



LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



V. C. Morris Gift Shop 140 Maiden Lane

Initiated by the Historic Preservation Commission, May 4, 2016
Approved by the Board of Supervisors, November 15, 2016
Signed by Mayor Edwin M. Lee, November 22, 2016

Landmark No. 72

Table of Contents

Overview.....	3
Building Description	4
Construction History.....	6
Master Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright.....	10
Post-War Commercial Development.....	13
V. C. Morris Building In Context.....	13
Kearny-Market-Mason-Sutter Conservation District.....	16
Statement of Significance.....	20
Boundaries of the Landmark Site	22
Character-Defining Features	22
Appendix: Morris House Designs	25
Bibliography	27
Acknowledgments.....	29

The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) is a seven-member body that makes recommendations to the Board of Supervisors regarding the designation of landmark buildings and districts. The regulations governing landmarks and landmark districts are found in Article 10 of the Planning Code. The HPC is staffed by the San Francisco Planning Department.

Cover photographs: Top: San Francisco Public Library; Bottom center: Courtesy of Paul Turner; Bottom right: Maynard Parker Collection, Huntington Library.

V. C. Morris Gift Shop

140 Maiden Lane

Built: 1949
Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright

OVERVIEW

The exterior of the V. C. Morris Gift Shop located at 140 Maiden Lane was designated as San Francisco City Landmark No. 72 in 1975. This landmark designation report amends the previous designation to include the interior, which was not designated at that time.

The V. C. Morris building, both the exterior and interior, is significant for its architecture and as the work of master architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright's design for the V. C. Morris Gift Shop breaks the rules of conventional department store design. Instead of a visually open storefront and open floor plan, the building's solid brick façade with narrow arched tunnel entrance gives no indication of the interior's double-height, mezzanine-ringed, top-lit circular interior space with distinct sales areas. The V. C. Morris Shop represents Wright's conscious departure from the formal principles of modern shop design resulting in a building so different from typical shops that it instantly attracted the attention and praise of architectural critics in the United States and Europe. It is the first building to be constructed using what became his favorite structural shape, the spiral, which dominated his work throughout his final years. The V. C. Morris Gift Shop was also the first time Wright incorporated the Romanesque arch in five decades, a design motif which he had often used in his early work.

Frank Lloyd Wright is by far the most well-known and influential American architect. His personal aesthetic and design theories on architectural form influenced the development of Modern architecture in the United States and in Europe. His work helped spawn a new design aesthetic that addressed the natural environment, contained minimal superfluous ornamentation, and emphasized function, flexibility, and an honest expression of a building's structural frame. Although Wright produced several designs for other buildings in San Francisco, the V. C. Morris Gift Shop is the only one that was realized. The V. C. Morris Gift Shop is also significant as a rare extant Modern building designed by the master architect.

BUILDING DESCRIPTION

Overview

140 Maiden Lane is a two-story, wood frame and brick building with a rectangular plan and boxy massing. The flat roof contains two ridge type skylights with gabled ends running north to south.

South (Primary) Façade



Above: Primary façade of 140 Maiden Lane (2015). Above right: Entrance detail (2015). Below right: Barrel vaulted entry (courtesy of Paul Turner).

Clad in thin, buff colored Roman type brick, the façade reads as completely flat brick plane. However, most of the façade actually projects slightly from the surrounding surface. The projecting surface is edged with top and bottom with buff colored stone, as is the cornice of the building. Beneath the bottom band of stone is a row of small square lights molded with a Greek key pattern. At the left side of the facade is a vertical band with alternating bricks missing, suggesting a zipper-like pattern. The voids are illuminated at night, providing a pattern of light that marches down the façade. An asymmetrical arched entrance with four slightly recessed bands of brick voussoirs leads into a barrel vaulted entry tunnel that is brick on the left and glass on the right ending in a planter box capped with stone.

Remaining elevations are obscured by adjacent buildings.

Interior

The façade conceals a circular inner volume behind its simple windowless wall of brickwork. The barrel vaulted tunnel continues inside. Within the two-story space, Curved walls plastered in rough textured concrete contain a spiral ramp that ascends to the circular mezzanine. Circular niches and openings in the walls follow the curve of the ramp. Convex and concave acrylic plastic bubbles cover the skylights. Built in mahogany shelves, cabinets and benches follow the curving plan. A brass planter hangs from the ceiling and the floor is covered rectangular and square concrete floor slabs laid in an irregular pattern.



Views of the interior (2015).

CONSTRUCTION HISTORY



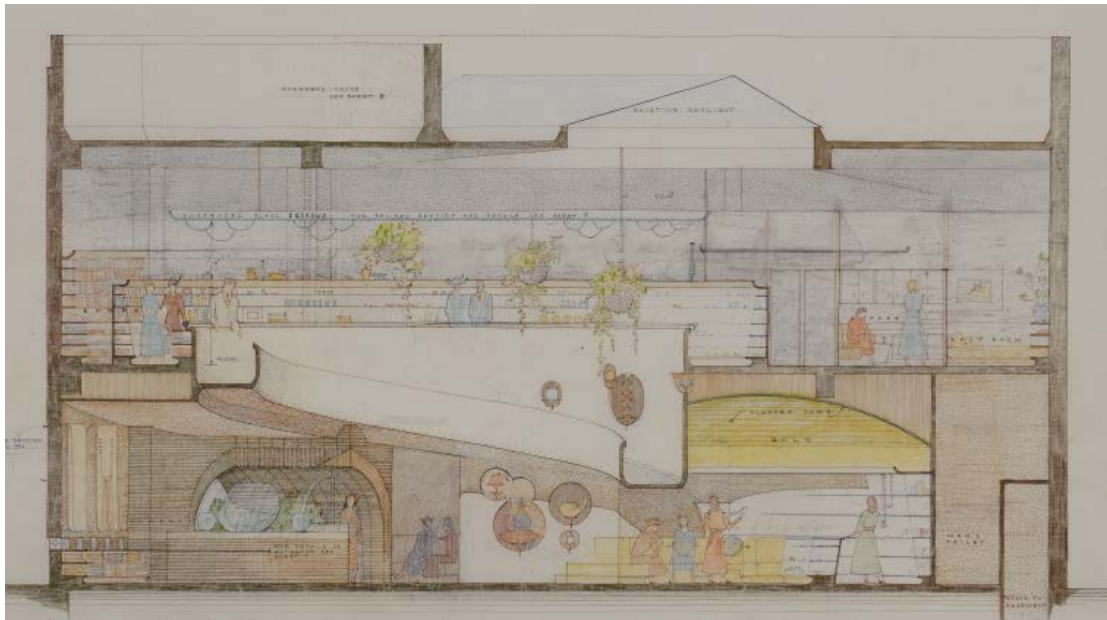
140 Maiden Lane at far left (noted by red arrow) likely after the remodel by Williams & Grimes and after the Morrises moved in, n.d.

Source: San Francisco Public Library.

140 Maiden Lane. Sometime in 1946 or 1947, V. C. Morris asked Frank Lloyd Wright to design a remodel for the building. Wright adapted the circular plan of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (designed in 1945 and completed in 1959) to the building at 140 Maiden Lane. The drawings were done in 1948 and construction was completed early the following year. Wright's son-in-law, Wesley Peters, was in charge of the project, but Wright made many trips to San Francisco to check on its progress.³

The original two-story plus basement, wood frame, and brick building at 140 Maiden Lane was constructed in 1911. It was designed by J.E. Krafft & Sons,¹ a local architectural and engineering firm. The building contained two shops with large plate glass windows on the ground floor and a loft space for storage that was lit by skylights and a band of tall continuous windows facing the street. It was remodeled in 1937 by local firm Williams & Grimes². The ground floor became a single space with a centered door flanked by plate glass windows on a terra cotta clad bulkhead. The second floor windows remained unchanged and the remaining visible façade was plastered and painted.

About 1937, V. C. Morris and wife Lillian moved their tableware and antiques shop to



Above: Section of the interior drawn by the architect. Courtesy of Paul Turner.

¹ Building permit application #3612, June 27, 1911.

² Building permit application #24729, February 11, 1937.

³ Millie Robbins, "A Jewel on Maiden Lane," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 5, 1968, 21.

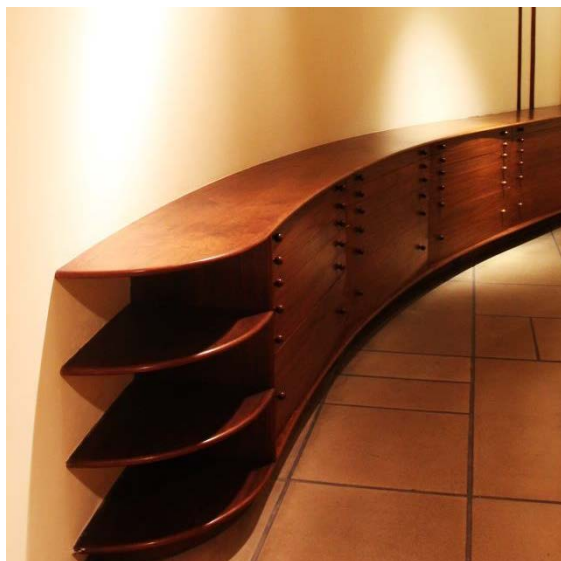
Wright opened up the existing two story space inserting a circular inner volume within the tight constraints of the existing building located on a narrow lot. The mezzanine and spiral ramp – both made of reinforced concrete - is defined by the rectangular volume of the building. The small circular illuminated openings along the ramp’s walls allowed a continuous display of merchandise.

To mask the 30 x 15 foot skylights, Wright designed a “mosaic screen” of flash glass (glass overlaid with layers of white glass giving it an opaque or opalescent quality) that was ultimately not allowed by the building department because of building code issues. Instead a local firm fabricated the 24 large concave dome and 96 convex domes from sheets of acrylic plastic. The smaller domes were free blown and the larger domes had to be formed from four sections cemented together. All of the plastic parts were coated with an anti-static coating to resist attracting dust. The domes are held in brass tubing and are suspended from the ceiling beneath the original skylights. The color of the domes changes depending on the quality of light, occasionally changing to a sky blue. At night the fluorescent lighting makes the domes glow. Other plastic installations included acrylic shelves that rest on solid lathe turned spheres of the same material imbedded with bronze, a large hemispheric bowl that held aquatic plants and fish, and a globe shaped vase that held flowers.⁴



Above: The circular inner volume with ramp and acrylic plastic domes at the ceiling.

Courtesy of Paul Turner.



Left: Remnants of the mahogany display fixtures designed and built by Manuel Sandoval (2015).

The display fixtures throughout the store were designed and built by Manuel Sandoval, a Nicaraguan woodworker who joined the Taliesin Fellowship in October 1932 to study architecture, until Wright discovered his woodworking talents. Sandoval was responsible for the swamp cypress plywood cabinets and carpentry in Edgar Kauffman’s office in Pittsburg that are now housed in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.⁵ For the V. C. Morris shop, Sandoval fashioned low comfortable stools, tables, and built in shelving in rich mahogany wood with curved forms. The merchandise was laid out on these counters, cases and shelves following the curvilinear plan. The tabletops were used by shop patrons to “experiment with combination of silver, glass and china or... consider and study an object of art in relation to their home or as a suitable gift.”⁶

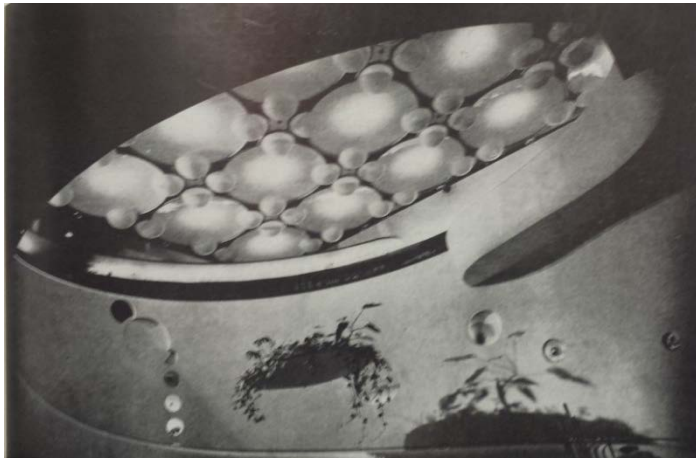
⁴ “China and Gift Shop By Frank Lloyd Wright for V. C. Morris, Maiden Lane, San Francisco, California” *Architectural Forum* (February 1950).

⁵ Donald Hoffmann, *Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater: The House and Its History*, (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 1993) and www.lustighouse.com, accessed September 2015.

⁶ *Architectural Forum*.

After the Morrises remodeled the shop, some 500 to 1,500 people a day came to see it, with one in ten buying something.⁷ Not only did the Morrises have a larger national business than they had ever had before, but many of San Francisco's elite purchased their fine china, crystal, glass and objet d'arts there.

In 1959 the V. C. Morris Gift Shop was designated by the American Institute of Architects as one of seventeen American buildings designed by Wright to be preserved as an example of Wright's architectural contribution to American culture. In 1998 the building was identified by a National Historic Landmarks (NHL) program study as one of Frank Lloyd Wright's most significant buildings and was proposed for NHL designation.



Above: View of the ceiling. Source: Architectural Forum, 1950.

Right: A view of the interior looking through one of the circular openings in the ramp walls. Source: Architectural Forum, 1950. Courtesy of Paul Turner.



Below: Interior view underneath the spiral ramp. Source: Architectural Forum, 1950.



⁷ *Architectural Forum.*

Alteration History

140 Maiden Lane has undergone very few alterations since it was remodeled in 1949. A non-loadbearing wall was removed in the basement and cabinet work was remodeled in 1972.⁸ The parapet was braced in 1977.⁹ New stairs to the basement were added in 1983¹⁰ and the roof and skylight were replaced in 1985.¹¹ In 1997 an elevator was installed, a bathroom was renovated and a power assist button added to the door.¹² In 1998 the interior was restored by Aaron Green, a former protégé of Wright.¹³ Building permits were not found to confirm this work. Seismic retrofit was completed in 2002, stabilizing the brick façade.¹⁴ The building appears to retain nearly all of its original Wright designed features, with the exception of some of the cabinet work.

Ownership & Occupant History

Ownership records prior to 1917 could not be located. In July 1917 Percy and Adeline Towne sold the property to May E. Bridge. It was owned by the Bridge family until 1941 when it was sold to Francis P. Farquhar. In 1965 the building was bought by Anton Marguleas. Raymond Handley bought the building in 1997. Marsha Handley became the owner in 2010. The building is currently owned by Downtown Properties IV, LLC.

According to Sanborn maps, the building was occupied by a restaurant prior to the Morrisses occupancy. After Vere and Lillian Morris passed away in 1957 and 1959 respectively, their shop was purchased in 1960 by Allan Adler, a famed silversmith.¹⁵ Adler was known as the “silversmith to the stars” for his celebrity clientele that ranged from Errol Flynn to Michael Jackson and Presidents John F Kennedy and Dwight D. Eisenhower. In the 1940s Miss USA and Miss Universe organizations commission crowns and he designed mini Oscars for Academy Award winners. His hand hammered work consisted of silverware, hollowware and jewelry in unadorned, geometric shapes inspired by the Modernist art movement and some of his work is now held in the Museum of Modern Art¹⁶ Adler had eponymously named shops in La Jolla and Corona del Mar. However, he left the name of his new San Francisco shop at 140 Maiden Lane unchanged.

In 1968 an art gallery run by Reese Pally and known as the Edward Marshall Boehm Gallery moved in. By 1979 the building was occupied by a women’s clothing shop, Helga Howie. This occupant removed many of the Wright designed fixtures, cataloguing and recording their original locations on blueprint plans before storing them.¹⁷ While a few of the moveable fixtures remain, it is unknown what has happened to the remaining moveable fixtures or where they were stored. Marsha Handley ran a gallery called Xanadu Gallery until June 2015.

⁸ Building permit #408104, April 14, 1972.

⁹ Building permit #7712127, November 7, 1977.

¹⁰ Building permit #8304324, May 16, 1983.

¹¹ Building permit #8507849, July 23, 1985.

¹² Building permit #9706284, April 8, 1997.

¹³ Coming Full Circle: Architect Aaron Green has revived local masterpiece by Frank Lloyd Wright,” San Francisco Examiner, July 26, 1998.

¹⁴ Building permit #200201227411, June 19, 2002.

¹⁵ “Silversmith Buys Store; New Shop for Maiden Lane, *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 11, 1960, 42.

¹⁶ Mary Rourke, “Allan Adler, 86; Crafted Beauty Queens’ Crowns, Silver Pieces for the Stars,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 2002.

¹⁷ *SF Progress*, January 26, 1979.

MASTER ARCHITECT: FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT¹⁸

Pioneering Modern architect Frank Lloyd Wright influenced the development of Modern architecture in the United States and in Europe. Wright grew up in Wisconsin, and at the age of 20 moved to Chicago to work at various architecture firms, including that of his mentor Louis Sullivan. His time in Sullivan and Dankmar Adler's office not only exposed him to some of architecture's most current and bold advances, but also allowed him to develop a personal aesthetic and theories on architectural form. Here, he established his passion for organic, functional forms that he felt linked his architecture to an American idealism and identity through its democratic rationality. Wright opened his own firm in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1893. For the next seven years he would develop the concepts behind the Prairie School of architecture.

From 1911 through 1932, Wright built and rebuilt his house in Green Spring, Wisconsin, which burnt down twice. His Taliesin Fellowship was based there; apprentices studied architecture under Wright through interdisciplinary courses and hands-on experience at the ever-changing Taliesin site. In 1937, he built Taliesin West in Arizona, which would serve as his summer home and a second campus for the Taliesin Fellows.



Lillian Morris and Frank Lloyd Wright in Stinson Beach, c. 1956.

Source: Collection of Aaron Green, courtesy of Paul Turner.

Frank Lloyd Wright is by far the most well-known and influential American architect. His tumultuous 75-year career evolved from the early Prairie House period (1900-1909) to the 1920s Mayan-inspired concrete block residences to conceptual plans for the 1930s Broadacre City. Throughout, Wright was staunchly anti-urban and a proponent of the Jeffersonian ideal, that as expressed through his Usonian house designs favored single-family houses set in the natural environment. As such his buildings (and legacy) are rooted largely in residential landscapes.

Architecture critic Martin Filler argued that Wright was central to, yet “estranged from Modernism.”¹⁹ Wright favored natural materials, craftsmanship, and traditional methods, though he also experimented with new materials and technology. Filler describes Wright's buildings as machines that took on a human aspect. His lengthy career was marked by precipitous setbacks and comebacks. Initiator of the Midwestern Prairie Style, Wright legacy includes the introduction of flowing interior open-plan spaces and the concept of organic architecture. Wright's Robie House (1909), located in Chicago, features key elements characteristic of the Prairie Style, which include strong horizontal planes; low-pitched hipped roofs with broad, projecting eaves; an open-plan interior layout; and a sprawling, low-

¹⁸ Excerpted from San Francisco Modern Architecture and Landscape Design, 1935-1970 Historic Context Statement, September 30, 2010 by Mary Brown.

¹⁹ Martin Filler, *Makers of Modern Architecture: From Frank Lloyd Wright to Frank Gehry* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2007), 33.

slung horizontal orientation. Iterations of Prairie Style houses are found in Berkeley and Oakland, but are rare in San Francisco. By the 1920s, Wright's design sensibilities and geographic influence shifted dramatically as he focused on interlocking, textile concrete block Mayan Revival residences in Los Angeles.

Despite his earlier acclaim, Wright's popularity waned in the 1920s and he was largely ignored in the influential 1932 MoMa exhibition "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition." His most renowned works, including "Falling Water" (1934-1937) and the Johnson Wax Building (1936- 1939) – arguably the apex of his career – were designed when Wright was in his sixties. With over 500 designs built, Wright has left a lasting legacy on the American landscape.

Frank Lloyd Wright's work and design theories influenced generations of architects across the United States and helped spawn a new design aesthetic that addressed the natural environment, contained minimal superfluous ornamentation, and emphasized function, flexibility, and an honest expression of a building's structural frame. More important is the legacy of Wright's disciples, members of the Taliesin Fellowship who are among the key architects of Modern design. Taliesin Fellows with works in the San Francisco Bay Area include Frederick Langhorst, Mark Mills, and Richard Neutra.

Of the approximately 300 extant buildings designed by Wright, the V. C. Morris Gift Shop is the only one located in San Francisco. Wright proposed other structures for San Francisco, including a skyscraper for the Press Club in 1920, a house for V. C. Morris in 1945, a mortuary in 1948 and a concrete "butterfly" bridge between San Francisco and the East Bay in 1949, but none were realized except the V. C. Morris Gift Shop.

V. C. Morris

Vere C. Morris and his wife Lillian Isaacs Morris operated their gift shop at 140 Maiden Lane for 22 years. Vere Conover Morris was born in the town of Brighton, Ohio on February 2, 1883 to David E. Morris and Clara Bachus.²⁰ By 1900 the Morris family, including brothers Merle J. and Clifford D., was living in Brick Township, County of Ocean, New Jersey. 17-year old Vere, an 8th grade graduate, worked as a news dealer.²¹ By 1910, Vere had moved to Brooklyn, New York and was living in a boarding house and working as a wallpaper salesman.²² Vere took his first trip to England in 1914, listing his profession as an importer²³ and two years later he worked as a salesman for the F.J. Emmerich Co.²⁴ In 1917, Vere was a business manager in a photography studio.²⁵ Later he was an instructor at the Parsons School of Design in New York.²⁶

Lillian Isaacs was born in Oakland on July 10, 1887. Her father, John D. Isaacs was an engineer for Southern Pacific Company. As a young woman, Lillian was considered one of the most beautiful "society belles" in the Bay Area, and in 1907 was the subject of a story in the San Francisco Call, saying the "smart set" would be losing a "prominent leader" because her father was being transferred to Chicago.²⁷ About 1912, the Isaacs family moved to New York. During this time, Lillian and her mother frequently visited San Francisco, often staying for the entire winter. Lillian met Vere when she attended his lecture at Parsons in New York. She often told friends that she had first fallen in love

²⁰ Ohio Births and Christenings Index, 1800-1962.

²¹ United States Census, 1900.

²² United States Census, 1910.

²³ UK, Outward Passenger Lists, July 18, 1914.

²⁴ New York City Directories, 1916.

²⁵ World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918

²⁶ Millie Robbins, "A Jewel on Maiden Lane," 21.

²⁷ "Society Belle of Oakland Will Reside in Chicago: City Loses Leader in Smart Set," *San Francisco Call*, January 19, 1907, 4.

with his speaking voice.²⁸ Vere and Lillian were married in Manhattan, New York in 1918.²⁹ In the early years of their marriage, he worked as a car salesman while she stayed at home.³⁰

About 1927, Vere and Lillian moved to San Francisco. They rented space at the back of a bookstore at 434 Post Street, selling antiques.³¹ They relocated the shop to 517 Sutter Street about 1932 where they sold art goods.³² Business picked up in the 1930s, and about 1937, the shop moved to 140 Maiden Lane.³³ The building had previously been occupied by a restaurant. Although the street had a bad reputation in those days, the Morrises saw that a florist and a few other more respectable shops were already established there. Vere and Lillian ran their shop at 140 Maiden Lane until approximately 1955.³⁴ Vere died in 1957 and Lillian died in 1959.³⁵



V. C. Morris House, "Seacliff," Scheme 1, 1945.

Source: Frank Lloyd Wright *The Complete Works*.

Lillian and Vere Morris first met Frank Lloyd Wright at a lecture he gave in Palo Alto in 1944.³⁶ Afterwards, the three began a friendly relationship that would last for over twelve years. The Morrises stayed with Wright at Taliesin in Wisconsin and Taliesin West in Arizona many times and Wright visited the Morrises in San Francisco, even staying at the Mark Hopkins Hotel as their guest in 1947. Not long after their first meeting, Wright began producing house designs for the Morrises (See Appendix for discussion of Wright's house designs for the Morrises). Ultimately he designed four houses for them, but unfortunately none were executed. Author Neil Levine notes that it is "important to stress the comprehensive and synesthetic naturalism of the [Seacliff] house in order to appreciate fully the contrast with the design of the couple's downtown store as a response to a completely different urban context."³⁷

²⁸ Millie Robbins, "A Jewel on Maiden Lane," 21.

²⁹ New York Marriage Index, June 24, 1918.

³⁰ United States Census, 1920.

³¹ San Francisco City Directories, 1927; Millie Robbins, "A Jewel on Maiden Lane," 21.

³² San Francisco City Directories, 1932.

³³ Millie Robbins, "A Jewel on Maiden Lane," 21.

³⁴ San Francisco City Directories, 1955.

³⁵ California Death Index.

³⁶ Millie Robbins, "A Jewel on Maiden Lane," 21.

³⁷ Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 368. See Appendix for more information on Wright's house designs for Lillian and Vere Morris.

V. C. MORRIS GIFT SHOP IN CONTEXT



Frank Lloyd Wright at his drafting table with photo of V. C. Morris Gift Shop in background.

Source: Courtesy of Paul Turner.

different from storefronts for banks, barbers, or bars. Components of the retail streetscape – paving, signage, plantings, canopies, and vestibules – also figured prominently in attracting attention to storefronts. In San Francisco several companies, including National Store Fixture (2750 19th Street) and Regal Manufacturing Co. (1306 Fulton Street), designed modern store fixtures and entire storefronts for local businesses.

Aggressive marketing campaigns by manufacturers, including Libbey-Owens-Ford (LOF) produced copious catalogs and advertisements marketing these new storefront designs. LOF's 1945 catalog "Visual Fronts" promoted large expanses of glass in order to reduce the barrier between pedestrians and the goods displayed inside. Numerous books published after the war, including those by well-known figures George Nelson, Morris Ketchum and Victor Gruen, stressed the four objectives of a storefront: identify the store by name or by the character of goods it sold; display the goods in a way that would create the urge to buy; and have an attractive entrance that would entice a customer to come in. The boundary between inside and outside was so amorphous that the customer was actually drawn into the store without even knowing it.³⁹

In early 1950, a mobile caravan of model storefronts began a three-month tour of major western cities. The model stores, developed by Pittsburgh Plate Glass, featured twelve one-eighth scale model storefronts that could serve as basic designs for architects and builders. Highlighted were "Open-front" storefronts, which put the entire street-level merchandising area on display. The caravan manager stated, "Architects throughout the nation are becoming increasingly conscious that 'display' is one of the most important words in any merchant's vocabulary. Display of the entire merchandising area on the street level is what the merchant wants. And it's what he gets in the 'open-front' type of store."⁴⁰

³⁸ Jim Heimann, *Shop America: Midcentury Storefront Design 1938-1950*, (Koln: Germany, 2007), 9.

³⁹ Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, 370.

⁴⁰ Adapted from San Francisco Modern Architecture and Landscape Design, 1935-1970 Historic Context Statement. September 30, 2010 by Mary Brown.

The evolution of this “open-front” storefront that allowed a customer to see directly into the store was felt to be a “logical consequence of modernist principles of functional expression and transparency” and blurred the boundary between inside and outside. Transparent, functionally expressive, designed from the inside out, it perfectly referenced the modernist objective of a building.⁴¹

Wright made a conscious choice not to use the principles of contemporary storefront design in the V.C Morris Store. Rather, he wanted to create an emotional sequence for the passerby. The building presents a big blank wall of Roman brick that arrests the shopper in contrast to its showy neighbors. Without an open front, the contents of the interior are a total mystery. The half brick, half glass tunneled arched entry was half inside and half outside and offered just a tantalizing glimpse of the interior and left the passerby with the anticipation of a surprise. Once inside the entrance vault the passerby is accepts the invitation to enter the shop and on the inside finds “a world of undreamed fantasy”⁴² entirely removed from the pedestrian world outside the door.

On the interior, Wright chose to ignore every rule of modern merchandising. Rather than a free flow, open plan for the interior of the shop, the spiral ramp shapes the interior into sharply defined retail areas. At that time, lighting was considered to be a crucial component of merchandising. The illumination in the shop was indefinable and atmospheric. Even the display technique of the shop was seen as unorthodox. Instead of displaying an abundance of goods for sale, most repetitious articles were stored out of sight, and visible merchandize treated as part of the architecture. Vere Morris said the integrity and beauty of the building, silently and insistently discarded anything unworthy, demanding that each article shown in the store had the same inherent beauty and integrity.⁴³

The façade of the V. C. Morris Gift shop design flew in the face of modern storefront design. Wright had previously designed a characteristically open-front shop in Oak Park in 1937. The design for the V. C. Morris Gift Shop represents a rejection of the principles he had once followed. When Vere Morris saw the design and worried about the lack of visibility. Wright responded, “We are not going to dump your beautiful merchandise on the street but create an arch-tunnel of glass, into which the passers-by may look and be enticed. As they penetrate further into the entrance, seeing the shop inside with its spiral ramp and tables set with fine china and crystal, they will suddenly push open the door, and you’ve got them!” Wright deliberately masked and concealed the internal structure, its space and function. However, once inside, one discovers the “top-lit building-within-a-building and the transformative effect of movement on the spatial form.”⁴⁴

The V. C. Morris Shop is an unusual design for Wright as it does not reflect his desire for an honest expression of a building’s structural frame. Wright followed the Modern belief that the exterior of a building should express the interior, which can be seen in his design for the Guggenheim Museum (completed in 1959). However, the V. C. Morris Shop is a building within a building and its blank façade on a boxy building gives no indication of the spiral form on its interior. Mark Anthony Wilson writes in *Frank Lloyd Wright on the West Coast* that there “is no doubt that the Morris Shop served as a working prototype for the Guggenheim Museum; a trial run done on a much smaller scale.”⁴⁵

Early on in his career Wright was “obsessed with the twin concepts of continuity and plasticity.” During World War II, Wright explored and expanded on his ideas of continuity and plasticity of space and structure. As Peter Blake

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² *Architectural Forum*.

⁴³ *Architectural Forum*.

⁴⁴ Robert McCarter, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (London: Phaiden Press, 1997), 306-307.

⁴⁵ Mark Anthony Wilson, *Frank Lloyd Wright on the West Coast* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2014), 167.

notes, “more and more often, Wright got away from straight-lined architecture all together; his module – if that is the word – became a circle, rather than a triangle or polygon...and his favorite structural shape became the spiral or snail. While this circle pattern remained in Wright’s work and dominated it throughout his final years,⁴⁶ the V. C. Morris Gift Shop is Wright’s first building to be constructed with this central theme.

In the V. C. Morris Gift Shop, Wright explored the possibilities of space in motion up and down, as well as sideways; the excitement inherent in changing levels; in light appearing through skylights from above and progression through architecture involving not only turns and twists, right and left, but ascents and descents as well. This is very different from his early buildings where Wright had felt that his designs of space should be a horizontally moving entity, always controlled in layers parallel to the earth.⁴⁷

The Romanesque arched entrance on the exterior of the building makes historical references to H.H. Richardson’s Glessner House in Chicago (1885-97) and Louis Sullivan’s small downtown banks, such as the one in Owatonna Minnesota (1906-1908). It was also the first time Wright had used this design motif in five decades. The Francisco Terrace Apartments in Chicago (1895, demolished 1971) and some of his Prairie Houses such as the Frank W. Thomas House in Oak Park, Illinois (1901), and the Francis and Mary Little House in Peoria, Illinois (1902) had been designed with arches, however he not included arches in his designs since establishing Taliesin in 1911. As Paul Turner notes, “the shop became one of Wright's favorite buildings, which he often illustrated in his publications and included in exhibitions of his work...”⁴⁸



Left: Glessner House, Chicago, IL (1885-97); H. H. Richardson, Architect. Source: Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress, 1963.

Right: Detail of Glessner House entrance. Source: wendycitychicago.com.

⁴⁶ Peter Blake, *Three Master Builders* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), 369, 395.

⁴⁷ Peter Blake, *Three Master Builders*, 355.

⁴⁸ Paul Turner, *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Bay Area*, unpublished manuscript.



Left: *Chicago Auditorium Theater; Adler & Sullivan, architects (1889). The Auditorium was Wright's principal assignment in Adler & Sullivan's office for a year or more and made an enormous impression on him. Source: Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress, 1987*

Right: *National Farmer's Bank Building, Owatonna MN, Louis Sullivan, architect (1906-1908). Source: Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress, 1987*



Left: *Frank W. Thomas House, Oak Park, Illinois (1901). Source: www.mcnees.org.*

Right: *Francis and Mary Little House in Peoria, Illinois (1902). Source: www.prairieschooltraveler.com*

KEARNY-MARKET-MASON-SUTTER CONSERVATION DISTRICT⁴⁹

The Kearny-Market-Mason-Sutter District covers a large area. Individual streets within the district have unique histories which have often changed dramatically over time. These changing land-use patterns were in part determined by the movement of high-quality retail stores. Throughout the years, the closing or movement of larger department stores has often provided new space for smaller stores, and has strongly influenced their locations. The best known stores of the retail district were located on Kearny Street in the 1870's and 1880's. The growth of the City, due in part to the introduction of cable car service, led to the movement of the retail district towards both Market Street and the Grant Avenue/Union Square area. Beginning in the 1880's, department stores such as the Emporium and Hale Brothers opened large stores on Market Street. However, the large width of Market Street and its distance from high income residential neighborhoods on Nob Hill hindered its further development as a high class retail district. By the 1920's, Market Street had become San Francisco's family shopping street.

The prominence of the Grant Avenue/Union Square retail area as an exclusive shopping district was assured when I. Magnin (originally on Third Street) moved from Market Street to the corner of Grant Avenue and Geary Street. The location of the City of Paris at the corner of Geary and Stockton Streets across from Union Square firmly established Union Square as the most desirable location in the retail district. Since the 1920's, Lower Grant Avenue and the Union Square area have been the City's premier shopping district.

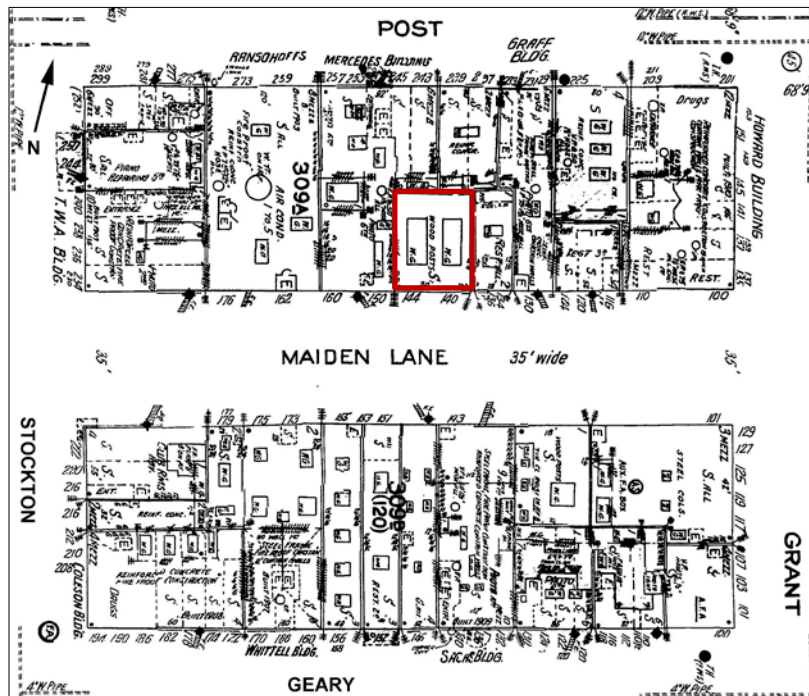
The pattern of development is one of dense, small-scaled buildings predominantly four to eight stories in height. The District is further defined by the location of Union Square in its heart. The character of the area is determined by the many fine quality structures, and supported by a number of contributory buildings. Since the entire area was built in less than 20 years, and the major portion in less than 10 years, buildings were constructed in similar styles and structural technology. Perhaps even more importantly, architects were of like backgrounds, schooled in the classical Beaux Arts tradition.

Much of the retailing area's vitality is attributable to its physical character. The mix of shops and unique buildings is not duplicated in suburban shopping malls, and, because of this, the area attracts shoppers from around the Bay Area. The prevailing architectural character is an important legacy from the Beaux Arts tradition and contains many fine examples of commercial architecture.

⁴⁹ Adapted from Appendix E to Article 11 Kearny-Market-Mason-Sutter Conservation District, San Francisco Planning Code.

Maiden Lane

Maiden Lane is a two block street, more of a mews than a street, that begins in the middle of one end of Union Square and runs from Stockton to Kearny in between Geary and Post. The block on which the V. C. Morris Building is located bisects the block between Post Street, Grant Avenue, Geary Street and Stockton Street. In 1856 the street was called St. Mark's Place. In 1869 it became Morton Street. At that time Morton was mostly a residential street, lined with small, one and two-story cottages used as "female boarding houses" or brothels and cribs. 140 Maiden Lane was occupied by two such cottages and a coal yard was located on the adjacent parcel to the west. Saloons and dance halls were located just a few streets away. Two murders and a suicide on the street in the early months of 1896 led to Police Chief Patrick Crowley ordering all prostitutes out by midnight on March 3, 1896. This didn't stop crime, as another murder and an assault took place just days later. In 1898 it was renamed Union Square Avenue.⁵⁰ By 1904 it was again renamed, this time it became Manila Street. The 1906 earthquake and fire, which leveled much of the city, reduced most of the street to rubble with only a few structures still standing. By 1913 the street name was still Manila and it was lined with two- to four-story shops, restaurants and warehouses, most of "fire proof" brick or concrete construction. The neighborhood was fully built out by this time and there appears to be no changes to the street over the years other than changes in businesses. Then in 1921, the City inexplicably switched its name back to Union Square Avenue, after the street became the service entrance for newly opened department stores on Geary and Post streets. Gradually the back alley doors became entrances to restaurants and cocktail bars serving the shop girls who worked in the department stores.⁵¹



Above: Sanborn fire Insurance Map, 1913-Aug 1949, Vol. 1 August 1948, Sheet 49. 140 Maiden Lane outlined in red.

Source: San Francisco Public Library.

⁵⁰ Jerry F. Schimmel, "100 Years Ago: The Night They Expelled Maiden Lane's Harlots," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 1, 1996.

⁵¹ Mary Duenwald, "Maiden Lane: from red lights to daffodils," *The Pacific*, July 1980.

In 1922 merchants led by jeweler Albert Samuels lobbied for the name to be changed to Maiden Lane after the famous street of jewelers in London and New York. The merchants obviously failed to see the irony of the new name. Sometime in the early 1930s, florist Sheridan & Bell received 2000 more daffodils than he had originally ordered. The florist gave the surplus to his neighbors who proceeded to decorate their own windows and give the remainder to their customers. In later years, the merchants agreed to help finance a Daffodil Festival so that they could have more flowers along with entertainers and singers. Despite the festival, the street's dubious reputation continued until the late 1930s when the Morrises leased the shop. Clara Kenyon, a saleswoman at the shop, remembered its reputation even at that time.⁵² After World War II, Maiden Lane's reputation finally changed. The street became widely known for the annual street festival, now renamed "Spring Comes to Maiden Lane." In response to the popularity of the festival, the merchants on Maiden Lane began to remodel and improve their shops, and formed a merchants association, the Maiden Lane Association, and collected dues to fund street improvements, such as trees and benches. In 1956 a City ordinance was passed by the Board of Supervisors permitting the street to be closed to traffic Monday through Saturday between 11:30am and 2:00pm for a pedestrian promenade.⁵³ Also around that time, the City paid for extension of the curb line, widening the sidewalks. The Maiden Lane Association had Welton, Becket and Associates design lamp standards and paid for their installation. The Association also had Donald Clever and Associates design eight candelabra that were installed on the eight corners of Maiden Lane. The spring festival continued until the mid-1960s. By that time Maiden Lane had emerged as an exclusive retail address. Today lane contains a number of relatively tall buildings interspersed with two- and three-story shop buildings and is still lined with upscale retail shops.



"Spring Comes to Maiden Lane" festival, March 31, 1949. Note the Sheridan & Bell Flowers sign at top right. They were the original organizers of the festival.

Source: San Francisco Public Library.

⁵² Millie Robbins, "A Jewel on Maiden Lane," 21.

⁵³ Letter to Mr. David Rowlands, University Development Council, Seattle WA from James J. Ludwig, Maiden Lane Association, February 16, 1972. Maiden Lane file, San Francisco Public Library.

ARTICLE 10 LANDMARK DESIGNATION

This section of the report is an analysis and summary of the applicable criteria for designation, integrity, period of significance, significance statement, character-defining features, and additional Article 10 requirements.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

Criteria

Check all criteria applicable to the significance of the property that are documented in the report. The criteria checked are the basic justification for *why* the resource is important.

- Association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- Association with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- Embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.
- Has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in history or prehistory.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Characteristics of the Landmark that justify its designation:

Significant Architecture

Completed well before the Guggenheim opened in 1959, the V. C. Morris Gift Shop was Wright's first realized exploration of the internal spiral concept the two share and which he frequently returned to in his later work. Its single bold arch on the façade, reminiscent of H.H. Richardson and Louis Sullivan, provides a basis for the increase in historical referencing which would undergird his most successful buildings of the fifties. And upon its completion, it electrified the architectural world not only for its architecture, but for its radical interpretation of a retail store. Wright's unconventional design for the V. C. Morris Shop was a rejection of the formal principles of store design, yet it inspired and gave direction to subsequent 20th century building. As the only building constructed in San Francisco by Frank Lloyd Wright, the V. C. Morris Gift Shop is also significant as a rare extant Modern building designed by the master architect.

Period of Significance

The Period of Significance for 140 Maiden Lane is 1948-1959. This represents the year the remodel was designed and completed, to the year of Lillian Morris's death. These ten years mark the intense use of the building by the Morrises for which it was designed - the display and sale of modern silver, glass, china and linens, with a separate department for books and fine prints. These items were treated as part of the architecture, a display technique that was unorthodox at the time. It is also within the time period when new "visual front" storefront typologies were developed and widely used, and which Wright chose to reject in his design for the V. C. Morris Gift Shop.

Integrity

The seven aspects of integrity are location, design, materials, workmanship, setting, feeling, and association in relation to the period of significance established above. Cumulatively, the building retains sufficient integrity to convey its expressive Modern architectural design by master architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Location, Feeling, Setting, Association

The building was originally constructed at its current location in 1911. The building has not been moved. Maiden Lane is a narrow, two block long street that is more like a mews. With its two-story mass, the V. C. Morris Building is set between two relatively tall buildings and the rest of the street is interspersed with two- and three-story buildings. The street is still home to upscale shops and hotels in the district. With its nearly flat, windowless façade, the exterior of the building retains its feeling of a solid wall. The interior of the building retains its light filled, circular inner volume with curved ramp giving one the feeling of entering another world. As a result, the V. C. Morris Building retains its location, feeling, setting, and association.

Design, Materials, Workmanship

The V. C. Morris Gift Shop retains the design features that were present during the established 1948-1959 Period of Significance. Prominent exterior design features and materials include the building's boxy, stout mass, nearly flat, windowless façade, vertical band of raised bricks with illuminated voids, arched opening with four concentric bands of stretcher course bricks, horizontal band of coping above white translucent squares with raised key design, recessed entry with curved glass tunnel, and buff colored stretcher brick. The interior, likewise, displays high integrity of design, materials and workmanship. The interior retains its two-story volume, curved interior walls, and spiral ramp with circular wall openings and niches, and acrylic plastic concave and convex domes held by brass tubing at ceiling. Historic interior finishes such as the rough textured wall concrete cladding and rectangular and square concrete slabs laid in an irregular pattern on floor; and historic interior fixtures such as the brass hanging planter, built in mahogany shelves, cabinets, and benches; and some furniture such as mahogany stools and tables are also extant. Although the interior underwent restoration in 1997, extant materials and design reflect the quality of construction, materials, and workmanship as evidenced by Wrights beautifully detailed drawings. This restoration appears to retain nearly all of its original Wright designed features and do not detract from the building's significance or design intent. As a result, the V. C. Morris Gift Shop retains integrity of design, materials, and workmanship.

ARTICLE 10 REQUIREMENTS SECTION 1004 (b)

BOUNDARIES OF THE LANDMARK SITE

Encompassing all of and limited to Lot 019 in Assessor's Block 0309 on the north side of Maiden Lane, between Stockton Street and Grant Avenue.

CHARACTER-DEFINING FEATURES

Whenever a building, site, object, or landscape is under consideration for Article 10 Landmark designation, the Historic Preservation Commission is required to identify character-defining features of the property. This is done to enable owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark. The character-defining features of the V. C. Morris Building are listed below.

The character-defining *exterior* features of the building are identified as the exterior elevation facing Maiden Lane, including but not limited to form, massing, structure, architectural ornament and materials identified as:

- Rectangular building plan and boxy, stout massing
- Nearly flat, windowless façade
- Vertical band of raised bricks with illuminated voids
- Arched opening with four concentric bands of stretcher course bricks
- White translucent squares with raised key design below horizontal band of coping
- Recessed barrel vaulted entry with curved glass and planter
- Buff colored stretcher brick cladding
- Flat roof with two ridge type skylights

The character-defining *interior* features of the building are identified as:

- Two-story volume
- Curved interior walls
- Recessed barrel vaulted entry with curved glass and display shelf
- Spiral ramp with circular wall openings and niches
- Acrylic plastic concave and convex domes held by brass tubing at ceiling
- Brass hanging planter
- Built in mahogany shelves, cabinets, and benches
- Rough textured concrete wall cladding
- Rectangular and square concrete floor slabs laid in an irregular pattern

Interior Landmark Designation

According to Article 10, Section 1004(c) of the Planning Code, only those interiors that were historically publicly accessible are eligible for listing in Article 10. Article 10, Section 1004(c) of the Planning Code states,

(c) The property included in any such designation shall upon designation be subject to the controls and standards set forth in this Article 10. In addition, the said property shall be subject to the following further controls and standards if imposed by the designating ordinance:

1. For a publicly-owned landmark, review of proposed changes to significant interior architectural features.

2. For a privately-owned landmark, review of proposed changes requiring a permit to significant interior architectural features in those areas of the landmark that are or historically have been accessible to members of the public. The designating ordinance must clearly describe each significant interior architectural feature subject to this restriction.

Although privately owned, the V. C. Morris Gift Shop interior has historically been accessible to members of the public. As first a retail store for fine tablewares and later a women's clothing store and gallery, the public entered the interior of the building on a regular basis to shop.

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Historic Name: V. C. Morris Building

Address: 140 Maiden Lane

Block and Lot: 0309 / 019

Owner: Marsha Vargas Handley

Original Use: Commercial store

Current Use: Commercial store

Zoning: C-3-R Downtown Retail

APPENDIX: MORRIS HOUSE DESIGNS

In 1945 Lillian and Vere commissioned Wright to design a house for them on two lots they had purchased on El Camino Del Mar, located in the Sea Cliff neighborhood of San Francisco. Overlooking China Beach and the Pacific Ocean, the house was to be constructed of reinforced concrete and seemingly grow out of the cliff on a slender tapering semi-tubular form that gradually became large enough to support the main living part of the house at the top of the cliff. An opening at the bottom of the tapering column allowed the sound of crashing waves to enter the hollow structure. From the ocean view it would have looked like a large conch shell attached to the cliff face. From the road, one would first see the flowers and vines lined the approach front door. A concrete slab cantilevered over the living room was designed to be planted with a green roof of hanging vines and shade trees. The roof garden stretched all the way to the carport and sheltered a long walkway to the entrance loggia of the house. There a circular open skylight in the roof garden and a light well below brought daylight to the lower levels of the house. The design was described as Wright's tour de force in terms of site and structure; with the steep grade of the site giving Wright numerous opportunities for the free organization of space and for bold experiments in the use of geometric forms including circles, squares, and triangles.⁵⁴



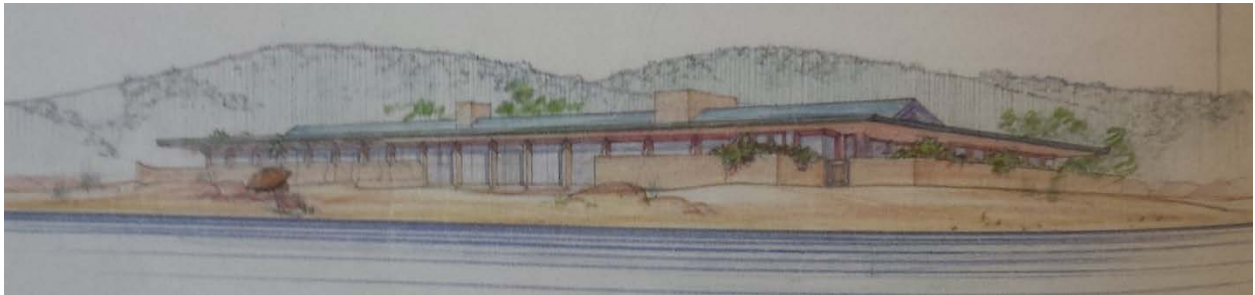
V. C. Morris House, "Seacliff," Scheme 1, 1945.

Source: Frank Lloyd Wright *The Complete Works*.

The first scheme proved to be too costly for the Morris' to build and in 1955, they requested a simpler design. This time the house was sited further down the cliff closer to the water. It was accessed from the street by an elevator and spiral stairs housed in a tall, tower like mass. The house was one level with a large circular living room opening to a broad balcony flanked by smaller circular masses for the dining room, bedrooms, and bathrooms. The entire mass was supported by a concrete pedestal. The site plan shows two additional houses: "House 2" was designed as a guest house, but eventually was suggested to take the place of the main house when costs became a concern. It is unknown what the third house was to be used for; no drawings exist for it. In 1957, Wright designed a third and final design for the Sea Cliff site with a single, two level building with circular elements placed closer to the main road, but still sited on a steep incline. Unfortunately, Wright's Sea Cliff designs were never realized.

⁵⁴ Frank Lloyd Wright, *Architecture: Man in Possession of His Earth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1962), 121.

In 1956, Wright designed a house in Stinson Beach for the Morrises. Unlike the steep Seacliff site, "Quietwater" as Wright named the house, was sited on a flat, sandy beach. The single story, elongated plan included a carport and utility room at right angles to it. The living room and master bedroom overlooking the beach were separated by the entry. Adjacent to the living room was a guest room with fireplace. A housekeeper's suite and a place for the white Persian cats that lived at the shop was included in the plan. The house was to be constructed of simple materials; concrete blocks with a roof covered in cedar shingles. Vere died during the preparation of the working drawings and Lillian died a two years later leaving the construction of Quietwater unexecuted.



V. C. Morris House "Quietwater" – Stinson Beach, California, 1956.

Source: Frank Lloyd Wright The Complete Works.

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World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942

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