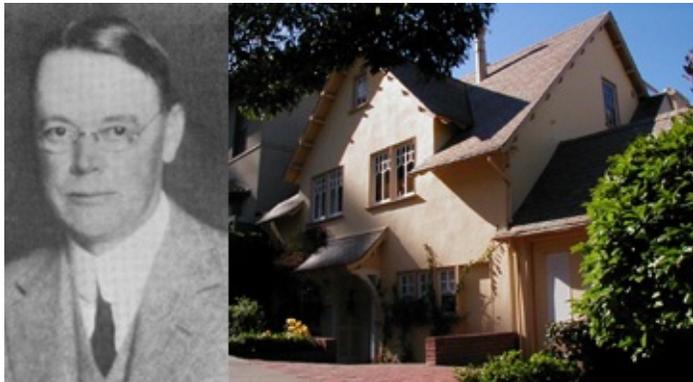


Pacific Heights Architects #3 - Edgar Mathews

The second condominium I purchased in San Francisco, in 1981, was in a corner four-unit brown-shingled building in Cow Hollow designed in 1904 by the subject of this month's article - Edgar Mathews. I subsequently noticed several similar corner multi-unit buildings, all distinguished by having separate street entrances for each of the units. Many years later I discovered who had designed these interesting apartment buildings and developed an appreciation for his work.

Edgar Aschael Mathews was a Bay Area native, born in Oakland on September 8, 1866. His father Julius Case Mathews, originally from New York, was living in Wisconsin with his wife Pauline McCracken and two children, Walter and Caroline, when he decided to try to make his fortune out west. He arrived in Oakland in 1852, with his younger brother Benjamin, and they tried their luck in the gold and silver mines, supporting themselves as carpenters. Julius returned to Wisconsin towards the end of that decade and a second son, Arthur, was born in 1860. In May 1866 Julius returned to Oakland with his family and their third son, Edgar, was born in September of that year.

Julius turned his construction experience into an architectural practice, opening his own office in Oakland in 1875. His eldest son Walter, after training as a carpenter and draftsman, joined him in 1879 and J. C. Mathews & Son was established. Walter later became a very prominent architect in his own right and was Oakland City architect for many years. The second son Arthur also trained as a draftsman with his father, but quickly developed his artistic talents, studied and exhibited in Paris, and ultimately achieved international prominence as a muralist, furniture maker, interior designer and teacher. Arthur's work embellished the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition and can be seen today in the Oakland Museum and the lobby of the Mechanics Institute at 57 Post Street in San Francisco.



Edgar Mathews and the house he designed for himself at 2980 Vallejo.

Edgar, the subject of this month's article, also trained in his father's office, then attended the Van Der Naillen School of Engineering, graduating in 1888. He also worked for his father, and other architects, before opening his own office in 1895. Soon after, he and his wife Katherine Dart moved into San Francisco and by the early 1900's he was well established as an important designer of town residences.

His earliest influences were the rustic houses of Ernest Coxhead and Willis Polk, but he quickly developed his own styles. His two early favorites were a half-timbered, half-stucco look (termed "Elizabethan" by a reviewer at the time) and a more steeply-roofed brown-shingle covered "box" (the same reviewer). He would define his building sites with low brick walls and create inviting clinker-brick entry porches. Characteristic Mathews' homes in Pacific Heights include the adjacent houses at 2508 and 2510 Green (1895), the matching pair at 2415 and 2421 Pierce (1897), 2360 Washington (1898), 2350 Broadway (1901), 2523 Pacific (1903), and 2190 Vallejo (1904).

Mathews also designed many pairs of flats and small apartment buildings, usually in the shingled style with entry porches and multi-gabled roofs, including these corner buildings in Pacific Heights -

2249-53 Broderick/2907-11 Jackson/2915-19 Jackson (1904 - three connected 3-unit buildings; he lived in 2919 Jackson after it was completed, until he finished his own house in 1908), 2870-78 Washington/2300-04 Divisadero, and 3196 Washington/2100 Lyon (both buildings in 1905, each having 8 apartments), and many other buildings in Presidio Heights and Cow Hollow.

His own home at 2980 Vallejo has the appearance from the street of a small English cottage with all of the Mathews' characteristics - the steep roof line, overhanging entry porch, curved window sashes, low brick wall defining the site - all enhanced by a landscaped front garden which is beautifully maintained by the present owners. Completed in early 1908, it was the first home on the block, and the only one for five years. When built it had a shingled roof, which has since been replaced with tile. Edgar and Katherine lived in the house until August 1935 when they sold it, moving to a new house Mathews had designed at 1956 Great Highway. The new owner of 2980 Vallejo, Martin Stelling, immediately commissioned experienced architect Earle Bertz, who is known for the many houses he designed in Sea Cliff, to enlarge the home significantly with a rear addition and a side garage. This expansion was tastefully done, retaining the original charm of the home. The lot has a challenging downslope towards Green Street, and the house now is five stories tall at the rear with each level having views of the Bay.

During his career, Mathews was involved in two well-publicized disputes. The first, in 1908, was an attempt by an attorney client for whom Mathews had designed a house in San Rafael ("a plastered cottage of an unusual English design") to stop him designing a similar house for someone close by. The plaintiff submitted an affidavit signed by four respected San Francisco architects stating that Mathews was guilty of a breach of professional ethics by supplying the same plans to two residents of the same city! The judge ruled otherwise, "If this injunction were granted it would have the practical effect of putting architect Mathews out of business, because his personality expresses itself in a certain type of house, and this injunction seeks to restrain him from constructing that type. The application for a restraining order is therefore denied." The second issue, in 1916, found Mathews as the plaintiff seeking to recover \$11,900 for his time and expenses from the Board of Library Trustees after they had awarded the competition for the San Francisco Public Library (currently being converted into the Asian Arts Museum) to George Kelham, for a plan which Mathews thought was suspiciously similar to the Detroit Public Library design which had been won by New York architect Cass Gilbert. Gilbert was one of the judges for the San Francisco Library competition, as was Paul Cret, Professor of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, who had also been a judge in the Detroit competition and had voted for Gilbert's design. Furthermore, Kelham had employed a draftsman who had assisted Gilbert in evolving the Detroit Public Library plans! Despite the evidence, Mathews did not find much legal or architectural community support for his position in that dispute, but his point was made.

Mathews served as Vice-President of the San Francisco Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for four years from 1913 to 1916 and as its President in 1917. At the State level, he was President of the Board of Architectural Examiners (the licensing agency) for four years from 1915 through 1918. He also designed churches, a fine Pacific Heights example of which is the First Church of Christ Scientist, 1710 Franklin at California (1912), and many commercial buildings, including one for P. G. & E. at 447 Sutter (1916) in the Italian Renaissance style of which he was a noted proponent later in his career. He became known Statewide, designing several public buildings in Sacramento and he won a prize for his grouping of the Santa Barbara Civic Center.

Edgar Mathews died at the age of 80 on December 31, 1946, a year after his 6-year-older artist brother Arthur, but a year before his 16-year-older architect brother Walter, who died November 20,

1947 at the age of 97. Walter and Edgar were guests of honor at an AIA chapter meeting in September 1945 at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley, with Walter, then 95, celebrated as the oldest living architect in the U.S. Both reportedly gave interesting accounts of the development of the practice of architecture in the Bay Area and it was noted that at times the older men were more progressive in their ideas than were the newer practitioners!

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