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San Francisco: The City Beautiful

San Francisco has seldom lacked for visions of what it might become. Its self-professed imperial destiny in the Pacific Basin—trumpeted by its leaders since the Gold Rush—demanded corresponding and permanent imagery. Yet that dream of durability, convenience, and beauty by deliberate design has largely eluded it. San Francisco became beautiful not because of but despite the men who built it.

Swiss surveyor Jean Vioget unwittingly locked the city’s future growth into a relentless geometry when he laid down a grid of twelve blocks around Portsmouth Plaza in 1859. In subsequent decades that pattern would be extended east across the town’s harbor and seven miles west across rugged topography to the beach. When hills got in the way, they were blasted for bay fill (fig. 1).

The grid—containing and defining property lines—is ample proof of the dominance of paper over reality. Arbitrary and invisible as they are, property lines have repeatedly resisted both disaster and visions of a better city.

The Visionary Tradition
The half century following the Gold Rush produced no significant schemes for the public betterment of San Francisco other than the sporadic development of
Golden Gate Park. As the command post of Western exploitation, San Francisco thrived on mining and land speculation. Municipal government was notoriously weak and corrupt and the concept of public planning virtually synonymous with socialism for the city’s builders.

The first act of monumental planning in the Bay Area was therefore undertaken by private initiative on an estate thirty miles south of the city. Leland and Jane Stanford’s creation of a university complex in memory of their deceased son, utilizing the talents of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and architect H. H. Richardson (and his successor firm after his death), helped to trigger a series of events leading to the visionary re-creation of San Francisco in 1905.

Begun in 1888, the Stanford quadrangle (fig. 2) constitutes one of the most brilliant and original examples of nineteenth-century ensemble planning. Individual buildings organized on formal axes were linked by a continuous Romanesque arcade enclosing a sequence of plazas. One entered the quadrangle through a triumphal arch; a frieze depicted Leland and Jane Stanford leading the forward march of civilization against the recalcitrant force of nature. (The arch is no longer there, having fallen down in 1906.)

Leland Stanford and his designers intended the original quadrangle to be extended indefinitely as the university grew, but his widow abandoned the plan at his death. The Stanford quadrangle forcefully demonstrated, however, what a few strong-willed individuals could achieve with sufficient capital on land free of subdivision lines.

As Stanford was being built, a group of young architects who were to exert a profound impact on the Bay Area arrived in San Francisco. Willis Polk, A.
Lewis Edward Hickmott. World’s Columbian Exposition (Court of Honor), 1893.
Oil on canvas, 51 × 80 in. (129.5 × 203.2 cm).
Collection of the Chicago Historical Society.
The World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago marked a sea change in American taste. It appeared as a revelation of classical harmony to Americans inured to dark and dirty cities built by laissez-faire industry and commerce. For decades following it, classical architecture was de rigueur for public and private buildings. Initiating the “City Beautiful” movement, the exposition made urban planning possible for the first time in the United States.

Oil on canvas, 52 × 27 in. (132.1 × 68.6 cm).
Collection of the University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, gift of William Randolph Hearst, Jr. (Photo: Ben Blackwell)
As widow and heiress of mining millionaire George Hearst, Phoebe Apperson Hearst adopted the state university at Berkeley and sponsored an international competition to make it the most beautiful in the world. A discriminating patron of architecture and education, the former Missouri schoolteacher was named the first woman regent of the University of California and, through countless benefactions, built it into a world-renowned institution.

Sepia print with ink inscriptions, 10½ × 29¾ in. (26.7 × 74.9 cm).
Collection of University Archives, Stanford University. (Photo: Ben Blackwell)
The proposed Stanford quadrangles were among the most brilliant examples of nineteenth-century ensemble planning, demonstrating what determined individuals could accomplish on land free of subdivision lines.
Page Brown, and Bernard Maybeck came to a city which they described as more fascinating than beautiful, a site of flagrantly missed opportunities.9 The arrival of well-trained architects coincided with the emergence of wealthy clients (many with second-generation fortunes) who desired a fitting image for their putative Queen City of the Pacific. Most of them witnessed the trend-setting World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 (fig. 3) and wanted more of the same for their own hometown. The fair, as one observer recalled, was “a miniature of the ideal city...a unity on a single architectural scale”—and an implied condemnation of the hideous growth and class warfare which laissez-faire economics had produced across America.

The Chicago exposition inspired San Francisco Chronicle publisher Michael deYoung to initiate a smaller world’s fair in his own city for the following year. The Midwinter Fair of 1894 in Golden Gate Park, using leftover exhibitions from Chicago, was intended by deYoung to stimulate San Francisco’s depressed economy and, architecturally, to express the exotic heritage of California in its Farrago of Near Eastern and Mission Revival “palaces.”

For San Francisco banker (later to be mayor) James Duval Phelan the fair was an impetus for urban greatness, but for other observers it was yet more proof of the city’s provincialism. Boston’s Architectural Review raked the fair as an example of mediocre architecture and incoherent planning. Willis Polk, who worked on the fair, described it as “a frightful nightmare.”14 The Midwinter Fair left no permanent mark besides the Music Concourse, a few sculptures, and the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park.

Of more lasting significance was the convergence, in 1896, of Bernard Maybeck and Phoebe Apperson Hearst. Maybeck had recently settled in the Bay Area after a rigorous course of architectural study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. At his residential atelier in north Berkeley, Maybeck trained and inspired a group of young men and women who themselves would go to the Ecole and return to embellish the Bay Area. Phoebe Hearst had recently inherited the bulk of her husband’s mining and real estate fortune and was embarking on a dynamic career of philanthropy and patronage.

Disgusted by the Victorian hodgepodge of buildings on the rural Berkeley campus, Maybeck proposed a
5  *The Boulevard des Italiens, Paris, 1905.*
Courtesy Préfecture de Paris and Norma Evenson.
By 1900 wealthy Americans and their favored architects were well aware of what Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann had accomplished in rebuilding the French capital. With characteristic chauvinism, they took Paris as a model for what Yankee know-how could do bigger and better at home. San Franciscans called their city the Paris of the Pacific and proposed to rectify earlier mistakes through coordinated planning.

6  *Bird’s-eye view of central Paris on the Right Bank.*
Courtesy Institut Géographique National and Norma Evenson.
The grand boulevards cutting through the heart of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century served as the model for what Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett proposed as the ideal solution to San Francisco's traffic problems. In addition, these streets would double as fire breaks in a city dangerously full of wooden structures.
comprehensive plan modeled on that of the Chicago exposition. Hearing of Maybeck's idea, Mrs. Hearst (fig. 4) offered to finance an international competition for the state university, cost being no object.

How much Phoebe Hearst was motivated by rivalry with Jane Stanford is not clear, but it was not her intention to create a design specifically Californian, like Stanford University, but one fully in the mainstream of international taste. She would shake California from its provincialism.

Hearst sent Maybeck to Europe, where he met with architects and formulated a utopian program for the competition. Each entrant was invited to "record his conception of an ideal home for a University, assuming time and resources to be unlimited. He is to plan for centuries to come." The program concluded: "It is the intention to restore the artist and the art idea to their old pre-eminence. The architect will simply design, others must provide the cost." Maybeck envisioned a Hearst-financed Renaissance on the Pacific coast.

In 1898 in Antwerp the jurors announced eleven finalists, all of whom were invited to inspect the site at Phoebe Hearst's expense. When they arrived, her own desire for imperial grandeur and order jumped the Bay. At a December 3 dinner for the architects at San Francisco's select Bohemian Club, Mayor James Phelan made a startling announcement. Mrs. Hearst, Phelan revealed, had told him of her intention to sponsor a second international competition "for plans by which the city of San Francisco may be laid out, altered, and improved on artistic and scientific lines as Napoleon through Baron Haussmann laid out Paris" (figs. 5, 6). Engineers would be invited to submit plans for the grading of new boulevards, the creation of new parks, and the construction of a badly needed sewer system. Regent Jacob Reinstein announced that Mrs. Hearst was also considering the establishment of a department of architecture at Berkeley, "where young men should be trained especially for the carrying out of the plan for the beautification and fitness in every respect beneath and above the ground of this city of ours."

Phelan's announcement was received with wild enthusiasm. The San Francisco Call headlined: "Would Build a City to Rival Rome of Old." The San Francisco Examiner predicted that the city would "rank with Florence, Constantinople, Edinburgh, and perhaps, thanks to her beautiful location, excel them all." Finalist Stephen Codman exclaimed that "the competition might be held up as a classic......I feel that this is an epoch from which the growth of American architecture may date."

Going even further, Mayor Phelan noted that the city had no municipal debt so there was no reason why the money to carry out the plans "could not be raised easily and willingly by self-imposed taxation." More than a new San Francisco, Phelan anticipated a New Jerusalem.

It is unclear why Phoebe Hearst, then in Paris, did not follow through on her offer. Her biographer,
Judith Robinson, speculates that she may have been overextended in her charities. In 1905, complaining of the parasitism of San Franciscans and the unwillingness of other wealthy citizens to pull their own weight, she left the Bay Area to live for a period in Paris. Nonetheless, the enthusiasm generated by her announcement would lead Phelan to inaugurate the Burnham Plan for San Francisco in 1904.

The Hearst competition was officially concluded in San Francisco in August 1899 after what the London Builder called an “exceptional and perhaps unprecedented architectural competition.” The finalists’ enormous Beaux-Arts drawings (fig. 7) were exhibited in a gallery of San Francisco’s new Ferry Building, where their utopian example would not be lost on citizens.

Willis Polk scathingly denounced the competition as a megalomaniac waste of money, but he had his own plans for the Ferry Building. Because of the city’s isolated position at the end of a peninsula, that terminus, completed in 1898, filled the role of the great train stations in other major cities; its monumental façade and clock tower bespoke its importance as one of the busiest passenger depots in the world. The building’s handsome tower (possibly designed by Polk) had the added advantage of terminating Market Street, the
city’s principal artery. Yet on leaving the depot, the transcontinental traveler’s introduction to the self-styled Paris of the West was an encounter with severe traffic congestion amidst shabby waterfront dives, chandleries, and warehouses. Polk proposed to remedy the situation with a curved peristyle bowing out from the terminal, enclosing a forecourt modeled on that of Bernini’s for St. Peter’s in Rome (fig. 8). The peristyle would meet at a triumphal arch through which one would enter or leave Market Street.

First proposed in the weekly magazine *The Wave* in 1896, Polk’s peristyle and arch scheme repeatedly surfaced for at least the next fifteen years. In 1905 Bernard Maybeck recommended in the *Merchants’ Association Review* that the complex be built of plaster over lath, as in contemporary exposition architecture, and gradually replaced with stone as money became available.11

At the other end of Market Street, both Polk and Mayor Phelan promoted an extension of the Golden Gate Park Panhandle. One city block wide, the Panhandle would, if extended thirteen blocks east, exactly meet the intersection of the two principal streets of San Francisco, Market and Van Ness.12


Extending the Golden Gate Park Panhandle thirteen blocks east to the intersection of Market and Van Ness became a lasting obsession for James Duval Phelan and Willis Polk. It was actively promoted by the Hearst-owned Examiner.

In an article titled “How to Beautify San Francisco,” Polk vilified the picturesque landscaping of Golden Gate Park and recommended the example of Versailles to the park commissioners for its redesign.15 If the Panhandle extension were to be executed in the formal manner of Le Nôtre, he predicted, San Francisco would have its own Champs-Élysées (fig. 9), and the “hideous, crazy, bay windowed and begabled houses” facing the park would be replaced by more dignified and permanent buildings. In the same article, Polk endorsed another improvement close to the new intersection. The scheme was developed gratuitously by architect B.J.S. Cahill and published and promoted by William Randolph Hearst’s *Examiner* in the fall of 1899.14

At that time the City Hall occupied a triangular lot largely on the site of the present main library, while
the wooden Mechanics Pavilion stood on the neighboring block where the Exposition Auditorium now stands. Cahill proposed uniting these large structures and the dignified Hibernia Bank building north of Market Street with the ornate post office and federal courthouse then being built just south of the street.

Cahill’s shotgun wedding of desirable structures required the demolition of all inharmonious buildings in the vicinity. A grand hotel and theater would be built on an island in the middle of Market Street, which would be split around it. Classical architecture, Pari-
sian landscaping, ornamental lamp standards, and monuments would make that bleak neighborhood into a permanent world’s fair and an architectural comple-
ment to the Ferry Building tower at the other end of the street.

Polk’s peristyle, Cahill’s civic center, and the Pan-
handle extension all were hot topics in 1899, stimu-
lated, no doubt, by the climax of the Hearst competi-
tion, the prosperity promised by the Spanish-American War, and the mayoralty of James Duval Phelan.

The fastidious and scholarly son of a pioneer Irish banker, Phelan was a prototypical magnum of the American Renaissance. “Pericles could not have loved Athens more than this man loved San Francisco,” eulogized one biographer. As mayor (1897-1902), the bachelor prince launched a campaign for civic re-
form and artistic patronage with a sense of noblesse oblige matched only by Phoebe Hearst. Phelan patronized local artists, among them the director of the Mark Hopkins Art Institute, Arthur Mathews, who shared the mayor’s hopes for San Francisco. When commissioned by the State Legislature in 1913 to dec-
orate the rotunda of the State Capitol, Mathews envisioned the city of the future through the Greco-
Roman lens he shared with his well-educated contemporaries. San Francisco’s destiny was a fantasy of sordid commerce and manufacture but of dancing maidens, busy artists, and a domed and colonnaded Byzantium by the Pacific. In one unfinished cartoon a penciled sculptor in the foreground suggests Mathews’ own vision in its incipience.

As local Maecenas, Phelan paid for or promoted hortatory monuments in parks and on Market Street and donated a library building to the city. In his second inaugural message as Democratic reform mayor in 1899, he insisted that the Panhandle extension was an essential public improvement. Apparently inspired by Phoebe Hearst’s offer, the Democratic platform of the same year recommended a master plan so that San Francisco would grow “on broad and liberal lines, that

will ultimately conduce to the health, comfort, and prosperity of its inhabitants.”

Though Phelan stumped tirelessly for a renewed San Francisco, he accomplished little. In 1901 he was voted out of office for his role in breaking a violent waterfront strike and for his identification with leading local capitalists. The patrician mayor was replaced by Eugene Schmitz, the Union Labor Party’s candidate, and by Schmitz’s manager, “Boss” Abraham Ruef.

The Burnham/Bennett Plan for San Francisco

Out of office, Phelan had time to devote himself more fully to municipal reform and to its physical embodiment in a revamped San Francisco that would express its growing military and commercial role in the Pacific Basin. In the latter role, he worked closely with Willis Polk, the West Coast representative of Daniel Burn-
ham of Chicago.

Phelan and Polk looked to Washington, D.C., for an object lesson in what imperial San Francisco could become. The Hearst competition drawings had toured the country for six months after being judged in San Francisco. In December 1900 they were exhibited at the Cosmos Club in Washington during the annual convention of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Citing the competition and winning plan as “a clear idea of the effectiveness which may be produced by an intelligent grouping of buildings,” the AIA directors recommended the formation of a commission to develop a plan for the nation’s capital. Burnham was appointed to head the Senate Park Commission for this purpose. Using Paris as the logical referent, the commission presented its grandiloquent plan to Con-
gress in 1902.

On January 15, 1904, Phelan founded the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco (AIASF), with many of the city’s business and professional leaders as members. In May the association officially requested a plan from Burnham, who enthusiastically agreed. After surveying the city for a few weeks, he put his young assistant Edward Bennett in charge and hurried off to the Philippines to develop plans for occupied Manila and a new summer capital at Baguio.

While Burnham doubtlessly did some preliminary work on the plan that bears his name, he was, in fact, infrequently in San Francisco and would later give credit to his assistant. English-born Bennett had studied informally in Berkeley with Bernard Maybeck and had been sent to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.
in 1895 by Phoebe Hearst. From a Polk-designed “shack” high on Twin Peaks, Burnham and Bennett fabricated the imperial image that the city’s businessmen wished to convey. Bennett’s sketches for the plan survive at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Completed in 1905, the Burnham Plan is the most comprehensive vision ever formulated for the redevelopment and future growth of San Francisco (fig. 10). Its changes in the city’s existing land-use patterns are so numerous and audacious that they suggest the designers had applied the utopian program of the Hearst competition to an existing city.

Client Phelan’s obsession predominated. “First in importance,” began the plan, “is the extension of the Panhandle to the center of the city.” From the semicircular civic center that would develop at its intersection with Market and Van Ness, radial boulevards would slash outward through the existing grid like a Parisian rond-point. The Panhandle would continue as a broad diagonal through the South of Market district to the Pacific Mail steamship docks. The grid pattern on the city’s steepest hills would be redrawn on contour lines and their slopes built in tiers like Italian hill towns.

The park system was to be vastly expanded as well; a park would be developed for working-class residents on the site of their houses on Potrero Hill, and another park, three times the size of Golden Gate Park, would sweep from the summit of Twin Peaks down to the sea at Lake Merced. The crest of the Peaks would be leveled for a colossal statue of San Francisco gazing toward the Pacific in a plaza embraced by a colonnaded athenaeum: “a nucleus for the skirmish line of advance in civilization.” A meandering park chain would have followed the course of Islais Creek in the southeastern quadrant of the city and was likened to Washington, D.C.’s Rock Creek Park.

Imperial gestures were not lacking. Telegraph Hill would be cleared of its shanties and developed as a Palatine Hill with majestic stairs, luxury apartments, public buildings, and a monument to the pioneers in a formal garden at its summit (fig. 11). An immense stadium would occupy Cole Valley in the upper Haight, offering views of the Golden Gate recalling the vista from Delphi. A proposed bayside parade ground in the Presidio was a foretaste of Albert Speer’s Zeppelin Field at Nuremberg.

The Burnham Plan was completed and presented to the Board of Supervisors on September 27, 1905. Though some estimated the cost at $50 million, Burnham assured the city’s business leaders that the plan would more than pay for itself in increased land values, modernized transportation and port facilities, and, above all, by a flood of tourists eager to see and enjoy the world’s most beautiful city.

So seductive was the overall concept and Bennett’s drawings for it that even Michael deYoung’s Chronicle, traditionally the voice of the bottom line, initially supported it. Others remained skeptical; the directors of the powerful Merchants’ Association stated: “San Francisco is a commercial city, and while every effort should be made to beautify the streets, the city’s growth and prosperity should not be sacrificed simply to give business districts an aesthetic appearance.”

Much as Burnham would have liked to play Baron Haussmann to Phelan’s Napoleon III, neither of them had the power needed to realize their dream. Noble diagrams were largely futile against the sanctity with which the Constitution had endowed private property. Both were operating as well in one of the most contentious cities in the United States.

What English socialist Beatrice Webb observed in 1898 had been true of San Francisco since the Gold Rush. Noting that it was “isolated from and unconcerned with any other part of America,” she went on to claim, “It has no standards, no common customs; no common ideals of excellence, of intellect or manners—only one universal anarchy.”

Social and political antagonisms fragmented San Francisco with particular intensity at the time of the Burnham Plan. The 1905 mayoral election had been unusually vicious, with Phelan, Fremont Older’s Bulletin, and their associates charging widespread corruption in the Schmitz administration. Though Schmitz won in a landslide, Phelan, Older, and financier Rudolph Spreckels were secretly preparing an all-out graft prosecution in the spring of 1906 when the San Andreas fault delivered a surprise of its own.

The shock that rolled across northern California on the morning of April 18, 1906, ignited a firestorm that accomplished in three days what Burnham had estimated might take fifty years of deliberation and negotiation; it hid the peninsula of about half of built San Francisco. Burnham rushed to the Pacific coast from Europe to view the scorched tabula rasa on which he expected to realize his plan. After all, he reasoned, the radial boulevards were intended to double as firebreaks to prevent uncontrolled conflagrations. Burnham failed to reckon with the power of the grid, which remained imprinted on the land amidst the rubble.

In May and again in August Burnham and Bennett presented to the Committee for Reconstruction their plans for the realignment and widening of streets in
The 1905 Burnham Plan was the most comprehensive and audacious plan to redevelop San Francisco. Burnham, Edward Bennett, and James Duval Phelan envisioned it as the Paris of the Pacific in fact as well as in name. Red overlays on the existing street plan show new boulevards, while shaded areas stand for the expanded park system.
the burned section. The Panhandle would yet be extended across Market, as would Montgomery (now Columbus) Avenue. Curved streets would circumscribe the lower slopes of Nob and Russian hills. Many existing streets would be widened. Parks would be carved out of congested neighborhoods.25

Even as Burnham, back in Chicago a month after the fire, was exulting that the “San Francisco of the future will be the most beautiful city of the continent, with the possible exception of Washington,”26 Michael deYoung was editorializing in his Chronicle that “the crying need of San Francisco today is not more parks and boulevards; it is business.” Citing the example of London—rebuilt by the dictates of trade rather than on the baroque plan of Sir Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of 1666—deYoung stridently opposed the “unbusinesslike” schemes of Burnham and Phelan.25

The published Burnham/Bennett Plan of August 1906 demonstrates why it immediately self-destructed.26 Street modifications were superimposed on a block book showing property ownership in the burned district. The property of hundreds of San Franciscans—among them the town’s leading citizens, including deYoung—would have had to be condemned by the city. The cost was estimated at anywhere from $8 million to $40 million. In fact, there was almost no municipal government at the time to accomplish such a feat.

With an entire city to be rebuilt, Schmitz, Ruef, and their supervisors had sensed an unprecedented opportunuity for graft in the granting of municipal franchises. Hardly missing a beat, Phelan, Older, and Spreckels zealously pursued the investigation and prosecution begun before the disaster. With extraordinary skill and extralegal means, the investigators cornered the grafters—then overreached themselves.27

Hounding the graft-givers as well as the graft-takers, Phelan and Spreckels invaded the highest realms of San Francisco society, where they were branded traitors to their class and ostracized. “Feeling on both sides is as embittered as were the feelings of the people of Florence in the days of the Guelphs and Ghibelines,” reflected one chronicler of the prosecution.28 Ultimately, only Abraham Ruef served time in San Quentin.

Within three years of the disaster, the city was virtually rebuilt with no significant changes; the Union Labor Party’s Patrick McCarthy was swept into the mayor’s office on the guarantee that he would make San Francisco “the Paris of America,” by which it was generally understood that the vice squad would be curbed (fig. 12).

An eastern architect demurred: “Its citizens like to talk about it as the Paris of America. But French restaurants, electric lights, and a prevailing atmosphere of gaiety do not make a Paris. A metropolitan city must be tied together by a plan which provides for every essential economic and aesthetic need; and San Francisco still remains devoid of such a plan.”29
Plan. What harmony exists in its downtown buildings derived from a consensus of classical order and rationality shared by architects and patrons rather than from any central authority.
The Panama-Pacific International Exposition

The social and political scars of the graft prosecution ran deeper than the physical wounds left by quake and fire. San Francisco was speedily rebuilt, but old friendships had been irrevocably damaged and the city’s reputation and credit rating dragged through the mud. Thoughtful San Franciscans knew that they had missed a seismic opportunity to re-create their city in the way they wished it to be seen.

Department-store owner Reuben Hale had suggested a major world’s fair a year before the Burnham Plan, but the quake, fire, and graft trials had sidetracked his proposal. With the city largely rebuilt by 1909, Hale’s scheme was revived as the ideal way to bring the city’s many factions together, repair its image, and, above all, stimulate business. 50

It was also, at first, a belated attempt to realize some of the Burnham Plan. Initial proposals included turning the entire city into a world’s fair with permanent improvements. Van Ness Avenue and Market Street would be transformed into Parisian boulevards converging with the Panhandle extension at a semicircular civic center (fig. 15). Burnham’s Outer Boulevard would have entirely circumscribed the city’s waterfront. Major exposition structures would be concentrated both at Harbor View (the Marina) and in the western half of Golden Gate Park. 51

Though less grandiose than the Burnham Plan, the initial schemes still far exceeded available finances. For example, a marble replica of the Parthenon was to have been built on Telegraph Hill by Greek-Americans. 52 A 100-foot statue of “San Francisco Looking into the Future of the Pacific,” intended for the bluff at Land’s End, 53 was superseded by an 850-foot observation tower and lighthouse for the same site. The tower, with a beam visible 100 miles to sea, was to be financed
Edward Bennett prepared plans for the exposition. Willis Polk, Bennett's agent in San Francisco, was appointed supervising architect for the fair. Polk may have suggested the courtyard plan that was so remarkable a feature of the exposition, but sketches in Bennett's papers of the Piazzetta of San Marco indicate that Venice, rather than Paris, was his inspiration this time. For an academically trained architect, the waterfront site made the Venetian analog obvious.

Rather than the usual arrangement of detached structures around formal axes, Bennett's compact block plan incorporated three large courts contained within one superbuilding made up of eight exhibition "palaces" (fig. 14). The eighty-foot walls of the buildings broke the prevailing wind and fog pouring through the Golden Gate. Three elongated forecourts opened from the central courts onto the waterfront esplanade and the panorama of Mediterranean promontories and islands across the Bay (figs. 15, 16).

Other innovations set this, the last of the great Beaux-Arts American fairs, apart from those that had preceded it. Walls and columns were constructed of privately at a cost of $1.5 million.° It, too, quickly vanished for lack of funding, and the exposition shrank to a square-mile strip along the northern waterfront in the Presidio and Harbor View.
16 Jules Guerin. Court of Honor, c. 1912. 
Pencil and watercolor on paper, 26 x 33 in. (66 x 165.1 cm). Collection of the San Francisco Public Library. (Photo: Ben Blackwell) 
The central ten-acre court of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition was designed by the New York firm of McKim, Mead & White. Here the two major axes of the exposition met, leading the visitor to all sections of the plaster “dream city.”

15 Jules Guerin. Court leading to the Column of Progress, 1912. 
Pencil and watercolor on paper, 50 x 37 in. (124.8 x 94.0 cm). Collection of the San Francisco Public Library. (Photo: Ben Blackwell) 
Guerin’s magnificent renderings of the exposition accurately portrayed the fair as a collectively realized vision of urban harmony, color, and imperial grandeur.
artificial travertine to give the fair the appearance of an ancient walled city of domes and minarets beside the Golden Gate. Jules Guerin, the artist who had worked closely with Burnham and Bennett on the Chicago Plan, color-coordinated everything from the architecture to landscaping and uniforms. The Panama-Pacific International Exposition was the first fair to be lit indirectly rather than with bare lightbulbs.55

Preservation efforts for some or all of the fair began almost the day it opened, February 20, 1915. That they largely failed is further testimony to the preeminent importance of land speculation. Only the Marina Green and Palace of Fine Arts were saved, the latter because it stood on Presidio land and the Army was in no rush to raze it. In the Palace of Fine Arts, however, San Francisco saved one of its archetypal creations.

The Palace instantly became the most beloved building of the exposition and launched Maybeck on a second career in his fifties. If the exposition was meant to give San Francisco a fantasy past, Maybeck went even further. The Palace was a brooding ruin, a polychrome Piranesi capriccio come to life. In the inseparable embrace of lagoon and building, in the plantings that sprang out of walls and were intended to erupt from entablatures, and in the “living walls” of ice plant that reached out from the rotunda, Maybeck blurred any distinction between art and nature (fig. 17). While housing art, the building spoke of the transience of civilization. While the rest of the fair celebrated the rebuilding of San Francisco, the Palace was a haunting memento mori of the city that had perished.

Mayor James Rolph and the Civic Center

After so many years of dissension and failure, the Panama-Pacific Exposition was a remarkable achievement of coordinated labor, design, and administration—a vision realized at last. That it was consummated without James Duval Phelan is not surprising; Phelan and his reformer associates were pointedly excluded from the exposition’s board of directors, at least one of whom had been indicted in the recent graft trials.

The baton of municipal improvement had passed to James Rolph, Jr., upon his election as mayor in 1911. Rolph proved himself far more competent at realizing visions than James Phelan or Phoebe Hearst had been. Unlike Phelan, Rolph was a self-made millionaire who was raised and continued to live in the plebeian Mission District. Dapper, jovial, and nonpartisan, “Sunny Jim” was precisely what the divided city wanted and needed. Equally at ease with stevedores, bankers, and
Hollywood stars, he was adored by San Francisco, which gave him what he wanted.\textsuperscript{36} Rolph wanted not only an exposition but a permanent Civic Center to commemorate the event and to concentrate the city’s administrative and cultural functions in one central location. San Francisco would be disgraced, Rolph told the voters, if it did not have a fitting city hall by the time of the fair to replace the one destroyed in 1906. He campaigned relentlessly, writing articles for the newspapers and even persuading Luisa Tetrazzini, the leading diva of the day, to plug the bond issue at her farewell performance on Market Street before the election. On March 28, 1912, the voters approved Rolph’s bond measure by a margin of eleven to one.

While there was no organized opposition to the bond issue, the proposed site of the Civic Center continued to stir passions. No one seems to have taken seriously Arthur Mathews’ schemes, published in his little magazine, Philopolis, to locate the Civic Center on Nob Hill near his studio.\textsuperscript{37} A vocal minority led by Willis Polk continued to insist, however, that the Center should be built at Market and Van Ness, where Burnham had decreed it. The site seems to have been dictated by Phelan’s deathless obsession with driving the Panhandle to that intersection.

The scheme developed by B. J. S. Cahill in 1904 and refined by him in 1909 would, instead, work within the existing grid pattern of the city (fig. 18). Cahill proposed that the City Hall be rebuilt on its old site facing a two-block plaza to its west. The space would be surrounded by other cultural and political buildings harmonious with, but subsidiary to, City Hall. The Panhandle would be jogged diagonally to Alamo Square. From there it would extend directly to the Civic Center on a widened and landscaped Fulton Street, which forms the central axis of the complex.

A committee of architects chaired by Professor John Galen Howard of the University of California at Berkeley adopted Cahill’s plan but moved the proposed City Hall from its old site on Larkin Street two blocks west to its present site on Polk Street, thus creating a ceremonial entrance for parades from Market Street (today’s United Nations Plaza). An embittered Cahill claimed his ideas had been stolen and stridently sought credit throughout the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{38}

Mayor Rolph wanted his city hall in a hurry. Architects were invited to submit their credentials for a limited competition within a week of the bond issue. Less than three months later, a jury selected the plans of Maybeck’s former students, John Bakewell and Arthur Brown, Jr., for a structure to cost $3.5 million.

The existing competition entries prove that the jury made the right choice. Over 100 firms entered the competition, but the majority of the entries were hackneyed and clumsy essays in French Renaissance monumentality. Bernard Maybeck was one of the few to submit a design without a central dome or tower; he placed a colossal sculpture in front of the main door and proposed an eccentric, inefficient spatial organization inside.

By contrast, the design by Bakewell and Brown invites favorable comparison with its French models. The scholarly and dignified elevation, detailing, internal organization, and, above all, the climactic rotunda with its ceremonial staircase, which appears to ooze over the marble floor, make San Francisco’s City Hall the palatial symbol of a Pacific city-state. Moreover, in comparison with the jerry-built “cyclops” of a city hall that it replaced, the new building stood for the presumed rectitude of the Rolph administration, and for a city physically, socially, and morally regenerated. It was, San Franciscans proudly claimed, built without a dime of graft.
One preservation proposal would have rebuilt the Palace of Fine Arts across Van Ness Avenue from the new City Hall. The juxtaposition would have made a telling comment on the poles of San Francisco’s culture: the academic correctness of City Hall versus the licentious imagination expressed in the Palace. Yet both buildings used the same classical vocabulary, albeit to very different ends, and here they spoke for the fundamentally conservative nature of San Francisco’s architectural taste as it matured. Not only was the Panama-Pacific International Exposition the last of the great Beaux-Arts American fairs but the Civic Center itself was one of the last monumental civic group plans to be initiated and executed in the United States.
The truly prophetic building constructed at almost the same time—Willis Polk’s curtain-walled Hallidie Building of 1917, near Sutter and Montgomery streets—was largely ignored. Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1912 project for a skyscraper on Market Street for the Spreckels family seems never to have been seriously considered. While wealthy Angelenos commissioned Wright, Irving Gill, Richard Neutra, and Rudolph Schindler to build their daringly modern homes, their counterparts in San Francisco continued to build stucco châteaux and villas in Pacific Heights and on the peninsula.

When the lights went out on the exposition on December 4, 1915, thousands openly wept. As the Great War began to rage, bringing with it the belated twentieth century, San Francisco seemed to hang back, reluctant to relinquish the lovely vision that it had collectively achieved at last.

The final panel painted by Arthur Matthews for the State Capitol at that time depicted a future beyond skyscrapers, beyond the machine. For painter and patron, the hope of the city’s future lay in the past (fig. 19).

NOTES

3 Charles Zueblin, A Decade of Civic Improvement (University of Chicago Press, 1905), pp. 60-61.
4 Longstreth, op. cit., p. 229.
5 Loren Partridge, John Galen Howard and the Berkeley Campus (Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association, 1978), pp. 11-12. See also Longstreth, op. cit., and California Architect and Building News during the period of the competition.
6 “A New San Francisco to Rival All Cities,” San Francisco Examiner, December 4, 1898. A Hearst paper, the Examiner carried the most complete coverage of the announcement. All other papers also carried the news on December 4.
7 Ibid.
9 Quoted in California Architect and Building News (March 1898), p. 34.
10 The Wave, July 18, 1896, p. 5.
12 See, e.g., San Francisco Bulletin, January 5, 1898; The Wave, Christmas, 1899; San Francisco Examiner, September 24, 1899.
14 San Francisco Examiner, October 7, 8, 12, 1899. Also see California Architect and Building News (October and November 1899).
20 Edward Bennett. Typed draft of Burnham Plan in Bennett papers, Burnham Library, Art Institute of Chicago.
21 Kahn, op. cit., p. 118.
26 Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett, Proposed Street Changes in the Burned District, August 20, 1906. (Round volume with color-coded overlays on contemporary block book.) San Francisco Public Library History Room.
31 See, e.g., Sunset magazine (January 1912).
32 San Francisco Chronicle, June 2, 1910.
33 The Architect and Engineer (November 1911), pp. 55-55.
34 Sunset magazine (February 1912), p. 197; The Architect and Engineer (January 1912).
Mathews' murals for the State Capitol in Sacramento depict the development of California from the prehistoric past to the future. In the final panel he envisioned a city of art and culture on the Pacific that would revive the classical tradition, a destiny beyond commerce and the machine. In doing so, he spoke for San Francisco's growing conservatism as it matured.