

Pacific Heights Architects #7 - Frederick H. Meyer



The focus of this series for this year has been Pacific Heights architects and the homes they designed for themselves in the area. The home designed by Frederick H. Meyer for himself and his wife Lilian in 1910 is of classical proportions and is an early example of how to design a house on a 25' wide lot to include a garage.

Frederick Herman Meyer was born on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco on June 26, 1876, the son of German immigrant parents who became naturalized citizens in 1877. His father John Nicolaus Meyer was a cabinetmaker. Meyer had no formal architectural training, but he started work in 1896 as a draftsman, first with builders Campbell and Pettus, and in 1898 he joined established Victorian-era architect Samuel Newsom, who quickly promoted him to partner.

Examples of two surviving grand houses that Meyer designed with Newsom in Pacific Heights in 1899 are 1916 Octavia Street and 1901 Pacific Avenue, both of which have since been divided up into multiple units. After the partnership with Newsom dissolved, Meyer designed 2474-78 Broadway in 1901, a 3-flat building, by himself.

In January 1902, Meyer entered into a partnership with Smith O'Brien who was 8 years older and had been trained in architect Clinton Day's office. That productive partnership was to last for 6 years. Meyer and O'Brien visited Chicago to gain an appreciation of office building architecture and returned to design the Rialto Building at 116 New Montgomery in a U-shape with a central light court and a uniform window arrangement for flexibility in subdividing the floors. They designed several more office buildings, before and after 1906, and several Pacific Heights residences including 2480 Broadway (1902), 2032-34 Baker (1903, now 2 condos), and 2021-23 Baker (1904, 2 flats). After the 1906 earthquake and fire they were responsible for the Cadillac Hotel at the north-west corner of Eddy and Leavenworth, which is now designated as San Francisco Landmark #176.

Meyer opened his own office in 1908 in the Humboldt Bank Building (785 Market, which he had designed with O'Brien and which had been rebuilt after the 1906 disaster). Soon after Mayor James 'Sunny Jim' Rolph was elected in 1911, Meyer was appointed, along with John Galen Howard and John Reid, Jr., to lay out the plan for building a new Civic Center. The concept of a Civic Center had first been applied in San Francisco by architect and town planner Bernard Cahill to ideas he had been working on since 1899. Prominent Chicago architect Daniel Burnham, the instigator of the City Beautiful Movement which had gained favor nationwide, had been asked to develop a City Plan for San Francisco back in 1904 and Burnham had incorporated Cahill's Civic Center concept in the Plan. The 1906 earthquake set back development of it for several years, but Mayor Rolph got the initiative underway in conjunction with the rebuilding of City Hall. Meyer wholeheartedly embraced the City Beautiful Movement. Later, after a bond issue was passed in March 1912 to fund the new City Hall, Howard, Meyer and Reid were given a second assignment to conduct the architectural competition for it. Cahill got that competition restricted just to San Francisco firms and it was won by Bakewell & Brown, resulting in the magnificent *Beaux-Arts* structure that anchors the Civic Center today. Howard, Meyer and Reid themselves designed the Auditorium on the south side of the Civic Center, which opened in time for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. First called the Exposition Auditorium, it now honors the memory of concert promoter Bill Graham.

In November 1909, Meyer bought a 25' by 70' parcel of land on the east side of Steiner just south of Vallejo, from Frederick Drinkhouse and his wife Alma. Meyer set about designing the house which stands there now and is the subject of this month's article. Almost a year later Meyer was able to buy an L-shaped extension to the lot, which provided an extra 25' of rear yard and an unusual, but convenient, 5' wide side pathway out to Vallejo Street. Instrumental in arranging that sale was fellow architect T. Paterson Ross. Ross had designed the corner home in 1909 on what was then a 26'6" by 70' lot, but he was able to distribute the remaining 30' by 51'6" of the corner parcel owned by Drinkhouse between the 3 adjoining properties, 2375 and 2395 Vallejo and 2756 Steiner. A deed in August 1910 from Ross and his wife Lillian shows the transfer of the rear yard and the Vallejo access strip to Meyer.

2756 Steiner has a classical Meyer design, with symmetry and elegance. The brick-faced first story provides two balanced openings, the one on the left for pedestrian entry and the one on the right leading to a recessed garage and providing additional off-street covered parking for visitors to the home. On the main level, three full-length French doors with curved arches above them open from the living room to a wrought-iron balcony, which has scroll brackets below it. On the bedroom level, three matching windows continue the symmetry and the composition is capped by a formal and 'correct' classical cornice with block modillions. Note the absence of bay windows, which would have been tempting on a north-south street to extend the living space and draw in the Bay view down Steiner Street. The living room and dining room still have original hand-painted beamed ceilings and woodwork.



It is interesting to review some of Meyer's larger residential work from that period and to notice the similarities in the use of brick cladding and the absence of bay windows. He was responsible for several substantial Downtown apartment buildings including two opposite each other at 980 and 999 Bush, both designed in 1910, of 73 and 35 apartments respectively. Some of his other major residential buildings include 775 Post (1913, 84 apts.), 795 Sutter (1913, 18 apts.) and 956 Post (1915, 32 apts.). In Pacific Heights he designed the corner apartment building, now condominiums at 2195 Green (1914, 10 apts.), a house at 2430 Pacific in 1917, and the apartments at 2595 Washington (1918, 9 apts.).

The garage at 2756 Steiner would have been an early innovation for a 1910 house, but is consistent with Meyer's strong interest in motoring and transportation. He was an early member of the California State Automobile Association, which was formed in 1907, and a founder of the Redwood Empire Association, which was established in 1920 to promote tourism in the Northern California and Southern Oregon coastal redwood counties. Frederick Meyer and his wife Lilian lived at 2756 Steiner for over 20 years, selling it in January 1932 and moving to Sausalito.

During World War II Meyer was appointed San Francisco's Administrator of Defense Transportation, refusing a \$10,000 p.a. salary for the position, which was admired as a master-stroke by an editorial in the local press at the time, "..... an encouraging exhibition of prudence, not to say astuteness. He will serve without salary, which means his appointment did not have to go to the Board of Supervisors his avoidance of the status of a paid city official reduces to lowest terms the possibilities of meddling and monkey-wrench-hurling by City Hall and other professional and amateur meddlers and monkey-wrench-hurlers."

In his long and distinguished career, Meyer formed several other professional partnerships, including with Albin R. Johnson (until 1926) with whom he designed the Elks Club at 456 Post Street and such houses as 2950 Broadway (1922); and also with Albert J. Evers after World War II, designing schools and office buildings. He was a Regional Director of the American Institute of Architects and was made a Fellow in 1934. He was also a member of the State Board of Architectural Examiners, the licensing authority, for 15 years from 1927 to 1941 and its President for 5 of those years, 1928-30 and 1936-37.

Meyer died on March 6, 1961 in Marin General Hospital after a long illness. He had a namesake working in the Bay Area, another Frederick H. Meyer, who was prominent in the Bay Area Arts and Crafts movement, had taught at the Hopkins Institute of Art on Nob Hill prior to the 1906 earthquake and after that institution was destroyed in the fire, founded the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1907. This Meyer had been born in Hamelin, Germany in 1872. Both had fathers or uncles who were cabinet makers. The older Meyer had died exactly two months earlier, on January 6, 1961. Researchers should be aware that the Examiner obituary of architect Meyer published on March 7, 1961 managed to confuse the accomplishments of the two and had to be corrected the following day!

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January 2002