BACKGROUND OF VICTORIAN ARCHITECTURE

In the 1870's and 1880's, valentines were assembled using blank, rectangular cards and layers of die-stamped paper filigrees, gilded cupids, hearts, flowers, and arabesques. The box-like houses of the period were decorated with machine-sawn redwood ornament in just the same way.

The exuberant prosperity of late 19th century San Francisco was expressed in her architecture which borrowed styles from Europe and the East Coast but used them in her own way. The plain houses of the pioneer period gave way in the 1870's and 1880's to what one observer called "...the remarkable passion for architectural adornment which did so much to convert San Francisco into a place of pinnacles and steeples which...gave the town its...picturesque appearance." By 1880, Hittell's guidebook explained that "the superior facility for shaping wood, and the abundance of machinery for planing and molding, has led to the adoption of more architectural ornamentation here than in any other city." He dryly added, "The visitor from the East is at once impressed by the rarity of plain exteriors in the dwellings of the wealthy."

And not just the wealthy. The real achievement of Victorian San Francisco was the construction of thousands of modest homes for skilled mechanics, craftsmen, and office workers. Visitors from the East constantly commented on the noticeably higher standard of living enjoyed by San Francisco mechanics and artisans. The wealth of Victorian San Francisco rested on the seemingly limitless agricultural abundance of California's great central valleys. In the 1880's it was the endless stream of wheat that flowed through this port to the mushrooming cities of Europe that began the sustained growth and prosperity of California in general, and San Francisco in particular.

The story of the Victorian house begins with the land and the way it was divided and graded. After an initial "land rush" in the 1840's and early 1850's, San Francisco seems to have developed a pattern of very small one-time squatter holdings and large blocks of land held by investors. It was a common pattern for large fortunes made in mining or other natural resource development to be invested in large blocks of land on the edge of the growing city. Would-be home owners had to secure a lot. They did so by forming Homestead Associations whereby members pooled their savings to buy large tracts for subdivision into house lots, generally 25 feet by 100 feet. By 1868, there were no less than 30 of these Homestead Associations in San Francisco. Members borrowed from them to build their houses, usually at 7% interest. In an age before the government regulation of the stock market, and at a time when ordinary people mistrusted banks, Building and Loan and Homestead Associations were attractive places for small investors to put their money even if they had no intention of building. As the many surviving rows of Victorians testify, relatively large pools of capital were amassed by these associations. As in many 19th century American institutions, there was often an ethnic base to these associations.

Other whole rows of frame houses were constructed by speculative builders who, like today, built small batches of houses to sell to the public. This resulted in standard floor plans and exuberant redwood decoration on the exterior. Gingerbread trim was a relatively low-cost way to customize a standardized house or string of houses.
These houses were essentially simple wood houses. Because of the interaction between the hilly terrain and the rigid gridiron street patter, a pleasing step-like profile was created in many parts of the city. Many of the long, narrow lots were tilted at steep angles to the street. The grading of the streets accentuated this condition. The common result was a steep embankment between the sidewalk and the house. The striking effect of San Francisco’s Victorians is often dramatically reinforced by their high bases.

Retaining walls and house footings (most houses did not have basements) were usually brick covered with cement plaster scored and painted to look like granite blocks. The houses have fir frames and redwood siding. Most were built according to the system of Western plate framing whereby each floor is built as a separate layer, one on top of the other.

The long, narrow lots dictated a long, narrow floor plan. The common row house plan consisted of a long hall with no windows on one side of the house from which branch three interconnected principal rooms: a rarely used formal front parlor, a second, or family parlor, and a dining room with a projecting bay window. Behind the dining room were the kitchen and pantry. Ten foot high sliding doors connected the ornamented three principal front rooms. As one architect noted, “the lower floor of such a house can be made into one large room – admirably suited for receptions.” The second, or bedroom floor, repeated the plan of the first floor without the interconnecting sliding doors. The master bedroom was usually in the front and had a bay window. The children’s bedrooms were next back, and servants were housed in the rear rooms or in the attic. The bathroom was placed over the kitchen to minimize plumbing. Water closets were usually separate from washrooms to maximize accessibility.

The basic box was embellished with ornament and bay windows. These “building adjuncts” were bought from wood-working mills south of Market Street. Builders picked out ornamental elements from catalogues. These house parts were machine-carved on newly invented machinery. Soft, knot-free, inexpensive, easily worked redwood was ideal for this.

In the Victorian period, houses began to be equipped with a variety of mechanical conveniences which invariably became the building’s chief selling points. By 1890, Newson’s *Picturesque Homes* reported that “almost all have modern improvements such as electric bells, electric lighters for the gas fixtures, hardwood mantels, art tiles, bronze hardware, open work plumbing, tiled vestibules, spindle arches, wall shelves, and a tasty staircase lighted with domed skylight. These residences are generally finished interiorly with fine hardwoods and redwood, interspersed with dades of Lincrusta-Walton. Throughout, the interior is full of novel features and well planned for furniture.”

Randolph Delehanty
STYLE CUES AND CLUSTERS
San Francisco Victorian Architecture

ITALIANATE — FLAT FRONT

STYLE CUES
♦ false front  ♦ flat, arched, or “squeezed” pediment
♦ bracketed cornice  ♦ hoods
♦ quoins  ♦ NO bay window (front is flat)
♦ simple window treatment

CHARACTER
♦ simple
♦ “classical”
♦ Redwood used to mimic stone ornament

PEAK OF POPULARITY
♦ 1870’s

CLUSTERS TO VISIT
♦ 2155-2165 Bush Street (between Fillmore Street and Cottage Row) built in 1874
  by The Real Estate Associates
♦ 329-337 and 334-342 Lexington Street (between 20th and 21st Streets), built in
  1876-1877 by The Real Estate Associates

ITALIANATE — SLANTED BAY

STYLE CUES
♦ false front  ♦ five-sided slanted bay window
♦ bracketed cornice  ♦ entryway with Corinthian columns or
♦ quoins  ♦ bracketed portico

CHARACTER
♦ same as Flat Front Italianate

CLUSTERS TO VISIT
♦ 226-236 Clinton Park (between Dolores and Guerrero Streets), built in 1878 by
  The Real Estate Associates
♦ 120-126 Guerrero Street (between Duboce Avenue and Clinton Park), built in
  1878 by The Real Estate Associates
♦ 2315-2321 Webster Street (between Washington and Clay Streets), built in 1878
  by The Real Estate Associates
SAN FRANCISCO STICK/EASTLAKE

STYLE CUES
♦ false front (either a false gable or a French cap)
♦ rectangular bay window
♦ wooden embellishment
♦ exuberant
♦ “non-classical”

CHARACTER
♦ vertical
♦ geometric
♦ angular
♦ inventive

PEAK OF POPULARITY
♦ 1880’s

CLUSTERS TO VISIT
♦ 1801-1845 Laguna Street (between Pine and Bush Streets), built in 1889 by William Hinkel
♦ 9-39 Scott Street (between Duboce Avenue and Waller Street), built in 1888 by John Hinkel

QUEEN ANNE – TOWER HOUSE

STYLE CUES
♦ tower
♦ steep “true” gable
♦ rounded bay window
♦ art glass windows
♦ plaster (rinçaux) embellishments
♦ horizontal bands of shingles

CHARACTER
♦ horizontal
♦ light
♦ frivolous
♦ asymmetrical

PEAK OF POPULARITY
♦ 1890’s

HOMES TO VISIT
♦ 1701 Franklin Street (corner of California Street), built in 1895, designed by W. H. Lillie
♦ 601 Steiner Street (corner of Fell Street), built in 1891, designed by Charles I. Havens
♦ 2007 Franklin Street (between Washington and Jackson Streets), built in 1886, designed by Peter Schmidt
QUEEN ANNE — ROW HOUSE

STYLE CUES
♦ same as the "Tower House" but without the tower

CLUSTER TO VISIT
♦ 710-720 Steiner Street (between Hayes and Grove Streets), built in 1894-1895 by Matthew Kavanagh

THREE VARIETIES TOGETHER

Go to the 1000 block of Dolores Street (west side between 23rd and 24th Streets). There you will find 1070 (Queen Anne Row House), 1074 (San Francisco Stick/Eastlake), and 1080 (Italianate with slanted bay).

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Judith Waldhorn, Coordinator, City Guides
City Guides Background Material
ITALIANATE
FLAT-FRONT

- Bracketed Cornice
- Flat Window Hood
- Turned Portico Ballustrade
- Bracketed Portico
- Transom

ITALIANATE
SLANTED BAY

- Bracketed Cornice
- Segmented Window Hoop
- Quoins
- Turned Portico Ballustrade
- Columned Portico
- Capital
- Column
- Slanted Bay with Colonnettes

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SAN FRANCISCO STICK

FRIEZE
BRACKET
BRACKET EXTENSION
SAWN PORTICO BALUSTRADE
BRACKETED PORTICO
PILASTER CAP
PILASTER
BALUSTER
NEWEL POST
MAIN CORNICE
UPPER CORNICE
DENTILS
COLONNETTI
SUNBURST
BELT CORNIC
ROSETTE BUTTON
BAY WINDOW
QUEEN ANNE ROWHOUSE, 1890S-1910S
**Victorian Vocabulary**

Architecture: The art of building

Bay Windows: Three or four sided windows which project from the house

Blind window: Area of the façade which is framed like a window but is solid

Capital: The head of a column

Column: An upright shaft which supports a roof or any load

Corinthian Capital: Capital with stylized acanthus leaves

Dentils: Small square blocks in a row

Dormers: Windows in attic spaces which project and have their own roofs

Egg and Dart Molding: Pattern with alternate eggs and arrow heads

False front: a façade falsifying the size of a building

Finial: Ornamental top of a gable or pinnacle

Fish Scale: Shingles with rounded ends (that look like fish scales)

Gable: A roof with a triangular shape
Gingerbread: Nickname for Victorian ornamentation

Ionic Capital: Capital with a scroll shape

Keystone: Central stone of an arch. In Victorian wooden architecture it is a decorative wedge-shaped ornament over doors and windows.

Parapet: A low wall. Can refer to a false front that conceals the gable roof on Italianate and Stick style houses.

Pediment: A triangular shape above doors, windows and entrances

Plan: A section through a building, looking down from above

Quoins: Corner blocks on a building, laid so the faces alternate between large and small

Shingles: Wooden tiles for covering a building

Stucco: Plasterwork

Sunburst: Ray-shaped, round decoration

Victorian: Houses built during the reign of Queen Victoria, approximately 1835-1900

Witches' Cap: A pointed tower roof, conical in shape