Re-interpreting The Haas-Lilienthal House

Over the past few years, Heritage has been completing a series of campaign-funded interpretive projects that deepen our understanding of the Haas-Lilienthal family and the historic-preservation movement in San Francisco, significantly enhancing the visitor experience. STORY ON PAGE 6
As this issue goes to print, the Campaign for San Francisco Heritage/Haas-Lilienthal House has exceeded its original $4.3 million goal by more than $100,000! Since the public announcement of the campaign in November 2015, Heritage News has included regular updates on our progress and repeated, perhaps tedious, appeals for additional contributions, with the outcome far from assured until just a few months ago.

The campaign’s success is a remarkable achievement given the sobering results of a 2011 feasibility study that found we could expect to raise only a small fraction of the $4.3 million goal. Its ultimate triumph is unquestionably due to the ceaseless faith, commitment, and hard work of the Campaign Cabinet, led by co-chairs Alice Russell-Shapiro and David Wessel, and expertly guided by campaign counsel Mike Romo. Heritage has been truly honored by the generosity of long-standing supporters, as well as many new contributors, to reach this milestone.

Today, as we unveil the renovated and restored Haas-Lilienthal House, it is important to recognize all those who steered the construction project to completion, overseeing myriad details and decisions, large and small, to upgrade, strengthen, restore, and provide access to the House while preserving its essential authenticity. We were especially fortunate to have selected Steven Doctors as Heritage’s project manager, who coordinated with general contractor Oliver & Company, architects Lerner + Associates and Architectural Resources Group, and an array of subcontractors and sub-consultants to assure that deadlines were met, permits were secured, specifications followed, and the budget was adhered to. The board and I are also grateful to Heritage’s staff, who were sequestered in the attic for eight months of construction and all the disruption that came with it.

With construction now (mostly) complete, Heritage has shifted its focus to developing a series of new interpretive projects that will enrich the public’s understanding of the Haas-Lilienthal family, the House, and the historic-preservation movement in San Francisco. These projects are profiled in this issue’s cover story. In recent years, Heritage’s creative and entrepreneurial staff has introduced new programming that has significantly broadened the House’s appeal, including seasonal traditions like Mayhem Mansion and the Holiday Victorian Teas. Taken together, these projects and programs re-position the Haas-Lilienthal House as a community resource that reflects and amplifies the value of Heritage’s citywide preservation mission.

The restored House, including a new permanent exhibition and visitor-orientation video, will be on full display at Heritage’s Semi-Annual Membership Meeting on Wednesday, January 31. The event will feature an intimate and rousing presentation by family member John Rothmann on The Haas Sisters of Franklin Street, the memoir written by his mother, Frances, in 1979 and recently republished by Heyday and Heritage. Please join us.

It has been a true privilege to work on this campaign and the Haas-Lilienthal House project with such a dedicated team. I am proud of what we have been able to accomplish together to help secure the future of Heritage, the House, and the cause of preservation in San Francisco.
Façadectomy Proposed for Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist

In December Heritage submitted comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the 450-474 O’Farrell Street/532 Jones Street Project, which proposes to demolish the historic Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist and two other contributing resources to the Uptown Tenderloin Historic District. Constructed in 1923, the building is eligible for listing in the California Register of Historic Resources. Representatives of the church and its development partner, Thompson Dorfman Partners, LLC, presented the project to Heritage’s Projects & Policy Committee in August 2017.

The historic buildings on this project site would be replaced by a 13-story, 130-foot-tall, mixed-use building with market-rate housing, retail space, and a replacement church. Of the 176 residential units, five would be below-market-rate. In an apparent effort to mitigate the destruction of historic resources, part of the church façade and its columns would be retained at an additional cost of up to $5 million.

In testimony before the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) and the Planning Commission, as well as in its DEIR comments, Heritage has consistently and unequivocally opposed the proposed project’s token gesture to retain its colonnade. This approach is not only contrary to the HPC’s draft policy against façade retention but would exacerbate already significant adverse impacts on historic resources. Heritage also attacked the DEIR’s project objectives as impossibly subjective, unquantifiable, and self-serving, falling far short of the EIR’s core informational function to enable decision-makers to assess the feasibility of preservation alternatives.

Despite being long condemned by the preservation community, façade retention is increasingly prescribed in San Francisco as mitigation for projects that would otherwise fully demolish potential historic resources. Stripped of everything but its façade, a building loses its integrity and significance, rendering it an architectural ornament with no relation to its history, function, or cultural heritage.

The alarming popularity of façadism in San Francisco in recent years has prompted the HPC to develop a draft façade-retention policy that discourages its practice, defines minimum preservation standards, and offers alternative mitigation strategies. The draft policy states that “character-defining features need to be retained to avoid an end product that looks more like a hollow vestige than a public benefit.” If approved, the 450 O’Farrell Project would embody the “hollow vestige” decried by the HPC. Heritage maintains that its visually jarring pastiche of historic elements and contemporary glazing would be confusing to the public and is inconsistent with the prevailing character of the surrounding Uptown Tenderloin Historic District.

The proposed project also sends the wrong message to the city’s development community by legitimizing façade-retention as appropriate compensation for destruction of the city’s most significant historic resources. Indeed, rarely is an individually eligible historic resource targeted for façadism, as here. Façade-retention projects typically involve contributory resources or “character” buildings. By contrast, Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist, is fully intact — inside and out — and is architecturally significant for both its exterior and interior features.

Heritage does not oppose the construction of new housing and church facilities on this block but will continue to advocate for preservation of the historic church building and against the normalization of façadism in San Francisco. We are adamant that the historic church building need not be destroyed to accomplish the project objectives, as evidenced by myriad successful adaptive-reuse projects involving historic churches, theaters, and similar buildings in the city and around the country.

To read Heritage’s comments on the DEIR for the 450-474 O’Farrell Street/532 Jones Street Project, visit sfheritage.org/positions-testimony.
San Francisco Heritage has raised more than $4.4 million at the end of 2017 for the Campaign for San Francisco Heritage/Haas-Lilienthal House.

The vast majority of campaign-funded renovations and restoration work was completed between April and October 2017. The comprehensive scope of work included accessibility improvements (including barrier removal and a new restroom at the ballroom level, and a wheelchair lift to reach the first floor), seismic strengthening, fire-life safety upgrades, and exterior and interior painting, among other projects.

A team from Architectural Resources Group (ARG) started conservation work at the House in September. The first-floor wood panels were cleaned to remove dust and general soiling, surfaces were waxed and buffed to restore their intended luster, and scratches and dents were in-painted to match the existing finish. The wainscoting and door/window casing in the rear stairwell were cleaned and re-varnished to match the existing finish. And lastly, the wallpaper in the second-floor hallway and first floor were dry cleaned, and select stabilization and repairs were performed.

A handful of remaining projects will be completed in early 2018, including landscaping, new exterior signage, furniture restoration and reupholstering, restoration of the exterior storm doors, and multiple interpretive projects (see page 6).
Restoration and upgrades at The Haas-Lilienthal House
At the outset of the capital campaign, Heritage commissioned multiple studies to identify strategies to assure the long-term viability and relevance of the Haas-Lilienthal House. Indeed, the original purpose of the campaign was not only to repair the House, but to update its interpretive program to complement restoration work and ultimately spur greater visitation. A new interpretive plan would soon offer fresh insights on how to tell the House’s unique story, focusing on evocative historical themes: the Gold Rush, the 1906 earthquake and fire, and the legacy of San Francisco’s pioneering Jewish community. Visitors to the House, whether they are tourists or San Francisco residents, would take the values and message of historic preservation back to their own communities.

Over the past few years, in conjunction with capital improvements to the House, Heritage has been completing a series of campaign-funded interpretive projects that deepen our understanding of the Haas-Lilienthal family and the historic-preservation movement in San Francisco, significantly enhancing the visitor experience. These projects include a multi-media installation by artist Ben Wood, new visitor-orientation video, a permanent exhibition in the ballroom, republication of The Haas Sisters of Franklin Street (see page 8), and a new website for the House at haas-lilienthalhouse.org.

Illuminating History Through Art

Throughout November 2017 the Haas-Lilienthal House was aglow with a site-specific, multimedia installation by artist Ben Wood. Drawing from a trove of family photos and home movies, the artwork was projected onto the front parlor windows of the House after dark. It vividly portrays the people, traditions, and celebrations that enlivened 2007 Franklin Street from the 1880s to 1972. The artist created the 15-minute video with photographs and film obtained from the family, with help from Heritage staff and funds from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and campaign co-chair David Wessel. Through the medium of contemporary video technology, Wood’s installation engages audiences in a way rarely associated with the interpretation of historic sites. During its limited run, the video garnered significant
media coverage for the Haas-Lilienthal House and Heritage, including a segment on local NBC news and stories in J, SF Chronicle, and Hoodline. Heritage looks forward to making Wood’s artwork a recurring feature at the Haas-Lilienthal House in the future.

Visitor-Orientation Video

A core recommendation of the Haas-Lilienthal House interpretive plan is to produce a new orientation video that contextualizes the House within a broader range of historical themes — something that Heritage has never offered tour attendees. Indeed, a visitor survey conducted by the National Trust in 2012 revealed a strong demand for an introductory video to set the stage for the House tour. Five years later, Heritage is finally set to debut a new visitor-orientation video produced by the same team responsible for the acclaimed documentary American Jerusalem: Jews and the Making of San Francisco (2013).

As this issue of Heritage News goes to print, Jackie Krentzman and Camille Servan Schreiber of Bread & Butter Films are preparing the final edit of the eight-minute video, featuring interviews filmed at the House with family descendants Alice Russell-Shapiro and John Rothmann, architectural historian (and former Heritage staffer) Christopher VerPlanck, and author, journalist, and historian Gary Kamiya. The narrative for the video seeks to draw parallels between the Haas-Lilienthal family’s immigrant story and the experiences of San Francisco’s contemporary immigrant communities, making the connection to Heritage’s mission-driven efforts to celebrate and protect the city’s diverse cultural identity. In addition to being shown to all museum visitors, the video can be viewed at haas-lilienthalhouse.org starting in February 2018.

Permanent Ballroom Exhibition

Visitor surveys taken early in the interpretive planning process revealed that most tour goers have no idea that the Haas-Lilienthal House is also headquarters to the city’s leading preservation nonprofit organization. A new permanent exhibition opening in late January 2018 will help remedy this disconnect. The ballroom display features 25 historical and contemporary photos, including sections on the Haas-Lilienthal family and the House as a rare survivor of its period, as well as Heritage’s early success in relocating Victorians in the Western Addition, its major “saves and losses” over the past four decades, and milestones such as the Splendid Survivors survey, the Port of San Francisco Embarcadero Historic District nomination, and the San Francisco Legacy Business Registry. Most wall space will be dedicated to telling the story of Heritage as a preservation organization, based on a design by James Brendan Williams. Heritage consulted with lead interpretive planner Max van Balgooy and longtime Heritage News editor Don Andreini on the selection of projects and photos.

With a recent grant from the Bland Family Foundation, Heritage will also develop a free, 12-to-16 page, full-color exhibition catalogue on the history of Heritage and the Haas-Lilienthal House. To be completed in 2018, the catalogue will serve as a valuable educational piece for museum visitors and attendees to Heritage programs throughout the year.

For more information on these projects, please visit haas-lilienthalhouse.org.
At Heritage's 2018 Semi-Annual Meeting on Wednesday, January 31, John Rothmann, a radio talk show host on KGO 810 AM and grandson of Florine Haas Bransten, will recount family anecdotes found in the memoir, The Haas Sisters of Franklin Street: A San Francisco Memoir of Family and Love (1979, 2017), written by his mother, Frances Bransten Rothmann (1914-1984).

Co-published by Heyday and Heritage in October 2017, The Haas Sisters brings to life a San Francisco of the past and tells the story of a family united by love. The book has been entirely redesigned and expanded, including over 100 historic photos from the family’s personal collections.

Outfitted with a new foreword by Kevin Starr (1940-2017), this account of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century San Francisco vividly evokes the luxurious lifestyle and close bond shared by sisters Alice Haas Lilienthal and Florine Haas Bransten, the daughters of William and Bertha Haas. Florine and Alice lived either together or just blocks apart on Franklin Street for their entire lives. In 1903 Florine married Edward Brandenstein (later shortened to Bransten) and moved into 1735 Franklin Street, while Alice and Samuel Lilienthal stayed to raise their family at 2007 Franklin Street.

While author Frances Bransten Rothmann recreates her mother and aunt’s world of leisure with lively descriptions of high tea at the Palace Hotel, excursions across oceans, and extravagant holiday celebrations that overfilled ballrooms with celebrants, her narrative is much more than a chronicle of leisure and opulence. Rothmann makes clear that the true treasure of those Franklin Street houses was Florine and Alice’s devotion to each other, their families, and their community. In inhabiting the sisters’ daily lives of telephone calls, errands, inside jokes, and myriad philanthropic projects, we can delight in the profound sense of wellbeing — of home — that emanates from the pages. And by witnessing two lifetimes full of kindnesses that extended from family to perfect strangers, The Haas Sisters enables the reader to see the best in others and in the marvelous City by the Bay.

In addition, President and CEO Mike Buhler will provide an update on Heritage’s latest activities, including public-policy and advocacy priorities in 2018.

On Wednesday, January 31, please gather at the Haas-Lilienthal House, 2007 Franklin Street, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m., for the meeting and lecture. The Semi-Annual Meeting is free for members and $10 for non-members. RSVP to Terri Le: tle@sfheritage.org or call (415) 441-3000, ext. 22.
Save the Date: Soirée 2018

Soirée 2018 will celebrate the opening of the Port of San Francisco and Orton Development’s Historic Pier 70 project. Listed in the National Register as the Union Iron Works Historic District, and one of the most intact industrial complexes on the West Coast, Historic Pier 70 honors the shipyard’s industrial past while creating a vibrant community of modern, innovative companies, including Restoration Hardware, Obscura Digital, Tea Collection, Gusto, and Uber ATG.

Last year’s Summer of Love Soirée was SOLD OUT and we expect the same for this year! For more information on Soirée 2018 and underwriting opportunities, visit sfheritage.org.

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As we celebrate the conclusion of the Campaign, Heritage would like to acknowledge and thank all those whose generosity has made possible this momentous achievement in the history of the Haas-Lilienthal House and of Heritage.

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