

Gems of the city: A list of S.F.'s top 25



[John King](#)

Tuesday, April 17, 2007

Put any group of 20 architects in a room and ask them to choose the buildings in their city that are of special significance, and I'll wager no two lists will be alike.

But when that opinionated mob is also the board of directors of the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, its verdict is delivered with a certain gravitas.

<< [Top 25 buildings: Share your opinions in Culture Blog](#) >>

So say hello to the semiofficial list of San Francisco's top 25 buildings, divided neatly into five choices in five categories: religious, residential, commercial, historic and civic.

And let the second-guessing begin.

There are beloved landmarks such as the Palace of Fine Arts and controversial newcomers, including the steel-sheathed federal tower at Seventh and Mission streets. You've got a block of century-old homes for the wealthy across from the Presidio, and low-income apartment buildings on Sixth Street and in the Tenderloin.

There's the big-eared Transamerica Pyramid and the sublime Palace Hotel -- two very different icons from very different eras.

"Our goal was to find the gems in our city that can be enjoyed by both architects and the public," says Zigmund Rubel, president of the local chapter's board and a principal at the firm Anshen+Allen. "We also wanted a mixture of turn-of-the-century buildings and more contemporary works.

The list comes two months after the national AIA released the results of an online survey that produced what it calls "America's 150 favorite structures." Gimmicky as all get-out, but irresistible -- which is why the institute's Web site received more than 5 million hits in the next three days.

This list doesn't involve a public survey. Nor is it the result of a consultation with the San Francisco chapter's 2,300 members.

Instead, the board was prodded to take a stand by chapter Executive Director Margie O'Driscoll.

(Note: The chapter covers only San Francisco and Marin counties. That's why the rest of the Bay Area is ignored.)

"Our objective was pretty clear," O'Driscoll says. "We want to inspire people to look at buildings and think about them critically, in both a positive and negative sense."

O'Driscoll wanted a brazen batch of just five faves -- but architects are a breed that loves nothing more than to finesse details, so instead there are five discrete lists with five buildings each. The board gathered in March and started whittling away.

Many choices are irrefutable -- you can't fight City Hall, at least not Arthur Brown Jr.'s Beaux Arts masterpiece -- and other buildings deserve acclaim simply because they bring joy. For instance, the Conservatory of Flowers adds a magical whimsy to Golden Gate Park, even though the parts were assembled in 1878 from a kit shipped over from England.

Similarly, who can begrudge Bernard Maybeck's romantic Palace of Fine Arts? It's a revered survivor of the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition -- even though it happens to be fake, a 1960s concrete replica of the plaster original.

And this being San Francisco, there's a conscientious effort to be (architecturally) diverse. The Haas-Lilienthal House from 1886, the very embodiment of Victorian style, takes a bow; so does the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, a triumph of cool abstraction that opened in 2005.

We also see -- and I doubt this was the board's intent -- that San Francisco's allure lies in geography and neighborhood context as opposed to architectural innovation.

The Palace of the Legion of Honor is an exquisite 1916 knockoff of neo-classical Paris. The old Crown-Zellerbach Building at 1 Bush St. is an exquisite 1959 knockoff of the modern towers perfected by Skidmore Owings & Merrill in Chicago and New York.

Aside from 1917's Hallidie Building with its glass curtain wall, you won't find design breakthroughs; the best buildings on the list distill what came before, as with 1 Bush St. and the Palace of the Legion of Honor.

The Federal Building and the de Young are welcome experiments by renowned outsiders. The same goes for 560 Mission St. -- a boxy blue tower from 2002 that shows how refined Cesar Pelli can be.

As for the second-guessing mentioned above, *I'm thrilled to see Curran House and the Plaza Apartments on the list: Each of these young housing complexes is a humane example of high design for people with low incomes.* (italics db+p)

But where are San Francisco's jazzy office towers from the late 1920s? A skyscraper like George Kelham's Shell Building at 100 Bush St. has an intoxicating pizzazz you won't find at the Pyramid or 1 Bush.

Rubel concedes the inherent subjectivity of a list hammered out over a conference table in an hour of spirited debate.

"What we came up with is representative of San Francisco, and it's the result of consensus," Rubel says. "With more time, maybe we would have tweaked it a bit."

But why leave the tweaking to the professionals? Readers, step to the plate. Is this top 25 a set of masterpieces, or mistakes, or some of each? What's missing?

No need to stop at the county line, either; there's a whole Bay Area to explore and deplore. I'll pass along some of your responses on May 1.

TOP 25

The top 25 buildings in San Francisco, according to the board of directors of the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

Religious

Grace Cathedral, 1051 Taylor St., 1928, Lewis Hobart

St. Mary's Cathedral, 1111 Gough St., 1971, Pietro Belluschi, Pier Luigi Nervi and McSweeney, Ryan & Lee

Temple Emanu-el, 2 Lake St., 1926, Arthur Page Brown

Swedenborgian Church, 2107 Lyon St., 1894, Arthur Page Brown

First Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin St., 1888, George Percy/1970, Callister Payne & Rosse

Residential

Plaza Apartments, Sixth and Howard streets, 2006, Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects and Paulett Taggart Architects

Curran House, 145 Taylor St., 2005, David Baker + Partners, Architects (italics db+p)

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 St., 1952, Erich Mendelsohn

Haas-Lilienthal House, 2007 Franklin St., 1886, Peter R. Schmidt

Commercial

San Francisco Federal Building, 90 Seventh St., 2007, Morphosis/SmithGroup

1 Bush St. (former Crown-Zellerbach Building), 1959, Skidmore Owings & Merrill and Hertzka & Knowles

Hallidie Building, 130 Sutter St., 1917, Willis Polk

Transamerica Pyramid, 600 Montgomery St., 1972, William Pereira

JPMorgan Chase Building, 560 Mission St., 2002, Cesar Pelli

Historic

Palace Hotel, 2 New Montgomery St., 1909, Trowbridge and Livingston

Circle Gallery, 140 Maiden Lane, 1948, Frank Lloyd Wright

Palace of Fine Arts, 3301 Lyon St., 1915, Bernard Maybeck

War Memorial Opera House and Veterans Building, Civic Center, 1932, Arthur Brown Jr. and G. Albert Lansburgh

Conservatory of Flowers, Golden Gate Park, 1878 (restoration architects, 2003: Architectural Resources Group)

Civic

M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, Golden Gate Park, 2005, Herzog & de Meuron and Fong & Chan Architects

City Hall, Civic Center, 1915, Bakewell & Brown

Yerba Buena Gardens: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 1994, Fumihiko Maki; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, 1994, James Stewart Polshek; Metreon, 1999, SMWM, Gary Handel + Associates

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., 1995, Mario Botta, Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum

Palace of the Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, 1916, George Applegarth

Source: American Institute of Architects

A correction has been made to the above article.

Place appears on Tuesdays. E-mail John King at jking@sfchronicle.com. Comments also are welcome at feedback@aiasf.org.

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle



Brian Rose