The Haas-Lilienthal House

An Architectural and Cultural Landmark

The Haas-Lilienthal House has led two separate lives—the first as a German-Jewish family home, and the second as San Francisco’s only intact late 19th-century Victorian residence open to the public. The stewardship of San Francisco Heritage, an organization committed to preserving the city’s architectural and cultural identity, has guided the latter chapter. “Today, the house is an icon of the city’s historic preservation movement and the centerpiece of Heritage’s education mission,” said communications and programs manager Terri Le.

By Courtney Peter  |  Opening photo by Jim Simmons; all other photography by Jody Stuart
DAZZLING INSIDE AND OUT

Handed a pristine, historic Victorian home only two years after its founding, San Francisco Heritage recast the Haas-Lilienthal House as a tribute to the era of its construction, the people who lived inside it and the city in which it stands. Unabashedly embellished to the hilt, the house features open gables, fish-scale shingles and a corner turret with a witch's hat roof.

The decorative details may suggest delicacy, but the home has proved its toughness. The Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 left behind a single ripple in the wall of the main interior staircase, and fortuitous placement spared it from the fires that followed.

Like many local Victorian homes, the Haas-Lilienthal House is made primarily of wood. The type varies based on function and aesthetics. For structural components and cladding, the material of choice was redwood. “As well as being beautiful, redwood is resistant to insect damage and rot,” said Haas-Lilienthal House docent Robert Greene. But it was also costly, so builders used cheaper materials when possible, sometimes even embellishing them to look more expensive. For example, the wainscoting in the exterior entryway is made of pine painted to resemble oak.

Inside, wood continues to dominate the decor via wainscoting, coffered ceilings and pocket doors. Detailed moldings abound too, some made of plaster disguised as wood—an impressive feat given the region’s foggy, humid air, Greene noted.

An impressed wallpaper known as anaglypta, which means “raised cameo” in Greek, cloaks the walls in several spaces, such as the foyer, dining room and upstairs hallway. First produced in England in the late 19th century, the durable and customizable wall covering quickly became popular.

“The furniture is mostly American copies of European designs from about the turn of the 20th century,” Greene said. Some items are more personal. For example, the needlepoint covering the dining chairs was made as a Haas-Lilienthal family project in honor of the United States Bicentennial and donated for use in the house.

The family’s private rooms fill the second floor. With a walk-in closet, an elaborate fireplace and light-filled turret windows, the large room facing Franklin Street offers the
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A JEWISH IMMIGRANT HOUSEHOLD

Bavarian-born William Haas, the youngest of nine children, arrived in San Francisco in 1868. He joined his cousin’s wholesale merchant grocery firm—known first as Loupe & Haas, and later as Haas Bros.—of which he eventually became president.

In 1880, Haas married Bertha Greenebaum, a member of a locally prominent German-Jewish family. They had three children: Florine, Charles and Alice. Both William and Bertha actively engaged in the cultural, charitable and social arenas. A generous supporter of the Federation of Jewish Charities, William held posts such as director of Wells Fargo and president of Mt. Zion Hospital. Bertha’s roles included director of the Emanu-El Sisterhood of Personal Service and member of the Council of Jewish Women.

“The Haas-Lilienthal House is an important piece of cultural history, a monument to the role Jewish immigrants played in the early development of San Francisco and the American West,” Terri Le said. “San Francisco’s Jewish pioneers transcended traditional social and political boundaries, shaping the city’s infrastructure and institutions in an unusually diverse and integrated urban center.”

In 1886, the Haas family moved into the brand-new Queen Anne-style Victorian home on Franklin Street, designed by local architect Peter R. Schmidt. For nearly nine decades, the house provided a stage for the everyday lives and celebrations of an upper-middle class family.

Alice Haas married Samuel Lilienthal there in 1909. Lilienthal’s family, also of German-Jewish heritage, owned a large wholesale liquor firm. After William died in 1916, Bertha invited Alice, Samuel and their children to live with her. Alice lived in the home until her death in 1972; her family donated it to San Francisco Heritage the next year. By then, “Large Victorian houses weren’t practical as family homes anymore,” Greene said.
FORWARD FOCUS

Between tours, private events and special programs, the Haas-Lilienthal House welcomes more than 10,000 visitors each year, including approximately 1,500 local third-graders who explore Victorian life and architecture through the award-winning Heritage Hikes program. Steps taken in recent years aim to secure the home’s future as a historical and educational resource.

In 2012, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Haas-Lilienthal House one of its 34 inaugural National Treasures in America. The designation generated a heightened awareness of not only the home’s importance, but also its vulnerability. Spurred to action, San Francisco Heritage launched its first-ever capital campaign in 2015. Funds raised will address preservation and maintenance projects, revamp interpretive programs and double the organization’s endowment.

So far, the campaign has raised approximately $3.9 million toward its $4.3 million goal. The first phase of capital improvements, completed in August 2016, involved restoring the home’s exterior and reinstating its original color palette. Dunn Edwards Paints donated more than 219 gallons of paint and primer to the cause. Teevan Restoration expertly scraped away 20 layers of old paint, then brushed on carefully selected shades and sheens of gray. Plans for the next phase include seismic strengthening and improvements in fire safety and accessibility.

For an organization created to interject a preservationist’s perspective into San Francisco’s mid-20th-century urban renewal craze, the Haas-Lilienthal House represents a categorical success story.