

Three Architectural Monuments in Desperate Need of Rescue

June 2022

The rich cultural heritage of the city of Berkeley includes three extraordinary structures now owned by the University of California, Berkeley and, since at least the mid-twentieth century, all three have been undergoing demolition by neglect.

1. **Phoebe Apperson Hearst Memorial Gymnasium for Women**, 1925-27 Architects: Bernard Maybeck and Julia Morgan

To memorialize Phoebe Apperson Hearst's life and her extraordinary gifts—of buildings, of a campus plan, and of library and object collections, to the University of California—her son, William Randolph Hearst commissioned a group of buildings to mark the southern boundary of the campus. Of these the one that was realized before the Depression brought an end to this ambitious plan, is the Women's gymnasium. This stunning example of the inventive interpretations of the Classical traditions taught at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris was designed by Bernard Maybeck who was a student there in 1882-86 with the assistance of Julia Morgan whose years at the École were 1898-1902. Based on the general ideas of symmetry, hierarchy, axuality, and the classical orders, the rigorous training at this epicenter of Western architectural practice in the late nineteenth century, nevertheless produced extremely creative designers, including Maybeck and Morgan. These two are arguably California's most important architects, and this the most celebrated structure on which they collaborated.

The structure is reinforced concrete with expansive windows elaborated with bronze ornaments. Around the north pool decorative sculptures, including cohorts of classically-garbed female figures dancing, enliven the program, and monumental urns and balustrades made of cast stone punctuate the perimeter of the building. The effect is both simplified and lush at the same time.

The Hearst Women's gym was equipped with six gymnasiums and two pools to ensure that the young women in the first uncorseted generation and their descendants would have the opportunity to play team sports and exercise as well as study during their university years. These utilitarian spaces are arranged around two courtyards, one with a reflecting pool, the other with a stand of California oaks shading the rooms ranged around it. The Hearst Memorial Gymnasium for Women has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1981.

This building is still in use, but its physical condition is precarious. The concrete has cracked, and not being repaired, these cracks have allowed water to penetrate, exposing and rusting the internal rebar and thus weakening the structure. In some instances, such as the bench supports by the east entrance, the structure has failed altogether. No fewer than five studies have been commissioned to evaluate the state of the building, but no substantial remedial work has been undertaken.



Bernard Maybeck and Julia Morgan, Presentation Drawing of Phoebe Apperson Hearst Memorial Gymnasium for Women, South Elevation, 1925. Note proposed (but unrealized) grand auditorium suggested in the distance. Environmental Design Archives, UCB



Bernard Maybeck and Julia Morgan, Phoebe Apperson Hearst Memorial Gymnasium for Women, north façade, 1925

Failed concrete; rusted rebar, Hearst Gym



Bernard Maybeck and Julia Morgan, Phoebe Apperson Hearst Memorial Gymnasium for Women, north pool area, 1925

2. Anna Head School Buildings, 1892, 1911-27

At Haste and Bowditch Streets

Architects: S. Edgar Fisher (Channing Hall) and Walter Ratcliff (eight buildings)

The Shingle Style tradition began in earnest in Berkeley with the completion of Anna Head's new school building on August 22, 1892. One of the first shingle style structures in Berkeley, Channing Hall (1892), designed by Soule Edgar Fisher for his cousin Anna

Head to house (and embody) her school for girls, is a powerful physical statement about nature, structure, and education. Mimicked in the Gables (1895, 1901) and the later structures designed by Walter Ratcliff and others to fill out the Anna Head School campus 1892-1927, Channing Hall's irregular massing, vernacular rough materials and barn-like gambrel roofs endorse important social, aesthetic, and ecological values. Its redwood shingle cladding and its rock chimneys and walls speak of domesticity and, simultaneously, of a radical teaching philosophy involving the potential of young women for natural intellectual growth, capacity for university education, and new roles in society. The shingle style was also an eloquent rebuttal to the more formal dressed stone classicisms in use at the time to represent institutional and social authority.

Anna Head and Fisher's decision to build in the Shingle Style put them in the architectural *avant-garde*—the 1890s marked the beginning of the First Bay Area tradition in architecture which was grounded in a philosophy best articulated by one of its early patrons, Charles Keeler in *The Simple Home* (1904). The Anna Head School complex of buildings embody the ideals of simplicity of plan, honesty of materials, and harmonious siting with the environment endorsed by progressive thinkers in California. Such structures represent the adoption by sophisticated architects of vernacular builders' skills and knowledge: An article in the *American Architect and Building News* of 1878 critically describes how they understood the vernacular architect they sought to emulate: He "is as innocent of archaeology as the Romanesque work of the Tenth Century." He is one of those "men who work without regard for precedent or rule, using forms which they know only by tradition and example, and with a simple adaptation to the wants of a people, to the material and mechanical process at their command..." Above all, the shingles signaled unpretentious honesty to those using and seeing them.

Also signaling honesty, straightforward simplicity, and truth were the rich variety of window types used. When the school opened, the local news media took note not only of the unusual architectural context but also the quality of light its many windows provided: "Inside, the well-lighted rooms, the spacious hallways, and ample stairs carry out the same idea. All the school rooms are on the south side and will be sunny all day long." And another journalist remarked, "All the rooms have eastern and southern exposure and are flooded with sunshine all day."

Many influential and historically significant citizens sent their daughters to the Anna Head School (for example, John Muir, the internationally known naturalist and conservationist), and many graduates achieved distinction, even renown. Two of Anna Head's graduates, for instance, later became British and American Singles Tennis Champions in the 1920's. One was Helen (Willis) Moody (seven times) who grew up in a Maybeck house nearby.

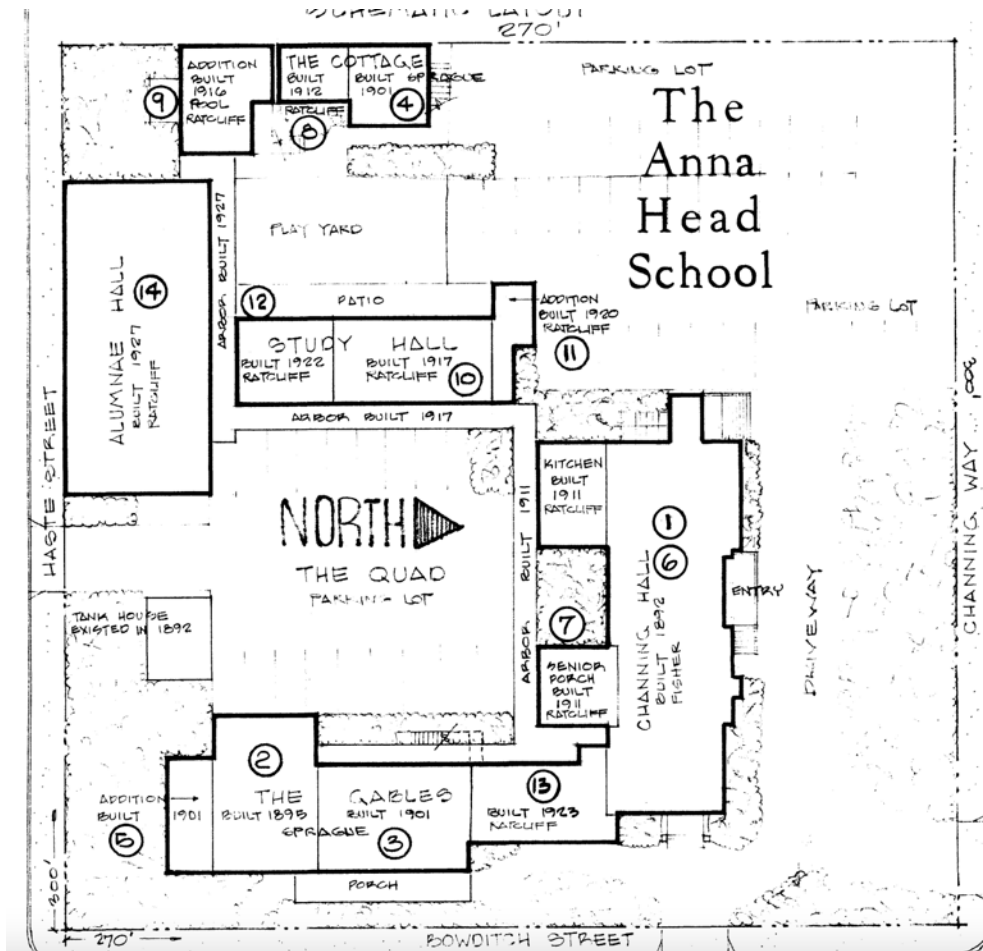
The Anna Head buildings were eminent domained by UC Berkeley in 1963 and for several decades they housed, among other academic functions and Organized Research Units, the distinguished Institution for the Study of Societal Issues. Few substantial changes were made to the buildings in ensuing decades beyond the introduction of internal partitions and a sprinkler system. None of the original walls, fireplaces, or stairs have been removed. This suite of buildings has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1980, but they have suffered badly from lack of maintenance to the point that they are no longer useable and have been abandoned. In the past two years five arson or squatter fires have damaged several of the buildings, most recently on May 2, 2022.

This suite of buildings represents very important chapters in the history of American architecture—the establishment of the Shingle Style, the first original architectural style developed in this country—and in the history of education—the belief that women could be educated for university as their male peers, and that, tutored in the principles of honesty and unpretentiousness by the very walls that contained and sustained their learning, they would make better citizens. These structures incorporate thousands of square feet of potentially very desirable real estate that could be actualized by the urgent repairs a thoughtful restoration would realize.

<https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/6fb07eab-0f21-4a9f-924b-1f78ef48f965> United States Department of the Interior Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. National Register of Historic Places. Anna Head School, Berkeley, CA. May 29, 1980. February 6, 2022. James P. Gibbon, Architect, and Elaine Stone, Architectural Graduate Student, authors.



S. Edgar Fisher, Channing Hall, 1892 (on right), and the Gables, 1895, 1901 (on the left), Anna Head School, photo 1908, Berkeley Historical Society.



Frederic Knapp Architect, Site Plan of Anna Head Campus, giving dates of construction of each of the buildings. Plan drawn 2008.



Firemen, having rescued four people from the second floor, are cutting holes in the roof of the Gables to pour in water (fire started outside at ground level), May 2, 2022.

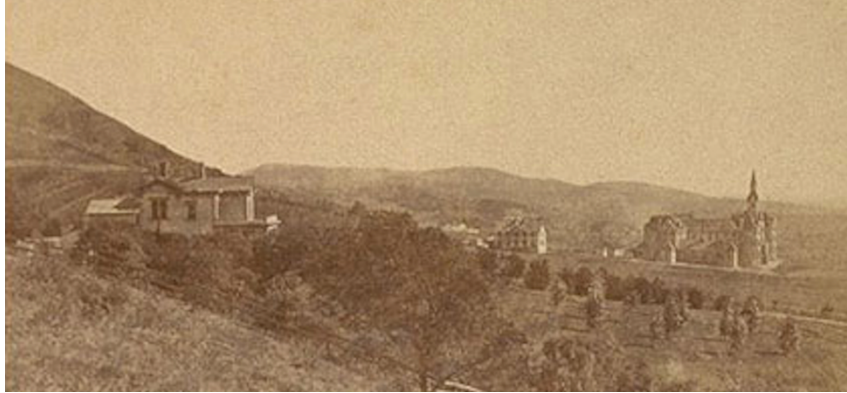
3. Smyth-Fernwald Property, 1867; 1911

Architects: Unknown and Julia Morgan

Built in the foothills of the Coastal Range as a home for Perez Mann Batchelder and his family, the house now known as the Smyth house was situated between the University of California campus and the property of the California School for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind where, like its neighboring newly-established public institutions, it enjoys a magnificent view of the Golden Gate. William Henry Smyth, an English-born inventor and lawyer at the turn of the twentieth century acquired the property and hired noted architect Julia Morgan to extensively remodel the house to its final Tudor Revival form with ornamental chimneys, old-growth redwood and oak interior paneling, and pictorial chimneypiece of inlaid woods. She also added a spectacular belvedere/study to the top of the house. Plans for the renovation dated 1914 by Morgan, the first woman to graduate from the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and the first woman architect to practice in California, survive.

The University of California, Berkeley acquired the property in 1926, by then reduced to approximately 5.45 acres, built temporary dormitories on the open space, and, from the 1950s to the 1970s, housed women graduate students in the house. Changes made to the interior at this time were perfunctory adaptations to dormitory use but the architectural character of the interior and the whole exterior were left intact although already showing signs of lack of maintenance. The roof, for instance, was not replaced or recovered in a timely manner. At some point in the 1970s the university, having become aware of the Hayward Fault that runs near the property and seeing the results of deferred maintenance, stopped using the house altogether, abandoning the building to squatters. Extensive graffiti on the paneling and other gratuitous damage to railings and windows ensued. At some point in this century the house—having lost all its windows—was boarded up and fenced.

The Smyth house is the oldest structure owned by UC Berkeley; it is a showcase of the imaginative work of a master architect and is unique among the 700 buildings credited to her. Despite the damage evident today, the structure could be restored, made seismically sound, and used for one of the many university functions (such as an Organized Research Unit) hungry for space if funding were to be found to do the work to restore and seismically refit it.



Smyth House (on the left) with California Deaf, Dumb, and Blind School in the distance.
Photo before 1875.

Julia Morgan,
Elevation Drawing
(South Elevation), for
Remodeling of the
Smyth House for
then-owner William
Henry Smyth, 1911





Smyth House South Façade, Spring 2022. Photo Max Zinkievich



Smyth House Interior, Spring 2022. Photo Max Zinkievich

Berkeley's desirability as a place to live and work is integrally linked to the character and history of its built environment. Stewarding that environment is the task of each generation of owners. These three remarkable examples of Berkeley's valuable cultural heritage have not received care or maintenance, due, we are told to the pressure of other priorities. Unfortunately, these are not the only buildings that UCB has neglected but these three are of national as well as local importance and they have been allowed to deteriorate to the degree that they are no longer functioning to aid the university in carrying out its mission. One might say that other buildings should rise in their place, but that "solution" would deeply damage the fabric of the city's cultural heritage and public memory, and inevitably create the soulless, memory-less spaces with which we are all too familiar. Moreover, sustainability experts tell us that the greenest building one can have is the one already on the site, renovated for current standards and uses. It behooves the present to preserve and adapt the past in our built environment to ensure a sustainable and enriched sense of place in the future. It is our hope that a portion of the state's current surplus could be mobilized to repair and restore for reuse these three state-owned buildings.

Petition: <https://chnng.it/XmZQqTvZ>