

An Icon of Simplicity: The American Arts & Crafts Movement started at the Swedenborgian Church

Leslie M. Freudenheim, MA,

FROM 1876 to 1910, a group of creative and pioneering men and women in Northern California sought an architectural expression appropriate to the region. They rejected Victorian excess, preferring simple homes of natural materials. Their aspirations went beyond architecture to advocate a sensibility and a way of life. The cradle of the movement was the Swedenborgian Church, at Washington and Lyon Streets in San Francisco. Its leader was the modest but charismatic Swedenborgian minister, Joseph Worcester, a serious student of architecture who inspired a quiet revolution as he turned Californians, and eventually Americans, toward the ideals of the Arts & Crafts movement and a return to a simpler life in harmony with nature.

JOSEPH WORCESTER arrived in San Francisco in 1864, bringing with him a Harvard education, deep personal belief in the Swedenborgian religion, extensive knowledge of architecture and a firm desire to put into practice the idea that a well-designed home could inspire and enhance one's life. Among those who came into Worcester's ambit were the leading architects of their time: A. Page Brown, Bernard Maybeck, Ernest Coxhead, Willis Polk, Julia Morgan, John Galen Howard and others. Worcester's friends included pioneering environmentalists John Muir and Frederick Law Olmsted, as well as William Keith, the great California landscape painter. Worcester's circle of friends was exceedingly well informed, well traveled, and made up of intellectually curious and knowledgeable individuals who were up to date on what was happening architecturally in Europe and on the East Coast. The California Shingle and Mission Style houses and churches they favored were grounded in the Arts & Crafts philosophy: they were rooted in local traditions, did not spoil the landscape, reflected honest work and handcraft, uplifted the soul and inspired the mind. Worcester and his circle were among the first American architects – and perhaps the very first – actually to deliver Arts & Crafts ideals translated into simple, affordable houses and other structures designed with nature, art, craft and spirit in mind.

IT ALL BEGAN when Worcester designed and built his ideal home in 1876. He chose an isolated East Bay knoll in the Piedmont hills, which afforded magnificent views of the bay and beyond. There he created a simple shingled bungalow – probably the first house intentionally designed as a bungalow in the United States – with an interior of redwood, unpainted inside and out. Worcester's Piedmont house, although unpretentious, was extremely influential. William Keith painted it at least five times and Jack London later lived there when he wrote his most famous book, *Call of the Wild*. Upon first seeing Worcester's woodshingled bungalow, Bernard Maybeck called it a "revelation." A clue to the house and the architecture it spawned in Northern California lies in Worcester's view of nature, which grew out of his religious training in the Swedenborgian Church, a Christian sect based on the Bible as interpreted by Emanuel Swedenborg. As a Swedenborgian, Worcester believed that specific things in nature – trees, birds and flowers – were worldly manifestations of aspects of God. The most beautiful styles of art and architecture, he believed, were those that most closely resembled the forms of nature. Worcester moved across the bay to San Francisco in 1887 to resume the leadership of the

Swedenborgian Church. Using his Piedmont house as a model, he urged parishioners to build three large houses he designed on land they owned at the top of Russian Hill. Next door, at 1030 Vallejo, he designed a smaller house expressly for himself. The four houses, all covered with natural wood shingles, fulfilled Worcester's desire to create a visible rustic city neighborhood with simple, affordable houses, intentionally unassuming, and designed with nature in mind.

IN THE EARLY 1890s Worcester turned his attention from building homes to building the Church of the New Jerusalem for his Swedenborgian congregation. He began raising funds to build the church in 1892 using a drawing by Maybeck. In 1893, a lot on Russian Hill at Taylor and Jackson Streets was surveyed as a potential home. The church rejected that site and chose a lot at Lyon and Washington Streets, which was surveyed in August 1894. "I hope our plan will not be too aesthetic," Worcester wrote, "but my artist friends are much bent on making it so. They want to build a little church, but a pretty church I do not think I could stand; I prefer the little congregation in the bare hall." Scholars have pointed out that it was not a matter of forcing an aesthetic to fit Swedenborgian thought, but of recognizing the convergence between the two. Worcester consciously wanted to convey his Swedenborgian theology connecting art and morality through the design of the building. The architect Worcester commissioned A. Page Brown, who also designed the Ferry Building and many other respected San Francisco buildings. Worcester, an architect by avocation, worked closely with Brown. "I could have done nothing without the architect but he was very patient with my suggestions," Worcester said. "Sometimes he said that an idea of mine was not good architecture. I answered him that I cared nothing for the canons of architecture – the building must teach its lessons." Brown assigned Bernard Maybeck, who would later design the Palace of Fine Arts but then worked in Brown's office, to serve as draftsman for the project. Maybeck may well have influenced its conception – as well as being influenced by it – but Brown was the architect of record. Worcester's group of artist friends helped decorate the interior of the church. William Keith created four pastoral paintings that were set into the walls as windows onto nature. Worcester, Brown and Maybeck designed the chairs. Worcester asked artist Bruce Porter to create the stainedglass windows. The architects and artists, in an Arts & Crafts collaboration, developed a total decorative scheme, with paintings, windows and furniture all designed expressly for the building.

AT FIRST VIEW, the church is modest. This is not a grand cathedral, nor is it a bright white wooden church with a soaring spire such as Worcester would have known from his New England upbringing. The door of the church is revealed only after passing through a quiet garden. Nor does the church really feel as though it is in the city. It is barely visible from the street, its sanctuary framed by a tranquil, wall-enclosed garden. It is quite small. It takes a moment to realize that this is a legendary church listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Inside the church, the sense of intimacy is astonishing. The interior suggests a living room. The nave, lacking side aisles, terminates at the east in an altar placed offcenter and at the west in a large fireplace flanked by built-in benches. The fireplace is also off-center, its tall chimney meeting the roof just to one side of the ridge. The chandelier at the east end is not hung from the center line but rather slightly to the right of the altar. The asymmetry of the focal points suggests the imperfections in vernacular architecture, where a building's forms reflect the hand of the individual craftsman rather than the finish of an architectural plan. The Church of the New Jerusalem, like his Piedmont and Russian Hill homes, demonstrated Worcester's preference for simple forms and natural materials. The interior decoration of the church was decidedly domestic

rather than ecclesiastical. There was a fireplace and no fixed pews; instead, each parishioner drew up a chair. Wooden wainscoting and ceilings in the church echo Worcester's houses and were left as natural as possible. The madrone tree trunks that support the ceiling were left gnarled with their bark on, and arch gently upward and inward just as they had in the forest where Worcester found them. On September 20, 1894, Joseph Worcester recorded in his diary: "Mr. & Mrs. Martin came with trees from the mountains, arriving in evening." By January 11, 1895, the roof of the Swedenborgian Church had been constructed and a bill for \$680 had been sent. The special meaning and expressiveness of the weathered tree trunks and the drama they lent the sanctuary was a motif that was definitely not suggested by the architect. Brown, who was accustomed to more conventional architectural solutions, opposed the use of the trees. But Worcester suggested that Brown came to accept them. "Yes," Worcester said, "he knew it was not architecture but more: it is the poetry of architecture."

ALL OF THE available evidence clearly makes the design of the Swedenborgian Church a group effort, with Joseph Worcester very much in control. A. Page Brown, the architect of record, died in 1896 about a year after the Swedenborgian Church opened to great acclaim and publicity. He never took credit as designer of the church, and neither did Maybeck. Perhaps Worcester convinced his circle to believe, like Swedenborg, that "the art of architecture comes from heaven." The Swedenborgian Church is an icon of the American Arts & Crafts movement, and it continues to cast its spell on all who enter. The Worcester group and their California shingle homes, Mission style furniture – and especially their church – had a lasting effect that can still be seen today throughout the Bay Area and far beyond.

Editor's Note: For more on Joseph Worcester and the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church see Freudenheim's book, *Building with Nature: Inspiration for the Arts & Crafts Home* (Gibbs Smith, Nov. 2005) . Photo credit: Eric Luse, SF Chronicle