INSCRIPTIONS

Gray Brechin

Indestructible by Reason of Beauty: The Beaumanence of a Public Library Building

Imagine it new, its granite flanks shining near white in the low winter sun. Imagine what it meant for the five hundred citizens who gathered in a cavernous reading room still smelling of fresh plaster and paint to hear the building dedicated on the afternoon of February 15, 1917. After all the vicissitudes and rented locations that it had occupied since its founding, the San Francisco Public Library now had not so much a library building as a palace worthy to house its books and to ennoble the city and citizens to whom it was about to be given.

Few could have felt more pride that day than Edward Robeson Taylor as he waited his turn to deliver an ode he'd composed for the occasion. Physician, lawyer, printer, poet, and former mayor, Dr. Taylor had survived most of those friends who, four decades before, had gathered at a temperance hall on Post Street to establish a free public library.

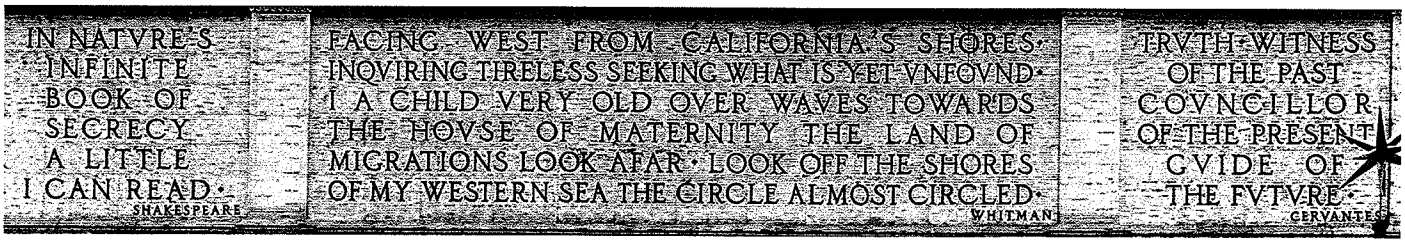
Andrew Hallidie and Henry George had been there, but both had long ago passed away without seeing their hopes for a custom-designed edifice realized. Hallidie – the public-spirited inventor of the cable car and president of the Mechanics' Institute – called the meeting in 1877 because, as he said later, "I cannot but feel that San Francisco should have so long stood alone not only without a great public library, but without any of those public galleries and halls which tend so much to make a community better in thought and action."[1] Radical economist Henry George served as secretary for that meeting. He voiced his own hopes for a library that "would be open to all classes, but principally frequented by the poor; that the man in corduroy is treated with the same courtesy as the rich man in broadcloth; that the conduct of all is decorous; and that the charm of the place is its perfect freedom."[2] George moved to New York, where the international success of his single-tax manifesto *Progress and Poverty* nearly made him mayor in 1886. In that same year on the other coast, George's friend Taylor assumed the responsibilities of trustee for the San Francisco Public Library, then seven years old.

By the time of the dedication in 1917, the Main Library stood foursquare on nearly an entire city block, the third structure completed on a formal park designed for San Franciscans to assemble *en masse*. It faced the new City Hall across the plaza, where its stately presence would serve to remind the mayor and supervisors of their responsiblity for a budget that too often gave the library short shrift.

For nearly two years, workmen had cut and carved the hard granite of its exterior walls. Assembled over a steel armature, the stone reflected sunlight like the cliffs of the Sierra from which it had been hewn. A deeply recessed Ionic colonnade on the front and arcaded windows on its southern flank created shadowed voids that further emphasized the building's solidity and permanence in a town largely built of wood. Architect George Kelham described his design as "in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance," and the lofty rooms inside, with their painted beamed ceilings, murals, and fumed oak furniture, did seem fit for state functions. As Taylor waited his turn to speak, Kelham told the crowd that he had "tried to make an environment for those who will use these rooms which will help to foster the respect and love that all good books merit." Yet the architect's building also incorporated, he said, the most efficient innovations of the libraries he had visited in the East, as well as others with which he was familiar from his studies in Europe.[3]

The fate of that continent was, at the time, much in doubt as the Great War raged on. Hostilities had begun there before ground was broken for San Francisco's library. Three weeks prior to the dedication, President Wilson proposed to the Senate a league of nations that would settle disputes before they could escalate to war. He took the opportunity to warn the belligerents that only a "peace without victory" could ensure a permanent settlement to the carnage they were inflicting on one another. Yet the nations kept fighting in hopes of achieving the sort of glorious triumph that had, in fact, departed in a new age of industrial slaughter.

Kelham was followed by Mayor Rolph, who quoted the inspirational lines that Dr. Taylor had written for



6 Inscriptions selected by Porter Garnett for the *Arch of the Setting Sun*, Court of the Universe, Panama Pacific International Exposition, 1915. Top: detail. Courtesy San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

the recent dedication of City Hall. He hailed the new building as a monument to the intelligence of the people of San Francisco. Taylor then rose to deliver his closing "Ode."

"The mad clamors of world-shaking war," he began, had horrified all civilized peoples. Yet even as Europe committed suicide, San Francisco showed a better way by its example. "While great cathedrals, hallowed and sublime / Beloved of all the ages, have been slain. . . . Peace has erected this majestic pile / And placed on it her everlasting crown." He contrasted the terrible disorder wracking the seat of Western civilization with the new home built to preserve its legacy on the Pacific: "And all its stones were then in order laid, / Till consummation rose triumphant here. . . . Here safely housed these tongues of all the past / Will speak their wisdom to the young and old."[4]

High poetry it was not, but Taylor's "Ode" spoke from the heart for the hopes that he and others entertained for the library they'd made. The poem served as a transient gloss for the thoughts of others that Taylor had selected for permanent inscription on the library's walls. The first quotation one saw after mounting the stairs was PEACE TO ALL WHO COME HERE. He placed it on the lintel of the door opening to the room where the books were delivered.

The Rise of the Public Library

For most of history, elites have known that knowledge is power, and for that reason they did not eagerly share it.[5] Libraries traditionally took the form of private collections of the priestly and courtly classes and were themselves among the prize trophies of war. Moreover, the very rarity of books discouraged literacy.

With the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, knowledge burst the bounds of the libraries. That explosion in turn profoundly upset the distribution of power. By making books widely available, Johannes Gutenberg's innovation set off a chain reaction of information diffusion with evermore unpredictable consequences: the Protestant Reformation and the wars that attended it were followed in turn by the English, American, and French Revolutions, the rise of newspapers and magazines, the growth of democratic institutions as well as communism, global capitalism and the concomitant telecommunications revolution. As knowledge has grown exponentially, so has access to it. The public library and public school are preeminent symbols of that increasing access to information which gained such startling momentum in the nineteenth century.

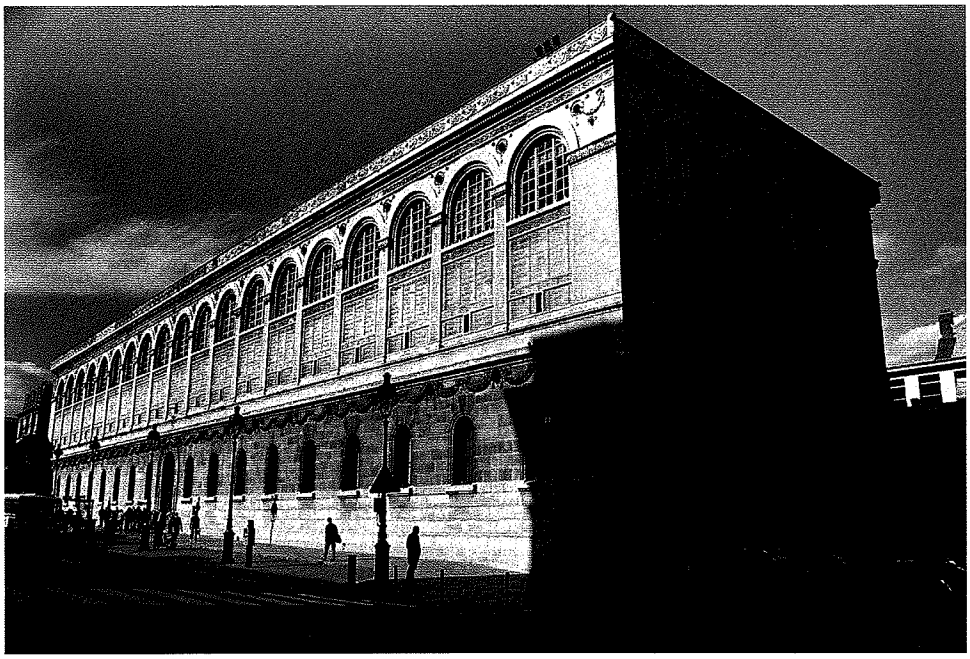
One must visit the Left Bank in Paris to find the ancestor of the old San Francisco Public Library (known to San Franciscans these days as the Old Main). Designed in 1838–39 by architect Henri Labrouste and built from 1843 to 1850, the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève represented a new building type that for a century served as an exemplar for the designers of public libraries elsewhere.

Labrouste's rigidly symmetrical façade pointedly recalled classical precedents, as did the elegant simplicity of his plan. The library's monumental window arcade defined from the outside its second story reading room while alluding, at the same time, to Alberti's famous Templo Malatestiano in Rimini – one of the seminal buildings of the Italian Renaissance. A roster of the names of great authors embellished the external faces of tablets that backed internal bookcases. At the core of the building, a spacious central staircase gave access from the street level to a magnificent reading room that ran the the length of the building on its second floor. There Labrouste employed attenuated cast iron columns to support a lofty double-vaulted ceiling as well as gas jets to light the space at night. His seamless melding of classical references with the advanced technology of the nineteenth century pointed toward new forms of architecture while creating at the same time a temple of learning, a secular but no less reverential descendant of the ancient monastic library of Sainte-Geneviève that formed the core of the building's collection.

Impressive as it was, Labrouste's library was but one building in the capital city and thus not easily accessible to most French citizens who lived far from Paris. It remained for advocates in the United States to popularize learning in a manner commensurate with Thomas Jefferson's belief that a lasting democracy depends upon widespread and *continuing* education. That understanding motivated the establishment of publicly supported schools and libraries. "Bigotry abhors public libraries and hates public schools," said Andrew Hallidie at the opening of San Francisco's first public library in 1879. "But to the people – to nine-tenths of my fellow-citizens – they are each and both the guardian of their liberty, the guarantee of their independence."[6]

Although Boston could not claim the honor of founding the country's first tax-supported, free public library (Peterborough, New Hampshire, did so in 1833), the self-proclaimed Athens of America blazed a trail that would ultimately lead to the San Francisco library. In 1854, Boston opened a tax-supported collection that served as an institutional model for those that followed. Promoted chiefly by a wealthy Brahmin named George Ticknor, the library's charter stated: "It is of paramount importance that the means of general information should be so diffused that the largest possible number of persons should be induced to read and understand questions of social order."[7] Such "questions of social order" had reason to concern those like Ticknor as ill-educated and potentially riotous immigrants poured into the country, and as accelerating industrialization and urbanization further upset social relations.

Despite the hopes of Ticknor and his associates, the establishment of publicly supported libraries lagged behind that of public schools. In the later decades of



7 Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris. Henri Labrouste, architect, 1838-50. (Photo: Dennis Letbetter)

8 Section of the façade of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève. (Photo: Dennis Letbetter)

the nineteenth century, however, New England saw a florescence of library buildings donated by wealthy philanthropists. Many were designed in the heavy Romanesque style popularized by architect Henry Hobson Richardson. There and elsewhere, laborers, clerks, and fraternal organizations founded social libraries whose paying members wished to better themselves; the fine private library of San Francisco's Mechanics' Institute continues a tradition begun in the same year that Boston founded its public institution.

It would take publicly spirited San Franciscans several decades to initiate the movement for a public library in the leading city of the West. Dr. Taylor was ideally suited for the role.

The Intellectual Milieu

A talented and admired polymath, Taylor married the niece of railroad baron Leland Stanford in 1870. His new wife gave him connections to the wealthiest of California's ruling elite. Taylor's conviviality, scholarship, and attempts at poetry made him, at the same time, most comfortable in the company of the city's intellectuals and artists. He met Henry George while working as a journeyman typesetter in Sacramento during the Civil War and, despite George's fierce attacks upon the sort of land monopolists best represented by Taylor's uncle-in-law, he maintained a close friendship with the "American Marx" until the latter's death in 1897. George credited Taylor for invaluable assistance in formulating the ideas of *Progress and Poverty*.

Members of San Francisco's intelligentsia maintained a sometimes uneasy brotherhood with those they considered philistines through mutual membership in the Bohemian Club. Founded in 1872 by journalists and artists, the club soon admitted wealthy businessmen on whose generous patronage its impecunious members depended. The later members eventually assumed complete control of the organization, making it one of the most exclusive and powerful fraternities in the nation, but up through the early twentieth century it did much to maintain camaraderie and cohesiveness among a group of often feckless individuals striving to live *la vie bohème* in a notoriously materialist culture far from the Left Bank and Montmartre.

Through the Bohemian Club, Taylor maintained close friendships with men such as architects Willis Polk and Bernard Maybeck; novelists Jack London and Frank Norris; painters Xavier Martinez, William Keith, and Maynard Dixon; photographer Arnold Genthe, poets George Sterling and Joaquin Miller; and all-round man of arts Porter Garnett. In addition, the club threw in leading professors from Berkeley and Stanford and scientists from the California Academy of Sciences, as well as businessmen and powerful heirs such as bankers James Duval Phelan and William Crocker. Taylor's law office on California Street was only two blocks from the old Montgomery Block, making it easy for the doctor-lawyer to spend hours visiting friends in their walkup studios or sharing wine, pasta, and lively conversation at Coppa's Restaurant on the first floor.

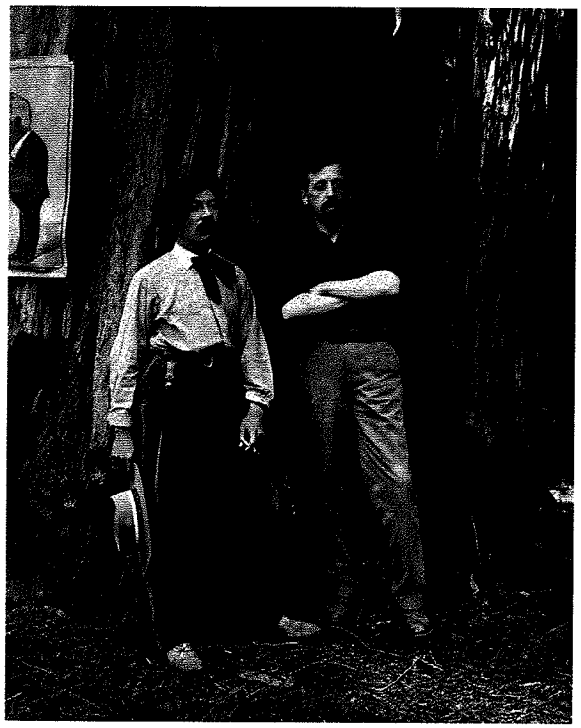
Taylor's was a genteel bohemianism, that of a cultivated man of letters. Much as he enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh and the mind, he never succumbed to the ruinous dissipation of so many of his artistic friends, living productively to the age of eighty-four.[8] In addition to his professional responsibilities, he served as trustee of Stanford University from 1891 to 1899, resigning only to become dean of Hastings College of Law, a position he held for twenty years while teaching classes. He found time to assume the presidency of the San Francisco Bar Association and served as mayor from 1907 to 1909, during which time the recently widowed mayor, nearly seventy, married a woman of twenty-seven. When teased about their age difference, Taylor quipped, "I would rather surprise a virgin than disappoint a widow."[9]

He was also instrumental in founding The Book Club of California in 1912 in order to foster the art of fine printing locally. Taylor had a passionate love of books and felt his responsibility to make them available to others less fortunate. He maintained his position on the board of trustees of the San Francisco Public Library from 1886 until his death in 1923. During his lifetime, he boasted, he had been responsible for building four library collections: that of Lane Medical College, his own, and the San Francisco Public Library before and after the 1906 disaster. It was Taylor who chose as the motto for the library's

bookplate a line from Seneca: VITA SINE LITERIS MORS EST, "Life without letters is death."

Porter Garnett shared that view. A fellow bohemian of what was then known as "good family," Garnett lived the life of letters in San Francisco and beyond, writing and producing plays before he found his *métier* in the crafts of fine printing and calligraphy. As a one-time printer himself, Taylor shared Garnett's ambition to express the best thoughts of the past in forms both fitting and beautiful. He imbued his sons with the same love of formal expression; they established the firm of Taylor & Taylor in 1900 that, for a half century, maintained the highest standards of printed books. Garnett left for Pittsburgh in 1922 to establish the first school of fine printing in the United States, the renowned Laboratory Press at Carnegie Institute of Technology.

Both Taylor and Garnett belonged to a self-conscious aristocracy of letters rooted in the Western canon, yet they also respected and honored labor well done. Garnett's writings on aesthetics and the often anonymous nobility of handicraft display a discriminating and rigorous mind infused with vast reading as well as practical experience with chisel, saw, and hand press. An admirer noted that Garnett not only "exemplif[ied] the grandeurs of the old humanist tradition, but he was one of the last of that group of inspired and dedicated rebels – such as William Morris – who stood out against the mounting mediocrity of an industrial civilization and who re-vivified and re-dignified the old hand crafts – especially printing."[10]



9 Xavier Martinez and Porter Garnett at the Bohemian Grove, 1906. Courtesy The Bancroft Library.

The Beaux-Arts and the Arts and Craft Movements

In his printing, calligraphy, and meticulously carved inscriptions, Garnett sought to reintegrate the hand and the mind. "Craftsmanship," he wrote, "is the patient, discriminating, and *knowing* application of instinctive taste and of the knowledge one gains from experience added to the knowledge one gains from books or teachers."[11] His own teachers included Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris, who had, in nineteenth-century England, preached the dignity of labor and the need to overcome the destructive specialization fostered by an ever more complex machine culture.

Their writings – and Morris's example in particular – inspired an international revival of arts and crafts that had a profound effect on the San Francisco Bay Area.

Unlike Ruskin, however, who detested the Renaissance as a fall from a much-idealized Middle Ages, Garnett and his circle revered the simplicity and discipline inherent in the classical tradition. They saw no inherent contradiction between the Arts and Crafts movement and the contemporary revival of a scholarly approach to design represented by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, then the world's leading school of architecture.[12] As more young Americans crossed the Atlantic to study in the French capital, they imbibed at the source the academy's heavy emphasis on historicism, its preference for classical order, and its insistence on logical thought derived from universal principles. They came to think of themselves as gentlemen scholars as well as courtiers to the industrial princes of the New World.[13] In planning buildings or entire cities, they most often looked back to Rome and Paris for inspiration and precedents.[14]

When the trustees of the Boston Public Library sought to erect a new building, they chose a graduate of the Ecole from the august New York firm of McKim, Mead, & White. Charles Follen McKim's design marked the opening salvo of what has come to be known as the American Renaissance.[15] Like Labrouste in Paris, McKim opted for the symmetry, clarity, and hierarchical order of the classical tradition. Instead of chocolate-hued brownstone, he sheathed the structure in pale grey granite emblematic of the enlightenment it was meant to foster.

The similarities between the Paris and Boston libraries in plan and elevation – and in the lavish provision for fine materials, craftsmanship, and uplifting public art – are immediately obvious to those who have visited them both, and they point the way to San Francisco. Labrouste had left little space between the top of Sainte-Geneviève's window arcade and the building's roof line, but McKim allotted an ample frieze to accommodate a one-line inscription that marked his building as distinctly American.

Harvard President Charles Eliot Norton composed a sentiment for the frieze that at once identified it, assigned responsibility, and invoked its high purpose:

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON BUILT BY THE PEOPLE AND DEDICATED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING

Norton's inscription judiciously democratized credit for a building whose unconventional style, lavish building program, and cost overruns made it controversial until the day that it opened in 1895. From that point on, Bostonians loved their library because it stood, they felt, for the best of which the city was capable. Nonetheless, many of the Brahmins who promoted it harbored misgivings about how "the people" would use it and its books; Henry James sniffed that the new building had the air of a busy train station.[16]

The astute architectural critic Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer observed that the Boston Public Library brilliantly accomplished what McKim, Mead, & White had hoped for it: a sea change in taste from the picturesque, dark, and irregular medievalism represented by H. H. Richardson's Trinity Church to the coolly disciplined classicism of the Renaissance-style structure the church faced across Copley Square. In doing so, she said, they "won a victory, not only for their own building, but for the general cause of architectural sobriety, dignity, simplicity, and refinement"[17] – a victory that would endure for decades as the preferred style for monumental buildings until it was defeated, in turn, by the International Style.

The New Medici

McKim's firm would have accomplished little without the willing complicity of socially ambitious patrons. Labrouste wanted his library to stand Janus-like between the past and the future. The Vanderbilts, Morgans, Rockefellers, and other captains of industry aspired to a similar role. Proponents of the most modern means of production and capital accumulation, they sought historical precedents that would give them legitimacy and social standing commensurate with their wealth. The Medici of Renaissance Florence provided role models, and the artists whom they employed were only too happy to compare themselves to Michelangelo and Raphael.[18] Newly rich businessmen could now afford to import the works of old masters, book collections, and other expressions of European culture by the job lot, and to build accordingly

to house their collections. We owe to the historical sensibility of that period many of our museums, universities, concert halls, public monuments, civic centers, and libraries.

No one could match the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie, however, especially after he negotiated the 1902 sale of Carnegie Steel to J. P. Morgan for $500 million. Carnegie devoted his remaining years to disbursing the bulk of his fortune, and he is best known today for the Carnegie libraries.

Carnegie's free-thinking father had founded a Tradesmen's Subscription Library in Scotland before emigrating to the United States with his promising young son. As an adult, Carnegie partly credited his success to a Pittsburgh philanthropist who had opened his own personal library for public use. As one of the leading captains of American industry, Carnegie would combine a genuine love of books with a firm belief in the human capacity for self-improvement. The wealthy man, he insisted, had a responsibility to act as an "agent for his poorer brethren.... doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves."[19] Like other reformers of his class, Carnegie insisted that free access to information made "men not violent revolutionaries, but cautious evolutionists; not destroyers, but careful improvers."[20]

American philanthropists frequently endowed their communities with public libraries, but Carnegie characteristically did so on an industrial scale after building one for his native town of Dunfermline. Before his death in 1919, he donated nearly $45 million to build 1,946 library buildings in the United States alone.[21] Most of those buildings were clothed in variants of the Renaissance styles favored by graduates of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The Carnegie Foundation disseminated such designs in pattern books to small towns wishing to host a library. Larger cities employed architects to produce more customized designs. Among the last to do so was the San Francisco Public Library. But the city first needed a plan on which to place the building to best effect.

City Beautiful

San Francisco's first chroniclers wrote in 1854 that the implacable grid of streets laid down on its rolling topography made little allowance for public amenities such as parks. "This is a strange mistake," they said, "and can only be attributed to the jealous avarice of the city projectors," who, they said, had turned every square foot of the site into an available building lot.[22]

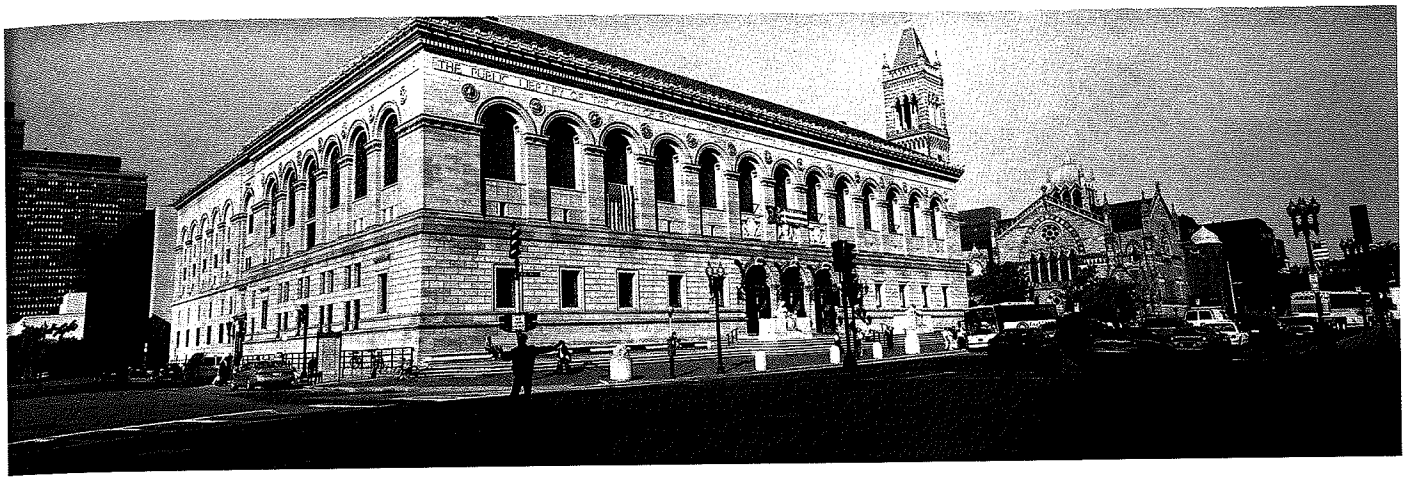
The same could be said for most other large U.S. cities at the same time. They had functioned admirably in the nineteenth century to convert nature and labor into fortunes, albeit at incalculable cost in human lives, social disorder, and degraded environments. Those who moved to or lived within them grew inured to a perpetual overcast, stench, and a rain of soot that made brick and brownstone darker still. With good reason Lewis Mumford dubbed the latter half of the century the Brown Decades.[23]

Charles Follen McKim wanted to change that as well. Even as he supervised the Boston library's construction, he was actively engaged in the creation of an ideal city nine hundred miles to the west. In league with his partners and with Daniel Burnham and other proponents of the classical revival, McKim wanted the Chicago world's fair of 1893 to serve as a model for what American cities *might* become with the kind of professional guidance that only they could provide.

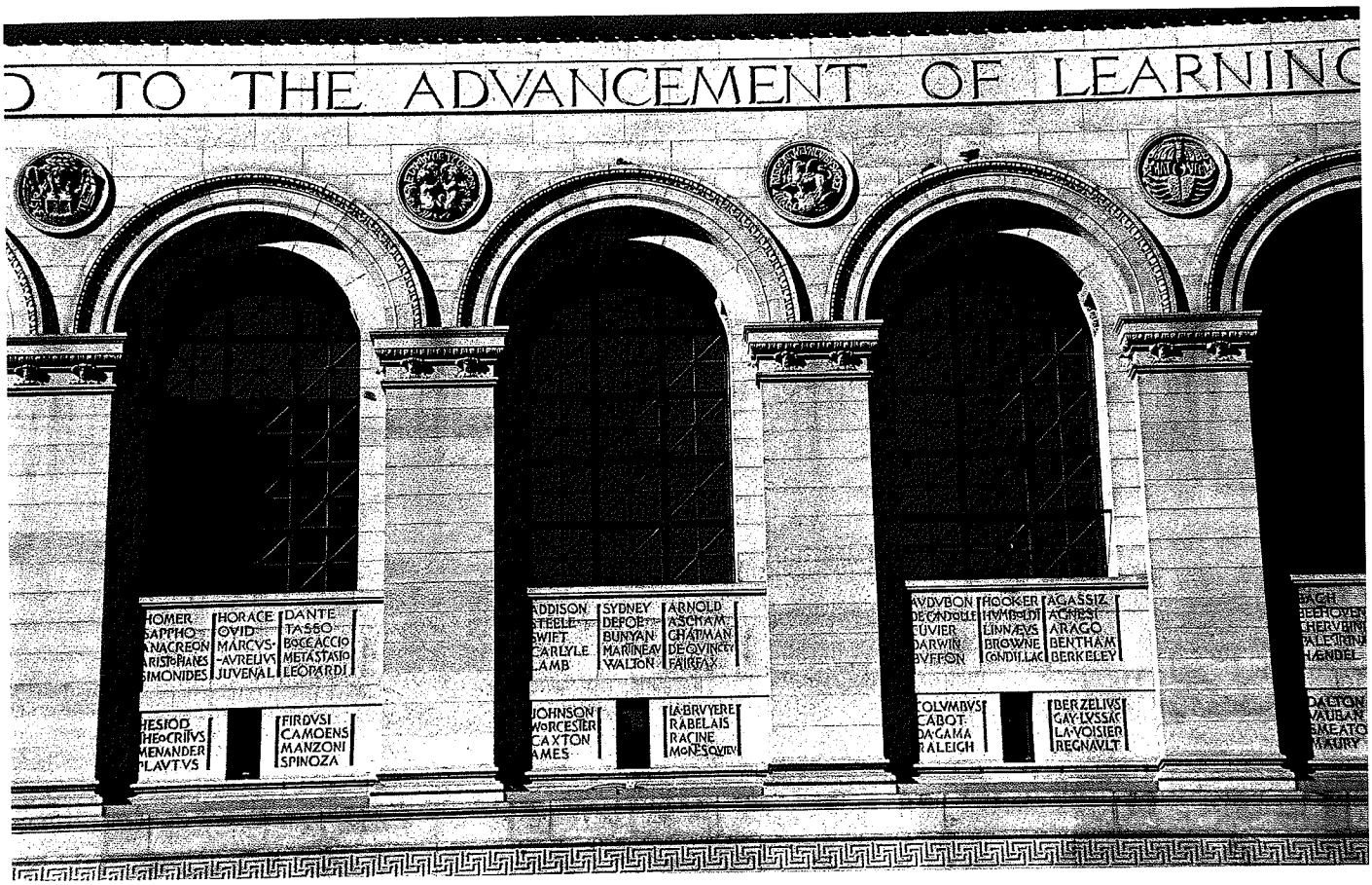
The World's Columbian Exposition was, by intentional contrast with its host city, constructed of white plaster meant to mimic marble. Immense exhibition sheds cloaked in columniated Roman splendor lined its plazas and water courts. The imperial façades visually announced to millions of visitors that the westward course of empire had jumped the Atlantic; progressive Western civilization was now enthroned on Lake Michigan in the heart of the continent.

For the millions who saw it, the Chicago fair resembled a celestial city. Some felt that nothing but a lack of will and sufficient cash stood in the way of permanently remaking American cities in its orderly image. Among the latter was Phoebe Apperson Hearst in California.

Hearst had only recently inherited her husband's mining and real estate fortune when she became a convert to the City Beautiful movement spawned by the



10 Boston Public Library.
Charles McKim, architect, 1887-1895.
(Photo: Dennis Letbetter)



11 Section of the façade, Boston Public Library.
(Photo: Dennis Letbetter)

Chicago fair's example.[24] In 1896, she wrote to the Regents of the University of California offering to pay for an international competition that would make the Berkeley campus a model "City of Learning," a virtual acropolis representing the best that Western civilization had to offer.

Two years later, an international panel of architects selected eleven finalists for the Hearst Plan in Antwerp. At a December 3rd dinner held at the Bohemian Club to honor the jurists, Mayor James Duval Phelan told the audience that Mrs. Hearst intended to sponsor a similar competition "for plans by which the city of San Francisco may be laid out, altered, and improved on artistic and scientific lines as Napoleon through Baron Haussman laid out Paris." She wanted engineers to submit plans for the grading of new boulevards, the creation of new parks, and the construction of a badly needed sewer system, all of which would make for a City Hygienic and Efficient, as well as Beautiful.[25]

For reasons unknown, Phoebe Hearst did not follow through on her offer. Phelan, however, took up the cause. He himself had inherited the means to make a close study of European city planning and had time to devote to improving San Francisco after leaving office in 1902. Impressed by Daniel Burnham's work on the 1893 exposition fair and in replanning Washington, D.C., Phelan persuaded fellow civic leaders to invite the Chicago architect and his assistant, Edward Bennett, Jr., to redraw the city's map almost entirely. Hearst had paid for Bennett's study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

Burnham and Bennett envisioned a civic center at the very heart of their ideal San Francisco. Around the intersection of Market, Van Ness, and an extended Golden Gate Park panhandle, they proposed a formal arrangement of the city's principal government and cultural institutions. The public library would have its own building, allowing it to move out of its cramped quarters in the existing City Hall. After years of financial stringency, there even appeared to be money to build such a structure.

For nearly a quarter of a century since its founding, a lack of public commitment and private patronage hobbled and deprived the library of an identifiable home. But in 1901, Andrew Carnegie pledged $750,000 as a challenge grant to San Francisco. He stipulated that half the money must be spent on a main library building, the other half on neighborhood branches. As with all Carnegie grants, maintenance, staffing, and acquisitions were the responsibility of the recipient community.

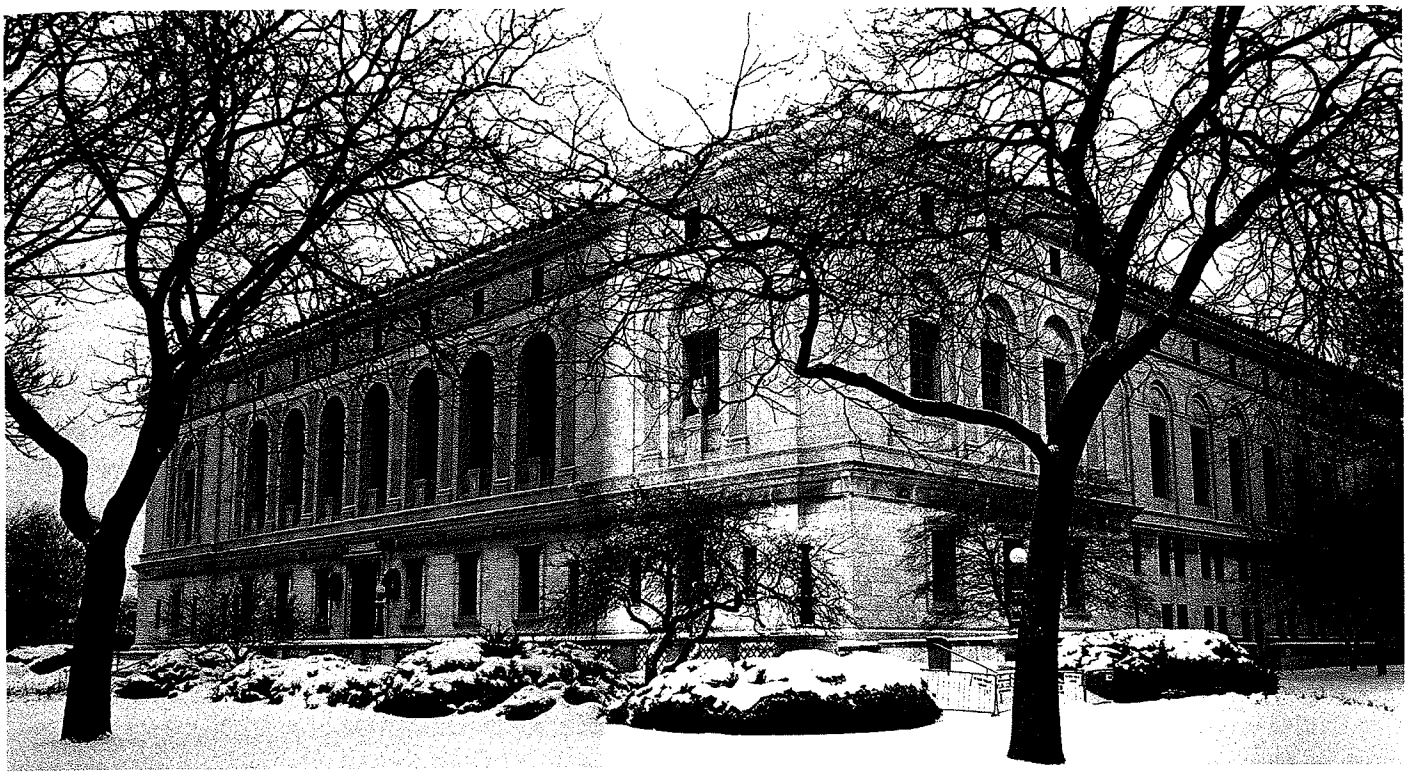
On the morning of April 18, 1906, the completed plans were ready for distribution in City Hall when a powerful earthquake smashed the building. As the ensuing fire ate through the ruins, it incinerated nearly 130,000 volumes in the library wing. A few copies of the Burnham-Bennett plan survived.

The Panama-Pacific International Exposition

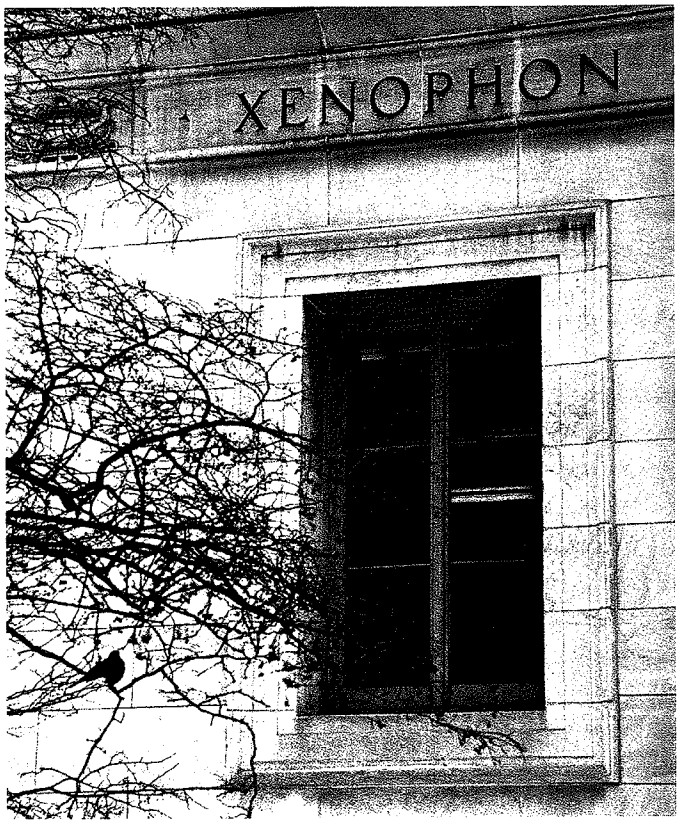
An outbreak of bubonic plague, a war scare with Japan, and the revelations and convictions in the graft investigation that followed the earthquake and fire assured that little of the ideal city would be realized in the rush to rebuild and resume business in San Francisco.

Hoping to reestablish stability, the graft prosecutors in 1907 unanimously chose Edward Robeson Taylor to replace Mayor Eugene Schmitz, who, it appeared, would soon be trading his City Hall office for a cell at San Quentin Prison.[26] Taylor agreed to accept the position in addition to his many other duties. His reputation for honesty and his affability earned Taylor popular respect despite his intellectuality. During his brief tenure as mayor, he actively promoted Burnham's plans for a civic center replete with an independent library building. For the first time, the library received a budgetary appropriation that exceeded the legal minimum.

As new buildings replaced ruins, the stability provided by Taylor's administration permitted San Francisco's leading businessmen to turn their attention to hosting a world's fair. Ostensibly meant to commemorate the opening of the Panama Canal, the Panama-Pacific International Exposition would, in fact, showcase San Francisco's comeback to the world. In 1911, voters elected a can-do mayor who devoted himself to realizing *two* ideal cities in miniature. Progressive and energetic, James Rolph, Jr., possessed such overwhelming charisma that citizens gave him virtually whatever he wanted in the way of bond measures needed to modernize San Francisco.



12 Detroit Public Library.
Cass Gilbert, architect, 1915-1924.
(Photo: Dennis Letbetter)



13 Section of the façade,
Detroit Public Library.
(Photo: Dennis Letbetter)

Venice inspired Edward Bennett, Jr.'s ingenious plan for the PPIE, as it was called. On a waterfront site inside the Golden Gate rose a Byzantine fantasy of brightly colored domes and towers composed of eight exhibition "palaces." At the core of the "Jewel City," two triumphal arches flanked a ten-acre plaza named the Court of the Universe. The arches symbolically represented the peoples of the East and of the West whom the canal would bring together in the Pacific Ocean.

Porter Garnett's erudition and craftsmanship fitted him to select inscriptions for the great arches. "The intention has been," he wrote at the time, "to make these two sets of inscriptions as completely representative of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres as the number of panels would permit."[27] Confining such representations to a strictly defined area and doing so beautifully required a degree of skill possessed by few. Garnett later defined his intention as "the externalization of ideas – in conversation, in literature, in music, or in the plastic and graphic arts. In the latter, ideas are expressed through design. Indeed, there can be no design without an idea."[28]

Beautiful though it was, the exposition could not last. Within ten months of its opening, the lights dimmed and the wreckers moved in for the salvage. For all their appearance of permanence, the Italian towers and the arches with Garnett's inscriptions were reduced to piles of broken lath and plaster dust. Edmund Wilson wondered why, "if American architects can build temporary buildings as good as this, can't they build permanent ones of the same kind."[29] George Kelham saved the murals from the Arch of the Setting Sun for the reading rooms of his new library building. But Wilson's question bothered many of those who had created the fair as well as those who had enjoyed the spectacle during its brief run.

The PPIE did leave a permanent legacy in the local tradition of fine printing. Printer John Henry Nash called the fair a renaissance for the impetus that it gave to typography. But that would serve as little consolation to Garnett, who had seen his labor hauled to the dump.

In a letter written to one of his students after leaving the Laboratory Press, Garnett attempted to explain his life's mission by defining a word which he had invented – *beaumanence*: "There is no word in English ... that means *indestructibility by reason of beauty*, a quality that, as I say, 'stays the hand of the iconoclast.' ... My word for this quality is beaumanence, from *beau* (*bellus*) and *maneo*."[30]

Civic Center and Library

But *beaumanence* would require permanent buildings artistically arranged and appropriately embellished with handiwork. Mayor Rolph wanted to build a civic center as a lasting reminder of the ephemeral world's fair he had conjured into being, and he had powerful support. William Randolph Hearst wrote at the time that the PPIE demonstrated that the United States had reached an artistic and architectural pinnacle equal to its material development: "Civic centers will be built which will perform all their useful functions and be made at the same time objects of beauty which will not only educate our citizens at home, but attract visitors from afar."[31]

In anticipation of the fair, citizens voted in 1912 to finance the Civic Center and to supplement Carnegie's gift with an additional $778,000. Though the site for the ensemble was moved several blocks east of that specified by Burnham and Bennett, a free-standing library remained one of its essential components. The following year, the library trustees announced a local competition for a fitting design.

Out of six submissions, the architectural jury selected the plan of a rapidly rising star in the architectural establishment. A polished and handsome graduate of Harvard and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, George Kelham had come to San Francisco from New York to rebuild the Palace Hotel for the Sharon family after the fire that followed the earthquake of 1906 had destroyed the previous structure. Named supervising architect of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, Kelham would go on to design such landmark skyscrapers as the Shell, Standard Oil, and Russ buildings and to serve as supervising architect of the University of California. Kelham proposed a granite-sheathed Italian Renaissance palace for the San Francisco library. It bore a close resemblance both inside and out to the new Detroit Main Library.

14 Detail of the main façade of the San Francisco Public Library, 1997. (Photo: Dennis Letbetter)

Too close, said competing architect Edgar Mathews, who charged that Kelham had plagiarized. Detroit, like San Francisco, had taken an equal sum of money from the Carnegie Foundation to build a main library and several branch buildings. Its library trustees hired architect Cass Gilbert, who later sat on the jury that selected Kelham's winning design. Mathews objected that the latter architect had paid the former the compliment of outright imitation. Among Beaux-Arts graduates, the boundary between copying and adaptation remained ambiguous; Mathews was generally dismissed as a sore loser.

Arthur Brown, Jr., for one, disagreed with Mathews. The architect of the new City Hall wrote at the time of the library's dedication that Kelham had shown "great feeling and skill . . . in the grasping of opportunities for monumental effects which make a universal appeal. "The architectural details of the exterior," he said, "inspired by the work of the Renaissance in Italy, are delicate and well adjusted, and are used with intention and comprehension of function, and in no place savor of blind imitation or affectation. Good proportion and directness seem to have been the guiding principles."[32]

Moreover, Kelham's plan had a "limpid simplicity . . . rigid logic, and common sense" characteristic of the best Beaux-Arts design. "Mr. Kelham had the happy idea of disposing his plan so that one is led to the main delivery and catalogue room, the heart of the mechanism of his plan, through a most pleasing and monumental succession of vaulted vestibule and noble stairway. The delivery room itself is of airy and ample proportion and forms a fitting climax to the monumental effects."[33]

Like its progenitors in Paris, Boston, and Detroit, Kelham's proposed library had symbolic meaning as well as practical intent. As Brown implied, the wide central staircase with its low risers endowed those who climbed it with a momentary nobility. Mounting those stairs took one from the confining darkness of the entry vestibule to the spacious majesty of the delivery room, just as the discipline needed for education presumably led on to enlightenment. Skylights above the side galleries on the second floor backlit a Doric colonnade that supported a barrel vault over the staircase. In consultation with Kelham, Gottardo Piazzoni would later embellish the gallery walls with a mural cycle depicting, in muted tonality, the meeting of land and water on the California coast.

Kelham reiterated the classical mission by specifying toast-tinted travertine for the interior finish. Travertine from the quarries at Tivoli was closely identified with the city of Rome. Charles McKim had also insisted on travertine for New York's Pennsylvania Station, which he modeled on the Baths of Caracalla; when it proved too costly, however, he substituted a plaster imitation for the walls. Kelham, in turn, used the same material for the exteriors of the PPIE. In the library, he used it for the internal walls and columns.

A rigorous geometrical order characteristic of Beaux-Arts training reinforced a sense of security, and inscriptions more explicitly instructed those ascending to the delivery and reading rooms. Dr. Taylor

selected terse maxims from the canon of Western literature for frieze panels and lintels around the second floor colonnade. These apothegms served as guideposts from the past, a compendium of sage advice on how to lead a fulfilling and civilized life as one strove toward the light.

On that February afternoon in 1917, Taylor concluded both his "Ode" and the ceremonies by invoking the dauntless spirit of San Francisco. The crowd applauded the old man who had come to California during the Civil War, when he and the city were young. For the rest of the day, library staff acted as guides for the visitors, showing off the new building and explaining how artificial travertine was made. A reporter from the *Call-Bulletin* wrote that visitors were enthusiastic about the admirable arrangement of the layout and the beauty of the building inside and out.

Taylor stayed for a while to talk with his many friends. He then descended the staircase and passed through the low-vaulted vestibule and out the front door, where he faced City Hall. The words inscribed over the Ionic colonnade on the front of the building were his own:

MAY THIS STRUCTURE, THRONED ON IMPERISHABLE BOOKS, BE MAINTAINED AND CHERISHED FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT AND DELIGHT OF MANKIND

Of all his many accomplishments, Edward Robeson Taylor had cause to be proudest of this one. He knew that he left the city he had loved and served with a building "indestructible by reason of beauty." The sentiment on the frieze informed those in the future of their debt and duty to the past. The responsibility would now be theirs.

Notes

1. "Report of the Board of Trustees of the San Francisco Free Public Library," *San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year 1878–79* (San Francisco: W. M. Hinton, 1879), p. 107.

2. Peter BoothWiley, *A Free Library in This City: The Illustrated History of the San Francisco Public Library* (San Francisco: Weldon Owen, 1996), p. 98.

3. *San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year 1916–17, Ended June 30, 1917* (San Francisco: Neal Publishing, 1919), p. 525-26.

4. Edward Robeson Taylor. "Ode Read at the Dedication of the San Francisco Public Library Building... " (San Francisco: Taylor & Taylor, 1917).

5. Library trustee Andrew S. Hallidie said at the inauguration of the San Francisco Public Library in 1879 that "knowledge is power – and a knowledge of power is independence." "Report of the Board of Trustees," p. 104.

6. Ibid.

7. Wiley, *Free Library*, p.70.

8. For the bad ends to which so many succumbed, see the chapter "Bohemian Shores" in Kevin Starr's *Americans and the California Dream, 1950–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) as well as Frank Norris's novel *Vandover and the Brute*.

9. Kenneth M. Johnson, *The Life and Times of Edward Robeson Taylor* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1968), p. 55.

10. James D. Van Trump, *Porter Garnett and the Laboratory Press* (Pittsburgh: Department of Fine Arts of the Carnegie Institute, 1962), designed and printed at The New Laboratory Press.

11. Ibid.

12. Beaux-Arts graduates Bernard Maybeck, Julia Morgan, and John Galen Howard moved effortlessly between the rustic Shingle Style and more monumental forms of historicism.

13. One graduate described the Beaux-Arts philosophy: "A logical plan to serve the purposes for which the building was erected and façades which were expressions of the interior plan were the principal characteristics of these buildings. An effort was made to solve every problem logically and the expression 'form follows function' was as true then as it is now." William H. Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1976), p. 346.

14. McKim was a founder of the American Academy in Rome, which was intended to give students a tutelary exposure to the classical tradition at its source.

15. See Brooklyn Museum, *The American Renaissance, 1896–1917* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

16. Jordy, *American Buildings*, p. 356.

17. Ibid., p. 332.

18. As they were planning the world's fair, Augustus Saint-Gaudens reputedly said to Daniel Burnham, "Look here, old fellow, do you realize that this is the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century?" Jordy, ibid., p. 364.

19. Abigail A. Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 21.

20. Wiley, *Free Library*, p. 75.

21. Carnegie gave another 828 libraries to other English-speaking countries.

22. Frank Soulé et al. *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York: D. Appleton, 1854), p. 160–61.

23. Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America* (New York: Dover, 1931).

24. Hearst was also spending more time in Paris, where she maintained a luxurious apartment.

25. Gray A. Brechin, "San Francisco: The City Beautiful," in *Visionary San Francisco,* edited by Paolo Polledri (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1990), p. 40–61.

26. Schmitz escaped on a technicality.

27. Porter Garnett, *Philosophical Writings on the Ideal Book,* compiled by Jack Werner Stauffacher (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1994), p. 164.

28. Ibid., p. 43.

29. Edmund Wilson (to Stanley Dell), August 29, 1915, *Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912–1972* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 22.

30. Garnett, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 33.

31. *The Legacy of the Exposition* (San Francisco: Panama Pacific International Exposition Company, 1916), p. 76.

32. Arthur Brown, Jr., "The New San Francisco Public Library," *The Architect and Engineer* 49, 1 (April 1917): 41.

33. Ibid.