

Ernest Coxhead: a British Architect's Influence in California at the Turn of the Century

by Robert Coombs



The architectural history of California is dotted with many architects whose vision and attitudes have helped forge the state's particular qualities. One who made possibly the most unique contribution was Ernest Coxhead. Not only was his own work instrumental in forcing the pace at the turn of the century, but his office planted the seeds of a new aesthetic in the minds of such young architects as Bernard Maybeck, which were to bear fruits later and today Coxhead's appreciation for the subtle and sophisticated can be seen throughout California.

If he were practising today he would almost certainly have 'let's put the fun back into architecture' as his letterhead. For during his years in Los Angeles and San Francisco during the 1880's and 1890's he preached a doctrine of playfulness and freedom of design. All artists, whatever the art form, owe something to the time they live in – it is this which helps form their characters – so to fully appreciate Coxhead's work, we will first look at his personal history and the prevailing moods of the time.

Coxhead was born in 1863 in England and his architectural career began with an apprenticeship with George A Wallis, during which time he worked with Frederick C Chancellor. During his apprenticeship he went to the Royal Academy of Art and also studied at the Royal Institute of British Architects, from whom he was awarded a silver medal for drawing in the term 1884-85. A year later, aged 23, he decided his future lay across the Atlantic and he emigrated to California, where he was to spend the rest of his life.

A new movement during his early years was the Arts and Crafts Movement which sought to reform the arts and restore to them the romantic dignity which the movement's leaders, including William Morris and John Ruskin, believed existed in the middle ages.

The Arts and Crafts Movement can best be characterised as a purging of the historical eclecticism which dominated so much of architecture, interior design and industrial design during the middle decades of the 19th century. The Movement felt that the Industrial Revolution had led to the disappearance of

the previous era's purity in line and form through the rush to mass produce goods of all shapes and description.

Architecturally, the Movement dates from the design and construction of Philip Webb's Red House for William Morris between 1858 and 1860. Simply and sparsely decorated, it was conceived and accomplished as the small house made into art. It was an unostentatiously scale house with decorations obviously man made rather than machine manufactured and each decoration was an intrinsic part of the object or surface on which it was found. Forms and spaces were, as was so often the case, designed to impress the visitor but rather to be appropriate to the tasks they were to serve.

Elizabeth Aslin writes of the Red House: 'The goal was to render all branches of art the sphere no longer of the tradesman but of the artist. It would restore building, decoration, glass painting, pottery, woodcarving and metal to their right place beside painting and sculpture'.

And British architect M H Baillie Scott writes of the Arts and Crafts Movement in his book 'The Ideal Suburban Home': 'It is difficult for the architect to draw a fixed line between the architecture of the house and the furniture . . . and this naturally leads to the conclusion that the architect should design the chairs and tables as well as the house itself'.

Coxhead was not alone among British architects in following this dictum; many believed that Baillie Scott and others like him, such as Charles F A Voysey, had the right approach to domestic design which was most appropriate to their age. The dictum was for a horizontal, spreading house with steep, sweeping roofs which dominated the whole building. A keynote of the design was the absence of unnecessary decoration, the placement and size of windows being the primary means of articulating the walls. This absence of 'frivolities' did not lead to a spartan appearance, but rather one of simplicity and genial ease or, in Voysey's words, 'a fitness of purpose' in which the form's appear to grow out of the requirements'.

But this school of architectural thought was not all made in England. Voysey and Baillie Scott both owed much to the American domestic design which had given birth to the American shingle style, much admired by both men. The shingle style was basically a modification of the British Queen Anne style which was itself a 19th century adaptation of British vernacular architecture of a period from the 15th to the 17th centuries. The style – which was unsymmetrical and rambling with windows of various sizes and more practical than impressive – was meant to fit into the landscape rather than dominate it. The Builder, an English publication, and American Architect and Building News, published in Boston, were eagerly devoured by British architects of the time and these publications showed the American shingle style in action.

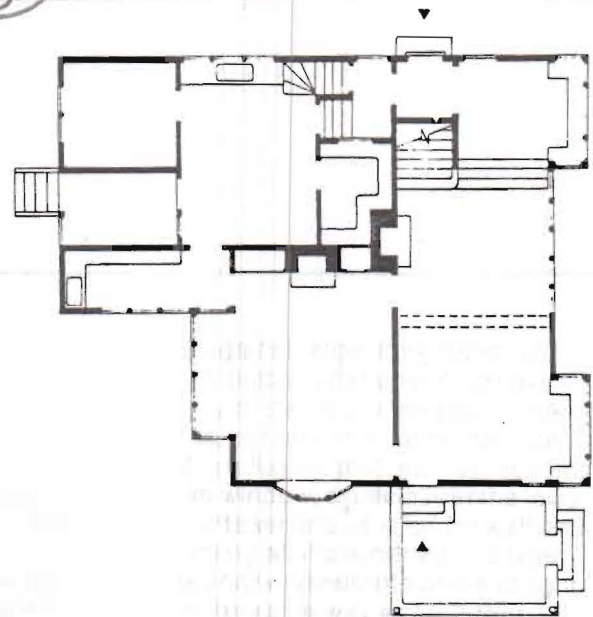
The shingle style generally followed the characteristics of the Queen Anne, but with several innovative differences. Houses were constructed entirely from wood, more often relying on the structural character of the balloon frame for formal development of the building. In many instances a verandah wrapped around most of the ground floor, extending and merging the house into the surrounding landscape. It was inside the house, however, where there were the greatest differences between the British and American styles. Instead of the separate cubicles of the British style, the American rooms flowed into one another with few rigid divisions; sliding doors were used in the main ground floor rooms, or even archways to create a sense of continuous space with only slight interruptions for areas of special use.

The shingle style answered well the demands of the Arts and Crafts Movement. It was conceived horizontally with its roof dominating the whole building. The size and placement of windows were the main articulation of walls and decoration was used with great discretion.

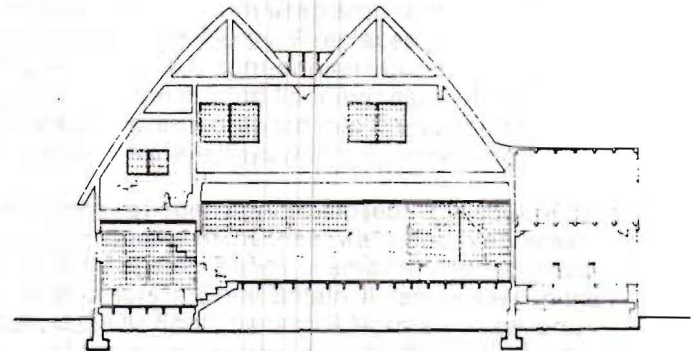
H H Richardson, whose houses in Newport, Rhode Island, and other north eastern coastal towns, were widely published in British and American journals, developed a style of housing which appeared to grow out of the soil. In addition, young architects were asked for stable and barn designs in competitions. These vast, utilitarian buildings had a simple nobility, with great sweeping roofs almost to the ground, functionally-placed windows and no decoration other than roof vents and chimneys, and showed the same care for composition and proportion as in houses and larger projects. These designs, too, appeared often in the American Architectural journals.

So when Coxhead arrived in California in 1886 he was already well-versed in the latest architectural developments in the United States. This, combined with his first-hand knowledge of the various historical styles in England was a unique asset, for it allowed him to use elements from all these schools of thought with an ease not possible for most American architects.

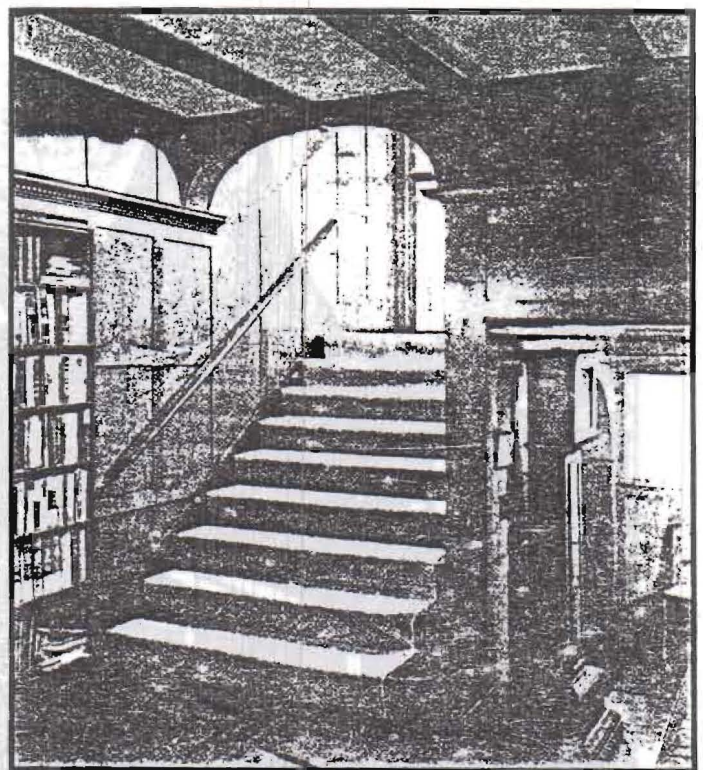
The fact that he chose America suggests, apart from the obvious advantage that a well-trained British architect would have in gaining commissions, that he had a strong leaning toward American domestic architecture – indeed, he devoted the rest of his life toward building small houses, appropriate to the needs of the American middle class, along the Arts and Crafts lines.



Obviously influenced by American open planning, Coxhead made the entrance hall and living room into a semi-continuous space. These areas and the dining room wrap around the kitchen and service zone of the house.



The degree to which he opened up the entrance hall and living room to the exterior is clear in this section of the San Mateo house. Except for the Tudor detailing, the relationship of the windows and walls looks forward to the most advanced designs of the first quarter of this century.

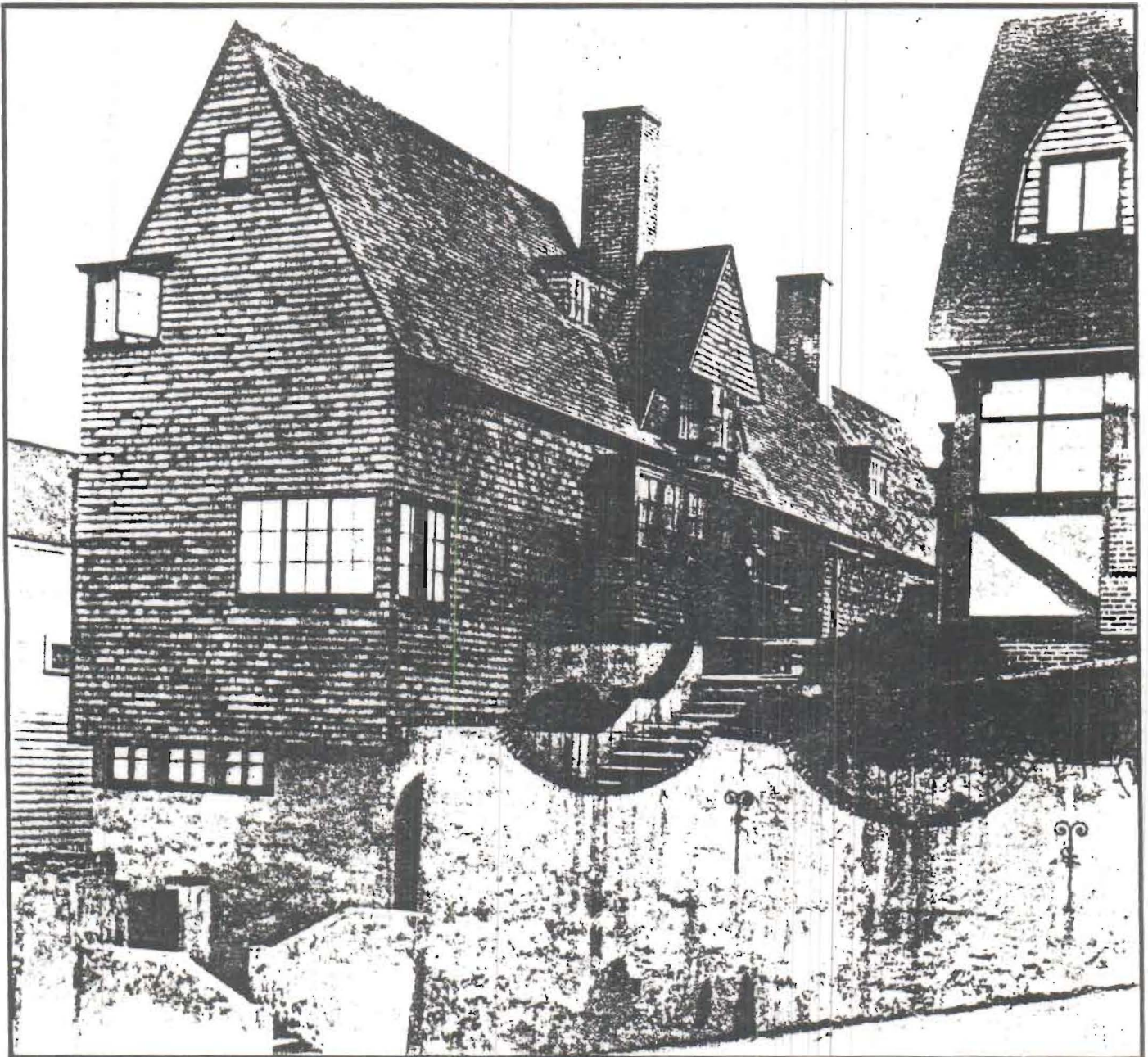


it is in the exaggeration of the glass bays almost to the point of extrusion from the walls of the house. Similarly, his conversion of the hall connecting the living room with the entrance into a continuous living area is an echo of the long galleries in Elizabethan houses. But in binding the two areas he was reflecting current American attitudes and luxuriating in the fluidity of space.

His concept of spacial organization was repeated in and embellished on his San Francisco house, which is a suave integration of the shingle style with British domestic planning. On a long, narrow site overlooking the bay, he created an attenuated shingle clad house which is both dramatically vertical and well-integrated into the earth. The short end of the house is turned towards the street and here again, Coxhead uses glazed areas as generators of articulation. He plays with differences in window size to increase the apparent size of the house. The dramatic effect is heightened by the playing-off of the massive brick and stucco staircase and wall foundation against the shingle clad wooden house which rises to a high gable.

Just below the base of the shingle-clad front wall, a low, horizontal band of windows is punched into the half-basement facing the street. Above, on the main floor, a larger rectangle of windows is wrapped around the opposite corner, directing attention to the main entrance. And in the upper storey yet another opposing band of windows marks the upper corner where front wall meets high gabled roof. However, the roof is set back at this point so that the windows appear to extend beyond the covering above and, in response to this shift in emphasis, the roof on the opposite side plunges to first floor ceiling height.

Points of articulation on the house are the roof dormers on the main facade and the chimneys. Coxhead worked out a particularly clever juxtaposition of formal elements by playing off the large gable dormer above an angled bay window. This, in turn, is opposed by a smaller dormer protruding from the roof of the larger one. As at San Mateo, bays are the main articulation of the long facade wall, directing attention to the entrance. The subtle use of dormers and bays, combined with the majestically rising chimneys, achieved a subtle play of



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volumes and openings in what is essentially a simple shingle clad box.

Inside, Coxhead again used the long gallery to connect living and dining areas. This gallery is in itself a living area. It has two fireplaces, one near the door from the entrance to the stairhall and living room, and the other towards the opposite end, directly across from a square bay window which overlooks the garden which, incidentally, is shared with the house next door, also designed by Coxhead.

for his brother

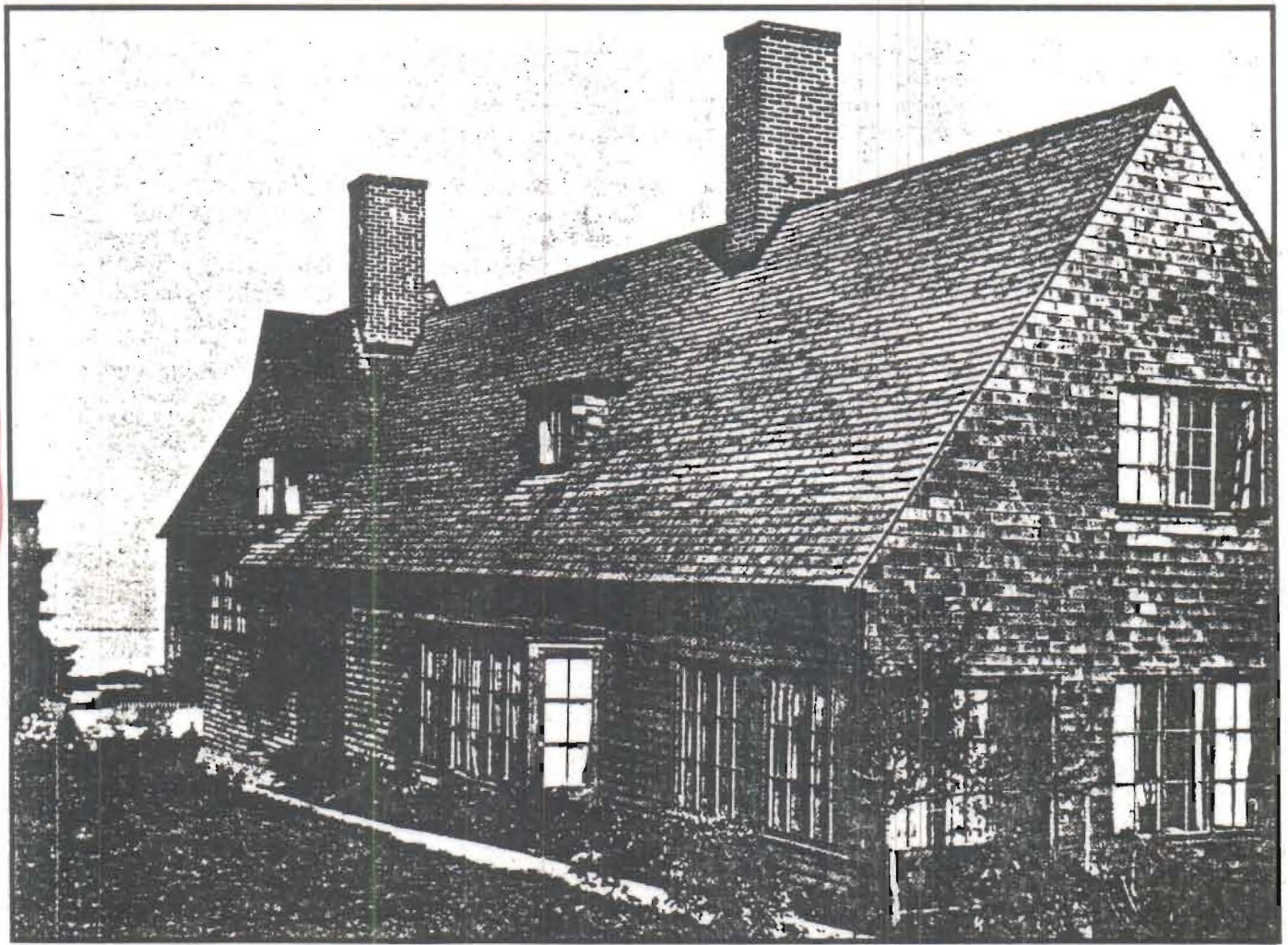
Opposite: In his San Francisco house constructed in 1893 Coxhead brilliantly adapted the shingle style to a difficult site. By his ingenious scaling and placement of windows, he elegantly articulated a very simple basic architectural type.

Below: This view shows the extensive areas of glass at the rear of Coxhead's San Francisco house. In its simplicity of detailing the house looks forward to designs of the 1930's.

Plan: The entrance of his San Francisco house opens into a long hall which also serves as a drawing room, linking the living room at the front to the dining room at the rear. Neatly compressed between these more public zones of the house are the kitchen and service areas.

The detailing of the exterior and interior is simple almost to the point of being spartan, confirming Coxhead's adherence to the Arts and Crafts philosophy. All elements are reduced to their bare essentials and decoration is non-existent.

The more playful side of his conception of domestic architecture can be seen in the Earl House, constructed in Los Angeles during the late 1880's but, sadly, destroyed by fire in the 1940's. The fireplace showed him adapting the Renaissance and Baroque styles for his

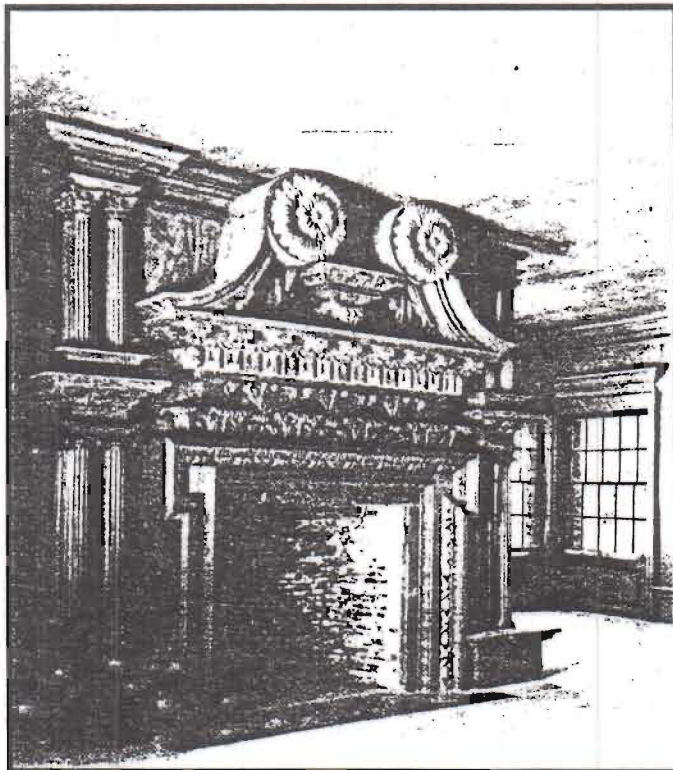


own ends. Luxuriant acanthus scroll volutes, resting on a plinth, trail down to meet a richly articulated overmantle. Below, a row of florid acanthus leaves grow from the multiple mouldings surrounding the fireplace opening. The whole elaborate composition is framed by delicate pairs of Corinthian columns with massive entablatures. The upper entablature forms part of the cornice, just below the ceiling, which serves to unite the fireplace and the general framing of the interior. This "and-or" approach to composition is repeated in the paired windows which share a mutual frame that has been adjusted to the corner of the room.

British 18th century architecture had combined with Coxhead's own character to lay down the rules for this elaborate game of distorting one architectural detail beside the other. The work of Sir John Hawksmoor in particular had showed a similar joy for wilfully distorting the 'laws' of architecture; giving free rein to subordinate elements and allowing them to overpower the normally dominant components. With almost the same sureness, Coxhead toyed with the expected in the architectural composition of the Earl House fireplace and, to a lesser extent, in the San Francisco house.

He was able to carry this playful exaggeration of scale to a more marked effect into his smaller houses. The Murdock House, constructed in San Francisco in 1892, shows a similar tension between the extremely simple and understated mass of the house and the scale of the windows. The contrast is achieved by a careful interplay between horizontal slit windows on the ground floor and the larger rectangle of tripartite windows on the second floor. In addition, the severely tailored dormer echoes the size and shape of the recessed, panelled front door.

This set up a contrast between the top and bottom of the house – the dormer popping out of the roof and the



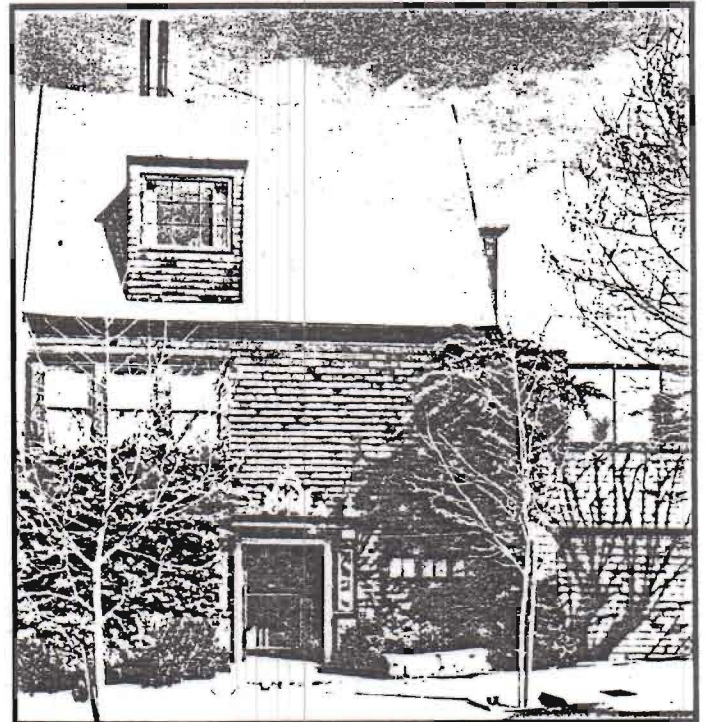
The elaborately encrusted overmantel of the Earl House fireplace reveals Coxhead's ability to juggle the classical architectural vocabulary with dramatic success

door dropping back behind the plane of the front wall are the only two abrupt manipulations of the basic box. It is a spartan composition, relieved only by the interplay of these elements and the extraordinarily rich decoration of these elements and the extraordinarily rich decoration on the door, where a floridly worked cartouche rests on an entablature supported by panelled Ionic pilasters which, in turn, are topped by gilt overlaid, carved finials.

Budget was probably the primary cause for this simplicity of approach, but he was also playing with the western American box-like house and giving it a tautly dynamic character. In general, Coxhead disdained using running decorations beneath eaves or the elaborate shingle patterns found in some east coast houses, preferring instead to use the British tradition of heraldic devices to accentuate specific points in the building. But the main vehicle for emphasis was always the placement of windows. Their arrangement, like his plans, remain firmly entrenched in the Arts and Crafts design rather than the shingle style – but compared to Voysey and Baille Scott, Coxhead shows a freedom of space and surface as well as playfulness in composing these elements. And this playfulness can be seen in his ecclesiastical work just as much as in his domestic constructions.

Like any architect with a growing practice in the 1880's, Coxhead was called upon the design churches – indeed, in time he was to become the prime High Episcopal church architect for the San Francisco Bay region. His first major contributions to church architecture, however, were in the Los Angeles area: namely the Church of the Angels in Highland Park, south east of Pasadena, and the Episcopal church of Sierra Madre on the edge of the mountains to the north of San Francisco.

To these churches he brought his knowledge of



In the simplicity and subtle interplay of its window sizes, the 1892 Murdock house in San Francisco prefigures Coxhead's own house built in the following year. Only the flamboyant cartouche and entablature of the entrance reveals his interest in luxuriant decoration.

neo-Gothic ecclesiastical design which he had acquired in England, and tempered it with American architectural influences.

The Church of the Angels, which dates from 1890, is thoroughly British in its major components. It rises from a steeply-sloping site with a cruciform aisleless plan and a chancel window facing the main road. A large, typically Norman tower rises at the intersection of the right transept arm and the nave, and marks the entrance into the church. So far the design follows established 19th century British theories. Behind the tower, however, there is an abrupt change of character. The roof sweeps down below the level of the lancet windows of the nave, to rest on sturdy Romanesque arches at the building's main entrance. Low dormers let into the roof create a domestic air about the main body of the church. Extending from the right side of the entry porch is the vestry with a simple gable roof, interrupted by a softly rolled dormer over its centre. The liquid, subtle drape of the shingle roof over the dormer is more characteristic of East Coast shingle style houses than churches of the period, but is prophetic of the direction Coxhead's North Californian church designs will take.

The site of the Church of the Angels undoubtedly fostered this interplay between styles, allowing Coxhead to emphasize his contradiction of form against form. The front of the church, facing the road, gives a great vertical plane to the building, stressed by the lancet window over the altar and the buttressing which frames the outer edge of the front wall. The height is stressed, too, by the narrow lancet windows along the flanks and the tower, with its pyramid-like steeple, which powerfully affirms this quality.

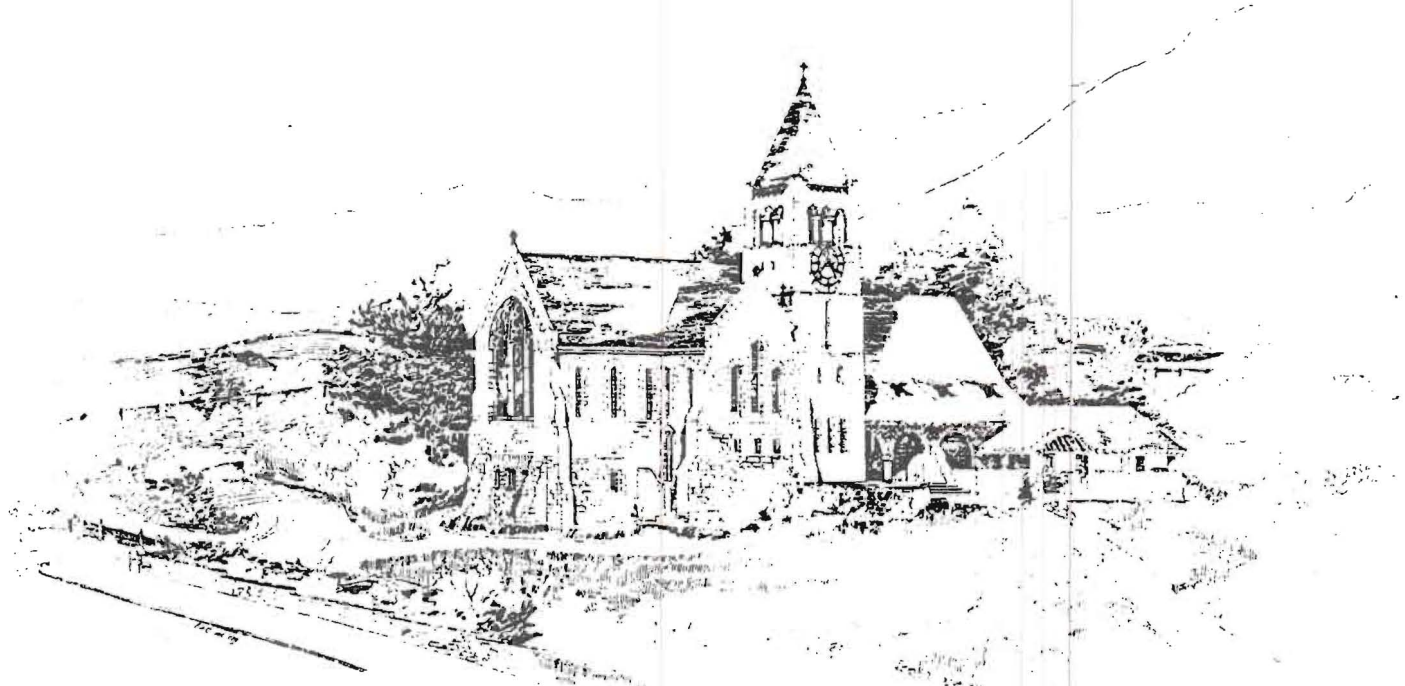
But the dramatic contrast of planes and styles also reflects the reality of many English churches dating from

the Middle Ages which, through devastation, either man-made or natural have had to be reconstructed at various times. Though the Church of the Angels suggests this chronological development, it is a startling sight in a Los Angeles suburb.

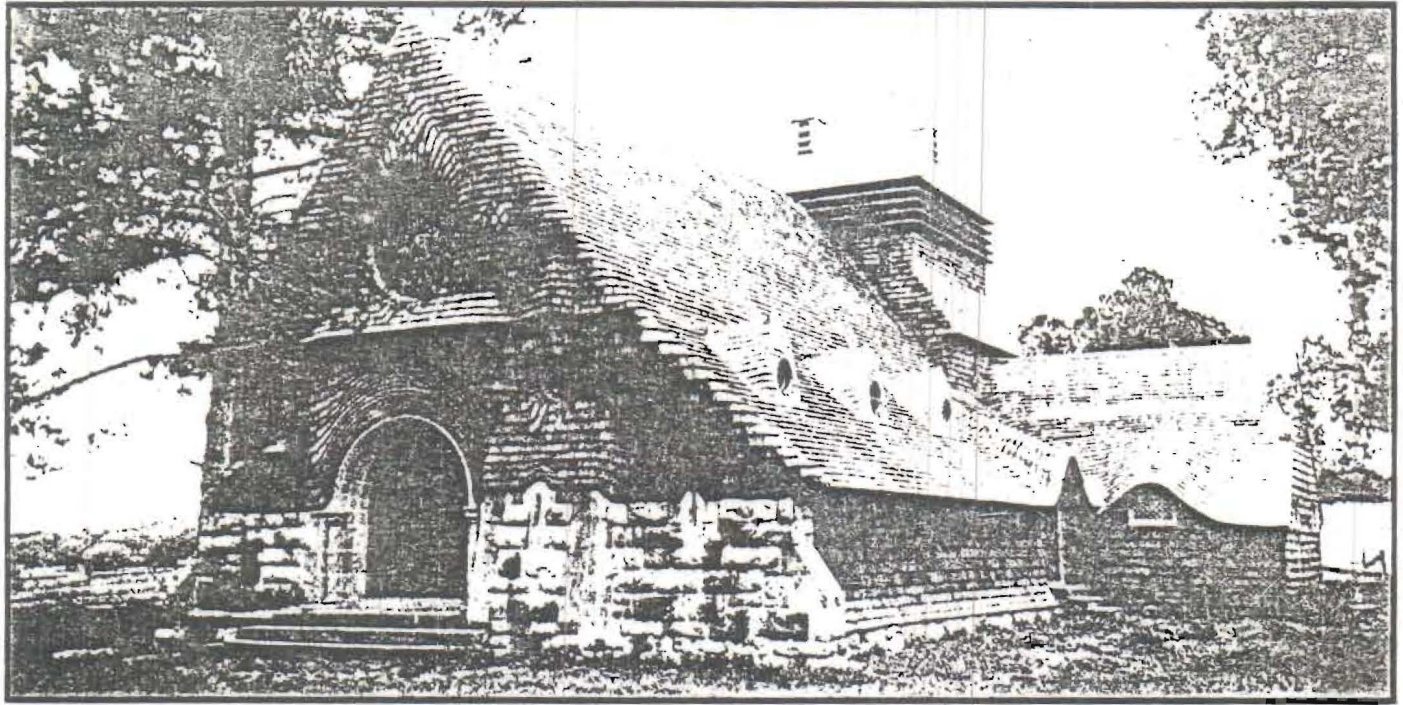
The contradiction in architectural styles is complemented by a further contradiction – between the front and rear of the church which is even apparent internally. The size of the dormers over the entrance porch for instance, is more appropriate to a medium sized house than a church of this scale. This ambiguity of scale was carried into Coxhead's major religious project in Northern California – St John's Episcopal, constructed in Monterey in 1891.

In terms of size, St John's is a less ambitious project than the Church of the Angels; but it is far more unified in character and brings to the fore Coxhead's love of contradiction in scale. Taking up where he left off in the rear section of the Church of the Angels, he conceived St John's as an earth-hugging building in which the roof sweeps down to almost shoulder-height at the eaves. The building is dominated by a massive squat lantern over the crossing, which is crowned by a louvered steeple that gives the illusion of a series of hats nestling one on the other. This 'hat' motif was not a new idea for Coxhead. He had played with the idea in a never-constructed project for St John's Episcopal in San Francisco.

At the outset the church appears symmetrical, but the right side is actually much wider than the left. The roof on the right side is visually slowed in its rush groundwards by triangular dormers set with miniscule round windows. These echo the large rose window over the Romanesque main portal.



The Church of the Angels in Highland Park was constructed on Coxhead's design in 1890 and it clearly shows his training in the ecclesiastical architectural traditions of his native Britain. However, it also points toward his use of shingle style elements in his later churches in and around San Francisco.



The lower part of the façade is heavily rusticated stonework set with miniature lancet windows. Above the spring point of the main portal, the rest of the façade is wrapped in shingles which rise and fall, responding to the force of the buttress beneath the circular window to the right at the portal. But another contradiction is the complementary window on the left, which is a lancet, undisturbed by a buttress.

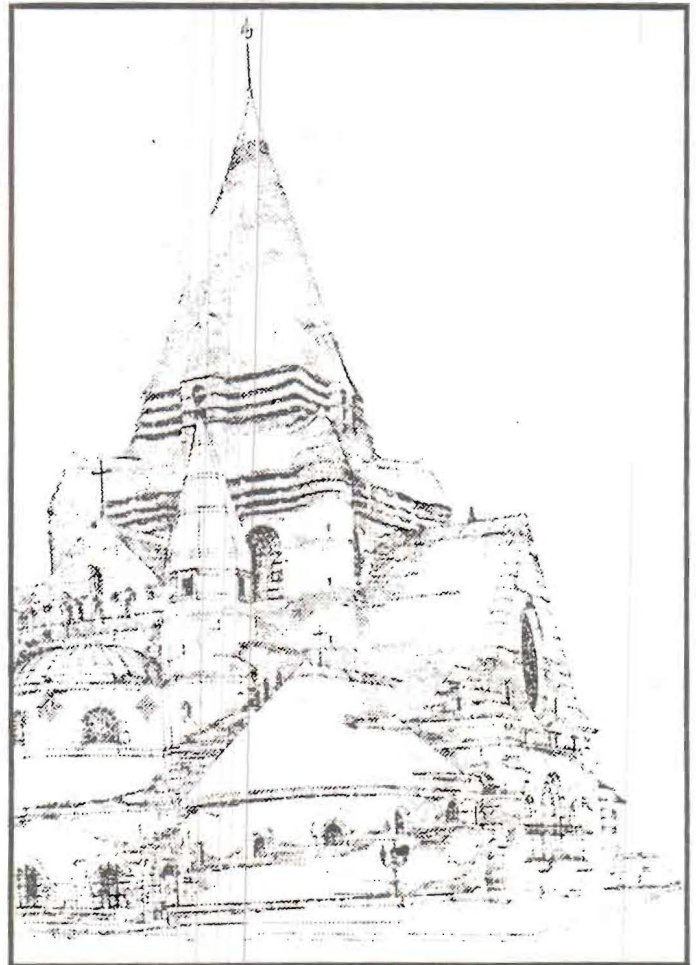
The entire building is wrapped in a skin of shingles which flow over the structure, curling round corners and softly draping over the side entrance and vestry window at the rear. St John's is a play of contradiction, of structure and skin meeting briefly, but not fully integrated. It lends to the building a dynamic, almost breathing quality – it is most akin to a child's dream of a woodland chapel.

As indicated, this playfulness was Coxhead's greatest contribution to American architecture. It was the playfulness of an architect with a full understanding of architectural theory and style. It was erudite, witty, but always practical. Decoration was used to advantage where necessary; generally reserved for the entrance porch or, as in the Earl House, for the fireplace, the focus of the living room. His education in the Arts and Crafts tradition was fully integrated with the American shingle style to which he brought a crispness of touch – as in the San Francisco house – or a magical quality, as in St John's Episcopal in Monterey.

Little of the Arts and Crafts movement passed to the United States from Britain, but this was rectified by Ernest Coxhead on the west coast in the best possible way. He integrates aesthetic philosophy with the practicalities of a formative regional architecture. Maybeck, Polk, Green and Green, like Coxhead, believed that architecture should be at once practical and mysterious, a subtle revelation of forms and surfaces.

This they achieved at the turn of the century – and their influence pervades the very best of California

St John's Episcopal Church in Monterey was Coxhead's most expressionist use of shingle style motifs in his built churches. With material and vocabulary he was able to create a fluid movement in the form of the building which is dramatically innovative as well as highly personal.



His unconstructed design for St. John's Episcopal in San Francisco is similar in character to the church in Monterey, except more monumental in scale and brooding in tone. Moreover, it is a brilliant exposition of the daring contradictions in form and scale which Coxhead so enjoyed.