



SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Landmark Designation Case Report

Hearing Date: July 15, 2015
Case No.: 2011.0685L
Project Address: 171 San Marcos Avenue
Zoning: RH-1 (D) - Residential - House, One Family - Detached
Block/Lot: 2882/035
Property Owner: Christine Willemsen
171 San Marcos Avenue
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PROPERTY DESCRIPTION & SURROUNDING LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT

171 San Marcos Avenue, historically known as the Cowell House, is located on a steeply sloped site on the south side of San Marcos Avenue in hilly Forest Hill, a residential neighborhood characterized by single family homes constructed in the 1920s through 1950s. The Cowell House is oriented south to take advantage of expansive southern views. Due to the site's steep downward slope, the house is largely hidden from view. The building's stories are inverted with a street-level garage story atop three lower stories. The Cowell House features unpainted horizontal redwood siding, floor-to-ceiling stacked steel-sash awning windows with horizontal muntin pattern, and rounded Streamline Moderne design elements. Striking design elements are found at the rear of the property, in particular the prominent window bays, balconies, and roof deck.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The case before the Historic Preservation Commission is the consideration of the initiation of landmark designation of 171 San Marcos Avenue as a San Francisco landmark under Article 10 of the Planning Code, Section 1004.1, and recommending that the Board of Supervisors approve of such designation.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW STATUS

The Planning Department has determined that actions by regulatory agencies for protection of the environment (specifically in this case, landmark designation) are exempt from environmental review, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15308 (Class Eight - Categorical).

GENERAL PLAN POLICIES

The Urban Design Element of the San Francisco General Plan contains the following relevant objectives and policies:

- OBJECTIVE 2: Conservation of Resources that provide a sense of nature, continuity with the past, and freedom from overcrowding.
- POLICY 4: Preserve notable landmarks and areas of historic, architectural or aesthetic value, and promote the preservation of other buildings and features that provide continuity with past development.

Designating significant historic resources as local landmarks will further continuity with the past because the buildings will be preserved for the benefit of future generations. Landmark designation will require that the Planning Department and the Historic Preservation Commission review proposed work that may have an impact on character-defining features. Both entities will utilize the *Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* in their review to ensure that only appropriate, compatible alterations are made.

SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING CODE SECTION 101.1 – GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Planning Code Section 101.1 – Eight Priority Policies establishes and requires review of permits for consistency with said policies. On balance, the proposed designation is consistent with the priority policies in that:

- a. The proposed designation will further Priority Policy No. 7, that landmarks and historic buildings be preserved. Landmark designation of 171 San Marcos Avenue, historically known as the Cowell House, will help to preserve an important historical resource that is associated with an innovative composer and pianist Henry Cowell, and is architecturally significant as one of San Francisco's earliest single-family houses of a fully expressed Modern design by master architectural firm Morrow & Morrow.

BACKGROUND / PREVIOUS ACTIONS

At its regularly scheduled public hearing on June 15, 2011, the Historic Preservation Commission voted to add the Cowell House, 171 San Marcos Avenue, to its Landmark Designation Work Program.

OTHER ACTIONS REQUIRED

If the Historic Preservation Commission adopts a resolution to initiate designation of the subject property as an Article 10 landmark at its July 15, 2015 hearing and directs staff to finalize the landmark designation report, a second Historic Preservation Commission hearing will be scheduled for the Commission's recommendation of approval of the designation. At the second hearing, if the Historic Preservation Commission recommends approval of the designation, its recommendation will be sent by the Department to the Board of Supervisors. The nomination would then be considered at a future Board of Supervisors hearing for formal Article 10 landmark designation.

APPLICABLE PRESERVATION STANDARDS

ARTICLE 10

Section 1004 of the Planning Code authorizes the landmark designation of an individual structure or other feature or an integrated group of structures and features on a single lot or site, having special character or special historical, architectural or aesthetic interest or value, as a landmark. Section 1004.1 also outlines that landmark designation may be initiated by the Board of Supervisors or the Historic Preservation Commission and the initiation shall include findings in support. Section 1004.2 states that once initiated, the proposed designation is referred to the Historic Preservation Commission for a report and recommendation to the Board of Supervisors to approve, disapprove or modify the proposal.

Pursuant to Section 1004.3 of the Planning Code, if the Historic Preservation Commission approves the designation, a copy of the resolution of approval is transmitted to the Board of Supervisors and without referral to the Planning Commission. The Board of Supervisors shall hold a public hearing on the designation and may approve, modify or disapprove the designation.

In the case of the initiation of a historic district, the Historic Preservation Commission shall refer its recommendation to the Planning Commission pursuant to Section 1004.2(c). The Planning Commission shall have 45 days to provide review and comment on the proposed designation and address the consistency of the proposed designation with the General Plan, Section 101.1 priority policies, the City's Regional Housing Needs Allocation, and the Sustainable Communities Strategy for the Bay Area. These comments shall be sent to the Board of Supervisors in the form of a resolution.

Section 1004(b) requires that the designating ordinance approved by the Board of Supervisors shall include the location and boundaries of the landmark site, a description of the characteristics of the landmark which justify its designation, and a description of the particular features that should be preserved.

Section 1004.4 states that if the Historic Preservation Commission disapproves the proposed designation, such action shall be final, except upon the filing of a valid appeal to the Board of Supervisors within 30 days.

ARTICLE 10 LANDMARK CRITERIA

The Historic Preservation Commission on February 4, 2009, by Resolution No. 001, adopted the National Register Criteria as its methodology for recommending landmark designation of historic resources. Under the National Register Criteria, the quality of significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, feeling, materials, workmanship, and association, and that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may

lack individual distinction; or properties that have yielded, or may likely yield, information important in prehistory or history.

PUBLIC / NEIGHBORHOOD INPUT

There is no known public or neighborhood opposition to designation of 171 San Marcos Avenue as an Article 10 landmark. The Department will provide any public correspondence received after the submittal of this report in the Historic Preservation Commission's correspondence folder.

PROPERTY OWNER INPUT

Property owner Christine Willemssen is supportive of landmark designation.

STAFF ANALYSIS

The case report and analysis under review was prepared by Department preservation staff. The Department has determined that the subject property meets the requirements for Article 10 eligibility as an individual landmark. The justification for its inclusion is outlined below under the Significance and Integrity sections of this case report.

SIGNIFICANCE

Association with Significant Person

The Cowell House is closely associated with Henry Cowell, an "ultra modern" composer, pianist, publisher, educator, and innovator who was a major force in new American music. He introduced new sounds, techniques, and tones into experimental music in the 1910s to 1930s. Among his many innovations were the "tone cluster" technique; percussion orchestras and collaborations with Modern choreographers; and the use of non-traditional instruments and techniques, such as playing a piano's strings. He was influential to a new generation of Modern composers including John Cage and Lou Harrison. He founded the New Music Society in San Francisco to promote and promulgate experimental and world music and hosted receptions and performances at the Cowell House.

Cowell's association with the house is reflected in the building's design, including the Modern style and an interior designed to enhance performance acoustics. The house—commissioned by his stepmother Olive Cowell—was designed to accommodate his recitals in the living room. The interior space of the living room is sheathed with Celoflex, an insulating board, and features built-in cabinets clad with a fibrous material to enrich the room's acoustics.

The composer is closely associated with the house (though he maintained a small cabin in Menlo Park), particularly the recital space in the living room. He also frequently resided at 171 San Marcos Avenue when not on tour or at his cabin in Menlo Park.

Significant architecture

The Cowell House is the earliest known example in San Francisco of a regional Modern vernacular style that developed in the mid-1930s in the San Francisco Bay Area. Now called the Second Bay Tradition, the emerging style fused the rustic, hand-crafted, woodsy aesthetic of First Bay Tradition architects with the sleek functional design, machine aesthetic, and cubic, rectilinear forms associated with European

Modernism. The resultant Modern architecture “both belongs to the region and transcends the region: it embraces the machine and transcends the machine.”¹ This union of the Arts and Crafts’ and International Style’s philosophies, materials, and volumes resulted in a simple, yet elegant regional Modern architectural style endemic to the Bay Area.

The Cowell House is also significant as a rare extant Modern building designed by master architects Morrow & Morrow and is their most influential collaboration. It represents an early Modern collaboration of Irving Morrow, designer of the Golden Gate Bridge, and his wife and partner Gertrude Comfort Morrow, a pioneering female architect.

PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Cowell House’s Period of Significance is 1933, the year of its design and construction, to 1936, the year that marked Henry Cowell’s arrest and imprisonment. These four years mark the intense use of the house for recitals, performances, and receptions during what was known as an innovative and productive period of Cowell’s career. It was a time that Cowell was most closely associated with the house. After his release from prison in 1940 he relocated to New York and is considered to have restrained his radical musical experimentation

INTEGRITY

Cumulatively, the building retains sufficient integrity to convey its association with Henry Cowell and its expressive Modern architectural design. The Cowell House was constructed at its current location in 1933. The building has not been moved. When constructed, it was one of the first buildings on this block of San Marcos Avenue in Forest Hill, a neighborhood historically dominated by Period Revival designs. From the mid-1930s into the 1950s, neighboring single-family houses were constructed, a notable number with Second Bay Tradition design aesthetic, including unpainted wood siding, boxy shapes, and expansive window walls. Trees dominate the landscape. Neighboring buildings feature front yard setbacks and expansive rear yards. Streets are curvilinear and richly landscaped, a sharp contrast to the uniformity of gridded streets of the nearby Sunset District. The subject block, which dead ends into a portion of Hawk Hill (a public park with limited accessibility), remains quiet and secluded with little vehicular traffic. The immediate area and surrounding Forest Hill neighborhood retains the “country in the city” feeling—described by Olive Cowell—resultant from the curvilinear street pattern, large lots, dense plantings, and prominent street trees. As a result, the Cowell House retains its location, feeling, setting, and association.

The Cowell House retains the design features that were present during the established 1933 to 1936 Period of Significance. Prominent design features and materials include the building’s articulated massing and stepped form that hugs the lot’s steep downward slope, unpainted redwood shiplap siding, roof deck, window bays and balconies, and prominent steel-sash windows with horizontal muntin pattern. The interior, likewise, displays high integrity of design, materials and workmanship. The interior retains the Japanese grass fabric coverings and Celotex cladding (chosen to enhance the living room’s acoustics), unpainted redwood wainscoting, tiled fireplace and built-in furniture including bookshelves,

¹ Gardner Dailey, *Domestic Architecture of the Bay Region* (San Francisco Museum of Art exhibition catalog, 1949), 4.

ironing cupboard, telephone cupboard, and cabinets. Historic interior finishes such as the stained lavender grey flooring are also extant. The extant materials and design reflect the quality of construction, materials, and workmanship as evidenced by Morrow & Morrow's exactly detailed construction notes.

Remodeling has largely been limited to the insertion of sliding glass doors and a metal deck at the basement level of the south-facing (rear) facade and remodeling of the kitchen and bathrooms. In the 1960s, the building was clad in asbestos shingle siding. That siding was removed in the 1990s and the building's historic exterior cladding was revealed. At some point, the violet colored steel window sash was painted orange—a likely nod to Irving Morrow's iconic International Orange color choice for the Golden Gate Bridge. The entry door and soffit, which were originally painted blue-green and lemon yellow respectively, were also painted orange. These alterations, including the revised painting scheme, are relatively minor and do not detract from the building's significance or design intent. As a result, the Cowell House retains integrity of design, materials, and workmanship.

Overall, the Department has determined that the building's primary character defining features, both exterior and interior, are largely unaltered since the building's construction in 1933 and 171 San Marcos Avenue retains outstanding integrity to convey its historical significance.

CHARACTER-DEFINING FEATURES

Whenever a building, site, object, or landscape is under consideration for Article 10 landmark designation, the Historic Preservation Commission is required to identify character-defining features of the property. This is done to enable owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

As described in the Landmark Designation Report, the following is a list of exterior and interior character defining features of the Cowell House.

The character-defining *exterior* features of the building are identified as all exterior elevations, including but not limited to form, massing, structure, architectural ornament and materials identified as:

- Building plan and volumes including spatial configuration of entry path
- Projecting bay windows and balconies at rear facade
- Open roof deck and wood ornamented chimney stacks
- Projecting flat wood overhang over the garage door and roof deck
- Curved entry portico with curved half-wall and decorative glass panel
- Steel sash windows and doors (including garage door) set with horizontal muntins
- Horizontal redwood siding with slightly projecting flat board panel parapet and metal coping

The character-defining *interior* features of the building are identified as:

- Japanese grass fabric coverings and Celotex cladding (which enhanced acoustics) in the living room
- Redwood flooring with lavender-grey stain
- Three-foot high redwood wainscoting, stained lavender-grey, in the living room, entry hall, and study
- Built-in furniture including bookshelves and living room cabinets
- Tile-clad fireplace
- Interior doors with decorative ribbed glass set in a horizontal muntin pattern

INTERIOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

According to Article 10, Section 1004(c) of the Planning Code, only those interiors that were historically publicly accessible are eligible for listing in Article 10. Article 10, Section 1004(c) of the Planning Code states,

(c) The property included in any such designation shall upon designation be subject to the controls and standards set forth in this Article 10. In addition, the said property shall be subject to the following further controls and standards if imposed by the designating ordinance:

- (1) For a publicly-owned landmark, review of proposed changes to significant interior architectural features.
- (2) For a privately-owned landmark, review of proposed changes requiring a permit to significant interior architectural features in those areas of the landmark that are or historically have been accessible to members of the public. The designating ordinance must clearly describe each significant interior architectural feature subject to this restriction.

Interiors of private residences are therefore ineligible for protection under Article 10 of the Planning Code. Nonetheless, given that the interior, particularly the living room, is so closely linked to Henry Cowell and musical performances, it is strongly recommended that the interior be preserved under a conservation easement and/or that future interior alterations are sensitively designed.

BOUNDARIES OF THE LANDMARK SITE

Encompassing all of and limited to Lot 35 in Assessor's Block 2882 on the south side of San Marcos Avenue, between Castenada Avenue and the eastern edge of Hawk Hill Park.

PLANNING DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION

Based on the Department's analysis, 171 San Marcos Avenue, historically known as the Cowell House, is individually eligible for Article 10 Landmark designation as it is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; and was designed by master architects. Staff recommends approval of the proposed landmark designation of 171 San Marcos Avenue.

The Historic Preservation Commission may recommend approval, disapproval, or approval with modifications of the proposed designation of 171 San Marcos Avenue as a San Francisco landmark under Article 10 of the Planning Code to the Board of Supervisors pursuant to Planning Code Section 1004.1. If the Historic Preservation Commission approves the designation, a copy of the motion of approval is transmitted to the Board of Supervisors, which holds a public hearing on the designation and may approve, modify or disapprove the designation (Section 1004.4). If the Historic Preservation Commission disapproves the proposed designation, such action shall be final, except upon the filing of a valid appeal to the Board of Supervisors within 30 days (Section 1004.5).

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Draft Landmark Designation Report
- B. Draft Motion initiating designation

Parcel Map

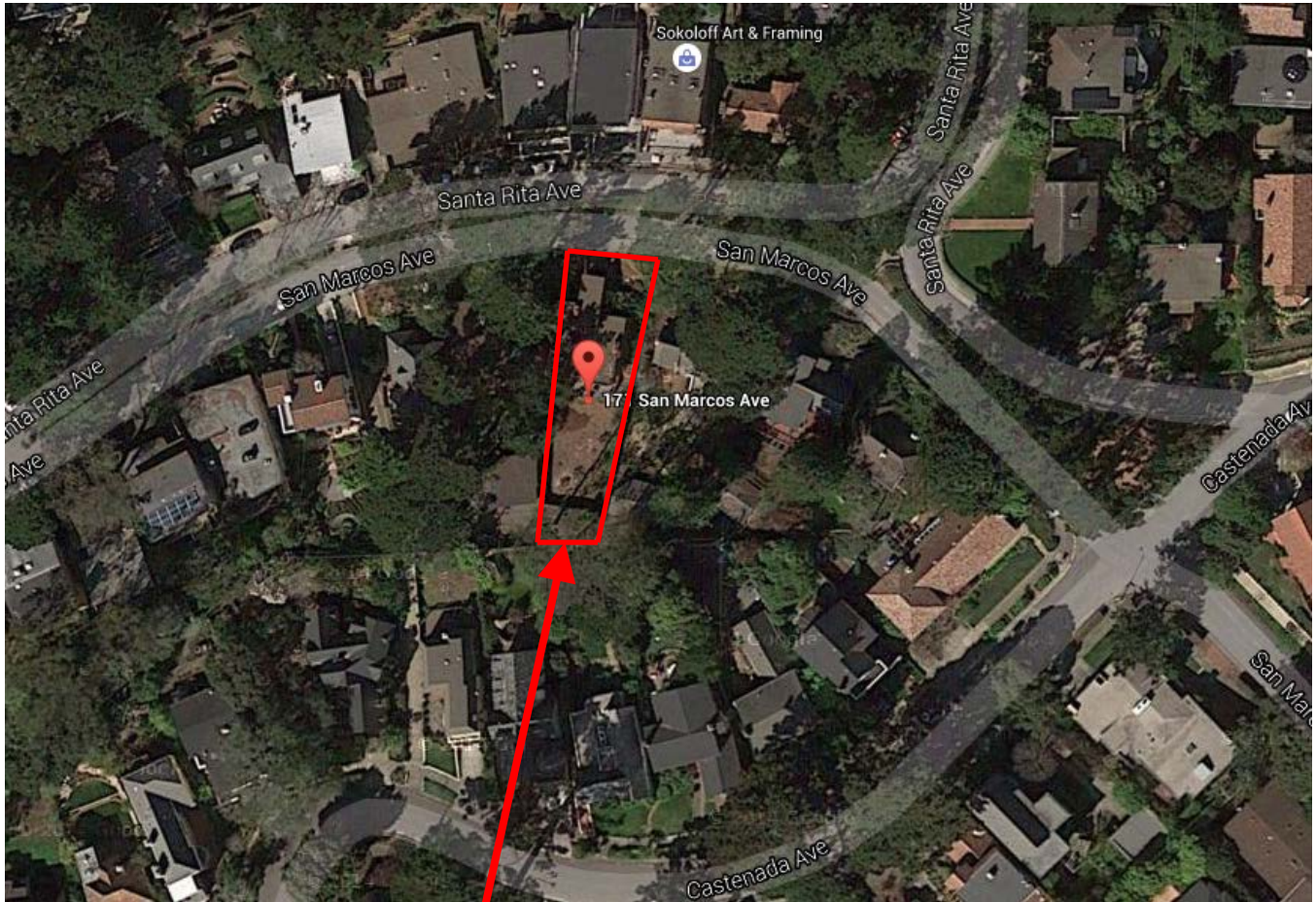


SUBJECT PROPERTY



Article 10 Landmark Designation
Case Number 2011.0685L
Cowell House
171 San Marcos Avenue

Aerial Photo

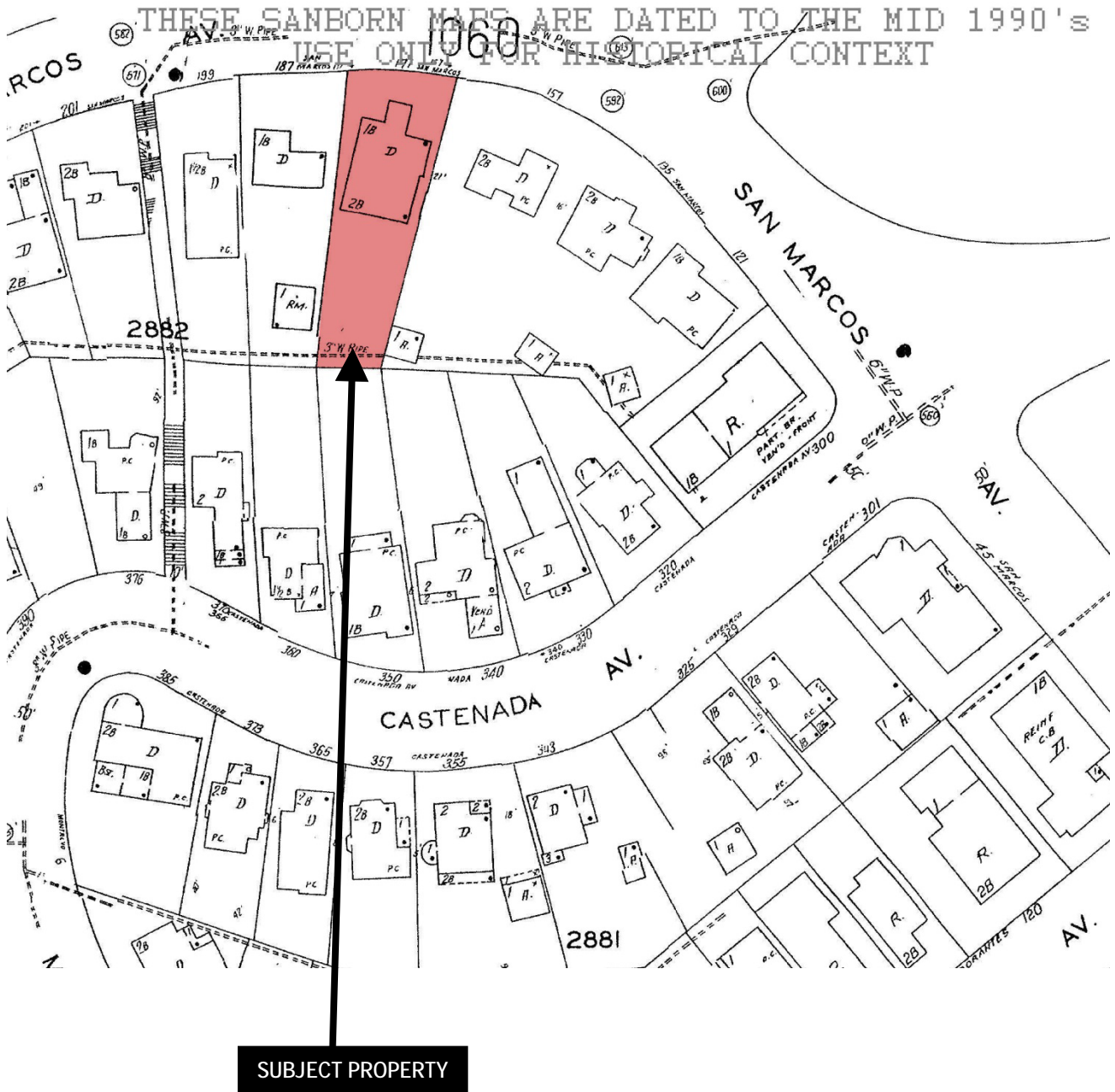


SUBJECT PROPERTY



Article 10 Landmark Designation
Case Number 2011.0685L
Cowell House
171 San Marcos Avenue

Sanborn Map*



*The Sanborn Maps in San Francisco have not been updated since 1998, and this map may not accurately reflect existing conditions.



Article 10 Landmark Designation
Case Number 2011.0685L
Cowell House
171 San Marcos Avenue

Site Photo



Article 10 Landmark Designation
Case Number 2011.0685L
Cowell House
171 San Marcos Avenue

Christine Willemsen
171 San Marcos Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94116

July 6, 2015

Andrew Wolfram, Commission President
San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission
1650 Mission St., Suite 400
San Francisco, CA 94103

RE: The Cowell House Landmark Designation

Dear President Wolfram:

As the property owner of the Cowell House, located at 171 San Marcos Avenue, I strongly support Article 10 city landmark designation for the building. Built in 1933 by Morrow & Morrow Architects a few years after Irving Morrow designed the Golden Gate Bridge, the Cowell House is one of the earliest Modern single-family houses in San Francisco. In addition, the living room was designed with special acoustical features to enhance the performances of Henry Cowell, an innovative composer and pianist who frequently performed there. The house and living room retain excellent integrity with nearly all the design features that were present at its construction still there today.

I urge the Historic Preservation Commission to recommend city landmark designation to The Board of Supervisors.

Sincerely,


Christine Willemsen

From: Inge Horton <ingehor@pacbell.net>
Sent: Tuesday, July 14, 2015 11:12 AM
To: Aaron Jon Hyland; Andrew Wolfram; Diane Matsuda; Ellen Johnck; Jonathan Pearlman; Karl Hasz; Richard Johns; Jonas Ionin; Frye, Tim (CPC); Ferguson, Shannon (CPC)
Subject: case No 2011.0685L Landmarking of 171 San Marcos Avenue

Mr. President and Members of the Commission,

I am in support of the Landmarking of the Cowell House at 171 San Marcos Avenue.

As the author of a book on *Early Women Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area* I conducted extensive research about Gertrud Comfort Morrow as well as her and her husband's designs, among them the Cowell House. I am very happy that this early Modernist or Second Bay Tradition house will now be acknowledged as a Landmark of the City and County of San Francisco.

However, I would like to make some remarks about some items which might deserve to be added to the Case Report.

1. I was very surprised that the client, Olive Thompson Cowell, was not mentioned in the discussion of Association of Significant Person. The San Francisco State University History Corner (<http://www.sfsu.edu/~retire/ocm/OCBWinter14.pdf> page 10) lists her as an "early powerbroker" on account of her successful efforts to establish the International Relations Department at San Francisco State University promoting the academic peace movement. She was married to Harry Cowell, an Irish poet who was a friend of Jack London. His son, Henry Cowell, was the composer who is featured in the Landmarks Report. What is not stated is that Henry Cowell was bisexual and was arrested on a morals charge while with a young men at his house in Menlo Park and he was incarcerated for four years at St. Quentin Prison. In 1940, his stepmother, Olive Cowell, waged a vigorous campaign together with Sidney Hawkins Robertson, who later married him, and got him released on parole. Recorded at the Cowell house, the details of this campaign are documented in a handwritten diary, part of the Olive Cowell papers at the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/olive-thompson-cowell-papers-6455>.

I am not sure whether one of the later owners of 171 San Marcos, Harry S. Parker III, the highly respected director of the San Francisco Fine Arts Museums from 1987-2005, should also be discussed under Significant Person related to 171 San Marcos.

2. An interesting side note is that the commission for the Cowell house was given to the architectural firm Morrow & Morrow on account of a personal relationship between the architects and client. Both Irving Morrow and Gertrude Morrow were highly musical. Irving Morrow met Henry Cowell at his performances and established a relationship with the Cowell family which resulted in the commission.
3. Thirdly, I always wondered how the Morrrows came to design the first modern house in San Francisco, the Cowell House, in 1933 at the same time they were working as architectural consultants of the Golden Gate Bridge. One of the sources could be the modern Southern Californian architecture by R.M. Schindler, Richard Neutra and others which was published in *Art and Architecture*. Los Angeles was more open to modern architecture than the traditional San Francisco.

Another source was quite likely the influential exhibition *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* by Philip Johnson and Henry Russell-Hitchcock shown at the Museum of Modern Art

in New York in 1932. Although I have not found anything which indicates that the Morrors travelled to New York, it is highly likely that Irving Morrow read about the exhibition in architectural periodicals for which he often wrote articles.

I hope that some of this information can be included in the staff report without delaying the adoption. Thank you for your attention to my comments.

Sincerely,

Inge Horton



Draft

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



The Cowell House 171 San Marcos Avenue

Draft Landmark Designation Report
July 15, 2014; Revised October 7, 2015

Landmark No. XXX

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The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) is a seven-member body that makes recommendations to the Board of Supervisors regarding the designation of landmark buildings and districts. The regulations governing landmarks and landmark districts are found in Article 10 of the Planning Code. The HPC is staffed by the San Francisco Planning Department.

This draft Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the initiation and designation process. Only language contained within the Article 10 designation ordinance, adopted by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, should be regarded as final.

The Cowell House

171 San Marcos Avenue

Built: 1933
Architects: Morrow & Morrow

OVERVIEW

171 San Marcos Avenue, historically known as the Cowell House is individually eligible for Article 10 Landmark designation as it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction. Built in 1933 in the Forest Hill neighborhood, the Cowell House is significant for its architecture as one of San Francisco's earliest single-family houses of a fully expressed Modern design. The detached, redwood-clad building is an early iteration of what would later become known as the Second Bay Tradition style. The house embodies a woodsy, yet sleek aesthetic that came to characterize the region-specific interpretation of European-style Modernism. The house was designed by the master architectural firm Morrow (Irving) & Morrow (Gertrude) a few years after Irving Morrow designed the architectural components of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The Cowell House is also associated with the lives of persons significant in our past. Henry Cowell was an innovative composer and pianist, founder of the influential New Music Society, and a leading pioneer of "ultra modern" experimental music in the 1920s to 1930s. The Cowell House was commissioned by Cowell's stepmother, Olive Thompson Cowell, as a private residence for Olive and Harry Cowell (Henry Cowell's father). Henry Cowell was close to his stepmother and father and stayed at the house when in the area. Frequent receptions and performances of Henry Cowell's New Music Society were held in the living room, which was designed with acoustics and such performances in mind. The open-plan living room is lined with paperboard cabinets that absorb sound and enhance the acoustics.

BUILDING DESCRIPTION

North (Primary) Facade: Overview



Above: View looking southeast towards the street-facing facade (2012).

Left: View looking southeast towards the street-facing facade taken shortly after the building's construction (c. 1933).

Source: Collection of Christine Willemsen.

Located on a steeply sloped site in the hilly, secluded Forest Hill neighborhood, the four-story Cowell House features unpainted horizontal redwood siding, floor-to-ceiling steel-sash windows with horizontal muntin pattern, projecting eaves over garage and roof deck and rounded Streamline Moderne design elements. Due to the site's steep downward slope, the building's stories were inverted, with a street-level garage story topping the three lower stories. The primary pedestrian entrance is accessed from the sidewalk via a curved stair with metal railing. A brick retaining wall hugs the hillside. The building is framed with Douglas fir and clad in 1" x 10" redwood shiplap siding with a

“re-sawn surface.”¹ Window trim found throughout the building is composed of 1.5” x 2” profiled redwood heartwood. The building terminates with a slightly projecting parapet clad in a flat board panel and capped with metal coping.

The Cowell House is oriented to take advantage of expansive southern views. Due to the view corridor and sloped site, the house is largely hidden from the street. Striking design elements are found at the rear of the property, in particular the prominent window bays, balconies, and roof deck.

¹ As noted in Morrow & Morrow’s detailed construction notes.

North Facade: Garage



Above: View looking south towards the street-facing facade level with the sidewalk (2015).

Left: View of the garage elevation shortly after the building's construction (c. 1933).

Source: Collection of Christine Willemsen.



The primary facade features a prominent integrated garage at street level, which is set back from the sidewalk on a raised driveway. The garage is clad in flush, unpainted redwood siding. A flat wood overhang projects over the garage door. The historic awning garage door is made of painted metal with three bands of horizontal windows divided by steel sash. Attached to the right side of the garage door are individual metal numbers indicating the street address crowned with a metal lighting fixture. Wood-clad side walls line the driveway. To the west of the side walls is a curved stair that leads from the sidewalk, down the hill and to the primary pedestrian entrance. To the east of the side walls is a secondary path and set of stairs that leads down to the service entry located at the building's east facade.

North Facade: Primary Entrance



Above: Views looking southeast (left) toward primary entrance.



Left: View looking down the steps toward the primary entrance.

Below: Detail of carving located adjacent to the primary façade entrance, between the louvered vents (2015).



The primary entrance is located down the hill and to the right (west) of the garage on the building's north side. It features a curved metal portico supported by a single slender column; a decorative glass screen; a curved half wall clad in vertical redwood siding and capped with a wood sill; a glazed metal door with horizontal muntins; and a small steel-sash window glazed with the same muntin pattern as the door. The horizontality expressed in the entry door and window muntin pattern is emphasized in fenestration throughout the building.

Adjacent to the entry portico is a series of four vertically stacked wood louvered vents. Between two of the vents is a raised imprint, carved in wood, that reads "Morrow - & - Morrow Architects - 1933."

West Façade



View from the pathway looking southeast toward the west-facing facade (2012).

The west facade is clad in horizontal redwood siding punched with six window openings. Windows are steel sash set with a horizontal muntin pattern. An adjacent pathway leads to a service entrance at the base of the bottom story. The facade terminates with metal coping at the open roof deck.

East Facade



Top: View from the sidewalk looking southwest toward the east-facing facade (2015). Lower left: View of the oversized, north-facing window wall and secondary entrance (2015). Lower right: View from interior looking north toward west facade secondary entrance (2012).

The articulated east facade features a projecting wing, a secondary service entrance—described by Olive Cowell as a “delivery door”²—and a prominent north-facing window wall. The facade is clad in unpainted horizontal redwood siding and the steel-sash awning windows match the building’s dominant horizontal muntin pattern. A large roof deck is visible from the sidewalk at this elevation as are two accordion chimney stacks. The roof deck was originally designed as a sleeping porch, a popular amenity at that time as advanced by architects influenced by Arts and Crafts design.

² Cowell, Olive T. From a three-page letter to prospective renters of 171 San Marcos Avenue describing its location, features, and amenities. Collection of Christine Willemssen.

South Facade



Above: View looking northwest toward the south (rear) facade (2012).



Left: View looking northwest toward the south facade taken shortly after the building's construction (c. 1933).

Source: Collection of Christine Willemsen.

The dramatic south facade is located at the rear of the building. This facade is clad in horizontal redwood siding. The top floor features two prominent squared window bays. The corner bay to the east (right) displays slightly inset floor-to-ceiling steel-sash windows set with a horizontal muntin pattern. Glass panels are 60" x 22". This fenestration pattern is found at all three sides of the bay, and the bay is topped with a slightly projecting cornice. The bay to the west (left) features off-set steel-sash windows with a horizontal muntin pattern that wrap around the bay to the east. These windows are also slightly inset.

Below the projecting bays are sliding glass doors, designed with the same sash material and muntin pattern as the upper windows, that lead to projecting wood-clad balconies. A small divided light window separates the two balconies. Below the balconies are contemporary sliding metal and glass doors, designed with a compatible muntin configuration, that lead to a contemporary deck enclosed with metal rail. These contemporary sliding glass doors replaced the smaller horizontal windows shown in historic photographs.

South Facade: Roof Deck



Top: Views of the rooftop deck, looking north toward the garage (2015). Lower left: Olive, Harry, and Henry Cowell on the roof deck of 171 San Marcos Avenue. Olive is seated on the bed, which is topped with a fabric curtain. Source: "Photograph album of Henry, Harry, and Olive Cowell, between 1890 and 1950." Olive Thompson Cowell papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Lower right: Olive Cowell on the south end of the roof deck in 1976. Source: *Barnard Alumnae* magazine, Spring 1976.

Topping the building is a bi-level roof deck bounded by redwood clad sidewalls. The deck was originally designed to function in part as a sleeping porch; Olive Cowell referred to it as a "sundeck."³ The east side is several feet higher than the west. Two prominent redwood chimney stacks designed in an accordion pattern are set atop the roof deck. At the north end of the roof deck is the rear of the garage and laundry room which is fronted with a large steel-sash window. Beneath the cantilevered overhang are doors with horizontal muntin pattern leading to the garage and to the house's interior stairway.

³ Cowell, Olive T. From a three-page letter to prospective renters of 171 San Marcos Avenue describing its location, features, and amenities. Collection of Christine Willemsen.

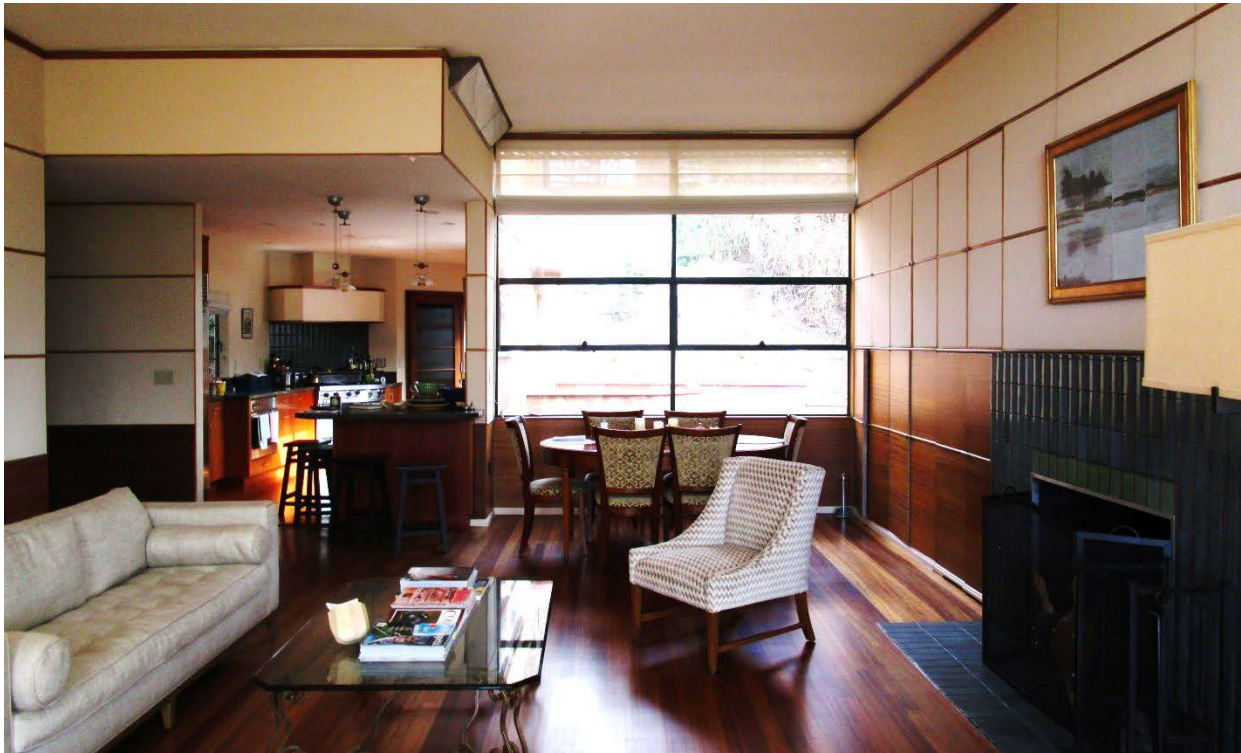
Interior



Top: View of the living room looking south (2015). Lower left: Detail view of the tiled fireplace (2015). Lower right: Fireplace and inset shelves (c. 1935); Source: Collection of Christine Willemssen.



Left: Interior door with ribbed decorative glass set in horizontally oriented muntins (2012). Below: View of the living room looking north (2015).



The main floor, on the same level as the entrance, contains a living room, study, hall, bathroom, and kitchen. With 11' high ceilings, a dramatic corner bay featuring floor to ceiling windows, walls covered with stained wood wainscoting and inlaid Japanese grass cloth, the 33' x 18' living room provided a suitably dramatic backdrop for concerts and

performances by Henry Cowell and the New Music Society. The 3' Philippine mahogany wainscoting, which continues into the hall and study, was stained to give a "lavender grey affect."⁴ Celotex, an insulating board made of cane fiber that was typically incorporated into the interior or exterior walls, was used to clad the interior walls. It was touted for its heat insulating quality and sound absorption capacity.⁵ An efficient material for sound quieting, the material was frequently used in the interior of theaters, auditoriums, churches, and broadcasting studios and was likely chosen by Morrow & Morrow to enhance the living room's acoustical quality. Built-in cabinets and deep cupboards are hidden behind the wall panels. The Philippine mahogany floors were treated with a grey stain, somewhat darker than the wainscoting, which was described by Olive Cowell, as "NOT yellow or brown or red! But blending with furniture."⁶

Bedrooms are located on the floor below and contain enclosed wood balconies accessed via steel sash sliding glass doors that are set with a horizontal muntin pattern. The basement level also contains bedrooms and feature contemporary sliding glass doors.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "The Hidden Comfort of Costly Homes," sales booklet produced by the Celotex Company, Chicago, Illinois, 1926, Fifth Edition.

⁶ Cowell, Olive T. From a three-page letter to prospective renters of 171 San Marcos Avenue describing its location, features, and amenities. Collection of Christine Willemsen.

CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

According to the original building permit, 171 San Marcos Avenue was built at a cost of \$7,400. Set on a long irregularly shaped lot—measuring 33' at the street frontage, 55' at the rear lot line, and extending to a depth of 155'—it was designed as a seven-room single-family house. Olive Cowell was listed as the sole owner on building permits and all construction documents and contracts.⁷ Local builder J.P.W. Jensen was the building contractor.

According to construction details noted in the December 1935 issue of *Architect & Engineer*, the exterior redwood shiplap siding was treated with a bleaching oil on the east, west, and southern exposures, and a yellow creosote stain on the northern street-facing elevation. A variety of colorful finishes brightened the exterior, including lemon yellow soffits, a blue-green main entrance, and violet colored steel sash windows.⁸

Alteration History⁹

1951: Covered the exterior wood siding with light grey asbestos shingle siding and aluminum trim.

1955: Installed new rail along entry ramp.

1961: Repaired portion of roof deck.

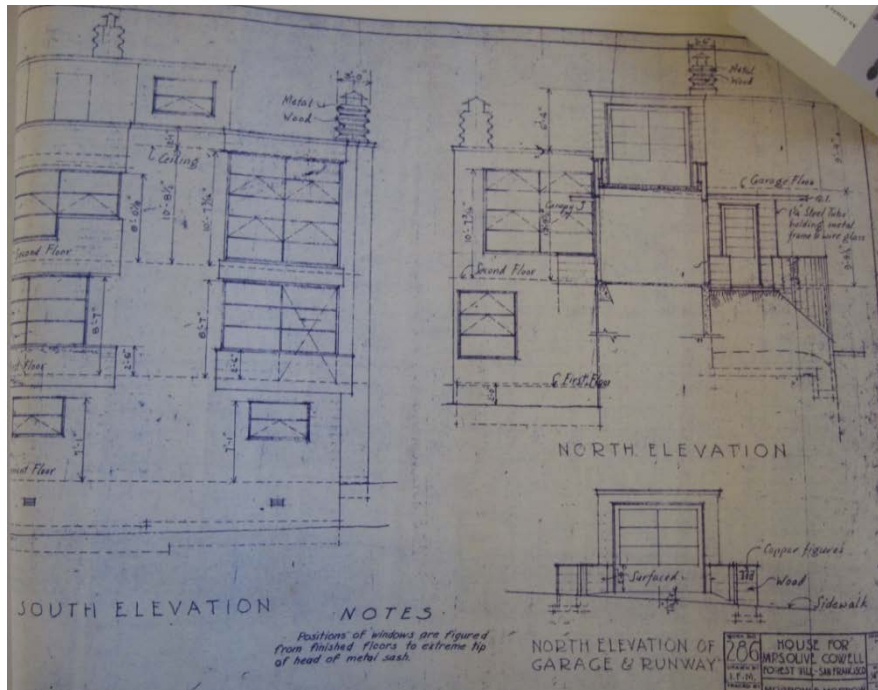
c.1990s: Removed asbestos shingle siding to expose historic redwood siding

1994: Replaced roof.

2007: Interior alterations include remodeling the middle floor bathroom; relocating the basement bathroom; reinforcing the foundation with piers; adding a rear deck at the basement level; and remodeling the basement family room.

2013-14: Removed two large redwood trees east and west of garage sidewalls and reconfigured original switchback pathway to a curved stair with painted metal railing and constructed brick retaining wall.

Additional alterations include removing a site wall stub adjacent to the sidewalk and relocating the street numbers to the garage wall at an unknown date.



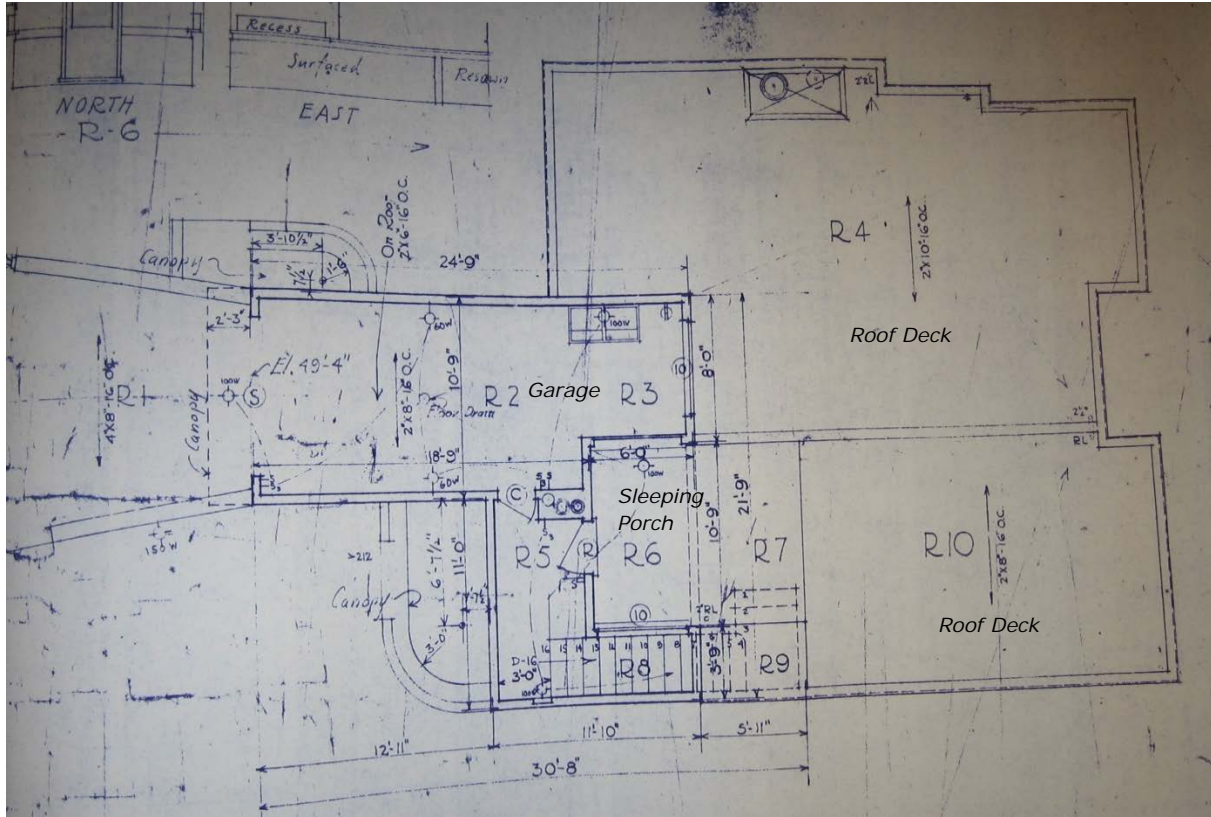
South and North elevations of 171 San Marcos Avenue, by Morrow & Morrow Architects.

Source: Collection of Christine Willemsen.

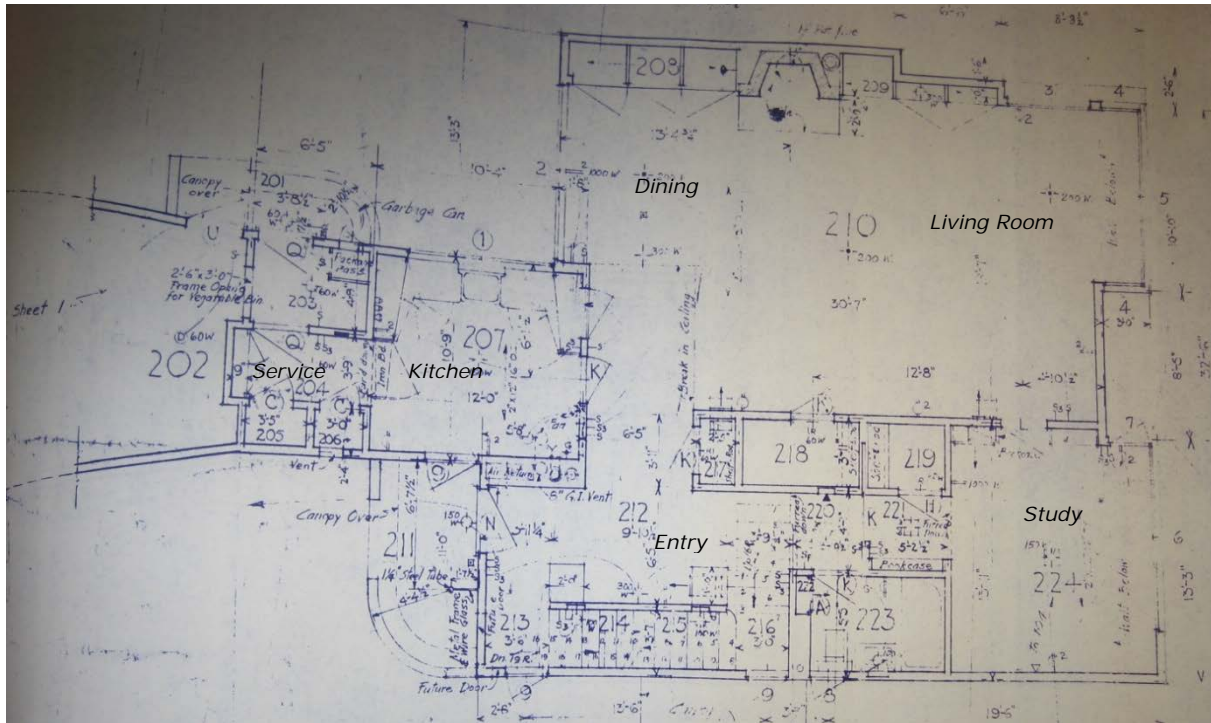
⁷ From the July 18, 1933 "Application for Building Permit, Frame Building" for 171 San Marcos Avenue issued by the Department of Public Works, Central Permit Bureau, City and County of San Francisco.

⁸ *Architect & Engineer*, December 1935, 40.

⁹ Alterations are documented in building permits, invoices, and/or Olive Cowell's correspondence to prospective renters.



Garage and roof deck plan of 171 San Marcos Avenue, by Morrow & Morrow Architects. Source: Collection of Christine Willemssen.



Second floor plan of 171 San Marcos Avenue, by Morrow & Morrow Architects. Source: Collection of Christine Willemssen.

OLIVE THOMPSON COWELL



Harry, Henry, and Olive Cowell seated in the living room at 171 San Marcos Avenue. Undated photograph.

Source: "Photograph album of Henry, Harry, and Olive Cowell, between 1890 and 1950." Olive Thompson Cowell papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

scholars, and bohemians. In a brief biographical essay, she notes: "I have also been active in the career of my stepson, composer Henry Cowell, who was interested in new musical resources and in musics of the world. During the Depression we were able to build a house of Modern design in San Francisco, where we entertained not only scholars and students in international relations, but also in the arts, in which I have been very much involved."¹¹ She later described the house as "simple lines in modern design to be functional ... The house is designed for modern, functional living with a minimum of work to keep it up."¹² Henry frequently stayed with the Cowells at 171 San Marcos Avenue when not on tour or staying at his tiny cottage in Menlo Park.¹³

In an oral history interview, Lou Harrison, a protégé of Henry Cowell and noted composer in his own right, recalled Olive and the salon atmosphere she fostered at 171 San Marcos Avenue:

¹⁰ Cowell, Olive. "Exploring and Experiencing International Relations, A Memoir" *Barnard Alumnae*, Spring 1976, 2-3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹² Cowell, Olive T. From a three-page letter to prospective renters of 171 San Marcos Avenue describing its location, features, and amenities. Collection of Christine Willemssen

¹³ *New Music 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Edition, and the Recordings*, page 280, also notes that Henry lived with Olive and Harry Cowell in 1933.

“Olive Cowell, she’s marvelous. She’s a grand lady, a really grand lady. She likes to be called “the wife of Henry Cowell’s father.” She doesn’t like to be called “stepmother;” I don’t think ... Olive was an expert in international relationships. They built the first modern house, practically, in San Francisco—a beautiful work, by the architect Irving Morrow, who was architect of the Golden Gate Bridge. She’s one of the few women I’d ever known anywhere who has maintained the old-fashioned salon. Visiting artists are there and visiting intellectuals, so that you could meet everybody. I met my first dancers for whom I started to work. Composers—well, [Edgard] Varese was one of them, and Henry of course. When Henry was in the region he always stayed there, that was his headquarters, and he would give concerts for friends there, and I was invited. Schoenberg was there. There was always some music. I often played there.”¹⁴

Leta Miller, author of *Music and Politics in San Francisco: From the 1906 Quake to the Second World War*, wrote about Olive’s role in supporting Henry’s musical enterprises:

Among the less acknowledged contributors to Cowell’s new music ventures is his stepmother, Olive Thompson Cowell, third wife of his father Harry. Olive had graduated from Barnard College in 1910, taught in high schools for a number of years, and then secured a position on the faculty of San Francisco State College, where she taught international relations and eventually rose to the rank of full professor. She met Cowell’s father in 1923, but they did not marry until 1926, after Harry finalized his divorce from his estranged second wife, Henriette. Olive had no children of her own, and she developed a great fondness for Henry. The two remained extremely close until Henry’s death in 1965.... As Henry launched the society’s concerts and the NMQ [*New Music Quarterly*] publication, Olive not only supported him with funds but also took on clerical duties during the publication’s first two years.¹⁵

Olive and Harry Cowell were together for 30 years. Harry died in 1954 at age 88. In a brief essay, Olive concludes, “My long life with the Cowells, my work and my home, have been most happy.”¹⁶ Olive resided at 171 San Marcos Avenue until her death in 1984.



Harry and Olive Cowell in front of the fireplace at 171 San Marcos Avenue (1948).

Source: *Barnard Alumnae*, Spring 1976.

¹⁴ Lou Harrison, from interviews with Vivian Perlis in 1970 and with Vincent Plush in 1983, included in *Composers Voices from Ives to Ellington: An Oral History of American Music*, By Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleve (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 178.

¹⁵ Miller, Leta E., *Music and Politics in San Francisco: From the 1906 Quake to the Second World War*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012), 188.

¹⁶ Cowell, Olive. “Exploring and Experiencing International Relations, A Memoir” *Barnard Alumnae*, Spring 1976, 2-3.

HENRY COWELL



Left: Undated image of Henry Cowell using his fists and forearms in a tone cluster. Source: www.Basic.fm.
Right: Henry Cowell playing piano strings, 1926. Photo credit: Imogene Cunningham.

Henry Cowell was an “ultra modern” composer, pianist, educator, publisher and innovator who was a pivotal force in new American music from the 1910s to 1960s. He is credited with composing 966 works, ranging from opera to piano compositions to complete symphonies to ensemble works to works for solo instruments. Perhaps his most enduring legacy is the tone cluster, an innovative technique, described as “depressing adjacent keys on the piano keyboard with his left forearm, while a melody is played with the right hand.”¹⁷ Cowell was based in California until 1940. He authored numerous articles on American and modern music, and sponsored the New Music Society concerts in California.¹⁸ His books include *New Musical Resources* and *Charles Ives and his Music*. He was also a frequent contributor to *Modern Music*, a publication produced by the League of Composers, and he contributed hundreds of articles to musical journals worldwide.¹⁹ Considered a pivotal figure within the emerging modern music scene, Cowell’s most significant contribution is likely the founding of the New Music Society and related journal.

Born in Menlo Park, California in 1897 to Harry and Clarissa Cowell, radicals and writers involved in avant-garde literary circles, Henry was early exposed to bohemian lifestyles and artistic pursuits. Family friends included author Jack London and journalist Ambrose Bierce.²⁰ The family moved to San Francisco in 1902, and Henry later moved frequently throughout the state and country after Harry and Clarissa’s divorce. A child prodigy, Cowell performed violin concerts in the San Francisco Bay Area beginning at age seven.²¹ By age 16 he was performing his own piano compositions, and several years later he was touring the country, playing 40 to 60 concerts of original compositions each year.²²

¹⁷ Carwithen, Edward R., *Henry Cowell: Composer and Educator*, (PhD Dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville, 1991), 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ *The Reminiscences of Henry Cowell*, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1964, 59. Transcript of interviews conducted by Beate Gordon with Henry Cowell during 1962-1963.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.

In an oral history interview, Cowell reflected on this early period of musical innovations, including development of the tone cluster, “I had as many as 24 different tones at the same time, contiguous tones along the keyboard, making terrific dissonances. The early teen years – that is 1912 to 1917, when I went into the Army – were my most modernistic years. I explored extreme dissonance, and did things which they now do in electronic music and twelve tone row music.”²³ Several groundbreaking works were composed in this era, including the “[Tides of Manaunaun](#)” (c.1917). Audiences, however, were not always receptive to these new musical innovations; Cowell noted that during this time, “There were a few enthusiastic people, but there were more than a few who were not enthusiastic at all.”²⁴

In the 1920s, when Cowell was in his mid-20s, and into the 1930s, he continued to innovate, travel, perform, and lecture widely. During this time, he was the first to play on both the keys *and strings* of the piano.²⁵ He called these experimental techniques, which involved strumming the strings on the inside of the piano rather than pounding the keys, “string piano.”²⁶ Several of his best known compositions, including the “[Aeolian Harp](#)” (c.1923) and “[Banshee](#)” (1925), involved strumming, plucking, and sweeping the strings of a piano. Cowell incorporated other types of non-traditional instruments for use in Modern dance scores. He collaborated with Modern dance choreographers, including Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, to develop what was known as “percussion orchestras”—made up of modern dancers who danced and played percussion. These orchestras utilized non-traditional percussion instruments including tuned bowls (ordinary Pyrex mixing bowls or rice bowls tuned with water), finger cymbals from Turkey, and bass drums.²⁷ Cowell pioneered a new collaborative process between Modern composers and Modern choreographers, one that provided more flexibility to dances that historically were choreographed to music, rather than vice versa.

Cowell also toured Europe five times—occasionally accompanied by Olive and Harry Cowell—and performed in Germany, Vienna, Paris, Italy, London, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Scandinavian countries. In Moscow, he played four-hour concerts every day for a month.²⁸ Teaching engagements included frequent stints at Columbia University and the New School of Social Research in New York City, Mills College in Oakland, the University of California extensions program, and Stanford University in Palo Alto.²⁹

During this time, Cowell intensively studied musical theory, instruments, and techniques from other cultures including the Indonesian Gamelan, Ugandan drumming, Japanese Koto and Shamisen, and music from China, Persia, and India. These influences were reflected in his compositions, which were increasingly oriented worldwide at a time when world music was little known to American audiences.³⁰

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

²⁶ Miller, Leta E., 185.

²⁷ *The Reminiscences of Henry Cowell*, 102-107.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁹ Carwithen, Edward R., *Henry Cowell: Composer and Educator*, (PhD Dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville, 1991), 40.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

New Music Society

In 1927, Henry Cowell founded the New Music Society in San Francisco to gather performers and composers to make and discuss music “too new and radical to get a sympathetic hearing in more conservative settings.”³¹ The New Music Society presented 26 performances in San Francisco from 1927 to 1936. Cowell also founded and edited the *New Music Edition*,³² an extraordinarily influential quarterly journal which printed avant-garde music and criticism from 1927 to 1936 and from 1940 to 1945.³³ The journal featured composers “of all different kinds, providing that they wrote interesting music or a type that would be difficult to publish elsewhere. The thought was that if it would sell, we wouldn’t publish it.”³⁴ The quarterly was the first to publish the compositions of influential composer, Charles Ives, who later was an important colleague/mentor to Cowell and the focus of Cowell’s book, *Charles Ives and His Music*.

In the mid-1930s, the critic Alfred Frankenstein described Cowell’s New Music Society as “the most important organization fostering modern musical creation in this country.”³⁵ As scholar Leta E. Miller notes, the New Music Society ventures “not only promoted composers throughout the nation (and beyond) but also enhanced SF’s reputation as the seat of some of the most exciting compositional developments outside the traditional centers on the Eastern seaboard.”³⁶

Cowell’s stepmother, Olive Cowell, was closely involved in the New Music Society from its inception. In an oral history interview, Olive Cowell described the genesis of the new musical venture:

“The three of us [Henry, Harry, and Olive] were coming home from a camping trip in an old Ford when Henry got the idea that something should be done to help composers whose music was not getting known. Why not publish a journal, he said, a periodical, four times a year, and get some of the works of these composers printed? So we talked about that and decided to call it *New Music*.”³⁷

Olive’s apartment at 1950 Jones Street on Russian Hill and, later, 171 San Marcos Avenue, was used as the quarterly’s mailing address. Though artistically and financially supportive of Cowell’s work, Olive was not wealthy and money was a frequent concern. In an oral history interview, she noted that “We had very little money and no money was taken in [by the New Music Society] to any extent.”³⁸ Nonetheless, Olive and Harry Cowell appeared to have frequently given or lent funds to Cowell’s *New Music Edition*, leading the couple to quip in a letter to Henry, “How the famous society is ever going to pay the three members of the Cowell family for the labor of love expended on its behalf, the God of Daring Adventure only knows.”³⁹

The Cowell House served as a performance and gathering space for the New Music Society. The house’s Modern design was compatible with the aims of Cowell’s circle of innovative composers and performers in producing new, Modern music. The living room of 171 San Marcos Avenue contained a small Steinway grand piano⁴⁰ and the intimate

³¹ Carwithen, Edward R., 38.

³² The publication is also referred to as the *New Music Quarterly*.

³³ Carwithen, Edward R., 18.

³⁴ The Reminiscences of Henry Cowell, 36.

³⁵ Miller, Leta E., 185.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

³⁷ As quoted in Henry Cowell’s *New Music 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Edition, and the Recordings*, page 60. From an interview with the author (Rita Mead).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁰ Cowell, Olive T. From a three-page letter (c.1960s) to prospective short-term renters of 171 San Marcos Avenue, describing its location, features, and amenities. Collection of Christine Willemsen.

living room performance space facilitated interactions between performer and audience members. In oral history interviews, several of the New Music Society participants specifically noted the Modern design of the house when describing events and performances. Noted composer Lou Harrison recalled that:

“During this period I was invited to musicales and social events at ‘the Cowell House,’ a fine modern house created for Olive and Harry, Henry’s [stepmother and] father, by Irving Morrow...the architect of the Golden Gate Bridge...In the Cowell House, Henry frequently performed his piano works, and it was a treat to ask for one’s favorites and hear them at once. He also arranged meetings with visiting composers, and it was there that I first met Schönberg and Varese..... Henry also arranged at the house a beautiful evening of Japanese chamber music...the first I had heard in live performance...of koto, shamisen and shakuhachi, with voice as well.”⁴¹

In 1935, following an important New Music Society concert conducted by the renowned Austrian conductor, Arnold Schoenberg, Olive hosted a reception at 171 San Marcos Avenue. She recalled, “Some of these fancy people who always wanted to promote the latest thing wondered what Olive Cowell was doing entertaining Schönberg in her home. They sent their chauffeurs out during the day to find the house. When the people arrived that night they discovered something—a modern composer in a modern house!”⁴²

A longtime supporter of the New Music Society, the architect Irving Morrow—who, with his wife Gertrude Morrow, designed 171 San Marcos Avenue—attended concerts and events at the Cowell House.⁴³ At one gathering, Henry Cowell introduced Morrow to the composer Lou Harrison, who later recruited Morrow to perform in his experimental *Canticle #1*—Morrow was “assigned to play the siren, for which “police permission was required for its use.”⁴⁴ Described as “an avid supporter of new music,” Morrow later played in percussion performances by the composer John Cage.⁴⁵

Morals Charges

In 1936, Henry’s career and reputation were abruptly shattered due to his arrest on morals charges.⁴⁶ Arrested in Menlo Park and charged with homosexuality and the corruption of a minor, Henry pled guilty and was sentenced to 15 years in prison.⁴⁷ This harsh sentence for reportedly consensual sexual activities with a 17-year-old boy reflects the particularly intense, institutionalized homophobia and public anxiety over sex crimes that characterized the 1930s. Many of his colleagues and collaborators—most notably, Charles Ives—abandoned Cowell during this period. Nonetheless, Cowell remained extraordinarily prolific during his four years of incarceration. According to scholar Leta E. Miller, Cowell taught numerous classes in harmony and music appreciation, directed a prison chamber music ensemble, led band rehearsals, wrote two correspondence courses, corrected papers for three University of California Extension courses in harmony, and prepared a dance score for Martha Graham.⁴⁸ He was imprisoned at San Quentin State Prison until 1940, when he was released early due to pressure in large part organized by his stepmother Olive

⁴¹ Lou Harrison, “Learning From Henry,” in *Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*, David Nichols, Ed., (Routledge, 2013) 163-164.

⁴² As quoted in *Henry Cowell’s New Music 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Edition, and the Recordings*, page 315. From an interview with the author (Rita Mead).

⁴³ Irving’s membership in the New Music Society dated to the 1920s. He was described as a long-time supporter in Rita Mead’s book *Henry Cowell’s New Music, 1925-1936*, 145.

⁴⁴ Miller, Leta E. and Fredric Lieberman, *Composing a World: Lou Harrison, Musical Wayfarer* – GOOGLE BOOKS, page 10.

⁴⁵ Miller, Leta E. 188. —Note... need footnote 27 regarding the house being used for concerts. on page 301. Missing in Google Books, ordered from SFPL.

⁴⁶ Entered San Quentin on July 8, 1936.

⁴⁷ Carwithen, Edward R., *Henry Cowell: Composer and Educator*, (PhD Dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville, 1991), 40.

⁴⁸ Miller, Leta E.

Cowell. She solicited and submitted at least 87 testimonials by prominent citizens in support of Henry.⁴⁹ In 1942, Governor Earl Warren pardoned Cowell at the request of the prosecuting attorney.

Cowell's four years in prison had a lasting impact on his career and musical trajectory. As Michael Hicks noted in "The Imprisonment of Henry Cowell," Cowell's quest for parole "drove him into an artistic circumspection that dissuaded him from some of the radical projects he envisioned. Perhaps most important, the damage to his reputation in California uprooted him from the west-coast counterculture that had nurtured his most experimental work."⁵⁰ Olive Cowell described his response to prison as "both inspiring and tragic. Although he seemed to have transcended his incarceration, he never accepted it [...] it did something to him—it did something to his music."⁵¹ After his release, Cowell moved to New York, where he was based for most of the remainder of his life.⁵² In 1941 he married Sidney Robertson, an ethnomusicologist specializing in American folk music. Henry died in New York in 1965.



Henry Cowell in the living room of 171 San Marcos Avenue. Unknown date.

Source: "Photograph album of Henry, Harry, and Olive Cowell, between 1890 and 1950." Olive Thompson Cowell papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴⁹ Michael Hicks. *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 137.

⁵⁰ Michael Hicks. "The Imprisonment of Henry Cowell," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 44, spring 1991.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 143.

COWELL HOUSE IN CONTEXT

The Cowell House is the first Modern single-family house known to have been constructed in San Francisco. Built during the height of the Depression, the Cowell House preceded by several years the better-known works by pioneering Modern architects including Richard Neutra, John Dinwiddie, William Wurster, and Gardner Dailey. For unknown reasons, the legacy of this obscure house was largely lost to history.

Modernism and the California Bohemians

Henry Cowell was affiliated with an eclectic group of friends loosely connected to a Bohemian scene in Carmel, California that counted artists, intellectuals, photographers, ecologists, puppeteers, writers, musicians and architects amongst its ranks. In addition to the composers and musicians Henry Cowell, John Cage, and Richard Buhlig, this circle of friends included Xenia Kashevaroff, Maurice Braun, Joseph Campbell, Imogene Cunningham, Merce Cunningham, Ellen Van Volkenburg, Cole Weston, Nellie Cornish, Ed Ricketts, and John Steinbeck.⁵³ The architect Irving Morrow, who later designed the Cowell House with his wife, Gertrude Morrow, was linked to these friends both through his support for new music and his connection to the emerging Modern movement in architecture. At the center of the circle was the writer Pauline Schindler, who was married to Rudolph Schindler, a pioneering Austrian architect who influenced a generation of architects with his European style Modernism.

As a writer and critic, Pauline Schindler deserves significant credit for exposing and promoting the nascent Modern architectural principles and practitioners to a wider audience. Even within the architectural community, Modernism in the mid-1930s was often dismissed out of hand. As the guest editor for the January 1935 issue of *California Arts & Architecture*, Pauline promoted the work of Modern architects, particularly those working in Southern California, including Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, and J.R. Davidson. This issue was published at a time of considerable dissent and debate over Modern architecture, as evidenced by the somewhat apologetic editorial printed by the journal's publisher, George Oyer:

"For some months we have been considering the advisability of recording some of the work of our California modern designers. To the layman, the term modern applies to any house or building with dominating horizontal or vertical lines ... Whether or not you like it, is beside the point. It is here so we acknowledge it."⁵⁴

Pauline Schindler selected Morrow & Morrow's Cowell House for inclusion in this special Modern edition of *California Arts & Architecture*, and noted that the house design was a response to the site's topography and the client's detailed requirements. The Cowell House was one of just two Northern California houses in an issue that featured now iconic Modern houses including Neutra's Lovell House in Los Angeles.

Unsurprisingly, the issue was not embraced by conservative critics of the time. Harold Van Buren Magonigle, architectural critic for *Pencil Points*, well known for his diatribes against Modernism, published a dismissive review of the Cowell House in the magazine's May 1935 issue. Magonigle was particularly critical of the placement of the garage

⁵³ Xenia Kashevaroff was a surrealist painter, sculptor, bookbinder, conservator, and musician and was married to John Cage. Maurice Braun was a California landscape painter. Joseph Campbell was a mythologist, writer and lecturer best known for his work in comparative mythology and comparative religion. Imogene Cunningham was a photographer known for her botanical photography, nudes, and industrial landscapes. Merce Cunningham was an avant-garde dancer and choreographer who was at the forefront of American modern dance and was life partner to John Cage. Ellen Van Volkenburg was a puppeteer who produced and directed large scale marionette plays and largely inspired the artistic puppet revival in the United States. Cole Weston was a photographer and theater director who attended Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, WA as well as the youngest son of photographer Edward Weston. Nellie Cornish was a pianist, teacher, writer, and founder of the Cornish College of the Arts. Ed Ricketts was a marine biologist, ecologist, and philosopher. John Steinbeck was an author and won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. These artists frequently collaborated together, producing revolutionary works of art for their time.

⁵⁴ George Oyer, *California Arts & Architecture*, (January 1935), 2.

on top of the house, a design solution resulting from the site's steep downward sloping topography. According to Magonigle, "Appearance is no longer an element of design."⁵⁵ Irving Morrow's response to the review was scathing:

"When Mr. Magonigle discusses modern architecture he neither understands nor wants to understand anything about it—a perfectly legitimate attitude, but not a qualification for a critic. Confronted by a modern design, he is as critical as a bull confronted by a red rag. He merely goes 'loco' at sight of any idea which has emerged since his school days."⁵⁶

Nearly a year later, as guest editor for the December 1935 issue of *Architect & Engineer*, Pauline again focused on California Modern architects and re-printed many of the photographs and projects from *California Arts & Architecture*. Modern masters Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, Harwell H. Harris, Michael Goodman, and William Wurster were featured in this issue. A nearly identical photo spread on the Cowell House was included in this issue, as well as Irving Morrow's rebuttal of the many commonly voiced critiques of Modern architecture:

"It is adduced as a weakness that all modernists use flat roofs, 'ribbon' and corner windows, pipe rails, projecting shelves and canopies, and so on. It is accepted as entirely natural, however, that all classicists use columns, cornices, balusters, modillions, garlands, etc.; that all Gothicists use pointed arches, buttresses, label molds, trefoils, quatrefoils, cusps, etc. In other words, the real objection is not to the common use of architectural motives, but to the fact that the vocabulary is unfamiliar, hence irritating."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ H. Van Buren Magonigle, *Pencil Points*, 1935.

⁵⁶ From a letter by Morrow submitted to *Pencil Points* and re-printed in June 1935 of *Architect & Engineer* (page 5) in response to criticism of the Cowell House in the May 1935 *Pencil Points* by Mr. Magonigle.

⁵⁷ Irving F. Morrow, "Modern Architecture and Common Sense," *Architect & Engineer* (Dec. 1935): 53.



Above and left: Exterior and interior views of the Cowell House, c.1934. Source: "California Arts & Architecture," January 1935. The photos were later reprinted in "Architect & Engineer," December 1935. Right: The same interior view in 2015.

MASTER ARCHITECTS: MORROW & MORROW



Gertrude and Irving Morrow, undated photo.

Source: Collection of Christine Willemsen

The Cowell House is one of the few extant Modern buildings designed by the master architectural firm Morrow & Morrow. Irving Morrow and Gertrude Morrow, married in 1920, practiced architecture together from 1925 until 1952, when Irving passed away. In addition to Irving Morrow's best-known work—the architectural design for the Golden Gate Bridge, for which Irving also chose the iconic rust-red color, “International Orange,”—the couple designed numerous residences, theaters and living complexes in the Bay Area. The firm's work appears to have peaked by the early 1940s. Commissions in San Francisco include the Gelber House (1344 Union Street, 1937); the Alameda-Contra Costa County Building for the Golden Gate International Exposition, (1939, demolished); an unnamed theater, 24th Street at Noe Street (unknown location, 1940); the McCay Flats (unknown location, 1940), and the Navy

Reserve Armory (Treasure Island, c.1943). Prior to their partnership, both Irving and Gertrude maintained established architectural practices.

Architectural critic Harold Gilliam described Irving Morrow as a radical, “a modernist long before modernist architecture was respectable.”⁵⁸ However, despite their prestigious commissions and the groundbreaking 1933 design of the Cowell House, Morrow & Morrow did not produce celebrated Modern buildings in San Francisco after 1940 and are largely excluded from the existing literature on San Francisco Modern design.

Irving Morrow

Born in 1884, Irving earned a Bachelor's degree in Architecture from the University of California, Berkeley in 1906 and studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1908 to 1911. The firm of Irving and his partner William Garren had, since 1916, designed houses, hotels, banks, schools and commercial buildings. In the 1930s, Irving was employed as director of the northern California division of the federal Historic American Building Survey (HABS) and was the education chair of the northern California chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). He edited *Pacific Coast Architecture* periodically in the 1910s and 1920s, and chaired the section on architecture of the Commonwealth Club of California from 1930 to 1941. Morrow also served as the Director HABS for California north of San Luis Obispo. Irving was described as “no businessman, but a quiet introvert scholar and philosopher so absolutely certain of his own ideas that prospective clients often found him too rigidly formidable and uncompromising.”⁵⁹ An avid backpacker, Irving often spent time in the high Sierra and the newlywed Morrrows spent their honeymoon on a backpacking trip.⁶⁰

Irving Morrow's support of ultra modern music and his connection to the aforementioned collection of artists, composers, architects and writers is likely a key reason why he was selected by Olive Cowell to design 171 San Marcos. As previously noted, Irving was an early and long-term subscriber to the New Music Society and had

⁵⁸ Harold Gilliam, *The San Francisco Experience: The Romantic Love Behind the Fabulous Facade of the Bay Area*, (Random House, 2011).

⁵⁹ Harold Gilliam, “The Bridge that Vigor and Vision Built,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, (Sunday Edition, April 2, 1961), 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

amassed a private music library that was described as an “omnivorous collection of contemporary music—American and European printed music.”⁶¹ According to Henry Cowell’s collaborator, Gerald Strang, Morrow’s collection served as the source of the New Music Society’s experimental workshops.⁶² He was widely known as a music lover and was friends with avant-garde composer Lou Harrison among others.⁶³ Morrow’s acoustical understanding and connection to the experimental music scene also likely led to a commission to design a series of listening booths at the Herbert Wilson Record Rental Library.⁶⁴ The booths were ingeniously soundproofed, according to Harrison, by “using two panes of glass of different thicknesses and of such slight misalignment as prevented resonance between them.”⁶⁵

Golden Gate Bridge

Morrow’s best known work, for which he is often relegated to a side note, is the architectural design—including the Art Deco inspired towers, lighting system, and stepped concrete pillars—of the Golden Gate Bridge. ⁶⁶ Gilliam’s theory as to why consulting engineer Joseph Strauss chose Irving Morrow, a fairly obscure young architect, as the consulting architect for the Golden Gate Bridge was that “Morrow, like Strauss, was a visionary and a poet...[and] his indifference to publicity and his willingness to let Strauss occupy the spotlight alone.”⁶⁷ While Irving is typically credited as the designer for the Golden Gate Bridge, several historians, including Gwendolyn Wright and Inge Horton, persuasively argue that Gertrude was an uncredited participant in the bridge design.⁶⁸

Upon completion, Olive Cowell complimented Morrow on the bridge in a letter

“May I congratulate you on a beautiful bridge. I have seen many bridges in many parts of the world, and never have I seen a bridge more beautiful. Not only the simple, graceful lines, but the colors are perfect. It is one of the most aesthetically pleasing engineering projects I ever hope to see. Certainly we who love SF and its surroundings are very happy over the outcome.”⁶⁹

⁶¹ According to composer Gerald Strang, as quoted in: Rita Mead’s *Henry Cowell’s New Music, 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Editions, and the Recordings*, (UMI Research Press, Studies in Musicology, Ann Arbor, Michigan: 1981), 228.

⁶² Rita Mead, *Henry Cowell’s New Music, 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Editions, and the Recordings*, (UMI Research Press, Studies in Musicology, Ann Arbor, Michigan: 1981), 227-228.

⁶³ Lou Harrison, “Learning From Henry,” in *Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*, David Nichols, Ed., (Routledge, 2013) 163-164.

⁶⁴ Opened in 1934 in Downtown San Francisco, the library’s tenure was short-lived. The office building that housed the library, 545 Sutter Street, is extant.

⁶⁵ Lou Harrison, 163-164.

⁶⁶ Morrow designed the bridge in conjunction with structural engineers Joseph Strauss and Charles Ellis.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See Inge Horton’s *Early Women Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area: The Lives and Work of Fifty Professionals, 1890-1951* and Gwendolyn Wright’s *USA: Modern Architectures in History*.

⁶⁹ Olive Thompson Cowell, associate professor of social science, San Francisco State Teachers College, June 3, 1937.

Gertrude Morrow

Gertrude Comfort Morrow was a pioneering female architect in a profession that was nearly exclusively male. She was accomplished in her field long before she married and formed a partnership with Irving Morrow. Born in San Francisco in 1892, Gertrude received a Bachelor of Science with honors in 1913 and was the second woman to receive a Master's degree in Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley in 1914. Upon graduating she worked in the office of Henry H. Gutterson until earning her architectural license in 1916; she was only the seventh woman in California to be registered.⁷⁰ A year later, Gertrude opened her own firm. In the November 1917 issue of the *Architect & Engineer* she proudly announced that she had established her offices in a central location in the Financial District. She was also listed in the Daily Pacific Building in 1917 as an architect practicing in San Francisco –one of only three women listed including Julia Morgan and Grace Jewett.⁷¹ Gertrude supervised the development of Mason-McDuffie's St. Francis Wood residential park, which was previously overseen by Gutterson prior to his military enlistment during World War I. She is credited with the design of approximately 10 houses in St. Francis Wood.

Gertrude and Irving married in 1920.⁷² In September 1925, they opened their firm, Morrow & Morrow, Architects. Gertrude and Irving worked jointly as well as individually on projects. In their partnership both of them did design work instead of specializing in different functions, as many husband and wife architectural teams did.⁷³ They worked closely together on small residential and larger projects. Projects credited to Gertrude outside of San Francisco include the music building at Monrovia College in Bethlehem, PA and the Women's Athletic Club in Oakland. As noted above, Gertrude likely assisted with the design of the Golden Gate Bridge, though was not formally credited. Author Inge Horton notes that "it is difficult to imagine Gertrude Morrow did not contribute, at least in discussions of the design, in the office or at the dinner table." Morrow's daughter is quoted as saying, "I am sure that she had her hand in it."⁷⁴

Gertrude was an active member of the Association of Women in Architecture and the Architectural Institute of America, and she produced a radio show with Martha Meade called "New Ideas for Old Houses."⁷⁵ In 1939 she participated in the Small House competition of *Ladies Home Journal* with an entry titled "A Place for Everything in Place." Although it received no award, it received high praise from the Journal's staff including editor John Cushman Fistere who said it was clearly Gertrude's work because "probably no man could have planned this house."⁷⁶ Gertrude retired from architecture after the death of Irving in 1952. She died in 1987 at the age of 95.

⁷⁰ The first women to receive their California State architectural license were from the liberal social climate of Northern California where the high building demand after the 1906 earthquake made it possible for women to practice their profession. *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 324-334.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

MODERNISM IN SAN FRANCISCO

The evolution of Modern architecture in San Francisco is closely linked to major social, technological, and building transformations, from the near collapse of the construction industry during the Great Depression to the Post-World War II demand for inexpensive, mass-produced and aesthetically pleasing housing. The sparsely detailed Modern architecture of the mid-20th century was a response and reaction to the eclecticism and false historicism of various earlier revivals of historic forms.⁷⁷

In San Francisco, considerable vitriol was directed at what was then considered unfashionable dust-collectors of the Victorian era. The gingerbread features, turrets, exotic influences, and asymmetrical ornamentation of Queen Anne, Italianate, and Stick/Eastlake styles were widely reviled. In the January 1935 edition of *Architect & Engineer*, P.J. McGuire slams the Victorian-era survivors of San Francisco's 1906 earthquake and fire thusly: "The 'spared' have lived to question their blessing. Those blocks of crowded buildings, dark and dingy, their ugliness emphasized by the tawdry gim-crackery of their 'doo-dad' encrusted faces, are the mournful graveyards of property value."⁷⁸ In the following month's issue of *Architect & Engineer*, San Francisco architect Charles Maury bemoaned the Victorian era buildings and envisages a new building type and style for a new age: "San Francisco, like many other cities is suffering from its dissipation of the late nineties, now termed the 'Jig Saw Age.' One has only to go through the Mission or Western Addition Districts to find hundreds of blocks of these obsolete houses and flats."⁷⁹

Trade magazines such as *Architect & Engineer*, of which the architect Irving Morrow was an active contributor, generated and spurred debates and, by the late 1930s, promulgated European-style Modernism. The work of pioneer European Modernists, including Mies van der Rohe, J.P. Oud, and Le Corbusier, was discussed, debated, and critiqued.⁸⁰ The October 1940 issue of *Architect and Engineer* mentions Irving Morrow, along with Miller & Pflueger and Gardner Dailey as early San Francisco architects inspired by Le Corbusier and other European Modern architects.⁸¹ New materials were touted and images of gleaming, streamlined, sleek and modern buildings in both advertisements and articles were featured in trade magazines and catalogs such as *Architectural Forum*, *Architect & Engineer*, and the *Sweet's Catalog*.

A review of the 1935 issues of *Architect & Engineer* reveals that the dominant styles in advertisements and articles were Mediterranean or Colonial Revivals, with some large-scale Art Deco buildings, institutional buildings in the Moderne style and a scattering of buildings influenced by the International Style. At that time the styles now referred to as Art Deco and Streamline Moderne were referred to as "Modernistic." Richard Neutra's International Style houses were likewise referred to as Modernistic or Modern.

Second Bay Tradition

The Cowell House is the earliest known example in San Francisco of a regional Modern vernacular style that developed in the mid-1930s in the San Francisco Bay Area. Now called the Second Bay Tradition, the emerging style fused the rustic, hand-crafted, woodsy aesthetic of First Bay Tradition architects (Bernard Maybeck, Julia Morgan, Ernest Coxhead, et. al), with the sleek functional design, machine aesthetic, and cubic, rectilinear forms associated with European Modernism. The resultant Modern architecture "both belongs to the region and transcends the region:

⁷⁷ William JR Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900, 2nd Edition* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987), 11.

⁷⁸ P.J. McGuire, "Modernization." *Architect and Engineer* (Jan. 1935): 19.

⁷⁹ Charles F. Maury, "Modernize." *Architect and Engineer* (February 1935): 11.

⁸⁰ *Architect & Engineer* (December 1935, February. 1935)

⁸¹ *Architect and Engineer* (October, 1940), 41.



An example of a Second Bay Tradition house. 3655 Clay Street, designed by William Wurster (1942). Photo: Mary Brown, San Francisco Planning Department.

it embraces the machine and transcends the machine.”⁸² This union of the Arts and Crafts’ and International Style’s philosophies, materials, and volumes resulted in a simple, yet elegant regional Modern architectural style endemic to the Bay Area. The resultant buildings are characterized by wood cladding, large expanses of glass, overhanging eaves, and flat or low-pitched roof forms. They are generally more open and light-filled than buildings of the First Bay Tradition. Architects associated with the Second Bay Tradition designed buildings that were generally small in scale, adapted to the landscape and climactic conditions, and were often built of locally sourced redwood. The richness of stained redwood resulted in luminous, earthy dwellings in keeping with emerging indoor-outdoor lifestyles.

The term Second Bay Tradition is used interchangeably with Bay Region Style, Second Bay Region Tradition, Bay Area Style, Bay Region Domestic, and Bay Region Modern. The term “Bay Region Modern” was coined in 1947–14 years after Morrow & Morrow designed the Cowell House—by the eastern architectural critic Lewis Mumford. In an article published by *The New Yorker*, Mumford posited the idea of “a native and humane form of modernism which one might call the Bay Region style, a free yet unobtrusive expression of the terrain, the climate and the way of life on the Coast.”⁸³ At the time, many argued that a Bay Region style was a figment of Mumford’s imagination.⁸⁴ The growing controversy prompted a 1948 symposium at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Attended by the eastern architectural elite—including Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Eero Saarinen, Serge Chermayeff, Isamu Noguchi, Lewis Mumford, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Vincent Scully, Peter Blake, and Alfred H. Barr Jr. (west coast architects were notably absent)—the symposium and future debates focused on whether such a regional style existed or if it even mattered.⁸⁵

Mumford, however, was not the first to notice an emerging style. From 1939 to 1944, articles in *Architect and Engineer*, *Sunset*, *California’s Arts and Architecture*, *Magazine of Art*, and *Pencil Points* documented the unique, regional trend.⁸⁶ The 1944 catalog for the influential Museum of Modern Art exhibit “Built in the USA, 1932-1944” likewise noted, “It was suddenly discovered that California had been enjoying a continuous but curiously unpublished tradition of building.”⁸⁷ In 1949, even *Life* magazine published a photo spread of buildings it called “Bay Region Modern.”⁸⁸ By the 1950s, the term “Bay Area Style” was nationally known and accepted as a regional iteration of Modernism.⁸⁹

⁸² Gardner Dailey, *Domestic Architecture of the Bay Region* (San Francisco Museum of Art exhibition catalog, 1949), 4.

⁸³ As quoted by Sally Woodbridge, “The Large-Small House to the Large-Large House” in *Bay Area Houses*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 171.

⁸⁴ Pierluigi Serraino, *NorCalMod: Icons of Northern California Modernism* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 70.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ David Gebhard, “Introduction: The Bay Area Tradition,” in *Bay Area Houses*, ed. Sally Woodbridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 7.

⁸⁷ As quoted in David Gebhard, “Introduction: The Bay Area Tradition,” in *Bay Area Houses*, ed. Sally Woodbridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 8.

The Bay Tradition styles (First, Second, and Third) are the only dominant regional styles of architecture to emerge from the San Francisco Bay Area. Earlier dominant styles, such as Italianate or Classical Revival were generally considered a “dry interpretation of the latest national fashion.”⁹⁰ Unlike earlier Victorian styles, which proscribed standardized ornament such as the use of incised brackets, dentils, spandrels, and cornice treatments, buildings designed in the Second Bay Tradition style do not have a standardized look. Rather, the style is characterized by an emphasis on volume over ornamentation and common denominators such as a woody aesthetic, small scale, and redwood cladding (often interior as well as exterior).⁹¹ There is a heavy emphasis on the use of natural building materials, however traditional materials such as brick, stone, stucco and plaster are occasionally incorporated and “manipulated as both texture and structure.”⁹² Second Bay Tradition buildings are often designed with a clear sensitivity to site and the natural environment.



An interior courtyard of William Wurster's (1937) residential design of 737 Bay Street in Russian Hill. Due to dense foliage, the house is barely visible from the street.

Photo: Mary Brown, San Francisco Planning Department.

Although many of the style's key practitioners were based in San Francisco, relatively few Second Bay Tradition buildings were constructed in the City, and the vast majority of these were residential. The style is more commonly found in suburban or semirural areas of the Bay Area. Nonetheless, San Francisco's long, narrow lots and occasionally extreme topography challenged architects to adapt the style to an urban hillside locale—such as the lot at 171 San Marcos Avenue—resulting in impressive feats of engineering and design. Most of the City's Second Bay Tradition buildings were constructed in already built-out neighborhoods with established lot patterns.

⁸⁸ Serraino, 75.

⁸⁹ Gebhard, 3.

⁹⁰ David Gebhard, “Introduction: The Bay Area Tradition,” in *Bay Area Houses*, ed. Sally Woodbridge (New York: Oxford Press, 1976), 8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

Early Modern Houses

Morrow & Morrow were the first of the pioneering Modern architects to design a Modern house in San Francisco. A handful of Modern houses were constructed in the following years, including four houses designed in the mid- to late-1930s by Richard Neutra, the Los Angeles-based practitioner of the European-influenced International Style.

Neutra's first house in San Francisco, designed in 1935, was the Largent House, sited on the largely undeveloped eastern slope of Twin Peaks. Though extant, it appears that 49 Hopkins Avenue has undergone significant renovation.⁹³ The (1936) Darling House, located on a steeply sloped site on Woodland Street in Parnassus Heights is Neutra's first wood-sheathed house.⁹⁴ It featured horizontal redwood siding, steel-sash ribbon windows, cantilevered overhangs and an expansive deck terrace. Of a similar design is Neutra's boxy, wood-clad facade of the (1937) Ford-Aquino duplex located on the 2400 block of Leavenworth Street in Russian Hill.⁹⁵ Neutra extended and designed the front facade of the duplex, an existing pre-1900 building.

The (1937) Schiff duplex on Jefferson Street in the Marina District is Neutra's only San Francisco building constructed on level ground. Designed in collaboration with architect Otto Winkler, it contrasts sharply with the revival-style residences that later characterized the 2000 block of Jefferson Street. The steel and glass facade of the Schiff House duplex most closely reflected the "Machine-Aesthetic" that characterized the International Style. Its rows of steel-framed ribbon casement windows and two roof decks facilitated indoor-outdoor living on a narrow city lot. Neutra's final San Francisco design is perched on a steeply sloped site in the Telegraph Hill neighborhood. The massive (1939) Kahn House was built as a three-story single family house, later converted to flats. Like the Schiff house, this Neutra design prominently features rows of steel-frame ribbon windows, terraces, and a flat, boxy form. It also features a prominent cantilevered roof overhang and projecting balconies.

By 1937, several prominent Bay Area architects and leaders of the as yet unnamed Second Bay Tradition movement had designed Modern residential buildings in San Francisco. From 1937 to the start of WWII, Bay Area modern pioneers, including Gardner Dailey, John E. Dinwiddie, and William Wurster, designed a few dozen buildings. Dinwiddie's Cubist-influenced (1938) Roos House at 2660 Divisadero Street was particularly notable. It featured modern geometric forms, ribbon windows, a canted bay window, and an unusual siding of wooden dowels that mimicked the appearance of corrugated metal. The house expressed the eastern interpretation of the International Style more so than later Second Bay Tradition practitioners.⁹⁶ Dinwiddie gained early renown: a 21-page article and photo spread in a 1940 issue of *Architect & Engineer* showcased his boldly Modern residential and commercial design.⁹⁷ Although Dinwiddie designed several commercial buildings in San Francisco, and many residences and storefronts in the East Bay, the Roos House, at 2660 Divisadero Street, represents his only known residential design in San Francisco.

⁹³ "Richard Josef Neutra (1892-1970)" in *Triangle Modernist Houses* (Triangle Modernist Archive, Inc., 2007-2010), <http://www.trianglemodernisthouses.com/neutra.htm> (accessed June 2010).

⁹⁴ Andrew Wolfram. Unpublished fiche for 90 Woodland, Docomomo, Northern California Chapter.

⁹⁵ "Richard Josef Neutra (1892-1970)" in *Triangle Modernist Houses* (Triangle Modernist Archive, Inc., 2007-2010), <http://www.trianglemodernisthouses.com/neutra.htm> (accessed June 2010).

⁹⁶Sally B. Woodbridge, "The Large-Small House to the Large-Large House" in *Bay Area Houses*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 155.

⁹⁷"John E. Dinwiddie, Architect," *Architect & Engineer*, April, 1940, 23-44.

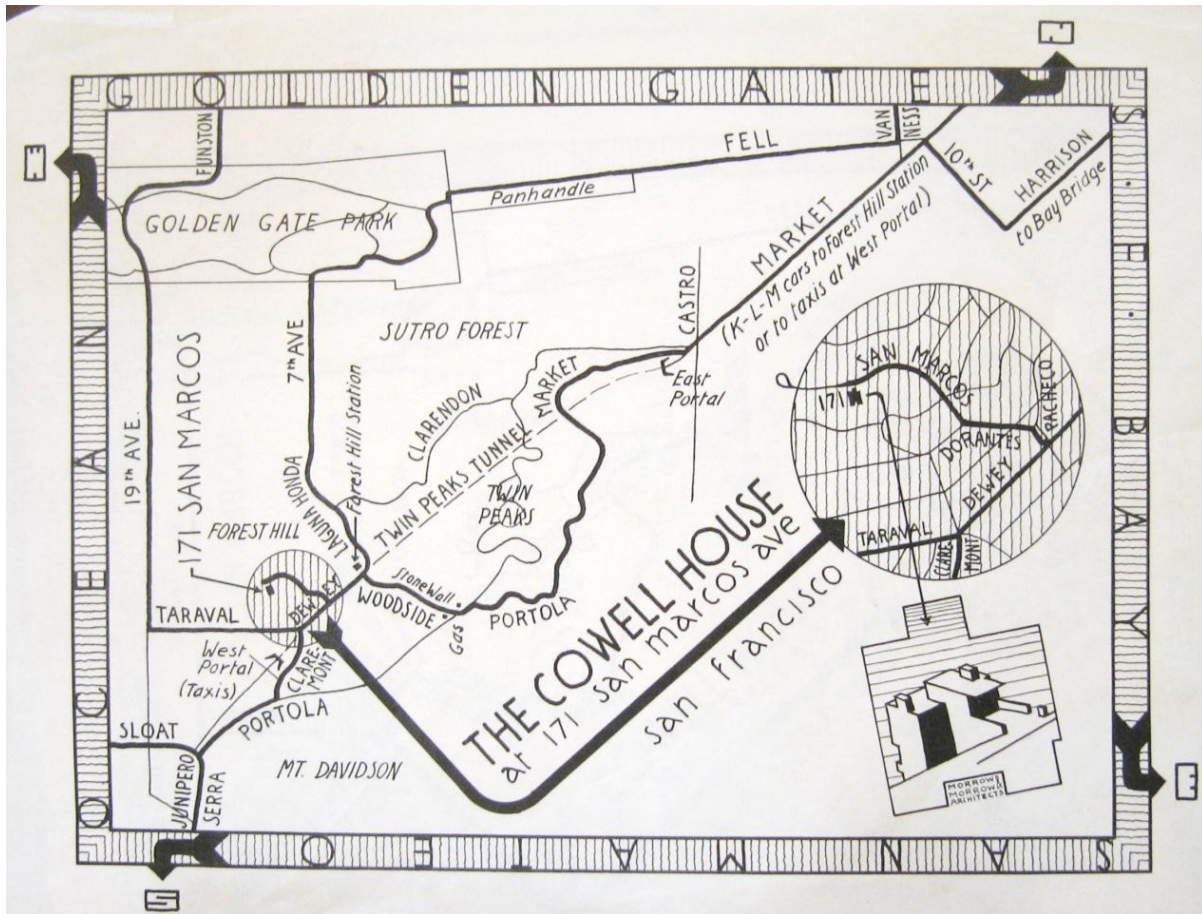


Examples of early Modern houses in San Francisco designed by Morrow & Morrow's contemporaries. Left: Richard Neutra's (1937) Schiff House, located at 2056-2058 Jefferson Street in the Marina District. Right: John Dinwiddie's (1938) Roos House, located at 2660 Divisadero Street in Pacific Heights.

Although the dominant design influence of the Cowell House is the woody aesthetic of the Second Bay Tradition, Morrow & Morrow also incorporated design elements associated with the Streamline Moderne style. Streamline Moderne, also referred to as Art Moderne, Moderne, Modernistic, or Depression Modern, was a conscious architectural expression of the speed and sleekness of the Machine Age. The style referenced the aerodynamic forms of airplanes, ships, and automobiles of the period with sleek, streamline rounded corners and curves. Considered a unique American style, Streamline Moderne is the first “modern” style to gain widespread acceptance in mainstream America.⁹⁸

Streamline Moderne influenced design elements found at the Cowell House include the curved entry portico and curved half wall at the primary entrance, flat roof form, and absence of historically derived ornamentation. The sans serif fonts and lettering of the street address and the raised carving of the architectural firm's name further reflect the influence of Streamline Moderne design.

⁹⁸ Lester Walker, *American Shelter* (Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1996), 220.



8"x10" flyer containing directions to the Cowell House. Unknown designer and date, though the font and style matches that of Morrow & Morrow. Source: Collection of Christine Willemssen.

FOREST HILL NEIGHBORHOOD

The Cowell House, 171 San Marcos Avenue was built in the secluded Forest Hill residential neighborhood which is located southwest of the geographical center of San Francisco. The hilly neighborhood is located approximately four miles from downtown and is bounded by Laguna Honda Boulevard to the northeast, Taraval Avenue to the south and 14th Avenue to the west. In contrast to nearby developments, the immediate neighborhood features large lots set along narrow, curvilinear streets in a steep, heavily wooded area. Numerous stairways bisect the neighborhood. San Marcos Avenue dead-ends less than a block from the Cowell House into still-largely undeveloped scrubby sand dunes, an area now known as Hawk Hill Park. As Olive Cowell noted, "Every window in the house is framed by trees and set in a garden, no street is seen from the house—the country in the City."⁹⁹

The neighborhood of Forest Hill is located on a portion of the former Sutro Rancho.¹⁰⁰ In 1912, the real estate firm of Baldwin & Howell syndicated the sale of Sutro's Rancho for \$1.5 million. To do so, they formed the Baldwin Residential Development Corporation (RDC) to make titles for the land and sold parcels to various developers and builders. Newell-Murdoch purchased the parcels they termed Forest Hill, while Mason-McDuffie together with

⁹⁹ Cowell, Olive T. From a three-page letter to prospective renters of 171 San Marcos Avenue describing its location, features, and amenities. Collection of Christine Willemssen

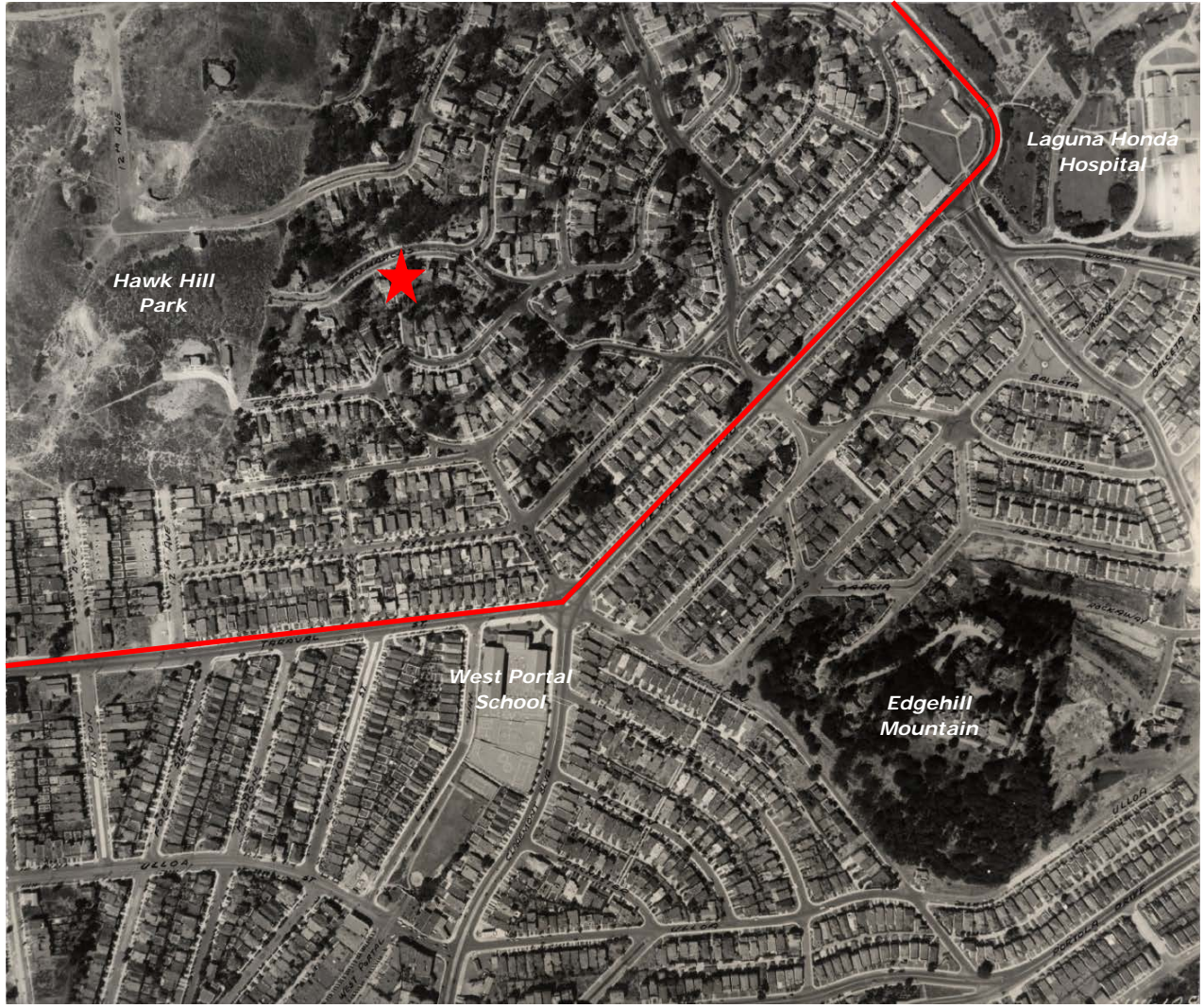
¹⁰⁰ Discussion of the Forest Hill neighborhood is excerpted from an unpublished history produced by San Francisco Planning Department intern Susan Parks, 2012.

Baldwin & Howell developed neighboring St. Francis Wood. A.S. Baldwin had been the appraiser of the Sutro estate, and impressed by the landscape of hills and trees, he believed it would create an attractive park-like experience for city dwellers.

Hoping to capitalize on their successful residential development of Thousand Oaks in Berkeley, Newell-Murdock hired the same architect, Mark Daniels, to design the new community of Forest Hill. Daniels had recently completed the master plan for Sea Cliff and Bel-Air in Beverly Hills. Rather than attempting to grid the streets over the hilly terrain, Daniels opted to allow the streets to wind naturally around the land's contours, using retaining walls as necessary. The result was a picturesque neighborhood with quiet winding streets with houses peeking out from the trees. Although the narrow, curvilinear street plan did not meet the City's requirements; residents nonetheless accepted the design and assumed responsibility by privately maintaining them for many years.

Newell-Murdock stressed the advantages of living in a forest-like setting and the convenience of walking to the Forest Hill streetcar station, from which downtown was only minutes away. Like many in real estate, the company was betting that the Twin Peaks Tunnel and its promise of a quick commute would create a thriving community and building boom. In a concession to practicality, the developers also reserved a few lots near the Forest Hill Station for a small commercial corridor. In the 1920s, Lang Realty assumed possession of Forest Hill from Newell-Murdock and oversaw the construction of the majority of houses. Many were designed by Lang Realty's in-house architect, Harold Stoner, who designed whimsical houses in a range of Period Revival styles.

It is amidst these Period Revival houses that 171 San Marcos Avenue was built in 1933. As such, its stark, yet woodsy aesthetic stood out from its whimsical neighbors. Its Modern design was influential, though, as the neighborhood features an unusual concentration of Modern houses designed several decades later in the 1950s, many with the redwood cladding similar to the Cowell House and popularized by the Second Bay Tradition architects. Notable nearby examples include 230 San Marcos Avenue (1956, architect unknown), 240 San Marcos (1956, Richard Grenfell), 225 San Marcos Avenue (1962, Sazevich & Walsh), 180 San Marcos Avenue (1965, Bernard J. Bloch), 45 San Marcos Avenue (1954, Frank Dakin), and 2 San Marcos Avenue (1955, owner-designed).



Above: 1938 aerial view of Forest Hill and surrounding neighborhood. The neighborhood's forested, curvilinear streets are in sharp contrast to the neighboring grids. Red line represents the southern boundary of the Forest Hill neighborhood.

Left: Detail view of the 100 block of San Marcos Avenue.

Source: Harrison C. Ryker, David Rumsey Map Collection.

APPENDIX: OWNERSHIP HISTORY

The Cowell House has had only five owners since its construction in 1933. The first owners were Harry and Olive Cowell. Olive commissioned the house from architects Morrow & Morrow. After Harry's death in 1958, Olive Cowell was the sole owner for the next ten years. In 1968 Alan W. Ford shared ownership of the house with Olive Cowell. The relationship between Alan Ford and Olive Cowell is unknown. There are no records in the California marriage index to indicate they were married. Alan W. Ford inherited and resided in Cowell's home after her death in 1984. The collection summary for the Olive Thompson Cowell papers located at Smithsonian Archives of American Art notes that Ford donated a portion of Olive Cowell's papers to the archives in 1994 and 1998 and destroyed all other papers at her request. The summary also notes that Ford subsequently resided in a house designed by Berkeley architect Lilian Bridgman (1899-1983), and donated a group of Bridgman's papers to the Smithsonian as well. No other information is known about Ford.¹⁰¹

Harry S. Parker III and his wife Ellen owned the house from 1988 to 2001. Harry Parker was born in 1939. From 1963-1973 Parker was the deputy director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. He worked at the Fine Arts Museum of Boston from 1968-1974. From 1974-1987 he served as Director of the Dallas Museum of Art and as Director Emeritus, the Museum named a curatorial position after Parker and his wife: The Ellen and Harry S. Parker III Curator of the Arts of the Americas and the Pacific. Parker was the director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco from 1988 to 2005. Upon his retirement, he was elected an Honorary Trustee. He currently serves as Chief Executive Officer of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Parker has received numerous awards for his work, including the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Art et Lettres and a Martin Luther King Special Appreciation Award. He is a past president of the Association of Art Museum Directors (1980-1981) and was Vice President of the American Association of Museums. He is a trustee emeritus of the San Francisco Art Institute and a member of the Century Association in New York and the Bohemian Club in San Francisco.

Information on Robert and Shawn Magnuson could not be located.

Ownership History:

1933-1958: Harry & Olive T. Cowell

1958-1968: Olive T. Cowell

1968-1984: Olive T. Cowell & Alan W. Ford

1984-1988: Alan W. Ford

1988-2001: Harry S. III & Ellen M. Parker

2001-2004: Robert & Shawn Magnuson

2004-present: Christine M. Willemsen

¹⁰¹ Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, summary of the Olive Thompson Cowell Papers, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/olive-thompson-cowell-papers-6455> (accessed June 2015).

ARTICLE 10 LANDMARK DESIGNATION

This section of the report is an analysis and summary of the applicable criteria for designation, integrity, period of significance, significance statement, character-defining features, and additional Article 10 requirements.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

Criteria

Check all criteria applicable to the significance of the property that are documented in the report. The criteria checked are the basic justification for *why* the resource is important.

- Association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- Association with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- Embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.
- Has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in history or prehistory.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Characteristics of the Landmark that justify its designation:

Association with Significant Person

The Cowell House is closely associated with Henry Cowell, an “ultra modern” composer, pianist, publisher, educator, and innovator who was a major force in new American music. He introduced new sounds, techniques, and tones into experimental music in the 1910s to 1930s. Among his many innovations were the “tone cluster” technique; percussion orchestras and collaborations with Modern choreographers; and the use of non-traditional instruments and techniques, such as playing a piano’s strings. He was influential to a new generation of Modern composers including John Cage and Lou Harrison. He founded the New Music Society in San Francisco to promote and promulgate experimental and world music and hosted receptions and performances at the Cowell House.

Cowell’s association with the house is reflected in the building’s design, including the Modern style and an interior designed to enhance performance acoustics. The house—commissioned by his stepmother Olive Cowell—was designed to accommodate his recitals in the living room. The interior space of the living room is sheathed with Celoflex, an insulating board, and features built-in cabinets clad with a fibrous material to enrich the room’s acoustics. Olive Cowell frequently held a “salon” in the living room, playing host to visiting artists, intellectuals and musicians who were part of the Cowells’ bohemian circle of friends.

The composer is closely associated with the house (though he maintained a small cabin in Menlo Park), particularly the recital space in the living room. He also frequently resided at 171 San Marcos Avenue when not on tour or at his cabin in Menlo Park. The house was built during Cowell’s musical prime and prior to his move to New York City.

Significant Architecture

The Cowell House is the earliest known example in San Francisco of a regional Modern vernacular style that developed in the mid-1930s in the San Francisco Bay Area. Now called the Second Bay Tradition, the emerging style fused the rustic, hand-crafted, woodsy aesthetic of First Bay Tradition architects with the sleek functional design, machine aesthetic, and cubic, rectilinear forms associated with European Modernism. The resultant Modern architecture “both belongs to the region and transcends the region: it embraces the machine and transcends the

machine.”¹⁰² This union of the Arts and Crafts’ and International Style’s philosophies, materials, and volumes resulted in a simple, yet elegant regional Modern architectural style endemic to the Bay Area.

The Cowell House is also significant as a rare extant Modern building designed by master architects Morrow & Morrow and is their most influential collaboration. It represents an early Modern collaboration of Irving Morrow, designer of the Golden Gate Bridge, and his wife and partner Gertrude Comfort Morrow, a pioneering female architect.

Period of Significance

The Cowell House’s Period of Significance is 1933, the year of its design and construction, to 1936, the year that marked Henry Cowell’s arrest and imprisonment. These four years mark the intense use of the house for recitals, performances, and receptions during what was known as an innovative and productive period of Cowell’s career. It was a time that Cowell was most closely associated with the house. After his release from prison in 1940 he relocated to New York and is considered to have restrained his radical musical experimentation.

Integrity

The seven aspects of integrity are location, design, materials, workmanship, setting, feeling, and association in relation to the period of significance established above. Cumulatively, the building retains sufficient integrity to convey its association with Henry Cowell and its expressive Modern architectural design.

Location, Feeling, Setting, Association

The Cowell House was constructed at its current location in 1933. The building has not been moved. When constructed, it was one of the first buildings on this block of San Marcos Avenue in Forest Hill, a neighborhood historically dominated by Period Revival designs. From the mid-1930s into the 1950s, neighboring single-family houses were constructed, a notable number with Second Bay Tradition design aesthetic, including unpainted wood siding, boxy shapes, and expansive window walls. Trees dominate the landscape. Neighboring buildings feature front yard setbacks and expansive rear yards. Streets are curvilinear and richly landscaped, a sharp contrast to the uniformity of gridded streets of the nearby Sunset District. The subject block, which dead ends into a portion of Hawk Hill (a public park with limited accessibility), remains quiet and secluded with little vehicular traffic. The immediate area and surrounding Forest Hill neighborhood retains the “country in the city” feeling—described by Olive Cowell—resultant from the curvilinear street pattern, large lots, dense plantings, and prominent street trees. As a result, the Cowell House retains its location, feeling, setting, and association.

Design, Materials, Workmanship

The Cowell House retains the design features that were present during the established 1933 to 1936 Period of Significance. Prominent design features and materials include the building’s articulated massing and stepped form that hugs the lot’s steep downward slope, unpainted redwood shiplap siding, roof deck, window bays and balconies, and prominent steel-sash windows with horizontal muntin pattern. The interior, likewise, displays high integrity of design, materials and workmanship. The interior retains the Japanese grass fabric coverings and Celotex cladding (chosen to enhance the living room’s acoustics), unpainted redwood wainscoting, tiled fireplace and built-in furniture including bookshelves, ironing cupboard, telephone cupboard, and cabinets. Historic interior finishes such as the stained lavender grey flooring are also extant. The extant materials and design reflect the quality of construction, materials, and workmanship as evidenced by Morrow& Morrow’s exactly detailed construction notes.

¹⁰² Gardner Dailey, *Domestic Architecture of the Bay Region* (San Francisco Museum of Art exhibition catalog, 1949), 4.

Remodeling has largely been limited to the insertion of sliding glass doors and a metal deck at the basement level of the south-facing (rear) facade and remodeling of the kitchen and bathrooms. In the 1960s, the building was clad in asbestos shingle siding. That siding was removed in the 1990s¹⁰³ and the building's historic exterior cladding was revealed. At some point, the violet colored steel window sash was painted orange—a likely nod to Irving Morrow's iconic International Orange color choice for the Golden Gate Bridge. The entry door and soffit, which were originally painted blue-green and lemon yellow respectively, were also painted orange. These alterations, including the revised painting scheme, are relatively minor and do not detract from the building's significance or design intent. As a result, the Cowell House retains integrity of design, materials, and workmanship.

¹⁰³ Based on review of historic photographs and ownership records, it appears likely that the asbestos shingle siding was removed in the 1990s.

ARTICLE 10 REQUIREMENTS SECTION 1004 (b)

BOUNDARIES OF THE LANDMARK SITE

Encompassing all of and limited to Lot 35 in Assessor's Block 2882 on the south side of San Marcos Avenue, between Castenada Avenue and the eastern edge of Hawk Hill Park.

CHARACTER-DEFINING FEATURES

Whenever a building, site, object, or landscape is under consideration for Article 10 Landmark designation, the Historic Preservation Commission is required to identify character-defining features of the property. This is done to enable owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark. The character-defining features of the Cowell House are listed below.

The character-defining *exterior* features of the building are identified as all exterior elevations, including but not limited to form, massing, structure, architectural ornament and materials identified as:

- Building plan and volumes including spatial configuration of entry path
- Projecting bay windows and balconies at rear facade
- Open roof deck and wood ornamented chimney stacks
- Projecting flat wood overhang over the garage door and roof deck
- Curved entry portico with curved half-wall and decorative glass panel
- Steel sash windows and doors (including garage door) set with horizontal muntins
- Horizontal redwood siding with slightly projecting flat board panel parapet and metal coping

The character-defining *interior* features of the building are identified as:

- Japanese grass fabric coverings and Celotex cladding (which enhanced acoustics) in the living room
- Redwood flooring with lavender-grey stain
- Three-foot high redwood wainscoting, stained lavender-grey, in the living room, entry hall, and study
- Built-in furniture including bookshelves and living room cabinets
- Tile-clad fireplace
- Interior doors with decorative ribbed glass set in a horizontal muntin pattern

Interior Landmark Designation

According to Article 10, Section 1004(c) of the Planning Code, only those interiors that were historically publicly accessible are eligible for listing in Article 10. Article 10, Section 1004(c) of the Planning Code states,

(c) The property included in any such designation shall upon designation be subject to the controls and standards set forth in this Article 10. In addition, the said property shall be subject to the following further controls and standards if imposed by the designating ordinance:

1. For a publicly-owned landmark, review of proposed changes to significant interior architectural features.
2. For a privately-owned landmark, review of proposed changes requiring a permit to significant interior architectural features in those areas of the landmark that are or historically have been accessible to members of the public. The designating ordinance must clearly describe each significant interior architectural feature subject to this restriction.

Interiors of private residences are therefore ineligible for protection under Article 10 of the Planning Code. Nonetheless, given that the interior, particularly the living room, is so closely linked to Henry Cowell and musical performances, it is strongly recommended that the interior be preserved under conservation easement and/or future interior alterations are sensitively designed.

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Historic Name: The Cowell House

Address: 171 San Marcos Avenue

Block and Lot: 2882 / 035

Owner: Christine Willemsen

Original Use: Single-family house

Current Use: Single-family house

Zoning: RH-1(D), Residential House, 1-Family, Detached

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