

## A History of Architects and Their Work at the Marin Art and Garden Center

Fran Cappelletti, Jose Moya del Pino Library/Ross Historical Society

[www.moya-rhs.org](http://www.moya-rhs.org)

The Town of Ross is just a few miles north of San Francisco. With a population of about 3,000, many simply drive through on busy Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. Yet there is much history here and a good place to start is at the Marin Art and Garden Center.

At its inception in 1945, one could describe most of the property as a blank canvas. A large estate from the 1860s to 1930s, it was the home of only two families, the Worns and Kittles. The Kittle mansion, shown below, was remodeled over the original house in the 1880s. While an architect is unknown, we do know the Kittles were residents of Rincon Hill in San Francisco, the fashionable neighborhood before Nob Hill became famous.<sup>1</sup>



*Ross Historical Society*

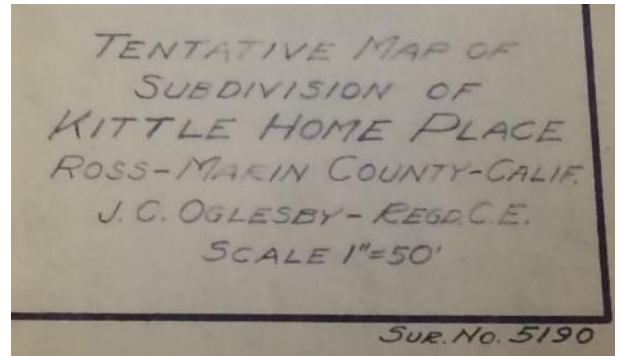
In the early 1930s, a death in the family and a fire at the mansion left the property uninhabited, leaving only the original barn and Octagon House. Subdivision, a new school and city park were all offered as potential uses for the site.

Local groups, led by Caroline Livermore, found a way to purchase the property as a living memorial and cultural center. In 1945 the site was officially established as the Marin Art and Garden Center. As the Center developed, buildings were added to support member organizations and meet the needs of the annual Art and Garden Fair, held from 1946 to 1970. Despite renovations, additions and even physical moves, many of these buildings remain. Today, the Center is open to the public from dawn to dusk and you can observe or visit the buildings and grounds in this history. Visit [www.magc.org](http://www.magc.org) for more information.

## What Could Have Been

The planned subdivision of the estate in the early 1940s is available in the Gardner Dailey collection at the College of Environmental Design Archives at the University of California, Berkeley.

Lots 6, 10 and 11 were sold and three houses built, but further development halted. The Octagon House, Barn and Magnolia Tree sites are still with us today, the creek still flows as it did then, and the roadway can be travelled, but you'll have to do it on foot in places. Sir Francis Drake Boulevard still has its earlier name of Red Hill and Ross Landing Road at the bottom.



Gardner Dailey Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley

## Octagon House

The Octagon House, built in 1864 for the Worn family, started simply as a pump house over a well. It also served as temporary residence for the Worn family as they built their house on the Center site.

The eight sided house enjoyed some popularity in the 1850s with a movement led by Orson Squire Fowler. From mathematical calculations showing maximum use of space to low cost and better airflow, he devoted an entire book to the concept.<sup>2</sup> Other examples survive in San Francisco and across the United States.



*William Wurster Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley*

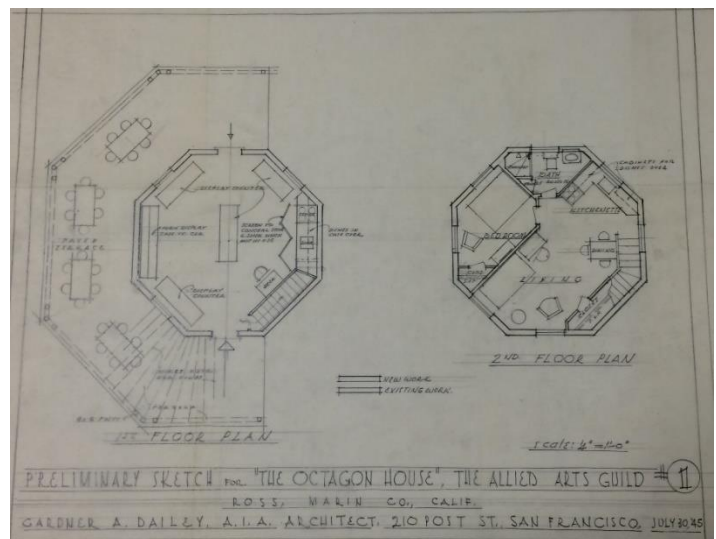
The second floor was replaced by a balcony, giving full view of the original ceiling. A Williamsburg chandelier and circular iron staircase were added, along with bookcases and custom-made furniture. Roger Hooper, A.I.A., was the architect and Carla Flood, A.I.D., the decorator.<sup>3</sup>

An earlier design to turn the Octagon House into an exhibit hall with upstairs apartment was produced by Gardner Dailey. The 1945 plan labels the plan as being for The Allied Arts Guild, Ross, Marin Co., Calif. One of the early inspirations for the Marin Art and Garden Center was the Allied Arts Guild in Menlo Park, CA, where Dailey was also the architect.



*Ross Historical Society*

Over the years it served as lodging, office, workroom, antique shop and café. It started its present incarnation as the Jose Moya del Pino library in 1969. In that year, the building was moved 35 feet and underwent an extensive renovation. Layers of old paint were removed to reveal original tongue and groove wood.



*Gardner Dailey Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley*

## The Barn

Visible in photos of the original Worn home, this building served its namesake purpose for many years. Starting with an initial reading by the Ross Valley Players in the Barn in 1940, it continues to serve as their home today.

During the many County Fairs at the Center, the building served as exhibit hall. Following trends, the themes changed from domestic sciences in 1950 to photography in 1970. The Barn also served as dining area and many remember the amusement park rides nearby.



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The Barn was also the site of one of the early meetings to save the Center property from residential development. The San Francisco Chronicle described the August, 1943 gathering. Local residents, including the Livermore, Bechtel and Kent families, discussed several proposals. In the end, the attendees supported a park for Ross.<sup>4</sup>

## The Studio Building

Near the Center main entrance is The Studio Building. Until recently, it was the home of the Marin Society of Artists, <http://www.marinsocietyofartists.org/> . Designed by architect Gardner Dailey and built in 1948, it is an understated structure, long and low, with wood planking and few windows. News accounts detail the building as 25 by 75 feet, with a rough redwood exterior, shake roof and sky-lights for light.<sup>5</sup> While the Society has a new home and the skylights are long gone, the building remains and the original plans are housed in the College of Environmental Design Archives at the University of California, Berkeley. As the photos show below, the building is recognizable from its original state to the present day.



*Ross Historical Society*



*Fran Cappelletti, 2016*

Dailey was well known as one of the pioneers in Bay Area modern architecture as part of the Second Bay Tradition. Starting his career as a landscape architect, he later designed in traditional styles for a time before embarking on his innovative designs. Notable credits include Tolman and Hertz Halls at UC Berkeley, the Brazil Building in Berkeley's Tilden Park and the Allied Arts Guild in Menlo Park.<sup>6</sup> Allied Arts is interesting as it is one of the original inspirations for the Marin Art and Garden Center. Dailey had a long and close friendship with then Society of Artists President, Jose Moya del Pino, even introducing him to his future wife, Helen Horst. He later designed Moya's home on nearby Laurel Grove Avenue, still standing today.



### **Bottle House**

Built in 1948 by Ray Olson, this type of structure enjoyed much popularity in the 1940s, primarily as a tourist attraction. One of the most famous was at Knott's Berry Farm in Southern California. Mr. Olson is not a famous name, but he was active in Marin County, with two signature brick residences still intact in Ross and Larkspur<sup>7</sup>. From antique shop store room to Fair office, it served many purposes over the years. The Bottle House is a much loved landmark and many visitors ask about its purpose and history.

*Ross Historical Society*

### **Pixie Parents**

Pixie Park was founded in 1952 by Elizabeth Terwilliger and the American Association of University Women (AAUW). Started as a safe place to play for the children of volunteers working at the Marin Art and Garden Center, it quickly grew and expanded. The families gathered donations for the first buildings. In 1958 they incorporated as Pixie Parents and continue to accept members to this day.<sup>8</sup>

In 1953, the Pixie Parents group built the Pavilion, a playroom and indoor space. Funding was provided by the Century Club of California and the Evers Family, with the building design by Meyers and Evers. For Sepha and Albert Evers, it was an inspired dedication to their son, Lt. Albert John Evers, who died serving his country in World War II. Mr. Evers was a successful architect, working on projects across the globe. Perhaps his most visible Bay Area work is the Floral Depot on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland.

Sepha Evers was active in the community for many years. She helped pass an ordinance restricting billboards near freeways in Marin County, still in force today. She was also one of four women to start a Citizens Survey Committee dedicated to the preservation of open space, leading to the creation of the Marin Conservation League, an organization that succeeded in preserving local land for parks such as Mount Tamalpais and Angel Island.

In addition to the building, the Pixie Parents later engaged Robert Royston to provide a modern, stimulating playground for the children. According to the San Rafael Independent Journal in 1958, Mr.



*William Wurster Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley*

Royston donated the design as a volunteer, but the price for construction was 15 to 20 thousand dollars.<sup>9</sup> In a later interview, Royston recalled that Pixie Park had one of the earliest 'splash pads', a popular attraction in many playgrounds today. Catherine Munson recalled how he insisted on doing hardscape first, paths, arrange uses, so whole thing works. Climbing structure, wonderful slides, concrete houses kids could climb through. "It became a lovely place and it's still a lovely place."<sup>10</sup>

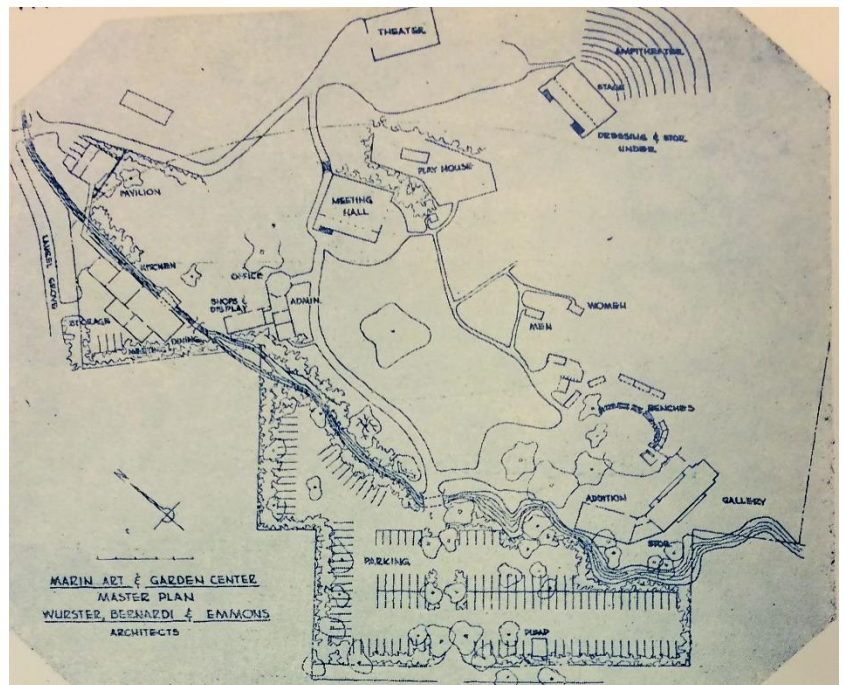
### The Wurster, Bernardi and Emmons Connection

William Wilson Wurster, Theodore Bernardi and Donn Emmons formed Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons in the mid-1940s. Famous for modern design, they won the American Institute of Architects architectural firm award in 1965. Wurster became dean of architecture at UC Berkeley in 1950 and he brought the departments of architecture, landscape architecture, and city and regional planning together to form the College of Environmental Design in 1959.<sup>11</sup> The buildings that follow are of their design and are part of the Center today.

### Master Plan

In the mid-1950s, Wurster, Bernardi and Emmons produced a Master Plan for the Center. They envisioned several new buildings, an expanded art gallery, a parking lot and the continued use of several existing buildings. While the plan was not adopted, they did design several buildings in place today.

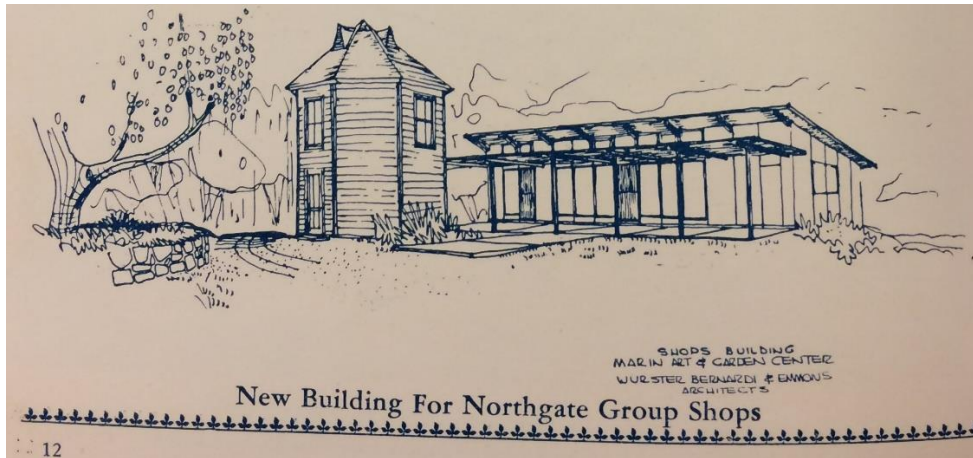
Donn Emmons was the principal member of the firm working on the Center. His resume includes many works over a nearly 50 year career, including the Mill Valley Public Library, Ghirardelli Square and the Bank of America tower in San Francisco, along with many residences throughout the Bay Area.<sup>12</sup>



California Room, Marin County Library

## Shops Building

The Fair program from 1955 shows the plan with a drawing of the new Northgate Group Shops building.



*California Room, Marin County Library*

A 1959 photo shows the new building in use.



*William Wurster Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley*

And the building is still in place today.

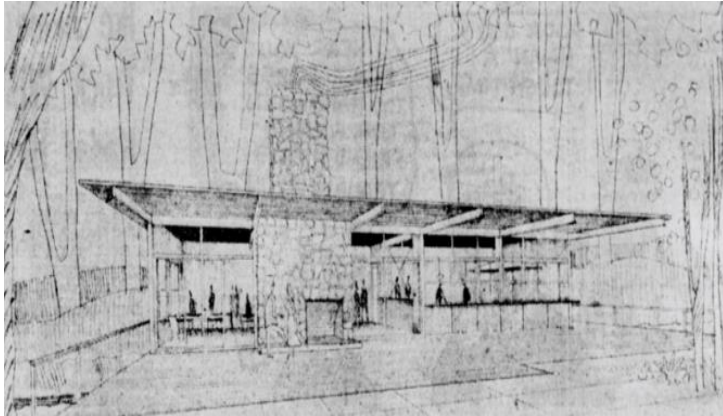


*Fran Cappelletti, 2016*



## Northgate/Livermore Room

In 1957, a building was constructed for the Northgate group. Named after the north gate of the Center, this was an important building during the Fairs. Remodeled and repurposed over the years, it is now the Livermore Room, site of many receptions and lectures. Donn Emmons was responsible for the design, as noted in an article in the Independent Journal on April 9, 1957.<sup>13</sup>



*Independent Journal*



*William Wurster Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley*



*Fran Cappelletti, 2016*

## Decorations Guild

Later in the decade, the Decorations Guild building was added, with a covered walkway linking it to the Octagon House and Shops Building. While the Guild is no more, the building is now office and meeting space.



*William Wurster Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley*



*Fran Cappelletti, 2016*

## Restrooms

In 1961, the firm even designed the very simple and functional restrooms near the main entrance, just one more building that remains on site.

## Serpentine Wall

Another major addition from 1969 is the long Serpentine Wall along the perimeter fronting the Center and along Laurel Grove. The wall was dedicated to Caroline Livermore by her son, George Livermore, who made use of salvaged bricks from San Francisco, a fitting tribute to a woman who valued conservation. Using a single layer of bricks, the serpentine shape follows the pattern followed by Jefferson at the University of Virginia.<sup>14</sup>



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## The Landscaped Grounds

The landscape architecture at the Center has a long history. The original architect was Thomas Church, involved for the early years of the Center. In a 1954 letter, the Center regretted to inform Mr. Emmons that “Mr. Church is no longer able to serve.” A loss in prestige, perhaps, but the replacement, Herman Hein was more than adequate. From specific designs for early Fairs to his overall responsibility for the Center moving forward, much of his original work remains in place today. He was well known in Mill Valley for many residential gardens and his work to preserve trees in the community.<sup>15</sup> Other credits include the gardens at Christ Episcopal Church in Sausalito<sup>16</sup> and the Guide Dogs for the Blind campus in San Rafael.<sup>17</sup>

Many thanks go to those who helped with this story, including the management and staff of the Marin Art and Garden Center, Jessica Fairchild, Chris Marino of the College of Environmental Design Archives, Annabelle Gibson Reber of Pixie Parents, and Dave Weinstein.

## SOURCES

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<sup>1</sup> "Cutting Away of Rincon Hill Necessary", San Francisco Call, October 14, 1911, 21, at California Digital Newspaper Collection, <http://cdnc.ucr.edu>.

<sup>2</sup> See O. S. Fowler, *A Home For All or The Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building*, (Fowlers & Wells Publishers, New York, 1854).

<sup>3</sup> "Victorian Jewel Moves", Independent-Journal, April 16, 1969, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Helene Rivers, "The Kittle Homestead, A Ross Estate May Become a Playground", San Francisco Chronicle, August 15, 1943, S1.

<sup>5</sup> "Marin 'Mum Show Will Have A Fine New Setting", San Francisco Chronicle, October 24, 1948, 2L.

<sup>6</sup> Dave Weinstein, *Signature Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2006), 86-96.

<sup>7</sup> The house at 7 Murray Avenue, Larkspur, is pictured on the cover of Marin Magazine in the April 29, 1950 edition of the Daily Independent Journal. Pages M8 to M9 discuss Olson's background and projects. More information on Mr. Olson and his work is provided in the book, *Larkspur, Past and Present*, by the Larkspur Heritage Preservation Board, 2010, 274-275.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://pixiepark.org/about/history/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Pixie Place Goes Contemporary", Independent-Journal, December 27, 1958, M7.

<sup>10</sup> From interviews with Robert Royston and Catherine Munson by Dave Weinstein, author of *Signature Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area*.

<sup>11</sup> <http://archives.ced.berkeley.edu/collections/wurster-william>

<sup>12</sup> See Biographical File in Mill Valley History Room, located in the Emmons designed Mill Valley Library.

<sup>13</sup> New Building Planned at Art-Garden Center, Independent-Journal, April 9, 1957, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Grace Eaves Prien, "Beloved Conservationist Gets a Lasting Memorial", San Francisco Chronicle, May 21, 1969, 19.

<sup>15</sup> For much more about his life, see Abby Wasserman, "Herman Hein, Mill Valley Master Gardener", The Mill Valley Historical Society REVIEW, Spring 2016, 17-19.

<sup>16</sup> See Biographical File in Mill Valley History Room, located in the Emmons designed Mill Valley Library.

<sup>17</sup> "Grounds Plans Made For Guide Dog Center", Sausalito News, March 13, 1947, 3.