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The Order of Dreams

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Victor Hugo once wrote that until the fifteenth century, architecture was the chief recorder for the human race. Each belief and event, each idea that rose from the people, and every religious law had its counterpart in the monuments of its age.

In recent times, Modernism and abstraction cemented the divorce between people and their buildings. Architecture critic Robert Campbell has said that in the 1980s we began to recognize again that buildings have a lot to say. But we have only recently begun to relearn the language.

At Ace Architects, we hope to rekindle the power of architecture to speak to the imaginations of ordinary people. We err on the side of excess in making buildings that have stories to tell, thoughts and dreams to communicate. Our work is too explicit for many architects, I will warn you. Subtlety is not our goal. For us, abstraction is a cop-out, a retreat to the private language of an architectural elite. A good outgoing comes from a building that has a place in the imaginations of those in its community, not just its client and architect. We love hearing about what people see in our buildings, even if it is not at all what we intended, because it means architecture has reached out and embraced real people.

We believe quite literally in the "Order of Dreams." The idea "that houses have always embodied aspirations, and often they have recalled for their inhabitants places and times not quite their own," is at the root of our design approach. We love clients who have strong ideas, and never shrink from embodying them. Dixie Jordan wanted a sanctuary in which to read and write, yet she wanted a house that was fun and tied to the history of its place. David Roth's dream was simply to build a wonderful house in Oakland, a house like a work of art. The Tabancay/Austin's dreamed of a Mediterranean seaside dwelling with overtones of Arabian Nights.

Purely personal dreams can inspire a dwelling. But especially vivid dreams, when nourished by the architect, have a way of leaking over the property line to become landmarks in and mirrors to the community. Though the language of buildings may not be that precise and easy to read, architects and laypeople recognize and respond to the very presence of content. They will weave their own stories, recounting them with joy and enthusiasm. In our modest work, we hope to nudge those who use and see our buildings towards feelings and imaginings on a visceral, architectural level. Good outings, for us, are measured by what enters the imaginations of those who live with and encounter our projects.

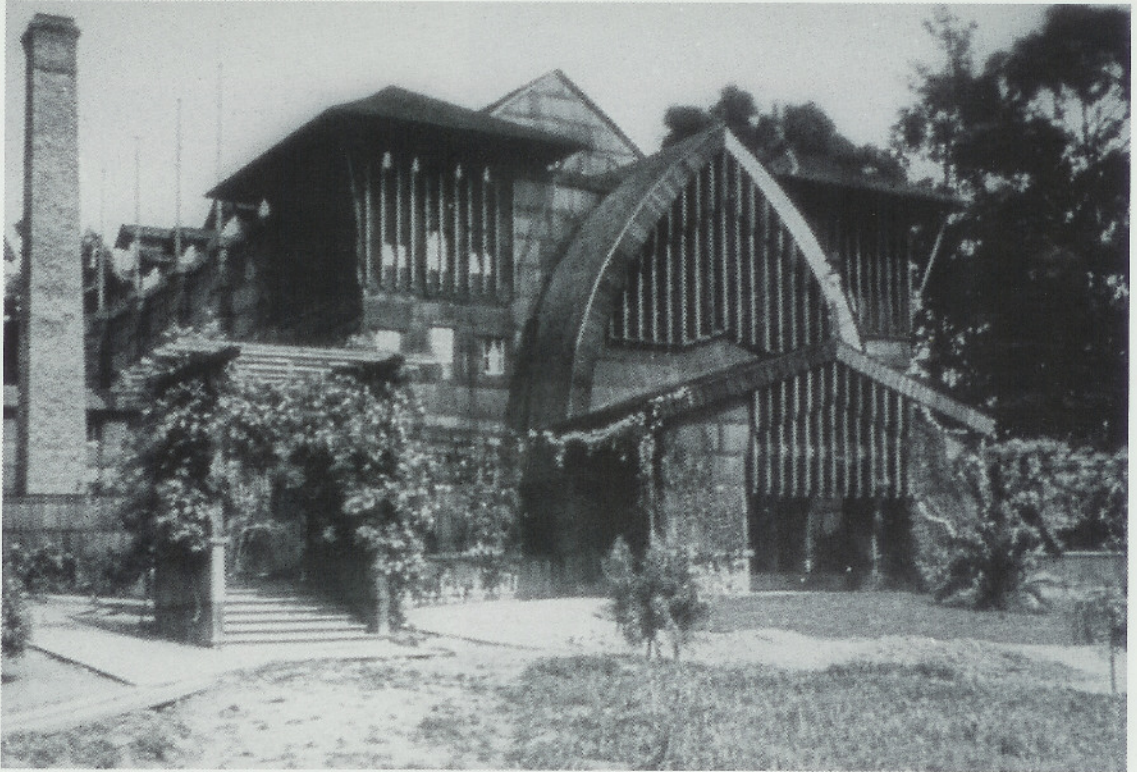
Jordan Residence

One day during the construction of this house, someone spray-painted "chapel with a doghouse" on the plywood sheathing. The client came to us because she was familiar with a building that we had designed in downtown Berkeley, another building that caused a commotion. She told us that she wanted a building that was "fun."

What we had in mind was neither a chapel nor a doghouse; we were thinking of Bernard Maybeck's Hearst Hall, a women's building at the University of California, Berkeley, commissioned by Phoebe Hearst. Our client was a single mother and a publisher, just as Phoebe Hearst was mother of the most famous publisher of her day, and Hearst Hall had also burned down, in an earlier East Bay Hills fire. Indeed, Hearst Hall was one of our favorite buildings, and one of Maybeck's most eccentric.

The large, gothically arched main space in Jordan's house is taken directly, inside and out, from Hearst Hall. Beam ends carved into dragonheads, cutout boards forming the balcony rail, and stained panels in a pattern forming the ceiling are all ideas borrowed explicitly from Maybeck.

The fireplace, as in many arts and crafts houses, is the center of the house. Inset into the fireplace are some terracotta fragments that came from the house that burned. The color palette of this very colorful house is derived from the only surviving bits of its predecessor.



Top: Hearst Hall, a building designed by Bernard Maybeck at the University of California, Berkeley, and destroyed in an earlier East Bay Hills fire. Courtesy Ace Architects.

Above: Jordan Residence, Oakland, replacing a home destroyed in a firestorm in 1991. Photograph by Alan Weintraub.



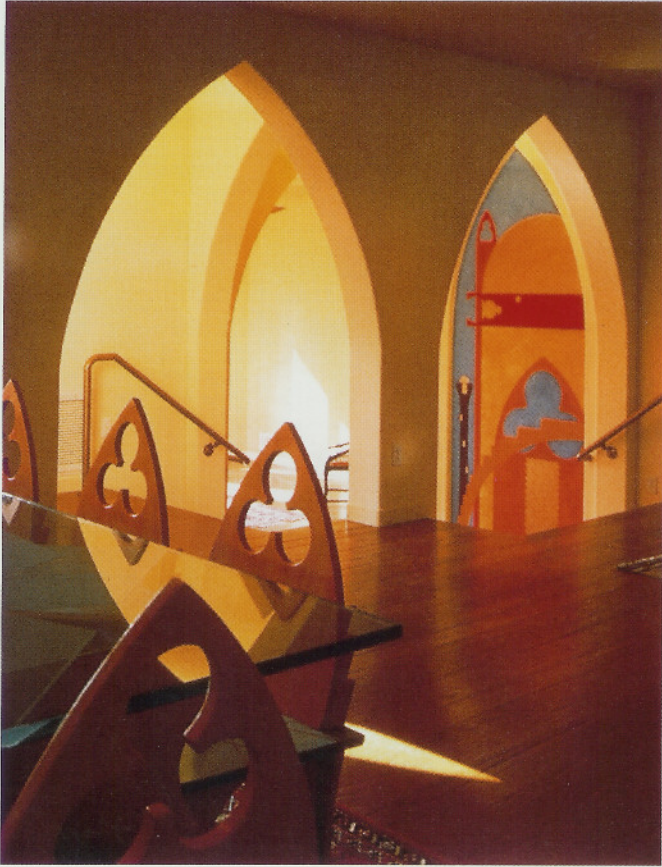
Roth Residence

The Roth Residence, which we also designed in the fire area, tells the story about the 1991 fire, about the way that fires recur in the Oakland–Berkeley Hills, and about how fires are events of both destruction and re-creation.

We envisioned the house in three parts. The street-fronting block, made of stucco and timber with wide, overhanging eaves, represents its chalet-style predecessor. The yellow wing along the adjacent public path, with its wooden exoskeleton of framing members and plywood, suggests that house under construction. The library tower, clad in blackened copper shingles, recalls the charred, monolithic chimneys, which were new, if temporary, landmarks after the fire. In the courtyard, we left pieces of the old foundation and polished and built them into the design of a garden in memory of the original house.

One day while I was standing in the front of the house with a photographer, a woman came by and said, “You know, I like this house. Not everybody likes this house, but I do. And I know what you were doing. I see the phoenix.” Now I had never seen a phoenix until that moment, but once she pointed it out, it was quite obvious. It turns out that *The Phoenix* was the name of a newspaper published by the people who survived the fire, so this was an especially poignant metaphor.

Roth Residence, Oakland. The three parts of this house, built in an area destroyed by fire in 1991, suggest the processes of destruction and creation. The left wing suggests the house under construction, the central bay suggests the stucco house that stood before the fire, and the copper-clad tower resembles buildings after the fire. Photograph by Alan Weintraub.



Tabancay/Austin Residence

This client had a dumpy 1940s house in a neighborhood of eclectic and romantic mansions, the worst and smallest house on the street. He wanted to build a tower for the entry, which had to have a dome. He was in love with colored tile. What he really had in mind was his memories of Sinbad and the Arabian Nights, and we didn't try to hold him back at all.

To us, this house is perfectly in keeping with the Bay Region tradition in architecture, where you see a lot of Moorish and Spanish influence. We tried to take that tradition a little further, adding a late twentieth-century story to the collection of architectural tales already told along the street.

In this house, we were able to carry this dream along into the furnishings. Tables and chairs have a Moorish inspired inlaid pattern, veiled curtains are hung at the windows, and in the "Pleasure Dome," seating is on pillows around a low table. The colors are a Moorish palette derived from a 1930s pattern book

Tabancay/Austin Residence, Oakland.

Left: Dining room.

Right: View of house from street.

Photographs by Alan Weintraub.