Beneath the placid surface of San Francisco’s bayside Marina District is a compelling story of land speculation, earthquake refugees, filling and grading operations, a major world’s fair and rapid residential development.

Unlike many neighborhoods in the city where multiple layers of built fabric resulted from different eras of development, the Marina was largely built out within a single generation, during the 1920s and 1930s. It is home to one of the city’s most cohesive collections of Mediterranean Revival and Art Deco architecture, and although very few individual buildings rise to the level of architectural distinction, the neighborhood retains the character of a well-preserved 1920s-era streetcar suburb.

The Marina lies north of Lombard Street between the Presidio and Van Ness Avenue. With the exception of Fort Mason, whose very different history ties it more closely to the Presidio, the area is quite flat.

The recorded history of the Marina district began when Spanish military authorities established the Presidio, in 1776, and a battery at Punta Medaños, 1797, now Fort Mason. Little of note occurred in the shallow tidal flats between the two military installations during either the Spanish (1776-1821) or the Mexican periods (1821-1848).

After the United States acquired California, in 1848, and admitted it as the thirty-first state two years later, President Millard Fillmore reserved a swath of land encompassing the Presidio, Punta Medaños (renamed Black Point because of its dense chaparral cover), and all the land between for military use. The following year, Fillmore specifically excluded the tidelands that comprise the Marina from the reservation, allowing the dry land to revert to city ownership and the submerged lands to the California State Tidelands Commission.

In 1862, the State of California built the Marina’s first significant structure, a wharf that extended from Bay Street along the Fillmore Street right-of-way, out into the large natural lagoon that sat at the center of the district. Named the Fillmore Street Wharf, it was the area’s economic lifeline, allowing locally grown produce and dairy products to be shipped throughout the Bay Region.

When the Tidelands Commission began selling off its holdings in the area in 1864, the Northern California Homestead & Railroad Association purchased one of the largest tracts, 448 acres of submerged tidal lands, for one dollar per acre. Homestead associations were cooperative enterprises that bought large tracts of land for resale in small lots to working-class people on the installment plan. Unfortunately, the foul-smelling tidal marshes discouraged potential buyers, and very little sales activity appears to have occurred.

Resisting large-scale residential development for several decades, what is now the Marina evolved into a remote community of truck farmers, dairymen, fishermen and crabbers. Early photographs from the 1860s and 1870s illustrate a rural landscape of mud flats, shanties, pastures and compact farms. Unwilling to give up so easily on real estate development, private investors constructed a macadamized toll road, known as the Bay Shore & Fort Point Road, between North Beach and the Presidio in the early 1860s. It skirted the southern end of the lagoon.

The road reduced the isolation of the Marina, and by the mid-1860s, the area had begun to attract beer gardens. One of the first, established in 1864 by a German immigrant named Rudolph Herman, was Harbor View Park. It offered saltwater baths, a shooting range, a hotel, a restaurant, and shaded picnic gardens. The park was so popular that the entire area between Fort Mason and the Presidio took its name.

Incompatible as these uses may seem today, industrial development of the Harbor View district occurred hand-in-hand with the amusement parks. Victorian-era industrialists found its large parcels of bay-front property to be ideal for shipyards, docks and power plants. The first industry to locate in the area was the San Francisco Gas & Light Company. In the early 1870s, the company constructed a large plant on the southern edge of the Harbor View Lagoon, on a block bounded by Francisco, Steiner, Bay, and Fillmore Streets.

The company built a second and much larger plant at a site adjacent to
Fort Mason (the present location of the Marina Safeway). Its mammoth gas tank (shown in 1897 photo above), the largest such structure west of Chicago, was visible from much of the city until the 1950s. The company’s main office building remains at the corner of North Point and Buchanan Streets.

Another major early industry at Harbor View was Fulton Iron Works. Started by silver baron and industrialist James G. Fair in 1893, the complex occupied a section of Strawberry Island, a sandy spit located east of what is now Crissy Field (approximate location today of the St. Francis Yacht Club). Next door to Harbor View Park, the Fulton Iron Works manufactured mining and railroad equipment, and steel-hulled ships.

Other industries in Harbor View included the California Pressed Brick Company, the Pacific Ammonia Chemical Company, and Charles Lillie’s Soap and Tallow Works. These industries attracted hundreds of unmarried immigrant workmen to the area. Some squatted on vacant land in hastily built shacks, while others rented rooms in boardinghouses along Tonquin (now Marina Boulevard) and Bay Streets.

Despite the arrival of these industries, agriculture persisted in the Harbor View district until the twentieth century. The 1900 Sanborn map shows several blocks, including the block bounded by Chestnut, Pierce, Scott and Lombard, containing “Chinese vegetable gardens”.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, larger forces began to interfere with the organic evolution of the Harbor View district. During the early 1890s, James Fair began quietly buying up lands belonging to the Northern California Homestead & Railroad Association. Within a few years, he controlled all but five of the forty-nine blocks bounded by Chestnut, Baker and Webster Streets and the Bay, planning to fill the tidelands and sell the lots for industrial use.

In 1892, Fair began constructing a seawall along the northern end of Harbor View Lagoon as a first step in this scheme. Seeking to protect access to the Fillmore Street Wharf, which would be closed off behind the seawall, San Francisco’s city attorney obtained an injunction against the project. For Fair, a politically astute figure, this was only a temporary setback.

Banned from constructing the seawall himself, he successfully lobbied the Board of Supervisors to commit the City to build it. Locked in the tight grasp of the Depression of 1893, many San Franciscans welcomed Fair’s proposal, believing that the filling operations would create hundreds of jobs and that thousands of manufacturing jobs would surely follow.

Warren & Malley, under City contract, began filling the tidal marshes to the level of the city grade in late 1893. Steam dummies hauled fill material from sand dunes at Fort Mason and dumped it into the marshes at the edge of Harbor View. Men with shovels and wheelbarrows manually leveled the fill, and began the grading of streets.

Meanwhile, lawsuits against the seawall gradually worked their way through the courts, and on October 15, 1894, the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court issued a ruling in Fair’s favor. The City directed Warren & Malley to close the last remaining gaps in the seawall. Once the bay waters were sealed off, the contractor resumed filling in the shallow Harbor View Lagoon with mud from the bottom of San Francisco
Bay by means of the newly perfected suction dredge.

Doubts about the viability of the proposed industrial park among the heirs of James Fair (who died in December 1894) brought filling operations to a halt, leaving a good portion of the lagoon north of Bay Street and east of Divisadero Street. Nevertheless by 1900, Fair’s project had resulted in completion of a substantial stone seawall and filling of almost sixty acres. A panoramic 1912 photograph taken from Pacific Heights shows the area, including the still unfilled section of the lagoon (see photo at bottom of previous page).

The 1906 earthquake was an important watershed event in the history of the Harbor View district. Its vacant lands and proximity to the destroyed portions of the city made it a primary destination for refugees from the devastation. Eventually, four refugee camps were established in what is now the Marina. There were tent camps at Lobos Square (now Moscone Recreation Center), Fort Mason, Harbor View Park, and a site that straddled the boundary of the Presidio. Wood shacks quickly replaced the tent city at Lobos Square.

By the time the last camp closed in 1908, many refugees had decided to remain in the Harbor View district, which witnessed the early stages of concentrated residential development. Many achieved homeownership on the cheap by purchasing an inexpensive lot and moving onto it an earthquake shack or two—available for $50 each.

Many of the newcomers to Harbor View were Italian immigrants and their American-born progeny. The district attracted Italians from densely populated North Beach even before 1906. Some worked at the Ghirardelli chocolate factory near Black Point Cove, while others made their living as truck farmers, growing fresh vegetables for sale in the wholesale vegetable markets of San Francisco.

Harbor View’s halcyon days as a quasi-rural retreat for earthquake refugees and Italian truck farmers would not last long. After less than five years of fevered reconstruction, San Francisco’s merchant princes began planning for a party to demonstrate to the world the extent of the city’s recovery from the 1906 disaster.

A meeting at the Merchants’ Exchange on April 28, 1910, resulted in the subscription of over four million dollars for the purpose of acquiring a site for a world’s fair. The following year, the Exposition Company’s board of directors announced selection of 635 acres along the northern waterfront, including 330 acres of Harbor View.

Beginning in 1912, the Exposition Company painstakingly assembled the exposition site. The company entered into short-term leaseholds with the Fair daughters (Virginia Vanderbilt and Theresa Oelrichs), the biggest landholders in the area, and initiated condemnation and eviction proceedings against hundreds of poor and less powerful landowners and tenants, displacing a thriving community of former earthquake refugees and Chinese and Italian truck farmers.

After the land was cleared of occupants and structures—including what remained of Harbor View Park, the Fulton Iron Works and most other industrial uses—suction dredges pumped sand and mud from the bay floor to fill the remaining seventy acres of submerged land behind James Fair’s seawall. The dredges worked for 146 days, pumping over 1.3 million cubic yards of materials into the lagoon.

Contrary to oft-repeated lore, Harbor View Lagoon was not filled with earthquake debris. Most of that rubble ended up in Mission Bay and further south near the San Mateo County line. Photos taken well after 1906 (see bottom previous page) show the lagoon intact.

After completing the fill, the Exposition Company installed water, sewer and electrical lines and began grading streets. Construction of the fair grounds and buildings got underway in late 1912. An extension of the State Beltline Railroad from the Northeast Waterfront through a tunnel beneath Fort Mason built that same year facilitated the work by bringing materials to the site.

When the Panama Pacific International Exposition opened to great fanfare in February of 1915, visitors marveled at magnificent pavilions laid out in a palm-studded landscape, divided into a grid of streets and avenues intersected by magnificent courts (photo on following page). Despite the darkest days of war in Europe, the ten-month run of the fair was a great success, tallying more than 18 million visitors.

On closing night, December 4, 1915, thousands crowded the fair grounds and surrounding streets and hillsides to watch the lights go out. The dismantling of the Exposition grounds began the following Monday.
The vast majority of the fair buildings—wood-frame structures with lath and plaster exteriors finished to resemble expensive permanent materials—were intended to last only for the duration of the fair and no longer. The Exposition Company offered up for sale anything that could be moved, including furniture, automobiles and sculpture. A few buildings were salvaged and moved elsewhere.

Whatever could not be salvaged or sold was demolished. After removal of the debris additional dredging and grading occurred. When work was concluded, only the Yacht Harbor, the North Gardens (now Marina Green), the Column of Progress and the Palace of Fine Arts remained. The column, crowned by a sculpture, “The Adventurous Bowman,” stood at what is now the intersection of Marina Boulevard and Cervantes Boulevard until it was deemed a traffic hazard and demolished in the mid-1920s.

A significant legacy of the exposition was greatly enhanced public transportation. Prior to the creation of the San Francisco Municipal Railway (MUNI) in 1912, a variety of private companies provided transportation to and from the Harbor View district. Henry Casebolt’s horse-powered streetcar began service from North Beach in 1866. The 1880s and 1890s witnessed the arrival of other private transit providers, the Presidio & Ferries Railroad cable car line on Union Street, and the Fillmore streetcar line in 1895.

By 1914, the Municipal Railway had opened three new streetcar lines to serve the fair and upgraded service on the Presidio and Ferries line, which it acquired. This was prelude to the next stage of the history of the Marina District—its development as a streetcar suburb.

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—This is the first of a two-part article generously provided by Christopher VerPlanck. Chris was architectural historian at Heritage from 1997 until 1999, when he joined Page & Turnbull. Early this year he formed a historical resources consulting firm with former Landmarks Board president, Tim Kelley.
After the Fair was Over: Marina District Development Takes Off

—This concludes Christopher VerPlanck’s two-part article on the Marina District. Part I appeared in the summer 2007 issue.

Work crews completed restoration of the grounds of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in February 1917. That same year Virginia Vanderbilt, daughter of James Fair—and the district’s largest landowner—filed a map for a proposed subdivision called “Marina Gardens.”

This subdivision went nowhere, for various reasons, and the cleared exposition site remained undeveloped until 1922, when, after lengthy negotiations, real estate developers George E. Bevel and the Rothschild Brothers purchased fifty-five acres from Mrs. Vanderbilt and formed the Marina Corporation. The tract lay within the boundaries formed by Fillmore, Scott, Chestnut Streets and Marina Boulevard.

Within the year, the company began laying out streets in preparation for a new subdivision (photo above). Most streets, including Cervantes, Alhambra and Mallorca, deviated from the city’s orthogonal grid. Diagonal and curvilinear forms provided striking bay views and recalled picturesque residential parks like Seacliff and St. Francis Wood platted a decade earlier.

Mrs. Vanderbilt and her sister Theresa Oelrichs retained most of the balance of the property west of Scott. There the standard grid would prevail, but development followed much the same pattern as in Marina Gardens.

Initially the Marina Corporation, which oversaw street grading and paving, utilities and other site improvements, also took charge of residential lot sales. A handful of speculative buyers acquired clusters of lots.

Italian surnames appear frequently among individual buyers seeking family homes or small income property, a sign that prosperous families were moving westward from the dense North Beach district. Their numbers increased markedly west of Scott Street.

Despite their intention to promote the Marina as an exclusive subdivision of large-lot residences, the Rothschild Brothers soon offered mostly standard twenty-five-foot lots when the market did not support that plan. Some larger lots, located often at corner sites, allowed for construction of apartment houses or somewhat grander homes.

One of the first developers in the Marina was the Meyer Brothers Company. Others soon followed, including William W. Rednall, the St. George Holden Realty Company, Ben Liebman, and E.L. Stoneson, who went on to become a major builder in the Lake Merced district in the years after the Second World War.

Many of the developers and contractors had staff architects. Developer Lawrence O. Ebbets partnered with architect Richard R. Irvine to design and build dozens of houses and apartments. Other architects who were busy in the Marina include Herman C. Baumann, Charles S. Strothoff, Albert H. Larsen, Louis Mastropasqua, Harold Stoner, Sidney Colton, and Pietro Canali. Despite their productive careers, most are not well known today. Occasionally, prominent residential architects accepted commissions to design individual single-family dwellings in the Marina, including
Clarence Tantau and the partnership of Farr & Ward.

The separation of commercial and residential uses in the Marina is consistent with other residential districts constructed in San Francisco during the 1920s, a consequence of the city’s first zoning ordinance, passed in 1917. Another feature of the district’s development, the inclusion of ground-floor garages in most residential buildings, reflects the growing popularity of the automobile.

By 1925, the Rothschild Brothers reported the sale of eighty percent of the lots in the Marina. Five years later, three-quarters of the residential sites had been developed with single-family dwellings, apartment buildings and flats housing about 25,000 people.

Although few individual buildings stand out as examples of excellent design, the Marina displays a remarkably cohesive architecture that exudes a sense of order and prosperity. This was the result not of design guidelines or any other prescriptive means, but rather of the fact that a small pool of residential builders developed the area in a short period of time, the prosperous 1920s.

Designing for the speculative market, developers rarely took risks. Consequently, most of the buildings that went up in the Marina reflected popular styles of the day, including the Spanish Colonial and Mediterranean Revival. Today the white-painted stucco facades, red clay tile roofs, dark stained wood trim and wrought iron and tile detailing typical of these styles give much of this district its distinctive character.

A particularly good example of Spanish Colonial Revival is the three-story house at 25 Casa Way (photo left). Architect Sidney Colton designed it in 1930; the builder was E.L. Stoneson.

Occasionally, other “period revivals” make an appearance in the Marina. A rare example of the Tudor Revival style is the single-family residence at 2450 Francisco Street. Irvine & Ebbets designed the house, constructed in 1933 by contractor M.P. Jorgensen.

With a large number of apartments—more than 200 apartment buildings providing nearly 2900 units—and good public transit to various parts of the city, the Marina proved a good place for renters to live.

The three-story-over-garage apartment building at 3825-35 Scott Street is typical of the district. Irvine & Ebbets designed this Mediterranean Revival-style structure, built in 1928 by developer Ben Liebman.

By the end of the ’20s, the increasingly popular Art Deco Style made its appearance in the Marina. Good examples include the apartment houses at 3700 and 3665 Scott Street. Irvine & Ebbets designed the former, completed in 1930, while Lawrence Ebbets, working on his own, turned out the latter, also constructed in 1930 (photo of entry above).

Development of the Marina’s commercial district lagged a little behind the residential areas, business owners waiting for the rooftops to appear in sufficient density before investing in the district. Throughout the late 1920s and early ’30s, one- and two-story commercial buildings sprouted along Chestnut Street, west of Fillmore. The original F streetcar line (now 30 Stockton trolley bus) and the 22 Fillmore crossed at that intersection, forming the Marina’s transit hub.

Like the residential neighborhood, the older commercial buildings on Chestnut formed a cohesive urban streetscape and reflected the Spanish Colonial Revival and Art Deco styles of the period. Many remain and are in good condition. A good example is the two-story Art Deco-style commercial building at 2176 Chestnut Street (photo above). designed by architect Hugh Kirk and constructed
in 1931. It features elaborate wrought iron screens within the second floor window openings. Also of note is the two-story terra cotta-clad concrete commercial building at 2080 Chestnut Street. Its architect was the prominent firm of Hyman & Appleton.

During the 1930s, in spite of the Depression, the Marina district continued to thrive and expand. Some buildings attracted favorable attention from the local press, including the Presidio Theater, at 2338-46 Chestnut Street (photo bottom page 6). Local theater architect John Ahnden designed the movie house (1937), with its brightly lit neon marquee and sculptured façade, to attract patrons shopping the street. The Presidio still anchors the western end of the commercial district.

As the neighborhood developed, the City of San Francisco invested significantly in public facilities and amenities. The Reid Brothers designed the Winfield Scott Elementary School (1930), on Divisadero Street, and later that decade, with city bond funds and assistance from the New Deal’s Public Works Administration (PWA), Marina Junior High (now Middle School) arose on Fillmore in 1935-1939 (photo left).

Working under the mandate of the Field Act, California’s response to the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, prominent San Francisco architects George W. Kelham and William P. Day incorporated the latest earthquake-resistant technology in their design for the school. It stands out as one of the best Moderne Style public schools in a city with many.

The Marina enjoys some of the city’s choicest recreation areas, including two yacht harbors, the Palace of Fine Arts, Moscone Recreation Center and Marina Green. In June 1921, the Exposition Company, on the initiative of William H. Crocker, donated to the City the four bayside blocks of filled land that offered fair patrons a landscaped greensward called North Gardens.

Altruistic impulses aside, Crocker had business ties with the Rothschild Brothers, who, once assured that public parkland—Marina Green—and not industry, would occupy the shoreline, closed the deal to purchase Mrs. Vanderbilt’s tract. The St. Francis Yacht Club made its home at the western end of the Marina Green in 1927, at the newly completed West Yacht Harbor. It has shared the harbor with the Golden Gate Yacht Club since 1939. Responding to neighborhood concerns, the City acquired land at Gashouse Cove to head off a proposal to construct an “air ferry terminal” at that site and, in 1929, announced plans to extend the Green eastward to Laguna Street. The City built the East Yacht Harbor at the cove, in 1933, with PWA funds.

San Francisco originally set aside Lobos Square—the four blocks bounded by Bay, Laguna, Chestnut, and Webster Streets—as public open space in the 1850s, but its development as a park had to wait many years. Not before 1925 did the Parks Department landscape the site, renaming it Funston Square (now Moscone Recreation Center). Until then it had been home to squatters in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a marshalling yard for the 1890s seawall project, a post-quake refugee camp and part of the 1915 fair grounds.

The crown jewel of the Marina, and the attraction that draws more visitors to the district than any other, is the Palace of Fine Arts (photo left), a universally recognized San Francisco
icon. Bernard Maybeck designed the classically inspired complex with its landscaped site in 1914, to showcase works of art from around the world at the PPIE.

Built of lightweight materials, all structures at the exposition were intended for demolition at the fair’s conclusion. However, even before the fair closed on December 4, 1915, a movement emerged to save the much-loved Palace of Fine Arts from this fate. The preservation effort succeeded, and for some time the exhibition hall housed a permanent art collection. However, time was not kind to the structures comprising the Palace, as it passed through a variety of less compatible uses.

After deteriorating to a point where it had become unsafe, the Palace of Fine Arts underwent reconstruction in concrete in the mid-1960s. Today, the structures and the surrounding parkland and lagoon are undergoing restoration.

Once isolated from traffic and congestion, the Marina district became inundated by commuter traffic after the Golden Gate Bridge opened in 1937. Widening of Lombard Street from two to four (and eventually six) lanes to accommodate the volume of traffic, physically and psychologically cut the Marina district off from Cow Hollow and other neighborhoods to the south. During the 1940s and ’50s, Lombard became San Francisco’s “Motel Row.” Motels designed in the then-poplar Googie style sported large neon signs and modern styling (illustrated below).

The 1950s witnessed the construction of two other well-known modern buildings. The first was the locally famous “Marina Safeway” (photo above). Designed by famed Northern California architect William Wurster and built in 1959, it has undergone only minor exterior modifications in the nearly fifty years since its completion. Known as the Marina Prototype, Wurster’s design was the basis for hundreds of Safeway stores across the nation.

Modernism also appeared in the district in the form of a new branch library. The San Francisco architectural firm of Appleton & Wolfard designed the boldly modern brick, steel and glass building. Opened to the public on June 16, 1954, the branch returned to service last August after undergoing a two-year rehabilitation and seismic upgrading.

A hidden gem of Modernism, a two-flat residence on Jefferson Street (photo page 7, column 3), is the work of Richard Neutra, an architect of international stature, with Otto Winkler. It appeared in the August 1939 issue of Architectural Record.

By the early 1950s, the Marina district was built out and did not undergo appreciable physical change until 1989, when the Loma Prieta Earthquake hit the neighborhood hard. The fill that underlies much of the district proved unstable in some areas, liquefying and destroying several apartment buildings, especially those with so-called ‘soft stories,’ that is, buildings with ground floors devoted to garages or storefronts.

Recovery and reconstruction, however, were swift and complete. Today the Marina district remains a desirable middle-class to upper middle-class neighborhood that in recent years has attracted well-paid younger people from all over the nation. Although chains have replaced many local businesses, Chestnut Street remains the thriving commercial heart of this attractive and vibrant urban neighborhood.

—Our gratitude to Christopher VerPlanck for generously providing this feature. He is a founding principal of Kelley & VerPlanck, Historical Resources Consulting

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