

California Polytechnic State University

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Julia Morgan's 'Pioneering Spirit' Shines In Cal Poly Exhibition

SAN LUIS OBISPO - A pair of lectures presented to a packed house in the Rotunda at the College of Business Oct. 22 opened the "Julia Morgan: Pioneering Spirit" exhibition at Cal Poly.

Morgan watercolorThe overflow crowd of students, faculty, staff and community members filled the lecture hall and spilled out the doorways for the afternoon talks and slide presentations by Morgan specialists Karen McNeill and Robert Blunk. The talks, sponsored by the College of Architecture and Environmental Design as part of its Fall Hearst Lecture Series, celebrated the centennial of Morgan's licensing as the first female architect in California.

Julia Morgan, best known as the architect of Hearst Castle, was a woman of many accomplishments in architecture and engineering - areas that were traditionally dominated by men, explained McNeil, a UC Berkeley doctorate candidate. Morgan was the only woman enrolled in the engineering program at UC Berkeley in the early 1890s and earned her degree in 1894. Later, she was the first woman to be accepted into the architecture program at the venerable Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, graduating in 1902.

Upon completion of her studies in Paris, Morgan returned to San Francisco and earned a certificate to practice architecture in California in 1904. It was then that she began her nearly 50-year career as the "most prolific woman architect" in history, according to McNeill. But, even with nearly 700 buildings to her credit, Morgan's successful career was not without challenges.

"Julia Morgan had to battle gender stereotypes in Paris and again when she returned to the United States," McNeill said. "The battle was on two fronts: with colleagues and with clients."

An example was Morgan's design for El Campanil, a 72-foot-tall reinforced-concrete clock tower she designed and built in 1904 for Mills College in Oakland. It was Morgan's first monumental commission, McNeill said, and her design work was constantly criticized at the time by a male building contractor who "resented the idea that a woman could do a man's job." The Mills College clients tended to agree, McNeill said, often asking the less-qualified builder to review and approve Morgan's plans.

"Morgan was an expert in reinforced concrete," McNeill said. "The fundamental weakness here was the doubt that a woman could ever really participate successfully in the aspects of what was traditionally a man's career."

The proof was in the pudding, though. El Campanil stood tall and remained unscathed after the devastating

San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

Curators photoAs her career progressed, so did Morgan's appearance. McNeill's photos of Morgan showed her change from a young girl with long curls and ruffled blouses to a prim woman in drab suits, her hair pulled back in a tight bun. Morgan's only apparent nod to fashion was her collection of lovely hats, most from Paris. "She was practical, but she liked hats," McNeill said. "I guess she felt she wouldn't be respected if she dressed more flamboyantly."

After McNeill spoke about Morgan and her career, Blunk, an architect from Burlingame, talked about Wyntoon, one of Morgan's major projects for William Randolph Hearst. In 1988, Hearst family members hired Blunk's firm to complete and restore the private, Bavarian-style family compound near Mount Shasta, and his office has worked on it ever since, he said.

Blunk called Wyntoon "Hearst's other castle." It exemplifies the pioneering spirit of Julia Morgan, he said. When the original five-story manor house designed in the late 1890s by Bernard Maybeck for Phoebe Apperson Hearst burned to the ground, Hearst's son, William Randolph, asked Morgan to design a home much grander than his mother's.

The architect complied, creating a Bavarian village with three guest houses on a four-acre riverside site of lawns and forest, decorated with many statues and fountains. "The guest houses were small Bavarian-style chalets, designed to establish a fairy-tale quality in the California woods," Blunk said. "Luckily, because of Julia Morgan's Beaux-Arts tradition, they were not cutesy."

"Brown Bear," "Cinderella" and "Angel House" were named after Grimms Fairy Tales. The first two guest houses were painted with elaborate exterior murals of fairy tale characters and finished inside with elaborate wood work. "These were accommodations of great luxury," Blunk said. Angel House was left unfinished for many years.

Hearst bought "The Bend," a neighboring lodge built in the Adirondacks-style of architecture, in 1934, and he and Morgan worked for many years to restore it. As work on The Bend and the guest houses stalled in the Great Depression, Morgan, characteristically committed to completion of the project, offered to continue work without commission.

William Randolph Hearst spent a great deal of time at Wyntoon late in life. He died in 1951, and little work was done on the Wyntoon property for the next 30 years, Blunk said. The Hearst family contacted Blunk in 1988. His work to complete the 14,000-square-foot Angel House was based on some original Morgan plans obtained from Assistant Dean Nancy Loe and the Special Collections Department at Cal Poly's Kennedy Library.

Blunk showed slides of Angel House prior to its restoration, with unfinished rooms and a bare staircase. Photos taken after the restoration show a carved wood staircase and beautiful wood paneling and moldings. "It's not Julia Morgan at her best," Blunk said, "but it's what we came up with based on today's codes, materials and economics."

Tile photoHowever, in 1992 fire destroyed an entire wing of bedrooms at The Bend. Blunk was a guest at the estate at the time, and his photos dramatically depicted the fiery devastation the midst of a severe snowstorm. His firm designed and rebuilt the bedroom wing the following year, this time out of stone. "We got pretty close to Julia Morgan at this point," Blunk said. "These projects (at Wyntoon) are truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunities – to work in the shadows of William Randolph Hearst and Julia Morgan."

An exhibit of Julia Morgan's original drawings, journals, photos, tiles and other artifacts from the Special Collections at the Kennedy Library are on display on the library's fourth floor, Mondays through Fridays, 10

a.m. to 2 p.m., through March 25. The exhibit is free and open to the public.

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