

Pacific Heights Architects #5 - G. A. Lansburgh

The focus of this series for this year is Pacific Heights architects and the homes they designed for themselves in the area. The home designed by G. Albert Lansburgh for himself and his family is easily overlooked, being hidden away at the rear of a prime Pacific Heights view lot.

Gustave Albert Lansburgh was born January 7, 1876 in Panama, the eldest son of Polish-born Simon Lazarus Lansburgh and his wife Rebecca. Tragically, Albert's father died in 1879 while his mother was carrying his younger brother, who was named Simon, after his father. His mother then relocated to San Francisco with her two young sons, taking rooms at 195 Hyde Street. Rebecca died of tuberculosis in 1888 and the Lansburgh brothers were raised in the City by Celia Goldman under the guardianship of Rabbi



Lansburgh and the Spanish-style house he designed at 3052 Pacific

Jacob Voorsanger of Temple Emanu-El. Graduating from Boys High School in 1894, Albert enrolled at U. C. Berkeley (the same year Julia Morgan graduated), where Bernard Maybeck had recently been hired to teach descriptive geometry. Albert worked as a draftsman for Maybeck during his vacations and later for architect Julius E. Krafft for a year. Maybeck was a positive influence on Albert and others, encouraging them to attend the prestigious *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Albert first went to Paris in 1898 as a tutoring companion to the son of real estate developer Harvey M. Toy. Keen to enrol in the famous architectural school, Albert found a San Francisco sponsor in Moses A. Gunst and passed his entrance exams in 1901. He chose the *atelier* of Jean Louis Pascal, working with him on the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and after five years work earned his Diploma in March 1906 and was awarded a *Medaille Salon* by the *Société des Artistes Français* in July 1906 for a set of drawings of a projected new Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, which had been largely destroyed in the April 18th earthquake.

Lansburgh had returned to the Bay Area in May 1906, one month after the earthquake, quickly teaming up with Bernard Julius Joseph (1875-1971) who had also worked as a draftsman for Julius Krafft - in Joseph's case for the previous 10 years. One of his first projects was the preparation in earnest of drawings for a replacement Temple Emanu-El at the corner of Sutter and Van Ness. However the building was never built as the Trustees recognized that the location was becoming too commercial. Many years later, in the mid-1920's, Lansburgh and his friend Bernard Maybeck were retained as consultants for the Temple's present structure on Arguello at Lake designed by Sylvain Schnaittacher with Bakewell & Brown.

Lansburgh and Joseph worked together as partners for two years before Lansburgh opened his own office. During that time they designed 3096-98 Washington/2100-02 Baker, now converted to four condominiums in Pacific Heights, and many Downtown commercial buildings in the reconstruction of the City following the devastation of April 1906, including the Gunst Building on the south-west corner of Powell and Geary in Union Square, the remodel of the burned-out Emporium on Market Street and a new \$1 million Orpheum Theater on the south side of O'Farrell between Stockton and Powell (demolished in 1938). After the partnership dissolved Lansburgh and Joseph still collaborated on several major projects.

Lansburgh became known as a theater and auditorium architect, designing over 50 nationwide. He enjoyed the patronage of Morris Meyerfield, Jr., President of the Orpheum Theater and Realty Company and Lansburgh's younger brother Simon, an attorney, became in-house counsel of the company, succeeding Meyerfield as President in 1920. Lansburgh was to design several theaters for the Orpheum chain in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans, St. Louis, Kansas City and Salt Lake City. He became a master of acoustics, fixing the problems of the Civic Auditorium which had been designed by the Civic Center architects John Galen Howard, Frederick H. Meyer and John Reid, Jr for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, with a new ceiling canopy in time for the 1920 Democratic Convention. Lansburgh himself designed several buildings for the PPIE including the Guatemala Pavilion. He consulted with local architects on six theaters in Los Angeles alone, including the Shrine Auditorium, site of the Academy Awards, and the historic Wiltern Theater on Wilshire Blvd.

In San Francisco two of Lansburgh's finest surviving theaters are the Warfield on Market Street at Taylor and the Golden Gate Theater across Taylor on the corner of Golden Gate, both built in 1921-22. (What is now the Orpheum Theater on Market Street at Hyde was designed in 1925 by B. Marcus Priteca for the Pantages Theater Company and acquired by the Orpheum Company in 1929). In 1931 Lansburgh and Arthur Brown, Jr. designed both the War Memorial Opera House and the War Memorial Veterans Building on Van Ness Avenue, with Lansburgh focusing on the interiors.

Lansburgh's personal favorite was a Byzantine-style theater he designed for Vaudeville producer Martin Beck on W. 45th Street and 8th Avenue in New York, which opened in 1924. It has room for huge sets and hundreds of actors and reflected Beck's ambitions to stage large musicals, such as the original "Bye Bye Birdie". Lansburgh came close to designing a 5300 seat Metropolitan Opera House in New York, but the death of Otto Kahn, philanthropist and President of the Metropolitan Opera Company, in 1934, stalled the project.

Lansburgh designed only a small number of houses in San Francisco, but two interesting examples include the Beaux-Arts influenced, but very original stylistic creation at 2201 Broadway on the corner of Webster, designed in 1914, and his own home which is the subject of this month's article at 3052 Pacific Avenue, which he completed in 1924. Lansburgh and his wife Irene Muzzy, who he had met while studying in Paris and married in 1908, acquired the lot in May 1922. The resulting home is very clearly in what we would now call the Spanish-Mediterranean style and was acknowledged at the time by architect and writer Irving F. Morrow to be "a house embracing the beauties and amenities of Spanish architecture". Lansburgh's objective had been to "design a house in which formal entertainment is no less possible than informal living" and he succeeded admirably on a prime 90 ft. wide Pacific Heights view lot, entered by a long driveway from Pacific Avenue with the house situated overlooking the last block of Broadway and with a curved pathway down to it. The Lansburghs sold the house in January 1937, moving to San Mateo. When World War II came, Lansburgh closed his New York and Los Angeles offices and contributed to the war effort by designing seaplanes and destroyer tenders, until ill health forced him into semi-retirement. He died in San Mateo in April 1969 at the age of 93.

From the early 1920's until the depression Lansburgh had leased a ranch at Stanford to raise show horses, a hobby that delighted his four children. One of his sons, Larry, who died in March 2001 at the age of 89, became a director and producer of animal-themed films for Disney, winning two Oscars.