



LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



The Cowell House 171 San Marcos Avenue

Landmark Designation Report
December 2012

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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
Architect: Morrow + Morrow

OVERVIEW

Built in 1933 in the Forest Hill neighborhood, the Cowell House is the first known Modern residential building in San Francisco. It was designed by master architects Irving and Gertrude Morrow a few years after the couple designed the architectural design components of the Golden Gate Bridge. The detached, redwood-clad building reflects an early fusion of the International Style, Streamline Moderne, and Second Bay Tradition. It embodies the woodsy aesthetic that came to characterize the Modern interpretation of the region-specific Second Bay Tradition. The Cowell House is the first of a few dozen architect-designed Modern residential buildings constructed in the years leading up to WWII. The building is significant for its architectural expression and for its association with master architects Morrow + Morrow.

The building is also significant for its association with the accomplished Cowell family, in particular, Henry Cowell, an avant-garde jazz pianist and composer. The interior of the house was designed with acoustics and performances in mind. An open-plan living room lined with paperboard cabinets absorbs sound and enhances the acoustics.

BUILDING DESCRIPTION

Primary Façade



Overview

Located on a steeply sloped site in the hilly, secluded Forest Hill neighborhood, the four-story Cowell House features unpainted redwood siding, floor-to-ceiling stacked steel-sash awning windows, and rounded Streamline Moderne design elements. Due to the site's down slope, the building's stories were inverted, with a street-level garage story topping the three lower stories. The primary entrance is accessed via a switchback pathway that hugs the hillside.



Primary Façade: Garage

The primary façade features a prominent articulated garage at street level. A historic awning garage door, comprised of six lights and painted, is set back along the raised driveway. A flush overhang projects slightly over the garage door. To the right of the door is the street number topped by a historic lighting fixture. Wood side walls line the driveway. To the right of side walls is a switchback path that leads down the hill to the primary entry. To the left is a secondary path and set of stairs that leads down to the secondary entry.



Primary Façade: Entrance

The primary entrance is located down the hill and to the right (west) of the garage. It features a curved metal portico supported by a single slender pole, a curved half wall clad in horizontal redwood siding topped with a wood sill, a glazed metal door with horizontal muntins, and a metal-sash window likewise glazed with the same muntin pattern. 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 stacked wood louvered vents. Between two of the vents is a raised imprint, carved of wood, that reads "Morrow – & – Morrow Architects – 1933"





West Façade

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



East Façade

The articulated east façade features a projecting wing, a secondary entrance and a prominent window wall. The façade is clad in flush horizontal redwood siding and the windows metal sash awning windows match the building's dominant horizontal muntin pattern. A large roof deck is visible at this elevation as are several stacked accordion chimney stacks. The roof deck was designed a sleeping porch, a popular amenity at that time espoused by architects influenced by Arts and Crafts design.



South Facade

The dramatic south façade is located at the rear of the building. The façade is clad in horizontal redwood siding and features two prominent squared window bays. The prominent east bay displays floor-to-ceiling metal-sash windows set with a horizontal muntin pattern. This pattern is found at the three sides of the bay. The bay is topped with a slightly projecting cornice.

The window bay to the west displays a smaller window opening with the same fenestration pattern.

Beneath the flush sliding glass metal doors, 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 glass doors, designed in a compatible muntin configuration, that lead to a contemporary deck enclosed with metal rail.

Master Architects: Morrow & Morrow

The Cowell House is one of the few extant Modern buildings designed by the firm Morrow + Morrow. Irving and Gertrude Morrow practiced architecture together from 1925, five years after their marriage, until 1952, when Irving passed away. In addition to the firm's best-known work – the architectural design for San Francisco's iconic Art Deco Golden Gate Bridge, for which Irving also chose the rust-red color – the couple designed numerous residences, theaters and living complexes in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The couple married in 1920 and in 1925 opened their small firm, Morrow & Morrow. Prior to this partnership, both Irving and Gertrude had established architectural practices. The firm of Irving and his partner William Garren had, since 1916, designed houses, hotels, banks, schools and commercial buildings. 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 from 1908 to 1911. Gertrude was a pioneering female architect in a profession dominated by men. She was just the second woman to receive her master's degree in Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley (1914). She worked in the office of Henry H. Gutterson until she received her California license in 1916. At this point Gertrude opened her own firm, supervising the development of Mason-McDuffie's St. Francis Wood, which had been Gutterson's project before he enlisted in war camp service during World War I.

The firm Morrow & Morrow designed and remodeled dozens of buildings throughout the Bay Area. 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.² Gertrude was also an active member of the Association of Women in Architecture, the Architectural Institute of America, and she produced a radio show with Martha Meade called "New Ideas for Old Houses."³ The firm's work appears to have peaked by the early 1940s. 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.⁴ However, despite their prestigious commissions and the groundbreaking 1933 design of the Cowell House, the firm did not produce celebrated Modern buildings in San Francisco after 1940 and are largely excluded from the existing literature on San Francisco Modern design.

The firm's commissions in San Francisco include the Gelber House (1344 Union Street, 1937); the Golden Gate International Exposition, Alameda-Contra Costa County Building (1939, now demolished); Theater Building, 24th Street at Noe Street (1940); the McCay Flats (unknown location, 1940), and the Navy Reserve Armory (Treasure Island, c.1943).

The Cowell House was highlighted in the December 1935 issue of *Architect & Engineer*, accompanied by Irving Morrow's rebuttal of 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."⁵

² The Morrow's designed the bridge in conjunction with structural engineers Joseph Strauss and Charles Ellis.

³ Inge Schaefer Horton, *Early Women Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area: The lives and work of fifty professionals, 1890 – 1951*. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Co. Publishers, 2010), 324-334.

⁴ *Architect and Engineer* (October, 1940): 41.

⁵ Irving F. Morrow, "Modern Architecture and Common Sense," *Architect & Engineer* (Dec. 1935): 53.

Evolution of San Francisco's Architectural Styles

The extant architectural heritage of San Francisco dates almost exclusively to the United States era. The pre-historic indigenous settlements of San Francisco were seasonal villages that shifted locations and consisted of impermanent, lightly framed structures covered with willows and tule reeds, of which none remain. The Spanish and Mexican settlements that succeeded them utilized primarily adobe construction, reflecting the scarcity of native wood for building. Adobe construction was largely vernacular, with architectural flourishes reserved for edifices such as the Mission Dolores chapel, the only Spanish-Mexican structure to remain standing.

In the latter half of the 19th century, under United States governance, architecture in San Francisco tended to utilize the same general progression of styles that were popularized in the eastern U.S. and Europe during the century, though delayed by a number of years and with regional differences. In response to newly accessible supplies of West Coast lumber, versions of designs, originally rendered in the East Coast in brick or masonry, were erected in San Francisco using wood, particularly redwood. Greek Revival style flourished in the 1850s and 1860s, Gothic Revival style less so. Italianate style dominated throughout the 1870s, Stick/Eastlake style characterized the 1880s, and Queen Anne and Shingle styles appeared in the 1890s.

Leading up to and after the turn of the 20th century, important shifts and innovations in San Francisco's architectural development occurred. New building technologies, such as elevators, reinforced concrete and steel frames, led to the rapid vertical development of Downtown, including construction of the city's first skyscraper in 1889. Other changes addressed concerns for health and welfare. The prescribed use of brick and other fireproof construction materials within specified commercial zones, enacted earlier in the City's history after a series of fires, was extended after the 1906 firestorm. Also as a result of the 1906 disaster, new residential construction favored flat roofs with tar and gravel surfaces that were more fire resistant than earlier pitched shingle roofs.

Shifts in popular styles accompanied the new building technologies. The asymmetry and elaborate ornament that had distinguished San Francisco's late 19th century architecture lost favor to the order and restraint of Classicism, which was widely introduced at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This stylistic shift was embodied in San Francisco by the completion of the Beaux-Arts -style City Hall, as well as by the classically designed structures erected for the Panama Pacific International Exposition, in 1915. However, a similar exposition in San Diego, held the same year, provided a different architectural focus attuned to the American West. This California-based vocabulary drew primarily from Mediterranean influences, which in addition to referencing the Spanish-Mexican heritage of the area, were easily adapted to California's climate and natural environment. Consequently, in the latter 1910s and 1920s, styles such as Mission Revival, Spanish Colonial Revival, and Churrigueresque Revival were popularized in California. Other local architectural influences that were popular at the beginning of the 20th century included those associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement such as Craftsman and First Bay Tradition styles.

San Francisco Modern Architectural Design

San Francisco on the Cusp of Modernism

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.⁶

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's, Italianates, and Stick/Eastlake styles were widely reviled. In the January 1935 edition of *Architect and 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."⁷



Excessive ornament and the ubiquitous San Francisco bay window are largely absent from Modern design.

In the following month's issue of *Architect and 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."⁸

Trade magazines such as *Architect and Engineer* generated and spurred debates and promulgated European-style Modernism. The work of pioneer European Modernists, including Mies van der Rohe, J.P. Oud, and Le Corbusier, was discussed and critiqued.⁹ 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. By 1941, advertisements promoted the use of stainless steel for countertops, doors, railings and appliances. Glass manufacturers Libbey-Owens-Ford's (LOF) aggressively promoted "Design For Happiness," a campaign advertised widely in trade and general interest periodicals such as *Good*

⁶William JR Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 2nd Edition (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987), 11.

⁷ P.J. McGuire, "Modernization." *Architect and Engineer* (Jan. 1935): 19.

⁸ Charles F. Maury, "Modernize." *Architect and Engineer* (February 1935): 11.

⁹ *Architect & Engineer* (December 1935, February. 1935)

Housekeeping and Life. The campaign promoted the use of glass to make houses “brighter, lighter, gayer, and more livable with glass.”¹⁰ LOF’s Design for Happiness campaign also included a regular half-hour radio program that “Tells people of the new effects they can achieve with glass, and urges them to build new homes now. It is probably the biggest effort ever put behind glass – should give appreciable impetus to home building.”¹¹ The Zouri and Kawneer Companies, likewise, were major advertisers, promoting their respective complete storefront systems.

Themes of San Francisco Modernism

Modern design in San Francisco takes vastly different forms in San Francisco, including massive Brutalist towers, architect-designed wood-clad cottages, Expressionist churches, and builder-developed Streamline Moderne row-houses. It is difficult to find a single common denominator that unites these disparate forms, styles, materials, and uses; however, in researching this context statement several themes have emerged. These themes do not apply to all buildings nor to all styles, but they do inform the development and expression of Modern design in San Francisco.

Rejection of Historicism

Modern design in San Francisco largely rejects Classical historicism and historically derived ornament. This is not to say that Modern buildings were not ornamented, they most emphatically were. However, Modern ornamentation was achieved through the richness of materials, particularly wood, and experimentation with design elements, such as color and texture, rather than the old model of applied ornament. Many designs reflect a simple, utilitarian aesthetic, which was often manifested in a box-like form with relatively simple detailing.

Flexible Interior Spaces

Le Corbusier’s influence is found in the popularity of flexible interior open spaces. Structural design and careful placement of load-bearing walls enabled large, open interiors. The interior architecture of office buildings, for example, shifted to emphasize flexible open plans, universal spaces, and fewer individual offices. Many architects, like William Wurster, were more oriented toward “life within the house, rather than the architectural shell that contained it.”¹²

Appeal of the Machine Age

Many San Francisco designers were influenced by the aesthetics, mass-production, and technologies of the Machine Age. State of the art materials and building technologies were readily adapted, including glass blocks, sleek porcelain enamel cladding, aluminum sash, spandrel glass, and glass curtain wall systems. Buildings were designed to maximize space and materials, to get the most from the least. There was a clear effort to reveal the honest structural integrity of a building. Louis Sullivan’s dictate “form follows function” resonates in San Francisco Modern design.

New Architectural Vocabulary

Modern architects eschewed San Francisco’s dominant architectural vocabulary of classically derived ornament and the exuberant ornamentation of Victorian-era buildings. The new architectural vocabulary was influenced by concurrent movements in Modern art, particularly the cubic, movement-based abstraction of Cubist paintings. Design elements emphasized the horizontal line. The new vocabulary included ribbon windows, corner windows, smooth stucco, smooth wood siding, flat roof forms, wood shingle siding, canted windows, and projecting overhangs. Landscape architects borrowed liberally and explicitly from Cubist and Abstract Expressionist paintings for their landscape designs.

¹⁰ *Architect and Engineer*, numerous issues 1941.

¹¹ *Architect and Engineer*, advertisement (October 1940): 7.

¹² Marc Treib, “William Wilson Wurster: The Feeling of Function,” in *An Everyday Modernism: The Houses of William Wurster*, ed. Marc Treib (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 22.

Indoor / Outdoor Living

San Francisco Modern design penetrated the barrier separating interior and outdoor spaces. This was due in part to the mild climate conditions in the Bay Area that allowed for enjoyment of the outdoors year-round. Designers took advantage of this in order to create more livable space for their clients. New design strategies such as residential atriums and enclosed courtyards expanded livable space into the outdoors. Decks and rooftop terraces were built. Transparent materials such as sliding glass doors and large expanses of glass integrated the inside with the outside. The close collaboration of architects and pioneering Modern landscape architects further facilitated the indoor-outdoor lifestyle.

San Francisco Constraints & Opportunities

Modernism in San Francisco adapted to geographic considerations, climate, availability of buildable land, and small lot sizes. Despite the City's Mediterranean climate, the cool, coastal fog (ubiquitous in the summer months) is just cold enough to curtail the expansive indoor-outdoor living that characterized leisure living in Southern California. Nonetheless, the temperate climate simplifies heating, and allows greater flexibility in window and wall structures. Advancements in engineering and building technologies enabled the development of steeply sloped vacant land. Newly accessible hilltop lands in the Diamond Heights area, Twin Peaks, Glen Canyon, Anza Vista, Bernal Heights, Midtown Terrace, and Clarendon Heights opened up for development during the 1940s-1960s. Much of San Francisco's most desirable land had already been built out by 1935. Undeveloped flatlands in western San Francisco and the gently sloped hills to the south and southeast were the focus of significant building activity during the 1920s-1950s. Former cemetery lands in the northern center also opened up to development during the 1940s-1950s.

San Francisco's historically long and narrow lot sizes, generally 25'x100' in older neighborhoods, limited the design of Modern buildings and largely precluded the mass development of ranch houses that characterize suburban communities in the larger Bay Area. Architects adapted Modern design in San Francisco to account for the tight urban sites available for in-fill construction in already built-out neighborhoods. Although a few sprawling Modern houses were constructed on large lots in affluent neighborhoods such as Pacific Heights, most infill construction was limited to long, narrow lots. As such, Modern design in San Francisco is often vertically oriented, more so than in suburban communities.

Views

In a hilly city such as San Francisco, views are of paramount importance. Centrally located neighborhoods with views attract affluent buyers, who are more likely to hire architects rather than rely on standardized builder plans. Architect-designed, in-fill Modern houses are commonly located in hillier, wealthier neighborhoods and are generally oriented north to maximize views of San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Marin Headlands. This orientation often results in the design of buildings with their backs toward the street. The primary facades of Modern houses are also occasionally completely hidden behind massive garage entrances or courtyard walls, resulting in plain, unengaging streetscapes.

The Cowell House is oriented to take advantage of expansive south-facing views. Due to the view corridor and sloped site, the house is largely hidden from the street. Its most impressive design elements are found at the rear of the property, in particular the prominent window bays and rooftop deck.

Modernism in the 1930s

In the mid- to late-1930s, Richard Neutra, the Los Angeles-based practitioner of the European-influenced International Style, designed four houses in San Francisco and remodeled the front façade of a fifth. His first, 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.¹⁶ The (1936) Darling House, located on a steeply sloped site on Woodland Street in Parnassus Heights is Neutra's first wood-sheathed house.¹⁷ 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 façade (1937) of the Ford-Aquino duplex located on the 2400 block of Leavenworth Street in Russian Hill.¹⁸ Neutra extended and designed the front façade 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 façade 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 Kahn House (1939) 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 featured 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 (1938) Cubist-influenced 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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 residential design in San Francisco.

¹⁶ "Richard Josef Neutra (1892-1970)" in *Triangle Modernist Houses* (Triangle Modernist Archive, Inc., 2007-2010), <http://www.trianglemodernisthouses.com/neutra.htm> (accessed June 2010).

¹⁷ Andrew Wolfram. Unpublished fiche for 90 Woodland, Docomomo, Northern California Chapter.

¹⁸ "Richard Josef Neutra (1892-1970)" in *Triangle Modernist Houses* (Triangle Modernist Archive, Inc., 2007-2010), <http://www.trianglemodernisthouses.com/neutra.htm> (accessed June 2010).

¹⁹ Sally B. Woodbridge, "The Large-Small House to the Large-Large House" in *Bay Area Houses*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 155.

²⁰ "John E. Dinwiddie, Architect," *Architect & Engineer*, April, 1940, 23-44



Top left: Richard Neutra's (1937) Schiff House, located at 2056-2058 Jefferson Street in the Marina District.

Top right: John Dinwiddie's (1938) Roos House, located at 2660 Divisadero Street in Pacific Heights.

Left: 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.

Photos: Mary Brown, San Francisco Planning Department; Aisha Rahimi.

The Cowell House displays bold Modern design elements and detailing from two distinct stylistic eras: Streamline Moderne and Second Bay Tradition. The following section describes the evolution of these styles and their application to various building types in San Francisco.

Streamline Moderne in San Francisco⁴¹

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.⁴² It evolved from the Art Deco movement and incorporated design elements associated with the International Style.⁴³

Most Modern styles that emerged in the 1920s to 1960s were typically applied to just one or two property types, (i.e., residential buildings or office towers); however, design elements of the Streamline Moderne style were incorporated

⁴¹ Discussion of the Streamline Moderne style in San Francisco is pulled directly from the Planning Department's 2010 historic context statement *San Francisco Modern Architectural and Landscape Design, 1935–1970*.

⁴² Lester Walker, *American Shelter* (Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1996), 220.

⁴³ Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 9.

into a wide range of property types including residential, commercial, institutional, industrial, educational, and recreational. Older commercial storefronts of the period were commonly remodeled to include elements of this popular style. Industrial and institutional buildings frequently incorporated glass blocks and rounded corners.

Design elements associated with Streamline Moderne include rounded corners and curved surfaces; curved railings and overhangs; speed lines (bands of horizontal piping); curved glass windows or small porthole windows; flat roof with coping at the roofline; smooth stucco or concrete wall surface, often painted white; wraparound windows at corners; metal balconettes, often curved; general absence of historically derived ornamentation; horizontal orientation; glass block window walls; aluminum, stainless steel, chrome, and or wood used for door and window trim; and towers or vertical projections. Streamline Moderne lettering and signage are often comprised of individual letters, often in a sans-serif, contemporary type face.⁴⁴

Streamline Moderne design elements found at 171 San Marcos Avenue include the curved entry portico and curved wall at the entrance. 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.

Second Bay Tradition⁴⁸

A unique regional Modern vernacular style developed in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late-1930s. 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: it embraces the machine and transcends the machine."⁴⁹ 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, that adapted to the landscape and climactic conditions, and that 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 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."⁵⁰ At the time, many argued that a Bay Region style was a figment of Mumford's imagination.⁵¹ The growing

⁴⁴ Mary Brown. *San Francisco Modern Architecture and Landscape Design, 1935-1970, Historic Context Statement*, San Francisco Planning Department, 168-170.

⁴⁸ Discussion of the Streamline Moderne style in San Francisco is pulled directly from the Planning Department's 2010 historic context statement *San Francisco Modern Architectural and Landscape Design, 1935-1970*.

⁴⁹ Gardner Dailey, *Domestic Architecture of the Bay Region* (San Francisco Museum of Art exhibition catalog, 1949), 4.

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ Pierluigi Serraino, *NorCalMod: Icons of Northern California Modernism* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 70.

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.⁵²

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.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ In 1949, even *Life* magazine published a spread of buildings it called “Bay Region Modern.”⁵⁵ By the 1950s, the term “Bay Area Style” was nationally known and accepted as a regional iteration of Modernism.⁵⁶

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 a “dry interpretation of the latest national fashion.”⁵⁷ 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 woodsy aesthetic, small scale, and redwood cladding (often interior as well as exterior).⁵⁸ 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.”⁵⁹ Second Bay Tradition buildings are often designed with a clear sensitivity to site and the natural environment. The style is noted for the close collaboration between architects and landscape architects. Although exteriors can appear plain, or even cheaply constructed, they were often highly complex; their outward simplicity “purposely played off against highly sophisticated spatial arrangements, surfaces, and details of design, and against a learned understanding of past historic architectural history.”⁶⁰ The Second Bay Tradition is associated with custom architects, rather than builder tracts (with the notable exception of Joseph Eichler’s architect-designed residential developments). Second Bay Tradition design was largely confined to the single-family house.

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, resulting in impressive feats in engineering and design. Most of the City’s Second Bay Tradition buildings were constructed in already built-out neighborhoods with established lot patterns.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ David Gebhard, “Introduction: The Bay Area Tradition,” in *Bay Area Houses*, ed. Sally Woodbridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 7.

⁵⁴ As quoted in David Gebhard, “Introduction: The Bay Area Tradition,” in *Bay Area Houses*, ed. Sally Woodbridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 8.

⁵⁵ Serrano, 75.

⁵⁶ Gebhard, (1976), 3.

⁵⁷ David Gebhard, “Introduction: The Bay Area Tradition,” in *Bay Area Houses*, ed. Sally Woodbridge (New York: Oxford Press, 1976), 8.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 9.

The Cowell House displays several key character-defining features associated with the Second Bay Tradition including: a simple or vernacular appearance; small scale, emphasis on volume rather than ornament; stained redwood siding; flat roof form; horizontal orientation; large expanses of glass and/or ribbon windows; open-plan or flexible interior plans; and an emphasis on indoor-outdoor living spaces.

FOREST HILL¹³⁵

Historical Development

171 San Marcos Avenue is located in the secluded Forest Hill residential neighborhood. Forest Hill lies slightly to the southwest of the geographical center of the City of San Francisco and is located at the base of the Mt. Sutro of the Twin Peaks. It is located approximately eight miles from San Francisco's Central Business District, the Financial District, and is bounded by Laguna Honda Boulevard to the northeast, Taraval Avenue to the south and 14th Avenue to the west.

The history of Forest Hill begins when Pio Pico, Mexican Governor of California presented a grant of one Spanish league (the equivalent of 4,443 acres) to Don Jose de Jesus Noé. The land given in the grant was known as Rancho San Miguel, and stretched from the western part of the Mission District across Sutro Forest to the other side of Twin Peaks.

Noé had come to California from Mexico in 1843 with a colonizing party. He became the last Mexican *alcalde* (mayor) of Yerba Buena, the name given to San Francisco by Spanish explorers.¹³⁶ During the Gold Rush, Noé, like other rancheros in San Francisco, had no financial means to preserve his ranch. Wages to police the ranches were high, costs to litigate rancho claims were high, and a series of droughts and floods affected his profits – this combined with the Financial Panic of 1852-59 required Noé to sell his lands.¹³⁷

In 1862, the Spring Valley Water Company purchased the natural lake, Laguna Honda, for use as a reservoir and built a flume to bring water from San Mateo County. In 1866, the city bought an additional sixty-two acres near the lake for the construction of the Alms House for the Poor (now the Laguna Honda Hospital). In 1880, Alfred Sutro bought the remainder of Rancho San Miguel after the eastern portion had been sold for residential developments. Sutro had arrived in San Francisco the previous year as a silver millionaire. Sutro planted thousands of trees and maintained the land as a nature preserve. With his death in 1898, the land and his heirs were involved in a complicated probate battle until a resolution was reached in 1909. Sutro's Rancho was put up for sale in 1910 – just as the City of San Francisco was desperate to recover from the devastating earthquake and fires.

Residential Suburb

Thousands of residents were displaced during the earthquake and many chose to restart their lives in other areas of the city or suburbs in the Peninsula or East Bay. For residents, it was actually faster to commute by ferry from the East Bay, than it was to live in the city and traverse Twin Peaks. City boosters were looking for opportunities to compete with the new subdivisions. In 1910, the City requested proposals for tunnels that would allow for the city to expand beyond Twin Peaks. Nationally renowned tunnel expert, Bion Arnold, was chosen to design the plan, which

¹³⁵ Discussion of the Forest Hill neighborhood is excerpted directly from an unpublished history produced by San Francisco Planning Department intern Susan Parks, 2012.

¹³⁶ City of San Francisco, Planning Department, *Noe Valley Neighborhood Statement*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*.

when completed in 1913, was also used by City Engineer, Michael O'Shaughnessy, as a blueprint for the expansion of the Municipal Railway in 1918.

The real estate firm of Baldwin & Howell (A.S. Baldwin was president and former appraiser of the Sutro estate) syndicated the sale of Sutro's Rancho for \$1.5 million in 1912. 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 Baldwin & Howell developed neighboring St. Francis Wood. A.S. Baldwin had been the appraiser of the Sutro estate, when he was impressed by hills and trees of the land and believed it would create a park-like experience for city dwellers.

Newell-Murdock was looking to duplicate the success of their Thousand Oaks community in Berkeley. The firm 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 picturesque neighborhood with quiet winding streets with houses peeking out from the trees. Unfortunately, the streets did not meet the City's requirements, and residents accepted the design and assumed responsibility by privately maintaining them for many years.

Forest Hill was influenced by the planning ideas popularized by the City Beautiful and Garden City movements. In 1905, Daniel Burnham, City Beautiful architect and planner, had created a plan to beautify all of San Francisco. His plans were abandoned after the 1906 Earthquake, but his influence can be seen in the grand boulevards, planned parks and axial arrangement of neo-classical monuments. Garden City called for residential parks of detached single-family houses, situated on villa-sized lots separated by curvilinear streets and lush landscaping, which prohibited commercial buildings. The combination of influences resulted in the Forest Hill design. As a result, the main entrance to Forest Hill is a boulevard system with a grand staircase leading to the expansive country-side cottages.

Newell-Murdock stressed the advantages of living in a forest and being able to walk to the Forest Hill streetcar station, from which downtown was only minutes away. In a concession to practicality, the developers reserved a few lots near the Forest Hill Station for a convenient commercial corridor. Also, Newell-Murdock donated twenty-one lots to the City for the Laguna Honda "Forest Hill" subway station. Like many others in real estate, the company was betting that the Twin Peaks Tunnel and its promise for a quick commute would create a thriving community and building boom.

In the 1920s, Lang Realty assumed possession of Forest Hill from Newell-Murdock and oversaw the construction of the majority of homes in Forest Hill. Many of which were designed by Lang Realty's company 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 designed. As such, its stark, yet woodsy aesthetic stood out from its whimsical neighbors. The design was influential, though, as the neighborhood features an unusual concentration of Modern houses designed in the 1940s-1950s, many with the redwood cladding popularized by the Second Bay Tradition architects.

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:

The Cowell Building at 171 San Marcos Avenue derives its significance from its association with Henry Cowell and its expressive Modern architectural design.

Association with significant person

The Cowell Building is closely associated with Henry Cowell, an avant-garde jazz pianist and composer. The house was commissioned by his parents, Henry and Olivia Cowell, with performances by Henry in mind. The interior features built-in cabinets, clad with a fibrous material, to enhance the living rooms acoustics.

Significant architecture

The Cowell House displays a high level of architectural expression and is considered the first Modern single-family house in San Francisco. The detached, redwood-clad building reflects an early fusion of the International Style, Streamline Moderne, and Second Bay Tradition. It embodies the woodsy aesthetic that came to characterize the Modern interpretation of the region-specific Second Bay Tradition. The building is also significant as a rare extant Modern building designed by master architects Morrow + Morrow.

Period of Significance

The Cowell House has a period of significance the year of construction, 1933.

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 Building at 171 San Marcos Avenue 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 Forest Hill, a neighborhood originally dominated by Period Revival designs. From the 1930s to 1950s, neighboring single-family houses were constructed, many with Second Bay Tradition design aesthetic, including unpainted wood siding, boxy shaped, and expansive window walls. Trees dominant the landscape and neighboring buildings likewise feature front yard setbacks and expansive rear yards. The block, which dead ends into a largely inaccessible portion of Hawk Hill park remains quiet, secluded with little street traffic.

Design, Materials, Workmanship

The exterior of 171 San Marcos Avenue retains the design features that were present during the established period of significance, including its form, massing, horizontal redwood cladding, awning garage door, entry portico, window bays and balconies, roof deck, and metal sash windows with horizontal muntin pattern.

Remodeling has largely been limited to the addition of sliding glass doors and a metal deck at the basement level of the rear façade. These exterior alterations are relatively minor, are compatible with the historic design, are barely visible from a rarely used public right-of-way, and do not detract from the building's significance or design intent. The building was clad in asphalt shingle sidings in the 1960s, though the shingles were removed and the building restored to its historic appearance 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 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 and rooflines
- All architectural finishes and features of the exterior elevations

- Building plan including spatial configuration of entry path
- Curved entry portico with curved half-wall
- Metal sash windows and doors set with horizontal muntins
- Projecting bay windows and balconies at rear facade
- Open roof deck

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

- None

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Historic Name: The Cowell House

Address: 171 San Marcos Avenue

Block and Lot: 2882 / 035

Owner: Christine Willensen

Original Use: Single-family house

Current Use: Single-family house

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

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