

REAL ESTATE | HOME DESIGN, HOME IMPROVEMENT & GARDEN

SIGNATURE STYLE / Gardner A. Dailey / Easy and elegant / Gardner Dailey brought Modernism to Bay Area

By **Dave Weinstein**, *Special to the Chronicle*

Sep 4, 2004



Chronicle / Liz Hafalia

Architect Gardner Dailey designed this house--120 Commonwealth Ave.--which was built in 1938 in Jordan Park. Looking from the living room windows, there are two outside doors--the one on left was an entrance to an office, and the one on right was the entrance to the home. Gabie Berliner's father was a psychoanalyst. Shot on 8/23/04 in San Francisco. LIZ HAFALIA / The Chronicle
LIZ HAFALIA

Seen from the street, there's nothing outrageous about the Berliner house, just a pair of redwood boxes and a quiet wall of glass. But in 1938, when it appeared in San Francisco's sedate Jordan Park, the home raised a ruckus.

"One time I heard a screech of brakes," says Gabie Berliner, who was a child when her father built the house. "A car had stopped in the middle of the street. They came and looked in the windows, mouths agape, eyes wide, like it was something from Mars."

It was an odd reception for a Gardner Dailey home. Something of a boy wonder, he had been designing immense Spanish and "English Cottage" mansions on the Peninsula, and Neoclassic town houses in Presidio Heights for a decade and a half. But in 1935, he switched to Modernism and never looked back.

Along with William Wurster, who was the same age and whose career followed the same stylistic arc, Dailey introduced modern architecture to Northern California. They were "the two leaders of the time," says San Francisco architect Craig Hudson, a student of their work, who says Dailey's buildings were just a bit more polished and refined than Wurster's.

A Dailey home has an easygoing air, as though it's settled onto the site and let out its belt. There are extra-wide hallways, doors and windows, and windows are unusually tall. Sliding glass and screen doors slide away to turn "rooms" into gardens. Although Dailey's dining rooms can have a formal aspect, his plans call them "garden rooms," and many are, being separate wings surrounded on three sides by walls of windows that open onto the garden.

Dailey began his career as a landscape designer, and on most of his homes collaborated with Thomas Church, the father of modern landscape architecture. "It was so smooth, to watch those guys work together," says Russ Levikow, an associate architect with Dailey in the '50s and '60s. "Both had big egos yet could work together so well."

Dailey loved his details, clean metal or white wood window trim, door pulls with Streamline Moderne "speed lines," and oh-so-simple flush molding. "He was a bearcat about that," Levikow says.

Broad, curving staircases add elegance, with cylindrical metal banisters that could come from an ocean liner. Blond-tinted or natural wood paneling brings warmth to otherwise cool interiors. Despite the occasional outrage, Dailey's homes are rarely confrontational. Todd Blake, who is restoring Dailey's 1937 Ets-Hokin house in Ross, calls his style "non-angry Modernism, if you will."

In a typical home from Dailey's Modern period -- it commenced in 1935 -- "you go in and you go right out again," Levikow says. Across from the entry, you'll often find a garden, a terrace or a hallway that opens completely to the outdoors with the slide of pocket doors. "It's so easy to open the house up," Charles McBurney says of the 1938 home he shares on a Marin hillside with his wife, the photorealist painter Linda Bacon. The home was designed to maximize views of Mount Tamalpais with walls of windows, and glass doors that open onto terraces.

The home, creamy white and sophisticated, with a sunken living room and originally with maid's quarters, is indebted to the chaste International Styles but with sensuous Streamline curves.

Dailey would on occasion play up these Art Deco-ish curves, as in a wonderfully shiplike home in Woodside with a curved prow and an upstairs deck that's clearly a ship's bridge.

Dailey's mature homes also included rambling woodsy structures that, from curbside, can look more standard '50s ranch than "Modern." Bill and Jackie Gomez's long (120 feet) and low home in Woodside, a redwood-planked, shake-roofed, gabled affair from 1939 with the typical Dailey walls of glass onto the garden and a garden-style dining room, is as informally unpretentious as Dailey gets.

After visiting the laid-back Gomez home, it's shocking to drive by Dailey's traditional mansions from a few years earlier, medieval piles with diamond-pane windows, wrought-iron lamps and cornice brackets shaped like angels. But look closely, and you'll see similarities. One immense English "cottage" in Woodside is L-shaped around a wonderful old oak, like so many of Dailey's modern landscapes. And when it was originally built, the home had an outdoor dining area scooped out of the living-dining wing.

It's not clear why Dailey made the switch from traditional to Modern -- or why in 1935 he decided that he could. It didn't hurt his career, which started out strong and never flagged.

"The names in here, it sounds like the social register in San Francisco," says Levikow, flipping through Dailey's project list. They include De Bretteville, Bechtel, Thieriot, Fleishhacker, Ghirardelli, Haas and, in Modesto, Ernest Gallo.

Dailey himself didn't come from money. Born in St. Paul, Minn., he moved to San Francisco as a teenager. During World War I, he won a Purple Heart as an Army Air Corps pilot. On a reconnaissance mission north of Verdun, Dailey flew low through searchlights and anti-aircraft fire, took a hit and was forced to land. His injuries left him blind in the right eye.

After the war he graduated from Stanford, studied engineering and drafting at Heald Business School, and worked as a nurseryman. He never got a degree in architecture. Dailey got his architect's license in 1927, opened his office and within a year was designing a country estate for the prominent speculator Julian Thorne in Woodside. He was 32.

Levikow believes Dailey's outgoing personality led to his quick success, along with an advantageous marriage to the daughter of a well-connected San Francisco lawyer.

"Gardner was a noisy, garrulous Irishman at heart," architect Joseph Esherick recalled in an oral history for the Regional Oral History Office at Bancroft Library in Berkeley. "He was very funny, incredibly funny."

Dailey loved the arts, especially Goya and the Impressionists, collected Asian art, and served on the board of the San Francisco Museum of Art (later Museum of Modern Art) for more than 20 years. He traveled widely, collected exotic plants and was president of the Strybing Arboretum Society, where you can still sit on the Gardner A. Dailey Bench.

"Yet at the same time," a magazine reported in 1946, "he often looks and acts like one of the hard-faced, two-fisted bosses and bricklayers who use his blueprints."

Dailey, a natty dresser, drove a Mercedes and a Lincoln, and lived in an apartment high on Nob Hill, a "redwood box" he designed for himself in Carmel and later a weekend home in Saratoga, Levikow says. Dailey moved in high society circles. Dailey, who never had children, divorced his first wife and remarried. His second wife served as the firm's "house mother" when Levikow worked there.

As a boss, Levikow says, Dailey was affable, "but he could turn it off, too."

"He didn't like people who were pretentious or pushy. He called them 'name drippers,' not droppers."

Unlike Wurster, whose firm became a regional powerhouse, Dailey remained midsize, with never more than three associates. At its height in the 1960s, when Gardner A. Dailey Associates was doing the master plan for UC Davis, buildings for UC Berkeley, Stanford and BART, hotels in Hawaii and a World War II memorial in the Philippines, the firm had about 70 employees.

Levikow says the firm never got bigger than Gardner wanted. "He always said we ran a 'limited practice.' It meant he did work with the people he wanted to work with."

In 1971 Dailey underwent brain surgery for an ailment he never discussed. "For a year he did OK then he slowly seemed to drift away," Levikow says, sitting at Dailey's old desk in his original office, which Levikow uses for his own firm.

"The day he died, that was in the afternoon, I came to see him in the morning. The table here was half full of little bits of keys. He said 'I've got to get it organized.' That afternoon he went off the Golden Gate Bridge."

In the years since his suicide, Dailey has lost much of his fame and many of his buildings. The Red Cross Building, which many regarded as among the best modern buildings in San Francisco, was demolished several years back. In Santa Barbara, neighbors are fighting to preserve Dailey's Coral Casino from what they see as unsympathetic improvements.

Todd Blake, who is restoring the Ets-Hokin house in Ross, can point to two neo-Craftsman homes from his backyard that have recently replaced Dailey homes.

But there are converts, like Tad and Dianne Taube, who own the 1939 De Bretteville estate in Woodside.

When Tad first got a look at it he saw wonderful oaks and land enough for a tennis court. The house itself he saw as a problem. "It's so ugly," he complained to an architect friend. "Can you think of something we can do to make it look better?"

"He said, 'If you want to (mess) up a Gardner Dailey design, get yourself another architect.' "

Taube took another look and fell in love. "What I discovered," Taube says, "was I had stumbled into a real architectural jewel."

Gardner A. Dailey (1895–1967)

Style: Gardner Dailey helped create the "Second Bay Tradition," blending International Style with local vernacular traditions.

Active: Between the late 1920s and 1967, Dailey designed about 200 residences, primarily on the Peninsula and in San Francisco and Marin. He also designed schools, colleges and retail, commercial and office projects.

Other practitioners: William Wurster, John Dinwiddie, Joseph McCarthy and Clarence Mayhew also created modern Bay Tradition houses in the years before World War II. Dailey's office was continued after his death by former associates and operates today as Levikow Associates.

Worth a look: View the Berliner house from the street at 120 Commonwealth Ave., San Francisco. To see Dailey's traditional work, visit the Spanish-style Allied Arts Guild, 75 Arbor Rd., Menlo Park, set to reopen Oct. 1 after repair.

Resources

The Gardner Dailey Archive, including photos by Roger Sturtevant and plans, is at the Environmental Design Archives at UC Berkeley; (510) 642-5124;

www.ced.berkeley.edu/cedarchives/.

Sep 4, 2004

By **Dave Weinstein**

SFGATE

Top ^



About ∨

Contact ∨

Services ∨

Quick Links ∨

HEARST *newspapers* © 2023 Hearst Communications, Inc. [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [CA Notice at Collection](#) |

[Your CA Privacy Rights \(Shine the Light\)](#) | [DAA Industry Opt Out](#)

[Your Privacy Choices \(Opt Out of Sale/Targeted Ads\)](#)