

Pacific Heights Architects #16 - H. C. Baumann



The focus of this series is architects who had a strong influence over the way Pacific Heights looks today. H. C. Baumann was probably San Francisco's most prolific apartment house architect and some of his best work, including a much-admired Art Deco condominium building, is in Pacific Heights.

San Francisco was extremely fortunate during the building boom of the 1920's to have H. C. Baumann practicing here. The growth of apartment living in the City spread from the rebuilt Downtown area to the City's 'Western Addition'. The economics of residential property was such that many Victorian structures, particularly large detached houses on good-sized corner lots became expensive to maintain and inefficient in their use of space, even when subdivided into apartments. This was particularly true in Pacific Heights, an area which had been largely spared in the fire that followed the earthquake of April 18, 1906.

Even the casual observer of apartment house architecture will notice today that there are many similar-looking buildings, especially in Pacific Heights and the Marina. Understandably, there were just a limited number of developers and they became comfortable with the work of just a few architects. One such developer was Marian Realty (President - Arthur F. Rousseau) and one such architect was Herman Carl ('Mike' to his friends) Baumann.

Baumann was born in Oakland, the son of German immigrant parents, but his family moved into San Francisco when he was just one year old. After graduating from grammar school, he worked first for architect Thomas Edwards, and later for Norman Sexton. He studied at the San Francisco Architectural Club. In 1921 he qualified for his State Architectural license (B1083). He then worked for the George Wagner Construction Co. until opening his own practice in 1924. His office was located at 251 Kearny, a commercial building occupied mainly by contractors and architects. For several years he had a partner, Edward Jose, a former City building inspector, who provided onsite supervision for Baumann's construction projects.

Baumann's output was truly prolific. During one 12-month period (1927-28) he designed an astonishing 137 apartment buildings! In a career summary he wrote in 1952 he listed more than 400 apartments or hotels (over 100 being five stories or higher with steel frames, the remainder being three-story over basement wood-frames), 250 pairs of flats, and 500 single-family homes.

His apartment building legacy is seen in just about every San Francisco neighborhood, but a few of his more distinguished buildings include 620 Jones (1928, the Gaylord Hotel, now San Francisco Landmark #159), the magnificent Bellaire Tower at 1101 Green (1930) on Russian Hill, 3401 Clay (1931), a rare Presidio Heights apartment building, and 290 Lombard (1940) on Telegraph Hill, which takes advantage of wonderful Bay views.

In Cow Hollow, the adjoining three-story wood-frame apartment buildings at 2845 and 2855 Pierce (1924) are good examples, and in the Marina, the pair opposite each other at 1690 and 1700 Bay (from 1931 and 1936) provide good examples of different Art Deco exterior treatments while having the exact same floor plans inside.

But Pacific Heights would be the neighborhood in which his work is most readily visible. A walking tour might start with the Art Deco classic at 1950 Clay (from 1930), continue up the hill to 1950 Gough (1926), proceed west to 2201 Sacramento (1928), north to 2400 Buchanan (1937), west to admire 2400 Pacific (1932), north and east to 2090 Broadway (1935), and then continue past 1945 and 1955 Broadway (twin buildings from 1929), to 1890 Broadway (1938), on to 1801 Broadway (1931), and then turn up Gough Street to peer into the beautiful Deco lobby of 1895 Pacific (built in 1931) on the corner. That tour would have covered just a fraction of his work in Pacific Heights!



1895 Pacific



1895 Pacific lobby

Baumann's buildings typically have projecting bays, rounded windows on the top story, decorative cornices, and ornate lobbies. Influences of Baroque classicism, Spanish Churrigueresque, and Art Deco Zigzag and Moderne can be seen in different buildings. His larger apartment designs would have a living room, formal dining room, kitchen, one, two or three bedrooms, and one or two hall closets. His smaller apartments ('efficiencies') would have a breakfast room off the kitchen instead of a formal dining room, and a large living room, with a Murphy bed as standard equipment attached to the back of a closet door to

provide additional sleeping accommodation. Such was Baumann's demand for Murphy beds that the President of the company manufacturing them made a special trip West to see where all of his product was going!

The Great Depression of the 1930's brought to a close the apartment building boom in the City and was a financial disaster for Baumann who had invested heavily in the construction of the Bellaire Tower. He remained busy however, accepting more commercial and industrial assignments (breweries, supermarkets, and a printing plant, for example). During World War II he held a contract with the U.S. Navy Bureau of Yards and Docks, designing many structures for them at Mare Island and other locations. After the war he designed about a dozen multi-family housing projects in the Bay Area. His last apartment house commission was the 10-story International Style building at 1800 Pacific (designed in 1959), very different from his earlier work such as 1895 Pacific at the other end of the block, which is one of the finest examples of Art Deco architecture in the City.

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