

Architectural Jewels



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Some of San Francisco's attractions are obvious, and most tour companies explore the well-known tourist traps. There are, however, loads of hidden treasures and a whole lotta folks who make it their business to show you their favorite spots. In this guide we present a sampling of the architecture of our beautiful city, so get out there and have fun! (NOTE: Our suggestion of San Francisco's "architectural jewels" are excerpted from Don & Betty Martin's Best of San Francisco book.)

Our 10 Most Handsome Victorians

"Of all the efflorescent, floriated bulbousness and flamboyant craziness that ever decorated a city, I think San Francisco may carry off the prize." – New York Times, 1883. The writer was talking about the "new" gingerbread Victorians. Were he here today, he'd probably prefer those "efflorescent structures" to some of the drab slabs built recently. Frankly, we like bulbous Victorians, and even some high-rises that have stepped out of the Wheaties box mold to offer a little form and shape. San Francisco may contain the greatest mix of building styles of any American city—get yourself a map and go see!

HAAS-LILIENTHAL HOUSE

Our premiere Victorian is a delightful clutter of elements from that architectural period: gingerbread trim, turrets, cupolas, dormer windows, and more filigree than you'll find in your great grandmother's hankie. Tours offered noon to 3p.m. Wednesdays, and 11a.m. to 4p.m. Sundays. 2007 Franklin St., 441-3000

HENRY OHLOFF HOUSE

Another elaborate architectural mix, this house sports a distinctive multi-faceted roof. 601 Steiner Street

ITALIANATE-STYLE HOUSE

This wins our vote as one of the most attractive small Victorians in the city. A restrained and tasteful use of colors on this little false-front home is particularly eye pleasing. Italianate homes typically have straighter lines than the more complex Queen Annes of the later Victorian era. 817 Grove Street.

QUEEN ANNE-STYLE HOUSE

Built in 1895 and now housing law offices, it's a particularly noteworthy example of the Queen Anne style; with twin towers and a decorative frieze that circles the structure just under the roofline. 1701 Franklin Street.

RUSSIAN CONSULATE

A large four-story Italianate mansion built in 1875 to house the consular corps of Imperial Russia; this structure characterizes the San Francisco Stick style—slender with many vertical lines, including a striking lookout tower. 1198 Fulton Street. NOTE: The Martin's listing of this building as the Russian Consulate is a misnomer and persistent SF urban legend. This incredible house has been called this for years despite the fact that it was never a consulate. The house was actually built in 1889 for banker and candy baron William Westerfeld.

SPRECKELS MANSION

Built in 1887 for sugar baron Adolph Spreckels, this great square-shouldered Victorian has several cupolas cut into the roof and colonial columns at its entrance, supporting an unusual half-moon portico above. 737 Buena Vista West Street.

TOWER HOUSE

Surrounded by a scruffy neighborhood, this elaborate Victorian is a fine example of a "tower house"—one or more towers dominate as architectural features. 573 South Van Ness Avenue.

CHATEAU TIVOLI

It is probably the most elaborate, gingerbread Victorian in the city, a fun conglomeration of cupolas, witches-hat towers, balconies, and gabled roofs. It's as close to a fairy-castle Victorian as you'll find. 1057 Steiner Street.

VICTORIAN DUPLEX

Many Victorians survive in the Fillmore District on the edge of Pacific Heights, and this is one of the more curious examples. It's a perfectly symmetrical duplex, a fusing of two skinny garage-over-San Francisco-stick Victorians, with scalloped columns supporting twin entries. 2527-2538 Washington Street.

LOVELY HAIGHT-ASHBURY VICTORIAN

This district, the former haven of 60's Flower Children, offers an extensive collection of Victorians, and gentrification is leading to many restorations. One of our favorites is this gabled and turreted four-story mansion with curved glass bay windows. 500-502 Cole Street

Five of Our Most Attractive Non-Residential Buildings

THE AUDIFFRED BUILDING

This French Renaissance office building with its green inset columns, red brick, and filigreed mansard roof is perhaps the most attractive commercial structure in the city. 100 Embarcadero.

ALCAZAR THEATER

Sometimes whimsy can be handsome. This recently renovated theater was built in 1917 as an Arabian-style Shriner's Temple. Picture a Middle Eastern lace façade with filigreed arches and balconies above, topped off by a big blueberry ice cream scoop of a dome. 650 Geary Street.

CONSERVATORY OF FLOWERS

A grand greenhouse in the Victorian style, and the oldest structure in Golden Gate Park was supposedly fashioned after London's Kew Gardens Conservatory. Ordered as a gift to the city of San Jose by early real estate magnate James Lick, it was built in Europe, taken apart, and shipped around Cape Horn. Lick had a falling out with San Jose officials and, in a huff, left the thing in its crates, where it remained until his death. In 1877, a group of San Francisco businessmen bought it from Lick's estate and had it assembled in the Park. The structure was badly damaged by a wind storm in 1998 and after a 25 million dollar reconstruction is open again to the public. JFK Drive, Golden Gate Park.

THE PALACE OF FINE ARTS

Romanesque colonnaded rotunda stands before a reflecting pool in the Marina District. It was built as a showpiece for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Expo. 3301 Lyon Street.

ST. MARY'S CATHEDRAL

St. Mary's is perhaps the most striking example of modern church architecture in the west, with wing like rooflines that sweep up into a cross. The massive yet graceful structure occupies two city blocks and soars skyward 200 feet. Inside, the lofty conception continues as your eyes trace four brilliant strips of leaded glass up the walls to the top of the distinctive square dome. 1111 Gough Street, 567-2020. Open to the public 9a.m.-5p.m.

The Top 25 San Francisco Architectural Gems according to the American Institute of Architecture.

These are the top 25 buildings in San Francisco, according to the board of directors of the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The AIA classified the buildings in 5 ways and amazingly enough there are only three buildings that made both the AIA and the Martin's lists.

RELIGIOUS

GRACE CATHEDRAL, 1051 Taylor Street, 1928, Lewis Hobart This "French Gothic" masterpiece was built to replace a church destroyed in the 1906 Fire and is the third largest Episcopal cathedral in the nation. Famed for its Ghiberti doors ("The Gates of Paradise"), labyrinths, varied stained glass, and medieval and contemporary furnishings, as well as its carillon, organs, and choir, the Cathedral has become an international pilgrimage center for church-goer and visitor alike.

ST. MARY'S CATHEDRAL, 1111 Gough Street, 1971, Pietro Belluschi, Pier Luigi Nervi and McSweeney, Ryan & Lee .

TEMPLE EMANU-EL, 2 Lake Street, 1926, Arthur Page Brown In 1927, the American Institute of Architects selected Temple Emanu-El as the finest piece of architecture in Northern California. The Awards Committee honored it as, “a glorious building . . . beautifully planned and modeled . . . realizing to the highest degree the expression of its religious character.”

SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH, 2107 Lyon Street, 1894, Arthur Page Brown Designated as a National Historic Landmark it is the first and only house of worship to be afforded this honor.

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH, 1187 Franklin Street, 1888, George Percy/1970, Callister Payne & Rosse

RESIDENTIAL

PLAZA APARTMENTS, Sixth and Howard streets, 2006, Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects and Paulett Taggart Architects The honor for this Sixth and Howard street building is especially compelling because the structure is subsidized housing built in a low-income area of San Francisco.

CURRAN HOUSE, 145 Taylor Street, 2005, David Baker + Partners, Architects Another award winning subsidized housing unit that blends with and enhances its neighborhood. Each of these young housing complexes is a humane example of high design for people with low incomes.

3200 BLOCK OF PACIFIC AVENUE, houses from 1900 to 1913 designed by architects including Ernest Coxhead, Bernard Maybeck, Willis Polk and William Knowles

RUSSELL HOUSE, 3778 Washington Street, 1952, Erich Mendelsohn

HAAS-LILIENTHAL HOUSE, 2007 Franklin Street, 1886, Peter R. Schmidt

COMMERCIAL

SAN FRANCISCO FEDERAL BUILDING, 90 Seventh Street, 2007, Morphosis/SmithGroup One of the newest additions to the city skyline this soaring “green” building is already a favorite

1 BUSH STREET (former Crown-Zellerbach Building), 1959, Skidmore Owings & Merrill and Hertzka & Knowles. The two facades of the building juxtapose glass and dark marble in a striking example of modern architecture. And the round building at its base, originally home to a bank is a great contrast to the soaring planes of San Francisco’s first glass tower.

HALLIDIE BUILDING, 130 Sutter Street, 1917, Willis Polk Built to house the offices of Edward Hallidie the inventor of the Cable Car system, the glass curtain hanging from the front of this building was a design breakthrough that has rarely been matched even today.

TRANSAMERICA PYRAMID, 600 Montgomery Street, 1972, William Pereira This is, of course, the iconic image of the San Francisco skyline. Like the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge it symbolizes San Francisco to the world.

JPMORGAN CHASE BUILDING, 560 Mission Street, 2002, Cesar Pelli

HISTORIC

PALACE HOTEL, 2 New Montgomery Street, 1909, Trowbridge and Livingston The Garden Court in this building once was the carriage drive for the hotel, now high tea is the order of business in this elegantly appointed domed room. Also of note is the Pied Piper Bar home to a Maxfield Parish’s Mural The Pied Piper of Hamelin

CIRCLE GALLERY, 140 Maiden Lane, 1948, Frank Lloyd Wright This small gallery was a dry run for the ramps and open spaces that Wright fully realized in New York’s Guggenheim.

PALACE OF FINE ARTS, 3301 Lyon Street, 1915, Bernard Maybeck

WAR MEMORIAL OPERA HOUSE AND VETERANS BUILDING, Civic Center, 1932, Arthur Brown Jr. and G. Albert Lansburgh These twin buildings are two of the many Beaux Arts treasures that fill the Civic Center.

CONSERVATORY OF FLOWERS, Golden Gate Park, 1878 (restoration architects, 2003: Architectural Resources Group)

