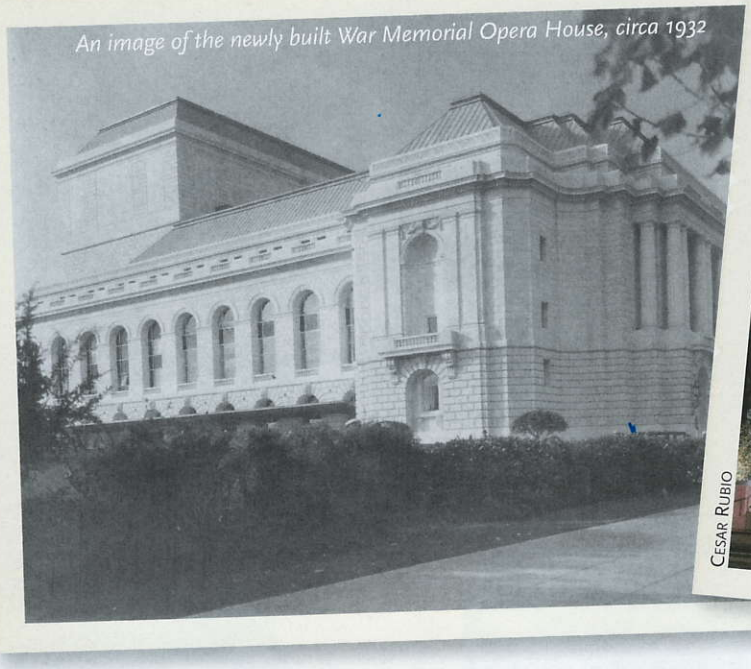
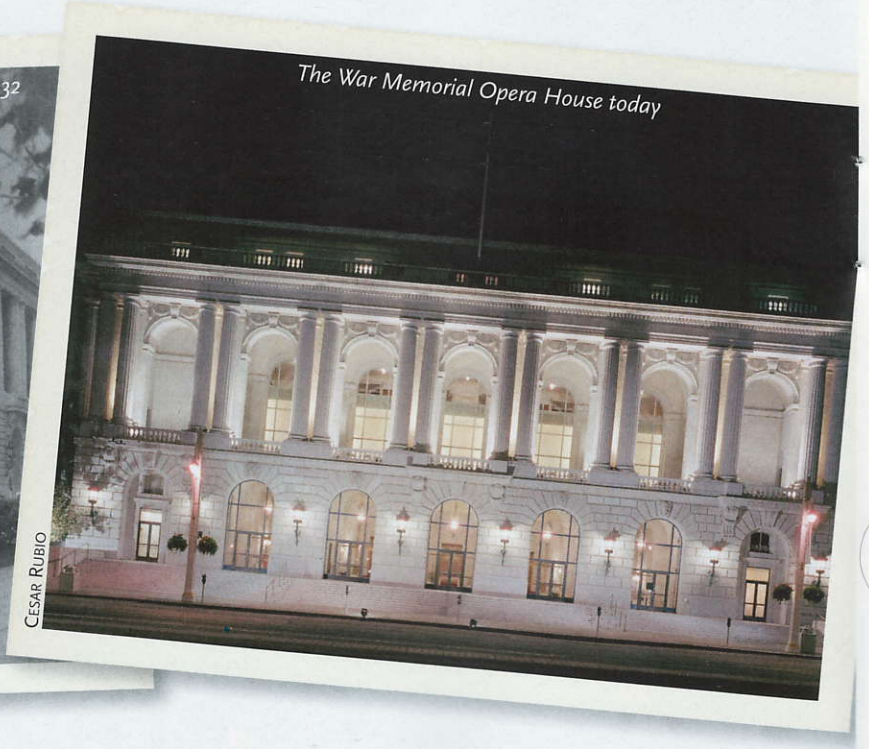
By Christopher VerPlanck



An image of the newly built War Memorial Opera House, circa 1932



The War Memorial Opera House today

Cesar Rubio

Eighty Years of the War Memorial Opera House

Along with the Veterans Building, San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House anchors the west end of the city's Civic Center. Designed by Arthur Brown, Jr., with assistance from G. Albert Lansburgh, the building is a shining example of the American Renaissance style, with some Art Deco interior features. Clad in granite and terra cotta and embellished with giant Doric columns, the building provides a majestic setting for its neighbors, including the Veterans Building and City Hall. Built as a monument to all of San Francisco's war dead, the War Memorial Opera House is indisputably one of San Francisco's most important public buildings and played host to two very important historic events—the drafting of the charter of the United Nations in 1945, as well as the ceremony where the United States restored Japanese sovereignty, in 1951.

Opera in San Francisco goes back to the Gold Rush, when European troupes began regularly visiting the remote western outpost. San Francisco's first "opera house" was a wood-frame building constructed by Thomas Maguire on Washington Street near Portsmouth Square. Early opera houses like Maguire's were hastily built and inexpensive wood-frame structures. It was not until 1874 that San Francisco got its first "real" opera house—the Wade (later Grand) Opera House. Located on the north side of Mission Street, just west of Third Street, the Grand Opera House perished in 1906 along with most of the city's other opera houses, including the Tivoli Opera House and the Orpheum Theater. Although most of these venues were rebuilt after 1906, their managers dropped opera in favor of more popular vaudeville productions. Regardless, opera continued to be performed in San Francisco after the disaster—most notably Luisa Tetrazzini's famous performance at Lotta's Fountain on Christmas Eve, 1910—but without a permanent home, the art form's future was uncertain in the city.

As early as 1899, plans were created for a municipal opera house near San Francisco's old City Hall, at 8th and Market streets. But the plans, which called for the construction of a new civic center along Market Street, went nowhere, mainly because a competing campaign (the Burnham Plan) called for a complete reworking of San Francisco along Parisian lines, with grand radial boulevards, monuments, classically designed public buildings, and even a municipally owned opera house. Though the Burnham Plan was adopted in 1905, the 1906 Earthquake derailed it and private inter-

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ests rebuilt the city largely as it had been. But San Francisco did get a new civic center in the years that followed the disaster.

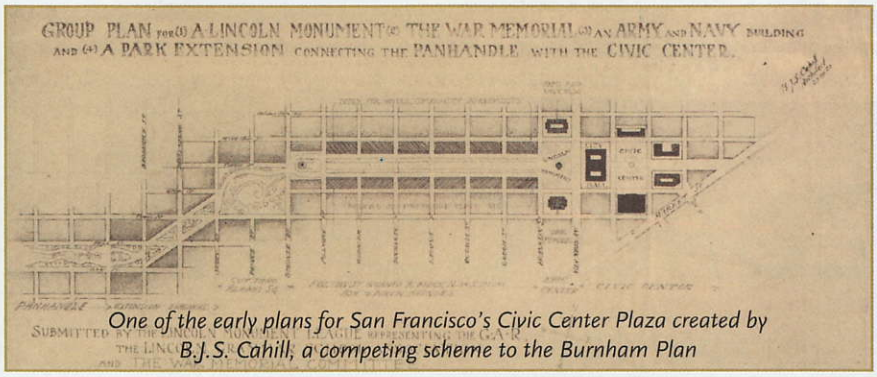
Spearheaded by Mayor James Rolf, an advisory committee devised a plan that became the basis of today's Civic Center. In 1912 San Francisco voters approved bonds to fund construction of a new City Hall and Civic Auditorium facing an equally new public plaza bounded by McAllister, Larkin, Grove, and Polk streets. Though not funded at this time, the master plan called for a municipal opera house to be built on the east side of the Civic Center, where the Main Library is presently located. In 1913, local architect Willis Polk drew up plans for an opera house in this location very closely resembling the Paris Opera—a splendid Beaux-Arts building designed by Charles Garnier and constructed between 1861 and 1875.

With the Civic Center underway, the Musical Association of San Francisco began raising money to build the much-anticipated municipal opera house. The Musical Association, which had recently established the San Francisco Symphony, wanted to build a performance space that could accommodate both the Symphony and a future opera company. The City agreed to donate the block bounded by Fulton, Hyde, Grove, and Larkin streets to the Musical Association if it would raise the money to build the opera house. Unfortunately for the project, the courts decided that it was illegal for the City to donate publicly owned land to a private organization, and the project foundered in 1911.

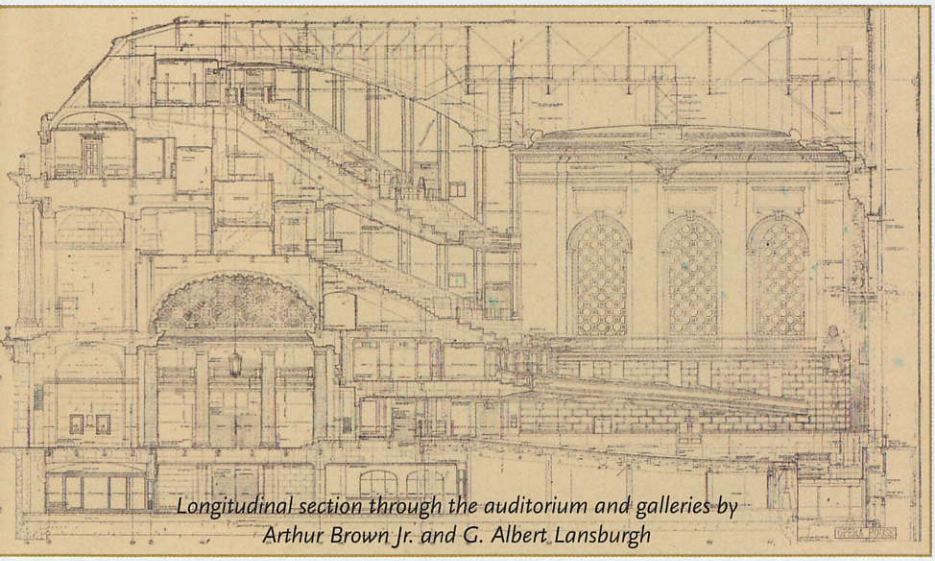
In 1918, prominent San Francisco businessmen began raising money to build an opera house on privately owned land located just outside the Civic Center. Fundraising had not gone well, mainly because opera was widely viewed as an aristocratic art that did not require subsidy. Upon hearing of the project's budget woes, Major Charles Kendrick, a World War I veteran and member of San Francisco's elite, suggested that the project be repackaged as a memorial to San Francisco's war dead. Kendrick's idea rallied the support of thousands of veterans and the Musical Association gathered enough to purchase a lot at the southwest corner of Van Ness Avenue and Grove Street; eventually $2,150,000 was raised.

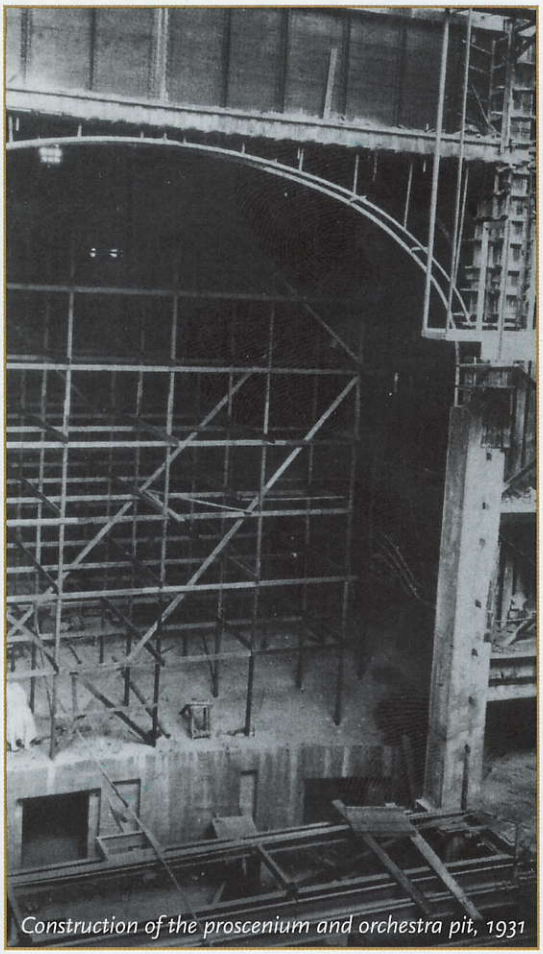
Neapolitan immigrant Gaetano Merola heard about the efforts in San Francisco to build an opera house. A young but accomplished conductor, Merola decided to move to San Francisco, where he hoped to establish the city's first professional opera company. He was successful, and the company's first production, Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohéme,* opened at Civic Auditorium on September 26, 1923. Though Merola was a flexible man who made the general-purpose Civic Auditorium "do," the notion of a purpose-designed opera house was vital to the long-term goals of his fledgling company.

In 1922, the trustees of the Musical Association appointed a commission to assist in developing the site at Van Ness and Grove (the site of today's Davies Symphony Hall). But the program—which at that point included an all-in-one opera house, memorial arch, art museum, and halls and meeting rooms for veterans—was entirely out-



One of the early plans for San Francisco's Civic Center Plaza created by B.J.S. Cahill, a competing scheme to the Burnham Plan


Longitudinal section through the auditorium and galleries by Arthur Brown Jr. and G. Albert Lansburgh


Construction of the proscenium and orchestra pit, 1931

War Memorial audience photo at a concert presented by renowned baritone Lawrence Tibbett in 1945

The audience at the opening of the 90th Season in September 2012

DREW ALTIZER

of-scale with the nearby Civic Center. Meanwhile, a trucking company announced plans to build a warehouse directly opposite City Hall. City officials recognized an opportunity to stop the warehouse *and* expand the amount of space available to the War Memorial project. In 1923, officials oversaw a complicated set of real estate transactions in which the Musical Association sold its property at Van Ness and Grove and used the proceeds to purchase the site of the proposed warehouse. Over the next few months, the City acquired the rest of the privately held lots bounded by McAllister Street, Van Ness Avenue, Grove Street, and Franklin Street – two square blocks of real estate.

With a site for the project finally settled upon, the Musical Association's commission divided the program among three discrete sites. The Opera House would be on the southern block, the landscaped Memorial Court would occupy the Fulton Street right-of-way, and the Veterans Building would occupy the northern block. In spring 1924, the trustees contracted with architects Willis Polk and G. Albert Lansburgh to design the Opera House and Bakewell & Brown to design the Veterans Building and Memorial Court, but Polk's death and further fundraising shortfalls suspended the project for almost three years. During this time, the trustees explored various possible resolution of the budget shortfall and decided to seek $4 million in public funding. The Board of Supervisors approved the bond issue for the ballot, and on June 14, 1927, San Francisco voters provided the required two-thirds majority required to pass it.

With the project back on track, the trustees asked Arthur Brown to take on the Opera House as well as the Veterans Building and Memorial Court. His collaborator was G. Albert Lansburgh, a talented if difficult architect, with whom Brown had recently collaborated on Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco. Throughout 1927 and 1928, Brown met with the trustees and veterans' groups to craft a project that would satisfy everyone, ensuring that the two buildings were essentially the same size despite their different programs.

Brown saw the War Memorial project as an opportunity to extend the Civic Center west of Van Ness Avenue and to create an appropriate setting for City Hall—his masterpiece. In this vein, the architect took pains to ensure that the Opera House and the Veterans Building would harmonize with City Hall; all three share rusticated granite bases and colossal Doric colonnades within their *piano nobile* (the second floor). Brown also introduced some decorative details that were similar to what he had used on the City Hall project a decade earlier, including lion's head keystones, gilded bronze railings, and the decorative metal light fixtures around the exterior of the building.

Though the War Memorial was to be the "people's opera house," Brown knew that the building would be too large to have good acoustics. He successfully negotiated the reduction of the building's seating capacity from more than 4,000 to fewer than 3,300. This allowed Brown to pull the dual balconies back from the center of the auditorium, creating a gracefully curved shape that aligned perfectly with ceiling's elliptical dome. On the opposite wall, surrounding the stage, Brown designed a simple proscenium defined by graceful relieving arches embellished with figural reliefs by Edgar Walter. Aside from these reliefs, the tragedy and comedy masks on the side walls, and several pierced stucco grills, the interior of the auditorium is restrained in comparison with typical European opera houses of the period. Brown and Lansburgh also incorporated hundreds of delightful Art Deco light fixtures, including the stunning Art Deco chandelier suspended from the dome in the auditorium, made by Stirling Bronze Company of New York.

The modesty encountered in the auditorium also holds true for the lobby, which though richly appointed with a barrel-vaulted and coffered ceiling, is otherwise quite restrained. In marked contrast to European opera houses, the War Memorial Opera House does not have a grand staircase. Many Italian and French opera houses have grandly appointed stairs that lead up from the lobby to the boxes, where opera goers could "see and be seen" in their furs and jewels. In contrast, San Francisco opera patrons climb up to the upper floors

using durable and functional stairs at the four corners of the building.

The War Memorial Opera House's modesty may reflect a long-running rivalry between the Italian/French and German traditions. Whereas Latin countries have traditionally preferred more flamboyant *grand opera*, with opulent architecture to match, the German-speaking lands have tended to prefer their own *romantisch* operas that privilege the power and richness of the music, as embodied in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The revolutionary design of Wagner's own opera house, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, is primarily focused on the enhancement of the opera-going experience through sound and production, not luxurious display. It is also more democratic, consisting of a large auditorium without luxury boxes or a lobby with a grand staircase. Though Brown's War Memorial Opera House has boxes, it has no grand staircase. Furthermore, even the balcony seats have a good view of the stage. Another Wagnerian innovation that Brown employed is the sunken orchestra. Wagner, who believed that opera was a quasi-mystical experience, felt that seeing the conductor's waving hands or the light reflecting off of brass instruments would diminish the experience.

Cornerstones for the War Memorial Opera House and the Veterans Building were laid on Armistice Day, 1931. Newspaper articles periodically reported on the progress of construction and the building's advanced features. An article in the June 8, 1932 edition of the *Chronicle* described the backstage area, whose rigging allowed for scenery to be raised 75 feet above the stage while other scenery could be pulled 20 feet into the basement. The article mentioned the "steam curtain"—another Wagnerian innovation—that allowed for a scene to be changed in full view of the audience. The Opera House also had advanced lighting and communications equipment, including telephones in the dressing rooms; a switchboard that allowed the stage manager to pre-set lighting and scenery; and a recessed orchestra pit that could be mechanically raised or lowered.

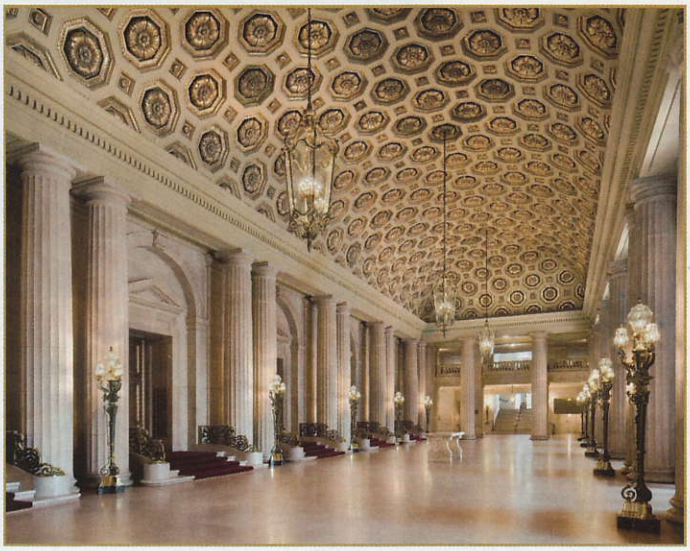
By September 1932, tickets to the upcoming season in the new opera house had already sold out. A *Chronicle* article sums up the public's excitement over the "first and only municipally owned opera house in the United States: Everyone wants to see—and hear—how opera goes in the new room. For many years opera has been presented in San Francisco in makeshift halls. The contrast in this new house should be tremendous."

The War Memorial Opera House opened on October 15, 1932 with Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*. Following the first act, Wallace M. Alexander, president of the San Francisco Opera Association, delivered a speech formally presenting the Opera House to the people: "This is your opera house, your own rich heritage. May you use it in the future that it may inspire only the highest ideals in the highest realms of art." Though the Depression raged, it was barely noticeable inside. Many of San Francisco's wealthiest and most powerful people were in attendance that night, and the *Examiner* noted, "Eyes sparkled like the jewels the ladies in the audience wore."

The Veterans Building was presented to the City a little less than six months later, in February 1933, and Memorial Court, the final component of the War Memorial project, was completed in 1936—landscaped with soil from the world's battlefields where Americans have fought.

For nearly fifty years, the War Memorial Opera House housed the San Francisco Symphony and the San Francisco Ballet. In 1980 the Symphony moved into its own facility across the street to Davies Symphony Hall. While the Ballet moved their administrative offices into a new facility at Franklin and Fulton streets in 1983, they still share their performance home with San Francisco Opera. After an addition to the Franklin street façade (1979) and a complete retrofit in the mid-1990s following the Loma Prieta earthquake, the War Memorial Opera House proudly stands as the centerpiece of the San Francisco Performing Arts Complex, one of America's foremost performing arts campuses. The artists who have performed on the stage are legendary, as is the building itself. At 80 years old, the War Memorial Opera House was completed a mere 84 years after the founding of modern San Francisco and continues to provide a vibrant enclave of art and urbanity in an ever-changing city.

DAVID WAKELY



DAVID WAKELY

The Goldman Foyer (left) and the proscenium and grand drape of the Osher Auditorium in the War Memorial Opera House