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BY DIANE DORRANS SAEKS



# ENHANCING THE LEGACY OF CALIFORNIA ARCHITECTURE

Stephen Sutro works closely with clients to ensure every residence is personal, practical, and elegantly site-specific.

San Francisco architect Stephen Sutro founded his architecture firm, Sutro Architects, in 2005, when he was in his early 30s. Today, it is the go-to architecture firm for the tech and finance set, young families, new winery owners, aesthetically astute executive couples, and a range of other clients who are aware of his classical bent.

Sutro's in-demand team continues to grow. A visit to his handsome new studio in the hip Tenderloin neighborhood quickly makes it apparent that he and his 25 associates are fully engaged in the current fever pitch of Northern California architectural projects. The new Sutro Architects design studio is humming with activity. Sutro's brother, Eliot, runs the Healdsburg office.

Sutro, who at 45 is very young in the lifespan of an architect, is working on large family houses all over Pacific Heights, as well as Woodside, Sonoma, Napa Valley, Tahoe and beyond. "I am very

engaged by and proud of ground-up projects," he relates, "especially the renovation and restoration work that we are doing in The City, on the Peninsula, and all over Northern California."

Sutro grew up in San Francisco and studied architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. He continues, "In San Francisco, for example, legendary Willis Polk, Ernest Coxhead, George Applegarth, and William Wurster are some of our most treasured architects of the past, and we are currently working on wonderful houses that each of these architects originally authored. The goal is to preserve or enhance the elements of these houses that are historically significant and unique."

Sutro believes that in this rich architectural legacy, his firm creates new spaces from antiquated layouts that do not work for contemporary patterns of family life. "Our team devises new configurations while respecting and protecting the original architect-



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Stephen Sutro and his team at Sutro Architects have earned numerous awards and accolades for their superlative work. The San Francisco- and Sonoma-based firm specializes in custom residential and unique commercial and institutional projects. Sutro notes, "We believe that the foundation of a successful project is a strong team; we pride ourselves on collaborations with accomplished owners, general contractors, and consultants in a process that is informed and rewarding. Our mission is not just to meet, but to consistently exceed client expectations."

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tural language,” he says. “Recently, on a project at a beautiful house in Pacific Heights designed by George Applegarth in 1915, we stripped down the original dining room to find not only a position of an original fireplace, but also hand-drawn pencil sketches on the wall of the original mantle design. The drawings appear to be from the original construction. They have become inspirational to me as we mock up railing pickets, molding sizes, shapes, and other details. Often, there is no substitute for visualizing something full-scale in place.”

Some of the most interesting projects are those with a mix of classic and contemporary elements. One of Sutro’s projects in the Marina District serves as case in point. “Though the house is new,” says the architect, “we designed it with historical details to appear original, and established a set of rules for what would be ‘old’ and what would be ‘new.’ The layout, function, technology, fixtures, and color treatment are all contemporary, but the look is intended to fit into the context of San Francisco history. The details are slightly more streamlined than those found in Victorian or Edwardian houses, but the way they are used is similar.”

Custom design today means that Sutro and his team are constantly revising and re-inventing details to customize architectural language for each client’s purpose, the site, and its history along with the immediate context.

“One example,” says Sutro, “is an inlay of bronze in a paneled room crafted of polished Macassar ebony wood. The pattern of the panels recalls a long tradition of proportion in a room, but the minimal detailing and highly finished materials are something fresh and bright. We are also designing spaces to work for highly specialized personal interests, including a room for a client devoted to the storage and display of fly fishing and other sporting gear. For this unique space, we were inspired by the famous Deyrolle taxidermy shop in Paris, dating from the late 19th century.”

When asked about design trends, Sutro notes that he is seeing a trend away from the single large great room. Instead, he relates, “There is a movement toward a sequence of spaces that are connected but separate. It is a more interesting and functional way than a single large open space, and I think we will see more of this.” Another configuration trend is for work/play/creativity spaces that are replacing the large study or fixed-seating home theaters. As he points out, “Families are interested in creating rooms where the adults and children can work and create alongside one another, often at large tables and flexible seating. Fixed media are less and less often part of the equation. We are now in a golden age of architecture in California,” he notes. “I am excited that the Bay Area is in a period where we value classic residences and appreciate the thought and craftsmanship that give them grace and elegance. I see a commitment by my peers and clients to create fantastic work and I admire this exceptionally creative era in the continuum of architectural aesthetic expression,” he adds. “Most of all, it is gratifying to see the work all of the artists and artisans and specialists who work hard to make these spectacular homes come to life. California is fortunate to have a robust tradition of architecture and craftsmanship that enriches our lives and residences.” ♦



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The scope of Sutro’s work runs from sophisticated and classical to bold and contemporary. It is a testament to Sutro and his team’s formidable skill set to be able to excel across these genres.