

## 56 years after her death, Julia Morgan wins top award

by Guest contributor

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Last month, the American Institute of Architects [awarded its highest honor](#), a Gold Medal, to architect Julia Morgan — 56 years after she had died. She is the first woman to ever be given the award.

Morgan, who practiced for 50 years and designed more than 700 buildings, studied civil engineering at UC Berkeley and caught the eye of the architect Bernard Maybeck, who taught there. After graduating from the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, Morgan returned to Berkeley where she went to work for John Galen Howard. That was the beginning of a long history of designing structures in Berkeley. Her name was in the news just last week when a building she designed on the Cal campus, Girton Hall, was [relocated to the UC Botanical Garden](#).

**Sandhya Sood**, AIA, has a Masters in Architecture from UC Berkeley and is Principal of [Accent Architecture + Design](#) in Berkeley. Her research on the sustainability of Morgan's work contributed to the success of Julia Morgan's AIA Gold Medal 2014 nomination. Berkeleyside invited her to share her thoughts on Morgan's work and influence:

Early publications on San Francisco Bay region architecture overlook the significance of Julia Morgan's work. Her recognition as an architect in her own right has been recent, spurred by the [Julia Morgan 2012 Festival](#) and the [AIA Gold Medal 2014 Award](#). Morgan's sustainable design approach from a century ago is still appropriate, and is strongly linked to the Bay region's geography, culture and climate, giving it timeless relevance. It is this approach that influences my practice. I believe Morgan's work needs more attention, for it holds valuable lessons for us all.



Julia Morgan: recognition for her as an architect in her own right has been recent. Photo: Creative Commons

Julia Morgan, FAIA was the only native Californian among the first crop of architects to propel the early Bay Tradition as distinct from the burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement of the time.

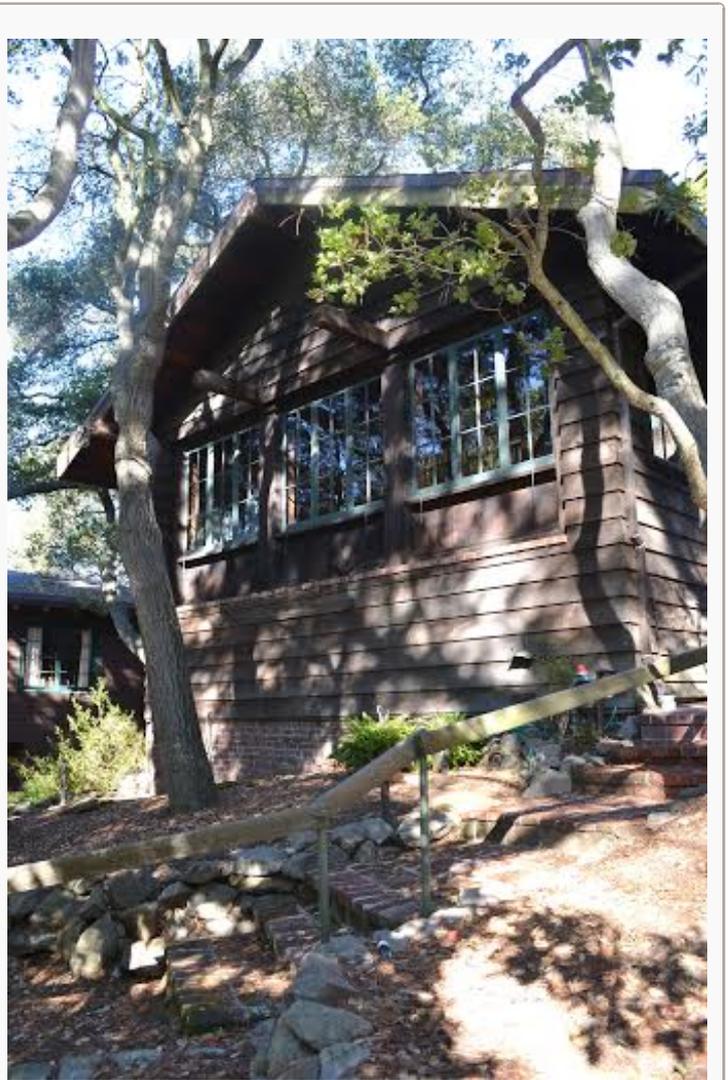
The Bay Tradition represents a vernacular approach to architecture in its native response to the site and its landscape, use of materials, their assemblage and the local climate. It developed distinctly from the Arts and Crafts movement by appropriating the regional vernacular, thereby planting the seeds for modernism and its tenet of living with nature. The Bay Tradition continues to influence contemporary architecture in the San Francisco region with its focus on sustainability and environmentalism.

Julia Morgan designed many buildings in the first phase of the Bay Tradition (1890-1920), especially in Berkeley and the East Bay: St John's Presbyterian Church (now known as the Julia Morgan Center), for example, [Girton Hall](#) and [many homes](#).

Perhaps the diversity in Morgan's projects put some of her simpler, but just as influential, works in the shadow. Take the Wadsworth House in Berkeley (1908) designed for Mr. and Mrs. Euleta Wadsworth.

The house is set uphill and is barely visible from its access street in a North Berkeley neighborhood. Wrapped in weathered, gray redwood boards, a box with a gable roof on a clunker-brick base appears to grow from a verdant knoll, one among the many tree trunks that surround it. The changing light casts shadows with patterns of sweeping branches on leaded glass windows and the rough hewn texture of the lapped wall surfaces.

A brick paved path carved in the hillside reveals an intimately scaled porch, leading directly to the living room. Its soaring interior, punctuated with the rhythm of hand crafted redwood trusses exudes the calmness and nobility of a chapel, belying its unassuming exterior. A bank of south facing windows with rectilinear mullions stained pale green fill the front porch with light, filtered through dense foliage.

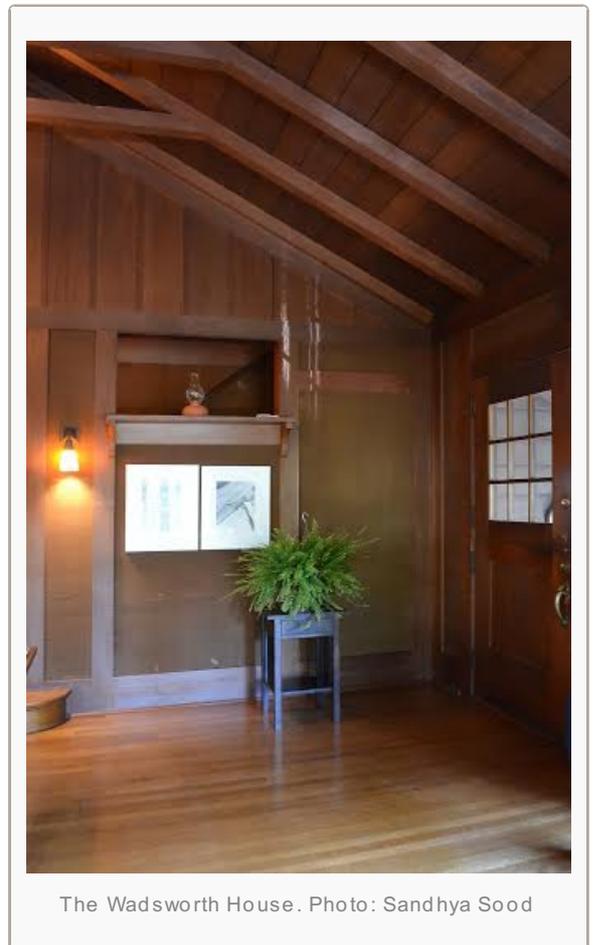


The Wadsworth House in North Berkeley. Photo: Sandhya Sood

For half a century, this humble abode was a gathering place for prominent artists, authors, and especially musicians, such as David Park, Margaret Webster and Igor Stravinsky. The orientation and simple arrangement of the rooms has facilitated harmonious additions through a century of habitation. The house has changed hands only twice in over 105 years, delighting and adapting to several generations, including the current owners who find the house uplifting and thoroughly livable.

Morgan's original design, created in her home office in Oakland called for a large, turn of the century California bungalow with a gallery, music room, open porches, balconies and latticed windows with decorative motifs. Interestingly, Morgan altered the design radically, stripping off the decoration and all secondary spaces but for an enclosed porch, creating a modest cottage.

An architectural expression of nature is expressed by using natural materials and integrating the house with its landscape, rather than alluding to it through stylistic ornament, as was prevalent in the Arts and Crafts movement. Morgan's design iteration produced a house that complies with [Charles Keeler's 'Simple Home'](#) (but without abiding by all the 'rules') more than any work of her peers, be it Maybeck, Averil Coxhead or Willis Polk.



Yet, the bold manner in which Morgan invokes the rural vernacular of the barn house for an urban locale presents her as a sophisticated architect, very early in her career. Even though the barn vernacular captivated many Bay Region architects — including William Wurster, Donlyn Lyndon, Joseph Esherick, and Mary Griffin — one would not conjure the image of a barn when thinking of Julia Morgan.

Morgan incorporates the vernacular directly and honestly, with all its attributes, rather than primarily for its stylistic or visual appeal. In its clean lines and contemporary vibe, the Wadsworth House could well have been designed a century later. The minimalism in Morgan's work emerges from the elemental qualities of the vernacular, imbibing it with a certain dignity and warmth, revealing her 'modernist' sensibilities.

The Wadsworth House, rooted in place, holds the principles of the Bay Tradition.

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