeck had only mules for the moving. With his engineer friend helping him, Maybeck designed a building of five parts, held together with iron bolts. When the bolts were removed the 140 foot long building could be sawn apart and the parts rolled to the new location. The parts were structural bays framed by doubled arches 54 feet tall. The arches were of laminated wood, made of planks bent to shape and then bolted together. Remember this was before we had glues suited to such uses.

4 The buildings' structure alone is interesting but not as interesting to us now as is the acoustics of its great room. The acoustics determined its whole shape. The walls were made irregular and sloping so the sound waves would not bounce back and forth. Bays and alcoves were added to ^{FORM} "sound hollows",

similar in their effect to the beauty and quality of ^{THE} sound
Maybeck had noted and admired in the forest. Wagner's theater
in Bayreuth, designed by Gustave Semper in 1876, was designed
on the same principle.

Maybeck designed not only with sound but also with light.
Of course Maybeck came after Thomas A. Edison's invention of
electric light, but never was Edison's invention used more
glamorously. At night, in the dark and immense overhead of
the great room, the light from 900 unshad^d incandescent lamps
suspended at varying levels, became small, sharp, floating
points of light sparkling in a soft atmospheric glow.

In 1900 the building was moved to the campus and dedicated,
"A Gift of Phoebe Apperson Hearst to the Women of California".
I never saw Hearst Hall because a fire destroyed it in 1922.
But my wife knew it. It was there when she entered the
University in 1915, and there when she left it in 1919.
Hearst Hall was the one building above all others on the campus
that represented the University in her mind. For her never-
finished book on Maybeck, William Gray Purcell wrote an
introduction that contains a detailed and perceptive description
of it. I would like to quote his whole piece about the
building but I won't. BUT HERE IS A PART OF IT.

"One warm summer-like day in January 1904, I walked out
from under the oaks on the Berkeley campus, on up past
the old Harmon Gym and South Hall. Then I came face to
face with a puzzling building. I thought at first it was
an unfinished exposition building with a sort of template

of sawed furring strips around two towers that seemed to be awaiting a plaster surface. Below was an ogival arch in wood with many deep vane-like vertical muntins, the plane of the glass wall back of them; before the entrance a sort of Greene-&-Greene-like porte cochere.

As I approached and entered, I was very strongly aware of something happening to all my senses with respect to the building. Nothing was startling but everything was persuasively different. The light inside was unusual and came -or failed to come - unexpectedly. I turned to mount the stairs. The stairs! here was something very impressive to feet, to one's whole body beginning to use this building. The risers were not the 7½"x10", nor the Beaux Arts public building standard - 6"x 12", but 3½"x 20"! They were like a ramp but stairs in fact. Wonderful feeling to walk up! Looking at my feet I felt the sunlight coming down from above ^{THROUGH} the shadowy wood pergola outside in long shafts through the slot-like muntins of the great ogival window, - it made patterns on the stairs and wall, - something wholly new here! The naked wood, fir and Redwood, used in great planks and boards. The stairs wound around at the landing in a great fan, the 20" steps expanding to 30". Looking down again from the high window and ceiling I began to ascend the final flight, and looked up to see where I was going. The impact was really terrific. The great hall was above and before me. Rank after rank of massive ogival

ribs in pairs with ceiling surface between them of large rough split shakes. A photograph may show, but it will never tell you, the emotional force of this building seen for the first time, and by a mind fresh out of Louis Sullivan's office, where the world of form and pattern were so different, but so basically alike. This, then, was my first experience with the building. I had a similar uplift when at ten I first saw the interior of Sullivan's great Chicago Auditorium.

"Now in this Hearst Hall Maybeck used no design borrowings to secure his effect, nor did he try to escape from known forms, nor to be original. Without violating structure, process or material, he made them build a sort of poem for him. So this was Maybeck's offer. His sense of structure and fitness: constructivism was not logical or illogical, it was just natural; and for the rest, he gave all his ingenuity to making the elements, and all he could bring to them, to create a living space of the spirit, to meet what he felt were going to be the demands of the people whom he hoped would come to love his building."

WYNTOON
⑤ Not all but most of Maybeck's commissions were for houses. This^{is} his house in a virgin forest on the McCloud River. Like the first building I showed you, this building also was for Phoebe Apperson Hearst. It is hardly a cottage. It was to be a country retreat on the Hearst property in Siskyou county.

Its form suggests a Tyrolean castle. In Maybeck's mind, Mrs. Hearst's role was that of a chatelaine. This was probably a hangover from Maybeck's first meeting with her when he was developing for her the world-wide competition for a plan for the campus of the University of California. Certainly Mrs. Hearst was a remarkable woman with high ideals, great plans and the money to implement them. The total effect of Wynton's livingroom with its extremely high ceiling, its Gothic shapes and proportions, its free-standing and soaring fireplace, and the addition of Mrs. Hearst's art objects, --- the total effect was fantastic. It is no wonder it appealed to William Randolph Hearst even more than to his mother.

Supervising the construction of Wynton was^a vital experience for Maybeck. California was still a region of great natural beauty. For practically a hundred years no one had trampled the sea of flowers in the great Central Valley; no one had disturbed the living silence of the Redwood forests, no one had penetrated the mountain ranges. Then suddenly the untouched nature of the seventeenth century was opened, --- not to seventeenth century eyes and minds but to ~~nineteenth~~ nineteenth century eyes and minds. From the time he was building Wynton onward, Maybeck would return to Nature to renew his fertility of invention, to re-create his spirit, to heal his wounds. Nature is complex. Even its plainly visible elements are myriad. Yet in Nature there is no ultimate rejection of a single one of them, --- only a re-grouping in patterns where relations are harmonious and each element is engaged in doing

what is natural for it to do and, in doing that, to enjoy a kind of democratic acceptance. This understanding of nature lay behind the most abstract of Maybeck's creations. It resembles Frank Lloyd Wright's concept of nature, his concept of "organic", his concept of architecture ^{BASED} _{ON} "principle".

I have the description of Wyntoon by a visitor to it, the author of a beautiful article about it in the British Architectural Review of January 1904, but it is too long to use here. If I started to read it, I couldn't stop.

We come now to a 1910 building. It is my favorite; Berkeley's First Church of Christ Scientist. Even though it is my favorite, I promise to not talk long about it. There are lots of pictures of it in the gallery.

Frank Morton Todd called this building, "A gilded, gray-and-golden, blue-and-silver glory of Byzantine and Gothic elements that make the heart sing to look at it". But in addition to the Byzantine and Gothic elements, there are other elements, --- or at least other materials. Along with Gothic tracery and pier heads cast from Third Century north African Roman remains and other relics of the past, there are Twentieth Century factory steel sash, asbestos-cement panels (Transite, we call them), and Redwood. The mixture's total effect seems perfectly natural. Each material and element is only doing what it does best. Furthermore, by their association with the honored materials of the past the modern materials gain stature and acceptance. They don't look cheap; they don't look like substitutes; they look proud to be there and doing what they are doing.

CHRISTIAN
SCIENCE
CHURCH

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A group of Christian Science women had come to Maybeck to talk about a new church building for themselves. Maybeck began by asking them to tell him their beliefs. They spoke of simplicity, honesty, sincerity, unpretentiousness. When they had finished, Maybeck told them they had Twelfth Century souls and what they they really wanted was a Twelfth Century building. Maybeck was not thinking of something out of a history book. He was thinking of the spirit that went into the building of those Twelfth Century structures. He was thinking of the builders' directness of construction, of their uncomplicated methods, of their use of common materials, of the total absence of cover-up of any kind. Looking at Maybeck's building for these Christian Scientists, one suspects the joy Maybeck must have had in designing this building.

③ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ (Point out the modern materials shown in the slides.)

PALACE OF
FINE ARTS

⑩ This is Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts in the San Francisco World Fair of 1915, --- The Panama Pacific International Exposition. The purpose of the Fair was to show the world that San Francisco would live again despite the 1906 earthquake and fire that had all but demolished it. The Panama Canal would be completed by 1915 and the world's fair would celebrate the opening of the canal and the re-building of San Francisco as well. Let me interrupt to say that the first motion picture I ever saw was in 1912 when I was 9 years old. It showed construction under way on the Canal; it showed General Goethals directing operations.

I remember also my visit to the Exposition in 1915 when I was 12. The two buildings I remember were the Tower of Jewels and the Palace of Fine Arts.

As I said earlier, Maybeck was made for California. What, then, made California? First of all it was its newness. It was so new it had not yet lost its natural beauty. It was the discovery of gold, and then silver only a stone's throw away in Nevada, that brought people from every class of society from all over the world. So the city was rich and cosmopolitan from the start. It was a frontier but unlike the frontier of the hunter and backwoodsman. The harbor brought it into touch with the world, giving it European contacts without colonial dependence. At this time the ocean was the highway of the world making Paris much closer to San Francisco than even St. Louis. The city's leaders were full of imagination, courage and love of the city. To these men, building San Francisco meant not only the construction of dry-docks, carriage works, woolen mills, --- it also meant building luxurious houses, theaters, restaurants, hotels and the encouragement of that whole mish-mash of art, music and fine living known as "culture".

San Francisco had its own particular social flavor from the first. It was neither the conventional, polished, class-conscious culture of Europe nor was it the timid colonial one of the Eastern Seaboard of the United States (and especially the architectural profession). When the architectural profession was in the grip of a frozen approach to architecture, ^{ELSEWHERE,} conditions in San Francisco enabled Maybeck to escape this influence and

and make his bold, creative approach. San Franciscans were ambitious and were not afraid of beauty and elegance. The Palace of Fine Arts was Maybeck's creative opportunity.

The design of neither this building nor any other ^{FAIR} building was Maybeck's in the beginning. His name was at the bottom of the list of architects considered. Willis Polk was assigned the Fine Arts building. Maybeck was working for Polk at the time. Polk was complaining that he had been given the worst site on the grounds. It was a mudhole. This is hardly surprising since this part of the grounds was on "made-land" dredged up from the bottom of the Bay. As Maybeck listened to Polk's complaints, he began a thumbnail sketch which he produced when Polk had finished talking. ^{THE SKETCH} He showed a lagoon in the place of the mudhole and building^s grouped about it. Polk was interested and suggested Maybeck take it home and see what he could do with it. A few days later Maybeck showed Polk a ^{RENDERED} perspective drawing. Now, Polk was really interested and asked if he might keep the drawing for a few days. The reason was that there was soon to be a meeting of all the Fair's architects. At this meeting, each would show drawings of his proposal. At the meeting, each architect put his drawing up on the easel, one after another, and received the criticisms and suggestions of the others. Polk's drawing was the last to go up. It was in charcoal and colored chalks and depicted a lagoon, and rising from the lagoon a loggia and dome, partly encircled by a colonade. Loggia and dome and pieces of the colonade were reflected in the water from the edge of which trees rose here AND THERE, NO ONE

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could see anything else. Polk was effusively congratulated. Then followed one of the most unheard happenings in the history of architecture. Polk announced that the design was not his but Bernard Maybeck's, and that he would be pleased to see Maybeck work it out under his own name.

So Maybeck became the architect of the Palace of Fine Arts, --- the only building not torn down at the conclusion of the Fair. Instead, 47 years later in 1962 Maybeck's seven hundred thousand dollar temporary building was re-built in permanent materials at a cost of over six million dollars --- and for no reason other than to satisfy San Franciscans' pride and craving for beauty.

The boldest, most imaginative and most beautiful building in the Exposition was designed by the man with the lowest status. For his work he was paid the least; 3 dollars per hour, his draftsman's wage. This man owed his participation in the affair entirely to the generosity of a colleague.

This building had a strange effect on people's minds. The building was to house art, so what is the proper atmosphere in which to view art? According to Maybeck's story, (quote) "The director of the Fine Arts exhibit said he did not want the visitors to come directly from a noisy boulevard into galleries of pictures but, on the contrary, he wanted everybody to pass through a gradual transition from the exciting influences of the Fair to the quiet serenity of the galleries." (end of quote). So Maybeck's design leads the visitor around a lagoon, past a

rotunda, and along a roofless colonade before allowing him to enter the enclosure which guards the pictures. Accordingly, the visitor's mind is prepared for what he is about to see. (quoting Maybeck again) "And when he comes away his senses are gradually led back to the commonplaces of human activity, and the horns of automobiles and the cries of the popcorn vendors will not grate upon his ears as they would if he was plumped out of the Fine Arts into the hustle and bustle".

I would like to go on talking ^{ABOUT} the Palace because the number of stories about it is endless. I have omitted Maybeck's houses even though Maybeck considered them his best work. "Wyntoon" is not a house in the ordinary sense. You can see pictures of many of his houses in the gallery exhibit. It's too bad that their special virtues are not immediately apparent in the photographs.

Maybeck helped found the Hillside Club. He also designed its clubhouse. The very special character of Berkeley's residences --- until the 1923 fire swept the hillsides behind the campus --- was owing to Maybeck and the Hillside Club. Not only the houses but the lot shapes and the pattern of the streets were products of Maybeck's mind and the club he formed. The Hillside Year ^{BOOK} of 1906-1907 says, "Hillside Architecture is landscape gardening around a few rooms for use in case of rain".

I am going to show you one more slide just because it depicts a Maybeck building so unlike the Palace and one that is easily associated in one's mind with the Maybeck portrait in the first slide we looked at. This is a lodge for the Sierra Club. It is build of rough stone, laid up without mortar, and of un-milled logs. Unlike the Palace, this building makes no display of erudition. It is a product of its own situation, character and potentialities. Like a natural object, it does violence to nothing in its surroundings, and associates easily with them.

If you can put up with a few more words, I will add a bit to what I said earlier about the California regionalism that made possible the work of Maybeck and others like him.

When Maybeck reached California in 1889, the state was still new, It was cosmopolitan, and it was rich from the start. (My paternal grandfather reached California in 1849 --- 40 years before Maybeck. He came on mule back in a party and over the "Gila Trail" whose name became the title of my grandfather's book about the California Argonauts).

The San Francisco to which Maybeck came, just 40 years after news of the discovery of gold flashed around the world, was like no other city. The wealth from the gold and silver mines and from the Oriental trade made it rich and cosmopolitan almost at once. It quickly became a town living on an exuberant scale, unhampered by tradition, identifying itself with the best they knew of rather than the merely established. In terms

of a new architecture, this meant opportunity. In no other place could Maybeck have found clients capable of appreciating his work and of giving him the freedom to develop ideas at variance with the dominant ideas of the time. Unfortunately this situation was not everlasting. Two World Wars and the Great Depression change^d all that.

Events on other sides of the world had provided much of the manpower that built up California; the Revolution of 1848 in Europe sent^{to} California many independently minded, adventuresome, true democrats, --- all bent on escaping imperialism. China, by way of the Tai Ping Rebellion and famine in the south, sent thousands of hungry Chinese to California to raise the vegetables, to cook the food, to ~~wash~~ the clothes and, later, to help build the railroads, --- all of which went into the formation of the region.

Gold, which had been mined by panning the stream beds, had attracted men equipped with only dishpans and strong backs. But soon silver was discovered just across the line in Nevada. Silver mining was a totally different operation. It required engineering, machinery and money, and it drew some of the finest minds in the world to San Francisco.

Also a part of the early ferment responsible for the special nature of the region were the writers, painters, naturalists, philanthropists, conservationists and reformers.

None of them were born there. Few of them were there by accident. They were there because it was where they wanted to be. They were drawn there by the life, the freedom, the natural beauty and the opportunity the place afforded. Among the writers was Joaquin Miller, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, George Sterling, Frank Norris, Gertrude Atherton and others. William Randolph Hearst's entry into the newspaper field in 1894 was an important factor in building up the life of the city.

Among the painters was William Keith whose large canvasses brought large sums from the nature-loving San Franciscans. The Bohemian Club became an important influence in the cultural life of the City and the State.

Among the philanthropists was Lick, Leland Stanford, and Phoebe Apperson Hearst. An observatory, the Lick Observatory; a privately endowed university, Stanford University; and a substantially stimulated and assisted state university, the University of California; -- all these are existing records of their interest.

People love^d the beauty of the country and were desirous of preserving it. John Muir signalized this love. He also signalized the early Conservation Movement which included President Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin K. Lane among its early supporters. Theirs was an important part in the determination to establish the National Forests. There^{^v} there was the Sierra Club, founded as much for the preservation of the Sierra

as for the enjoyment of mountain climbing.

People's interest in nature was not restricted to what they found here. They were fascinated with the possibilities of what could be established here. They greatly enlarged the variety of plant life with importations from the Orient, the South Pacific and the Mediterranean. They warmly applauded the successes of their fellow Californian, Luther Burbank, who developed many new species and was known as The Plant Wizard and held in the same high esteem as his contemporary, Thomas A. Edison, The Electrical Wizard.

I have gone into so much detail and have recalled half-forgotten names because it is important to recognize the intellectual ferment --- the state of mind --- that marked the region that was to be distinguished by the architecture of Bernard Maybeck, Greene & Greene, Irving Gill, Willis Polk, Myron Hunt and many other only slightly less gifted designers.