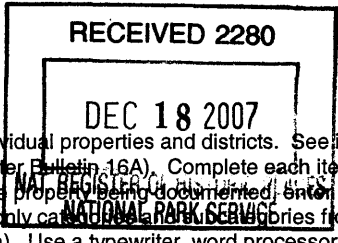


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

1469

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Colombo Building

other names/site number Drexler Building

2. Location

street & number 1-21 Columbus Avenue not for publication N/A

city or town San Francisco vicinity N/A

state California code CA county San Francisco code 075 zip code 94111-2101

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Wanda Wayne Clark 17 DEC 2007
 Signature of certifying official/Title Date
 California Office of Historic Preservation
 State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

 Signature of commenting or other official Date

 State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain): _____

Edson H. Beall 1-31-08
 Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

Colombo Building
Name of Property

San Francisco, California
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/ business

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/ business

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Classical Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete
roof Asphalt
walls Concrete
other Other: cast stone, cement plaster, METAL: sheet metal
STONE: marble

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Colombo Building
Name of Property

San Francisco, California
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

Community Planning and Development

Architecture

Social History

Period of Significance

1913 - 1919

Significant Dates

1913

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Drexler, Elise Abigail

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Architects: Reid Brothers

Builder: McDonald & Kahn

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government - planning department
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

San Francisco Architectural Heritage

Colombo Building
Name of Property

San Francisco, CA
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	10	552620	4183100	3	—	—	—
2	—	—	—	4	—	—	—

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Caitlin Harvey, Architectural Historian, Karen McNeil, Ph.D., Historian

organization Carey & Co., Inc. date October 19, 2007

street & number 460 Bush Street telephone (415) 733-0773

city or town San Francisco state CA zip code 94108

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets = 31

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

Name City College of San Francisco

street & number 50 Phelan Ave. S142 telephone (415) 239-3750

city or town San Francisco state CA zip code 94112

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Section number 7 Page 1

Colombo Building
San Francisco, CA.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

SUMMARY

The Colombo Building, designed by master architects James and Merritt Reid, is a two-story commercial structure built in 1913 for financier Elise Drexler. The triangular plan results from its gore lot at the forty degree intersection of Columbus Avenue and Washington Street in San Francisco's North Beach/Chinatown neighborhood. The street-facing facades on the Classical Revival style structure have an organized and symmetrical composition, with continuous rows of storefronts at the first story. The structural frame is reinforced concrete and the exterior is partially clad with ashlar-scored cement plaster. The interior divides into relatively uniform retail spaces on the first floor, with offices above. Wood and plaster comprise the majority of the interior finishes with simple, but refined detailing. Various alterations have been made to the building and do not overly compromise the building's high level of physical integrity.

SITE

The Colombo Building occupies a triangular parcel (Block 195 Lot 4) at 1-21 Columbus Ave. and 612-624 Washington Street in San Francisco, on the southeast side of a block bounded by Columbus (northeast), Washington (south), and Kearny (west). The building's northeast and south façades abut the sidewalk, while a small vacant lot and Ils Lane separate the northwest and west façade from similarly-scaled structures beyond.

BUILDING

Structure

The Colombo Building is a two-story plus basement structure built in 1913. The structural frame is reinforced concrete. The rear walls are exposed form-board concrete, while the street facing facades are clad with ashlar-scored cement plaster. The roof is tar and gravel with six skylights. Storefronts are cast iron and original second story windows are one-over-one awning wood sash.

Plan

The building covers most of the forty degree triangular shaped lot, the exception is the point at the intersection of Columbus and Washington, as the building gore is semi-circular. The 27,207 square foot structure has two full stories with a basement.

The basement is larger in plan than the footprint of the building itself, as it extends beneath the sidewalks on the northeast and south sides. At one time, sidewalk lights lit an extension of basement space under the front sidewalk. City permit records indicate these were removed in 1977. The basement serves as an underground parking garage with vehicular access from a concrete ramp on the Washington Street (south) elevation.

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Colombo Building
San Francisco, CA.

On the ground floor, demising walls behind the columns on the commercial storefronts form one retail space per structural bay. The intermediate partition that originally created two shops per bay has been removed in all but the northernmost Columbus Avenue storefront. The nine current shops are primarily deep narrow spaces along the northeast elevation, and shallower storefronts at the gore and south elevation. Some retail spaces include a rear mezzanine.

At the second floor, a double-loaded corridor parallels the triangular plan of the building. The offices on either side of the corridor are generally of a uniform size, with two offices per structural bay. A larger single office occupies the gore. While external offices have street-facing windows, most internal spaces face a central light well.

Architecture

Exterior

The Colombo building is a Classical Revival style commercial structure. The exterior walls of the street-facing facades are clad in ashlar-scored cement plaster, giving the appearance of masonry. They are embellished with engaged fluted Ionic columns and pilasters at the ground floor, with simpler flat Tuscan pilasters above. A classical entablature separates the first and second stories, while a smaller, simpler one separates the second level from the parapet. Both entablatures are articulated with dentils and include a cast plaster architrave and frieze surmounted by a sheet metal cornice. Only the lower entablature features modillions.

The engaged columns and pilasters divide each façade into structural bays corresponding to the interior spatial organization. Between the ground floor columns are prismatic glass clerestory windows above cast iron storefronts. A pair of glazed, wood doors is centered on each bay. At the second floor, one-over-one awning wood sashes create the appearance of double-hung windows. In general, there are two windows per bay, with one per bay at the gore.

The rounded gore at the forty degree intersection of Washington and Columbus, is the focal point of the building's architecture. It possesses the same decorative features as the other elevations, although in a more concentrated arrangement. Five narrow bays comprise the corner, separated at the first story by engaged Ionic columns. The five second-story windows curve slightly to correspond with the radius of the wall. On the ground floor, the center bay at the tip of the gore and the two Washington Street bays have been infilled with stucco and/or glass block.

The northeast elevation, facing Columbus Avenue, has six storefront bays at the first story, with twelve windows above. The base course is green marble veneer. At the narrower end bay, a pair of glazed wood doors, with a transom above, leads to the second-story entrance lobby.

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Colombo Building
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The south elevation, facing Washington Street, is similar but secondary to the Columbus elevation. This is apparent in the simplification of architectural detailing on the lower level. The flat pilasters separating the four cast iron storefronts lack decorative capitals, fluting, or marble plinths, which puts them in stark contrast to the classical engaged columns of the gore and the northeast façade. At the storefront level, proceeding west from the gore, the first bay is infilled; the clerestory windows remain above. The next bay retains its original storefront. A simple, central column bisects the next storefront bay; a three-panel storefront occupies the eastern half, while the entrance to the basement parking garage, added in 1924, occupies the western half. A non-original blade sign reads "PARK." The narrower end bay at the southwestern corner is similar to the northern bay on Columbus: a pair of glazed wood doors, with transom above, accesses stairs to the second floor and basement. The majority of the windows at the second story level are non-original aluminum, incorporating both fixed and casement sash. The one remaining wood window is adjacent to the gore.

The west elevation, which once abutted a neighboring building, is a horizontal board-formed concrete wall. Vertical wood furring strips stretch from the ground to the roof. There are no windows or other architectural features on this elevation. Metal ducts attach to the center of the wall. The narrow north elevation was similarly intended to abut a neighboring building, and therefore has an unfinished, board-formed concrete surface. Billboards are now affixed to this elevation.

The building has a flat tar and gravel roof behind a capped parapet. Six skylights pierce the roof and a trapezoidal light well, near the center of the roof, descends one story to a skylight over the first floor. The walls of the light well have a rough, board-formed concrete surface. Wood awing windows within the light well are similar to, but narrower than, the façade windows.

Interior

The basement parking garage is reinforced concrete, the exposed structural frame of the building. Four-panel wood doors access two sets of concrete stairs at the southwest and north corners. A boiler room is next to the southwest corner stair, and an attendant's booth is adjacent to the vehicular access ramp.

The ground floor retail interior finishes typically consist of concrete floors, and plaster ceilings and walls with wood picture rails and baseboards. Common elements of the shop interiors include remains of paneled wood above, and tile below what was once an inset entry. Most have a toilet room at the rear. In some cases, non-original partitions at the rear separate the restroom and back area from the more public space. Some shops have rear mezzanines or suspended ceilings. A room beneath the light well near the center of the building now acts as a kitchen associated with one of the retail spaces.

The entry lobbies at the southwest and north corners have terrazzo floors, marble wainscoting, and plaster walls and ceilings. Stairs leading to the second floor have marble risers, treads and wainscoting with wood handrails on brass brackets.

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At the second floor, a skylight illuminates the upper landing of the primary, north stairwell. The double-loaded corridor has plaster walls and ceilings, and a terrazzo floor with marble baseboards. A thin synthetic veneer panel covers the original wood wainscot. Wood trimmed clerestories run in a continuous band at door-head height, with transoms above each door. Wood doors are faux-grain finished, with two solid horizontal lower panels and textured obscure glazing in the upper half. Plaster finished structural beams cross the corridor at regular intervals.

The offices are linked internally by wood panel doors. Party walls are plaster with wood baseboards, and wood trim at the clerestories. Wood lavatory cabinets with double, paneled doors remain in the corner of ten offices. Elaborate cast iron radiators heat each office. Five internal offices surround the central light well. The three internal offices not adjacent to the lightwell (two at the southwest corner, and one large assembly space near the north corner) are lit by skylights. Two restrooms occupy the southeast corner on the internal side of the corridor. Both have original terrazzo floors, plaster walls marble wainscot and stalls. Each is illuminated by skylights. The men's restroom includes two toilets, a urinal and a sink; the women's has one toilet and a sink.

ALTERATIONS

Changes include the alteration of storefront assemblies. The most ubiquitous change was the repositioning of storefront doors, which, according to building permits, happened at multiple points throughout the building's early history (1917, 1919, 1920 and 1944). Originally inset, most are now flush with the storefronts. Also common was the removal or covering of the clerestory windows to provide a solid wall surface for signage. Overall, only two of the eight original storefronts remain entirely intact. At least six original wood doors remain. Fourteen of the original prismatic glass clerestory windows remain. One storefront bay was entirely infilled, while another was replaced with a moderne storefront in 1948. The recessed, glazed tile-clad wall has chrome-framed openings, including an angled, horizontal strip show window and a glazed door. A flagstone planter with a thin wrought iron railing stands in front of the window. Half of one storefront bay was demolished in 1924 to create the ramped entry to the parking garage. At the second story, the majority of the original wood awning windows remains on Columbus Ave; however, on the Washington Street elevation all but the window adjacent to the gore have been replaced with aluminum units.

At the gore, three of five bays, including an entry, were infilled, two with glass block. These alterations were made in 1949.

Originally, sidewalk lights penetrated the concrete pavement on Washington Street and Columbus Avenue, and two sidewalk elevators on Columbus Avenue provided direct freight access to the basement. All were removed in 1977 during a street widening project.

At the first-floor level, interior alterations include the removal of eight original partition walls. One was replaced with modern materials, creating nine shops from the original sixteen. These alterations appear to have occurred throughout the building's history, but primarily within the historic period, in 1916 and

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1917, as well as in 1942 and 1948. The additions of mezzanines (one in 1932) and some rear partitions have also altered the layout of certain shops. Some interior finishes have been replaced. A light well, which originally descended to a skylight over the basement, was infilled above the first floor, creating a room now used as a kitchen.

On the second floor, four plaster partitions with wood doors between offices have been removed, one of which was later rebuilt with gypsum board. In 1965, partitions separating two offices flanking the gore office were removed to create a large open office. This change eliminated a small secondary hall branching off from the main corridor. In conjunction with the removal of partitions throughout the second floor, eight of the original eighteen lavatory closets were removed.

The Colombo Building retains a relatively high level of physical integrity. Most of the alterations occurred sixty to ninety years ago and have gained significance in their own right. For example, the basement garage, added in 1924, has been an integral part of the building for the majority of its history. Those alterations which are not historic are primarily cosmetic, including the installation of awnings and signs, a bathroom remodel, and the installation of a kitchen vent hood. The only non-historic alterations that could be considered relatively major have been the removal of partition walls, storefronts, windows and prismatic glass. Most alterations are reversible, particularly since original plans are available for reference.

SETTING

The Old Transamerica Building stands across Columbus Avenue. Also known as the Fugazi Bank building, it demonstrates a scale, plan and style similar to the Colombo Building. Constructed in 1909 and designed by Charles Paff, it is San Francisco Historic Landmark No. 52. This Classical Revival white terra cotta-clad building was originally two stories with a cupola at the gore, but a third story was later added. The Fugazi Bank was an obvious reference-point for the Reid Brothers' Colombo Building design.

With mirroring gores, the Colombo and Fugazi Bank buildings form a gateway between the Financial District and North Beach. Buildings to the north are small scale, in contrast to the large high-rise office buildings of the Financial District rising to the south. In particular, the Transamerica Pyramid stands on the corner diagonally across from the Colombo Building. The Colombo Building is also adjacent to the western boundary of the Jackson Square National Register Historic District. The visual connection between the Colombo Building and the Fugazi Bank building reinforces its ties to the district.

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Colombo Building
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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Colombo Building is nominated under National Register Criteria B, for its intimate relationship to the biography of Elise A. Drexler (1866-1951), with a period of significance from 1913 to 1919, the year of construction to the year that Drexler dispensed with the property. A wealthy widow, prominent philanthropist, and significant property owner in San Francisco, Elise Drexler quietly undermined prescribed gender roles for women during the Progressive Era. As a philanthropist, she worked entirely outside the club system, which was highly unusual for a woman of her stature. As a property owner and landlady, she distinguished herself by helping to launch one of the most powerful banking corporations in the country, the Bank of America; she provided its first rental space in the building that used to stand on the Colombo property. Even more unusual was Drexler's foray into the world of large-scale property development following the earthquake and fires of 1906. A lawsuit related to three properties, including the property on which the Colombo Building stands, ultimately released Drexler from peculiar restrictions of her husband's will and, in the process, helped free women from the limitations of biological determinism. Before the State Supreme Court's 1916 decision, however, Drexler could not sell the disputed properties. Instead, in 1913, she commissioned master architects James and Merritt Reid to design the Colombo Building and a building for one of the other disputed properties. Whether or not the latter building was ever executed or if the third disputed property was developed is unclear; regardless, they gave way to the Embarcadero Center and no longer exist. The Colombo Building is the only surviving artifact in a defining moment of Elise Drexler's path towards independent womanhood, during this period of over all expansion in women's rights.

Elise Drexler's early biography reads like that of many other affluent women in late nineteenth-century California. She was born Elise Abigail Kelley in Mendocino, California, in 1866. Her parents were Elizabeth Lee Alice Owen and William Henry Kelley, who came to California in 1852 and made his fortune in the logging and lumber industry. Both parents hailed from Prince Edward Island, Canada. Elise attended Mills College and Seminary, located five miles outside of Oakland. Although it touted itself as the first women's college west of the Mississippi, Mills College functioned more as a finishing school than rigorous academic institution before the twentieth century. Elise Kelley shared the experience of higher education with less than 2% of women in the entire country, but like most women who did attend college during the 1880s, Elise Kelley did not pursue a career after graduation.¹ Around this time an aunt introduced the young Elise to San Francisco high society, establishing her status among the wealthy elite and, likely, resulting in her introduction to Louis P. Drexler, a man twice her age. Having established himself in San Francisco in 1881, Drexler's investments consisted of real estate throughout California, both in San Francisco and in rural areas of Tulare, Colusa and Yolo counties. He also had mining, banking and industrial interests. He was president of the California Jute Mill, director of the Giant Powder Company, and director of the Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Company.² Elise Kelley married Louis P. Drexler in 1893. Their marriage lasted six years.

¹ Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven, 1985), 62-77, 115-140.

² Platt, et al.

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On August 17, 1899, Louis P. Drexler died and left to his wife the entirety of his \$2.5 million estate (the equivalent to more than \$58 million in 2006). This included mining interests in Nevada, quartz mills, cattle interests, the Fresno Vineyard Company, and significant real estate investments. Of all the property – real and otherwise – that Drexler bequeathed to his wife, he singled out three parcels and their buildings in San Francisco that he forbade her to sell under any circumstances. These included a parcel at the northeast corner of Front and Clay Streets; a parcel at the southeast corner of Front and Commercial Streets; and a parcel at the gore corner where Washington Street and Columbus Avenue meet. This clause was designed essentially to create a trust for the children of Louis P. Drexler and/or his wife. The three properties were some of the most valuable land that Drexler owned in San Francisco and could yield a significant fortune to whoever inherited them. By restraining Elise Drexler from selling them, Louis P. Drexler protected that fortune from being compromised.

The underlying principle of this clause was Louis P. Drexler's assumption that his wife would follow the conventional path for women during that era. Though their marriage did not produce offspring, Elise Drexler was just thirty-three years old when her husband died and had several child-bearing years left. Even in death, Louis P. Drexler placed restrictions on his wife's future by her potential to be a mother. After her husband's death, however, Elise A. Drexler did not follow the conventional path of late-Victorian womanhood; instead, her biography resembled that of a New Woman of the Progressive Era.

In many ways, Elise Drexler's biography after the death of husband typified that of the Progressive woman of San Francisco. She involved herself in the same type of moral and charitable causes that helped draw so many middle- and upper-class women out of the house. A teetotaler, Elise Drexler banned the sale of alcohol on all of her properties in 1901, including on those properties she inherited from her husband.³ The plight of Russian Jews captured her attention in 1905, when she contributed \$500 on behalf of their relief.⁴ Drexler devoted the most time and money to health-related issues. She first donated money to the University of California hospital toward the creation of a "Diet Kitchen," which was devoted to the study of nutrition. Following the earthquake and fires, the University of California determined that it needed to build new facilities. When it finally embarked on a building campaign in 1913, Elise Drexler donated over \$125,000 to the construction of a children's wing, with the stipulation that at least twenty beds always be absolutely free to those unable to pay hospital fees. Over the next decade she also donated funds towards the endowment of beds for cancer patients. All told, Drexler donated over twenty percent of the funds necessary to build the new University of California Hospital on

³ "No Liquor May be Sold in Building Owned by Her," *San Francisco Call*, March 28, 1901, p. 12.

⁴ A succession of autocratic czars in late nineteenth-century Russia led to widespread discontent, eventually culminating in a short-lived and unsuccessful bloody revolution in 1905. Throughout this period Jews comprised one of the most oppressed groups in czarist Russia, and they disproportionately fell victim to the government's bloody massacre of rebellious factions during the 1905 revolution. "More Money Collected to Aid the Suffering Jews," *San Francisco Call*, November 26, 1905, p. 36; "The Russian Revolution of 1905," <http://mars.wnec.edu/~grempel/courses/wc2/lectures/rev1905.html>, accessed October 9, 2007.

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Colombo Building
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Potrero Avenue. She endowed a second children's hospital in Palo Alto in 1919. The Stanford Home for Convalescent Children has evolved into the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford University.⁵

Causes like these were common among activist women during the Progressive Era. From the late nineteenth century onward, women in San Francisco, the Bay Area, California, and nationally, devoted their energies to the creation of various moral and social welfare issues. Among the causes they advocated were childhood education, health and safety issues, temperance, and sanitation. Their activities helped establish new schools, orphanages, playgrounds, hospitals, and retirement facilities, not to mention child welfare, labor, and safety laws. Historians have presented a variety of related reasons for women's devotion to these causes: Men and women understood the consequences of rapid urban growth differently; where men concerned themselves largely with finances, women took care of people. Educated women sought an outlet for their intellectual energy in a society that did not yet provide career opportunities for them. The charitable causes women pursued and which put them in the public sphere could be rationalized and accepted as an extension of women's natural maternal instincts. As women transformed the social health and welfare of the people, they bolstered arguments in support of suffrage and rights to full citizenship. Whatever their motivations, the activities of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century resulted in the creation of a charitable landscape, or the urban footprint on which schools, hospitals, and other facilities like those mentioned above continue to be built today.⁶

Where Elise Drexler differed from most of her activist contemporaries is that she worked outside of the club system, or "organized womanhood." A 1922 directory entitled *Who's Who Among the Women of California* listed nearly 800 clubs and institutions to which women belonged. These included everything from social and literary clubs, to business and professional associations, educational organizations, and charities. While the first meeting of the California Woman Suffrage Society dates to 1871 and the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the primary advocate for prohibition in the United States, established a California chapter in 1880, San Francisco's own club movement began in earnest in the 1880s and flourished until the Great Depression. Combined, the thousands of women who belonged to these institutions, including many middle-class women and women of wealth similar to Elise Drexler's, were largely responsible for building the charitable landscape mentioned above. Drexler was not a member of any other these groups; nonetheless her influence could be felt in significant ways. She did not

⁵ Correspondence between Elise A. Drexler and various people affiliated with the University of California, 1909-1924, University Archives, Office of the President, series 1, box 45, folder 37, and series 3, box 35, folder 14, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; *A History of the UCSF School of Medicine*, <http://history.library.ucsf.edu/chapter2/>, accessed October 9, 2007; *Drexler v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue*, 25 B.T.A. 79; 1932 BTA.

⁶ The historiography of women in the Progressive Era is enormous. See, for example, Maureen A. Flanagan, *Seeing with their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871-1933* (Princeton, 2002); Marta Ruth Gutman, "On the Ground in Oakland: Women and Institution Building in an Industrial City," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000); "Gayle Gullet, *Becoming Citizens: The Emergence and Development of the California's Women's Movement, 1880-1911* (Chicago, 2000); Karen McNeill, "Building the California Women's Movement: Architecture, Space, and Gender in the Life and Work of Julia Morgan," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006); Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*.

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Colombo Building
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belong to the Women's Christian Temperance Union or the Children's Hospital of San Francisco. She simply prohibited alcohol from being sold on her property, which made news in San Francisco, and funded the construction of the children's wing and free beds at the University of California Hospital. Only during World War I did Elise Drexler finally join an official organization. By that time, however, the impact of her moral crusading and charitable donations on the people of San Francisco had been well established.⁷

Elise Drexler also owned property in San Francisco. She purchased her first property as early as 1890, at the age of twenty-four. Newspaper reports and property records indicate that she bought and sold property on a regular basis from that point forward; she engaged in at least fourteen real estate transactions between 1901 and 1906 alone.

These records do not, however, indicate that Elise Drexler engaged in building on these properties. Instead, she acted as landlady. Most notably, Elise Drexler collected rents from tenants who occupied the building at the corner of Columbus and Washington, a property Louis P. Drexler owned as early as 1894.⁸ An image of the building's plan appears on an 1899 Sanborn Map and shows a three-story building that appears to have housed five shops, an office and a saloon, with lodgings on the upper floors. One of the businesses located there was the Columbus Savings and Loan Society (Banca de Colombo) at 614 Washington Street, founded in 1893 by John F. Fugazi. It was the first bank to be established in North Beach and possessed one of the few safes in the area. Fugazi was an extremely influential member of the Italian-American community in North Beach, and the bank was established across the street from Fugazi's White Star Line travel agency.⁹

After serving as director for some time, Amadeo P. Giannini left the Columbus Savings and Loan Society in 1904 to establish his own financial institution, the Bank of Italy (known as the Bank of America after 1929). In a move that vexed the Columbus Savings and Loan Society, Elise Drexler all but sold the building at the Washington-Columbus gore to A. P. Giannini; the indentured lease contract established Giannini's right to sublet the property and collect rent from the subtenants. He could also remodel the building, with approval of plans by Drexler or her representative, and she demanded that he maintain the roof and exterior.¹⁰ As historian Gerald Nash has stated, "The directors of the Columbus Savings and Loan Association suddenly found that A.P. was their new landlord and that he was opening a competing

⁷ Michael Corbett, "Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco: Nomination for the National Register of Historic Places," (United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, July 2004), 22-25; Philip Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (Berkeley, 1994), 209-217, 345-407; Gullet, *Becoming Citizens*; Gutman, "On the Ground in Oakland," McNeill, "Building the California Women's Movement;" Josephine Wilson, *Who's Who Among the Women of California* (San Francisco, 1922), 219-226.

⁸ Handy Block Book of San Francisco (San Francisco, 1894).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Indenture of Lease, June 4, 1904; Marcel E. Cerf to tenants of Drexler Building [1904], undated memos re transfer of rights to A. P. Giannini; Marcel E. Cerf to A. P. Giannini, [1904], Box 34, Marcel E. Cerf Papers, 1860-1916, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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bank on the same site as theirs.”¹¹ The Savings and Loan took legal action to try to stop the lease arrangements, but the Bank of Italy was successfully established in the Drexler Building. Giannini reputedly liked the location because it was near the city jail and thus many police officers. An article in the *San Francisco Call* reported that “the bank has leased quarters at the northwest corner of Montgomery Avenue and Washington Street. They will be remodeled and opened for business early in September.”¹² A later *Call* article reports that remodeling consisted of alterations and additions made to the building by contractors W.T. Veitch & Brother and architects Wright & Polk for \$5,295.¹³

The Bank of Italy was opened on October 17, 1904 as a savings and commercial bank. Through its now-familiar branch system, the Giannini’s institution was revolutionary for catering to the particular needs of nearby residents, instead of focusing exclusively on corporations and wealthy patrons, as did more traditional banks.¹⁴ Giannini also instituted new practices in advertising, attracting customers from rural areas and from poorer demographic groups. He gave loans for real estate investments that helped develop the North Beach area, and was willing to grant personal loans in much smaller denominations than were other banks. In this way, the Bank of Italy gained great favor among the local immigrant and working class community and the bank expanded exponentially.¹⁵ The Bank of Italy stood at the corner of Columbus Avenue and Washington Street until 1906, when the Drexler Building burned to the ground. As per a clause in the indentured lease contract that pertained to disasters, Elise Drexler decided not to continue the lease agreement with Giannini.¹⁶ While Giannini’s relationship with Elise Drexler ended at this point, she was an influential party in providing a first home to what would become one of the largest banking institutions in the United States.

The 1906 earthquake and fires propelled Elise A. Drexler into a most unusual role for a woman: that of property developer and capitalist. On April 16, 1906 Elise Drexler acquired the deed for a property on Mason Street near Turk. Two days later, a catastrophic earthquake followed by three days of fires devastated most of San Francisco, including most of the buildings on property that Elise Drexler owned as well as the building that housed the Bank of Italy. By the end of the year Elise Drexler donned the new hat of property developer; she had submitted a permit to build on Market Street a seven-story, reinforced concrete commercial structure designed by the Reid Brothers, one of San Francisco’s preeminent architectural firms. Drexler commissioned the Reid Brothers to design two more commercial structures in 1907, one on Market Street and one on New Montgomery.

By choosing the Reid Brothers as her architects, Elise Drexler dedicated herself to rebuilding San Francisco in world-class fashion. Prominent San Francisco architects from 1889 to 1932, the Reid Brothers were one of the most renowned architecture firms in the city during the Progressive Era. The

¹¹ Gerald D. Nash, *A. P. Giannini and the Bank of America* (Norman, OK, 1992), 28.

¹² “Bank of Italy Organizes,” *San Francisco Call*, August 14, 1904, p. 39.

¹³ “Builder’s Contracts,” *San Francisco Call*, September 10, 1904, p. 12.

¹⁴ Marquis and Bessie R. James, *Biography of a Bank: the Story of Bank of America NT & SA* (New York, 1954).

¹⁵ Nash, *A. P. Giannini*.

¹⁶ Indenture of Lease, Marcel E. Cerf Papers.

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Canadian-born brothers practiced architecture in Evansville, Indiana before coming to California. James W. Reid, the elder of the two brothers, was born in 1851 in St. John, New Brunswick and studied architecture at both the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.¹⁷ He came to California in 1888 to design the Hotel del Coronado in San Diego, now a National Historic Landmark (listed 1977).¹⁸ In the late 1880s, James' brother Merritt relocated to San Francisco and, after the completion of the Hotel del Coronado, was joined by James. Their joint architecture practice assumed a path towards becoming an influential West Coast firm. It ceased operation in 1932 following Merritt Reid's death.¹⁹

The Reid brothers undertook projects in major cities along the West Coast, including Portland, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and other Bay Area cities. They were known for designing hotels, office buildings, churches, houses and theaters and were in high demand to build a variety of structures throughout the city, particularly after the completion of San Francisco Call Building (1898), which some critics lauded as the "first successful solution of a modern skyscraper." Most of their works were quite prominent when they were built and merited feature articles in *Architect and Engineer* in October 1908 and November 1910. These articles note that the brothers were renowned not only on the West Coast, but nationally and internationally as well. London Council and the government of New Zealand, for example, commissioned the Reid Brothers to design municipal buildings, resulting in a municipal building in London and a building for the Public Transit Department in Wellington.²⁰ Already established as one of the most prestigious firms in the city before 1906, the rebuilding of San Francisco catapulted the Reid Brothers to new heights. They went on to design many other civic, commercial, and residential buildings that stand as San Francisco landmarks.²¹ With her first three post-earthquake commissions, Elise Drexler

¹⁷ U.S. Federal Census records.

¹⁸ The physical construction of the Hotel del Coronado was overseen by a third brother, Watson Reid.

¹⁹ Platt, et al.

²⁰ *Architect & Engineer* magazine, Nov. 1910.

²¹ The Reid Brothers also designed residences for some of San Francisco's elite. They created a French Chateau for industrialist and sugar baron Claus Spreckles and remodeled it after it was damaged in the 1906 Earthquake and Fire. They also designed a Georgian Mansion for Claus Spreckles' eldest son, John D. Spreckles and an Italian Renaissance style home for sugar baron William G. Irwin. Their civic and commercial works include such well-known structures as the 1906 Fairmont Hotel (San Francisco Landmark No. 185), the 1901 Geneva Car Barn (San Francisco Landmark No. 180), the 1899 Spreckles Temple of Music in Golden Gate Park, and the 1909 version of the repeatedly reconstructed Cliff House. The Reid Brothers also designed many buildings in downtown San Francisco, including the 1914 Call Building, the 1913 First Congressional Church, the 1923 Fitzhugh Building on Union Square (now demolished), two Hale Brothers buildings dating to 1902/1907 and 1912, and the 1908 Rose Building. All of these buildings are given the highest ranking of "A" in *Splendid Survivors*, a book publishing the results of a Downtown survey conducted by San Francisco Architectural Heritage. The "A" ranking denotes buildings that are of "highest importance," being "individually the most important buildings in San Francisco, distinguished by outstanding qualities of architecture, historical values and relationship to the environment. All A-group buildings are considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and are of highest priority for San Francisco landmark status." Most of these buildings are also rated as Category I buildings in the Downtown Plan (Article 11 of the Planning Code of the City and County of San Francisco). This means that such buildings are considered significant for their individual importance and are rated "excellent" in architectural design or rated "very

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helped propel the Reid Brothers into the most important phase of their career, one that contributed significantly to the architectural landscape that defines San Francisco today.

Drexler's foray into the world of commercial real estate development compelled her to attach a new moniker to her name. Beginning in 1907, she listed herself in the City Directory and in the Federal Census as a capitalist. This title, which she claimed for over thirty years, set Elise Drexler apart from the vast majority of women, for it implied a conscious effort to increase her already substantial wealth and to engage in a level of investment and return that most people, particularly women of her own social background, would consider the appropriate domain of men only. The first three buildings she commissioned after the earthquake, for example, cost between \$11 thousand and \$80 thousand to build (the equivalent of between \$200 thousand and \$1.7 million in 2006, without taking into account impact of inflation on labor and materials).²² Other wealthy women, most notably Phoebe Apperson Hearst, widow of mining magnate George Hearst and mother to media mogul William Randolph Hearst, invested as much money in building programs, but they tended to serve philanthropic purposes – the construction of university buildings, orphanages, schools, or women's clubs. As noted, Elise Drexler engaged in philanthropy. She also built houses. But her first post-earthquake buildings offered large retail spaces to purely commercial enterprises. Sterling Furniture Company sold household furnishings, Brittain & Co. sold household and sporting goods, and Standard Building Company was a construction firm.²³

To put Elise Drexler's singular status as a capitalist and property developer into perspective, it is worth comparing her to the normative context for female businesswomen. The California constitution of 1849 set a precedent for liberal property rights of women by protecting women's rights to property acquired before and after marriage. After 1852, a married woman could register as a "sole trader," which protected her right to profits she earned independently of her husband. Once the government repealed the registration requirement in 1870, a woman could freely pursue her capitalist enterprises independently of her husband. Though the law offered equal economic protection and property rights, California women tended to adhere to Victorian mores of ownership and capitalist pursuits. The thousands of women who owned businesses in San Francisco usually owned small businesses that reflected preconceived notions of gender – flower shops, small restaurants, dressmakers, laundries, boarding houses, and hair dressers – and rarely lasted for more than ten years, if that long. Women built too. They built thousands of houses, which linked them to the domestic sphere and mitigated any threat of impropriety. After 1900, clubwomen constructed substantial buildings that often required public campaigns to raise funds. In San Francisco, these collaborative efforts eventually resulted in a club district located near the heart of the downtown retail center. Chambers of Commerce provided the most common avenue for California women of the

good" in architectural design and relationship to their environment. Alexander, James Beach and James Lee Heig, *San Francisco: Building the Dream City*. San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 2002; Platt, et al; San Francisco Planning Department, San Francisco Preservation Bulletin No. 11: Historic Resource Surveys, 2003; Exceptions apply to the Fitzhugh Building, which was demolished before the Downtown Plan was adopted, and the Hale Brothers Building at 979-989 Market Street, which is listed as a Category II building.

²² *San Francisco Call*, March 20, 1904, p. 33; *ibid.*, February 21, 1907, p. 10; *ibid.*, April 25, 1907, p. 11; The Inflation Calculator, <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/>, accessed October 9, 2007.

²³ *Crocker-Langley's San Francisco Directory* (1907 and 1918).

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middle and upper classes to voice their opinions and influence the physical and commercial development of cities. It held the advantage of shielding women from public scrutiny and risky business ventures. This situation changed only gradually before World War II.²⁴ Within this context, Elise Drexler's role as a female proprietor, business woman, and property developer distinguishes itself as highly unusual and another way in which she quietly subverted normative gender roles.

The location of Elise Drexler's office reinforced her status as a prominent San Francisco business woman. Although women populated the downtown district in large numbers, they did so within discreet boundaries and according to unspoken rules of propriety. By the early twentieth century, the retail center of downtown was largely imagined as a feminine space, while the financial center was imagined as a masculine space. Of course, women did enter the financial district, but their roles were usually limited to secondary pink collar jobs as typists, clerks, and secretaries. Elise Drexler defied these norms. She maintained an office first in the Claus Spreckels/ *Call* Building on Market Street at the southwest corner of Third Street, and later in the Kohl Building at the northeast corner of Montgomery and California Streets. Both of these buildings were early icons of the San Francisco cityscape and symbols of power. James and Merrit Reid designed the Spreckels Building in 1898 to house the headquarters of the *San Francisco Call*. It was designed to compete with the nearby towers of the *Chronicle* and *Examiner*, and at nineteen stories and topped with a baroque dome, it rose well above every other building in the city and set a new standard of beauty for the city's skyscrapers.²⁵ Though damaged by fire, the *Call* building survived the 1906 earthquake, which served to reinforce its status as a symbol of power and prestige. Drexler moved to the Kohl Building in 1914. Willis Polk, another giant among San Francisco's architects, had designed this landmark in 1901 during his short-lived partnership with George Washington Percy. Celebrated as a model for the "correct" use of Baroque and Romanesque ornamentation when it was built, the Kohl Building gained fame as one of the fire "fireproof" steel frame skyscrapers when the fires following the earthquake of 1906 damaged only the first four floors of the building. Both of these buildings were located in the financial district, with the Kohl Building standing at its very heart. Unlike other women who entered and departed that building everyday as pink collar workers, Elise Drexler occupied the space as an independent financier in a primary position of wealth and power. She maintained an office in the Kohl building until 1939, when she was seventy-three years old and apparently ready to retire from the business world.²⁶

²⁴ See Corbett, "Woman's Athletic Club," 22-25; Gutman, "On the Ground in Oakland;" McNeill, "Building the California Women's Movement," 158-197; Edith Sparks, *Capital Intentions: Female Proprietors in San Francisco, 1850-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006); Lee M. A. Simpson, *Selling the City: Gender, Class, and the California Growth Machine, 1880-1940* (Stanford, 2004).

²⁵ Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley, 1999), 177-179; Michael R. Corbett, *Splendid Survivors: San Francisco's Downtown Architectural Heritage* (San Francisco, 1979), 85.

²⁶ Corbett, *Splendid Survivors*, 207-208; Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870-1930* (Baltimore, 1994), 94-128; Karen McNeill, "Julia Morgan: Gender, Architecture, and Professional Style," *Pacific Historical Review* 76 (May 2007), 260-262; *San Francisco City Directory* (1907-1939); Jessica Sewell, "Sidewalks and Store Windows as Political Landscapes," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 9 (2003), 85-98.

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Elise Drexler's second phase of post-earthquake property development landed in her the California State Supreme Court and forced her into an unexpectedly public role as an advocate for the rights of childless women. In 1909 she commissioned the Reid Brothers to design two more commercial buildings: one at the gore of Columbus Avenue and Washington Street, and one at the northeast corner of Clay and Front Streets. The building at the Washington-Columbus gore was to be a three-story, class C building clad in white glazed brick containing twelve stores with offices above.²⁷ A permit to fence the lot was filed in 1910 and a Sanborn map dating to 1913 shows the parcel partially developed, with a small, one-story building at the southeast corner of the lot. This building contained two shops and an office (1-9 Columbus Avenue), with a floor plan closely resembling that of the current Colombo Building's first floor at the gore. Another small shop stood within the subject parcel farther down Columbus Avenue (29 Columbus Avenue). Advertisements indicate that the Zapettini & Perasso travel agency and the Italian-American Real Estate Co. were located in the building in April of 1910.

In February of 1910, Drexler agreed to sell the two properties mentioned above, along with a third property at the southeast corner of Front and Commercial Streets, to the Washington Development Company for \$225 thousand (the equivalent of nearly \$5 million in 2006). The California Title Insurance Company, however, would not issue a policy of title insurance upon seeing the clause in Louis P. Drexler's will that forbade Elise Drexler from selling these three properties. Drexler and the Washington Development Company agreed to enter into a contract anyway. The development company would then demur, citing problems with the title, and Drexler would sue, arguing that she was acting within her rights as owner of the properties in question. Once the courts cleared the title, Drexler would be able to sell the properties. Marcel Cerf, Drexler's lawyer and future justice of the California Supreme Court, was certain that this process would be straight-forward, for the decree of distribution – the legally binding document in the execution of a will – declared Drexler sole proprietor of the estate.²⁸ He was wrong. A local judge sided against Drexler in 1913, concluding that “no widow may sell property in which she has but a life interest.”²⁹ This judgment changed the rhetoric of the debate and turned the supposedly simple case into a six-year ordeal.

One person at the lower court hearing complained that Louis P. Drexler's attempt to bar his wife from dispersing with the properties in question was unfair.³⁰ Elise Drexler and Marcel Cerf agreed and took their case to the State Supreme Court. Cerf presented two arguments for clean title to the Court: Louis Drexler did indeed forbid Elise Drexler from selling the properties, a restraint of alienation that was intended to create a trust for his and/or his wife's children that could not be violated. Since Louis P. and Elise Drexler did not have children and, by 1910, it was clear that the now forty-four year old woman would never have children, the property rights of future title holders would not be violated. No intended heirs existed and a woman's theoretical potential to bear children should not define her right to dispense

²⁷ “New Building Projected,” 3 October 1909, p. 43.

²⁸ Marcel Cerf to W. P. Plummer, Esq., March 2, 1910, Carton 37, Marcel E. Cerf Papers.

²⁹ City of San Francisco building permits; “Widow's Right Limited,” *San Francisco Call*, January 3, 1913, p. 16; *Drexler v. Washington*, Supreme Court of California, 172 Cal. 758 (1916).

³⁰ “Widow's Right Limited.”

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with property that she otherwise owned. In addition, the language in the decree of dispensation, which was the legally binding document, differed from that in the will and named her as "sole proprietor." As such, Elise Drexler held title to the property outright and, therefore, could not be subject to restraints against alienation. In short, Elise A. Drexler held clean title and could sell the property; therefore, the Washington Development Company was obliged to fulfill its contract with her. The Supreme Court of the State of California agreed unanimously on both counts. The second argument regarding the decree of dispensation had several precedents, but the case established a new one with the first argument. As the Court stated in its opinion, "there were no children or possibility of any." The manner in which a widow developed or dispensed with inherited property, therefore, should not be limited by her potential or past potential to produce offspring. Biology should not define a woman's rights.

These court cases directly affected Elise Drexler's business decisions. Between 1910, when the Washington Development Company first demurred on the real estate contract, and 1913, when the San Francisco court handed down its judgment that Drexler could not sell the valuable properties. They remained underdeveloped which limited the rental income that Drexler could collect. Following the lower court decision, Elise Drexler continued to fight for her right to dispense with property that she felt she owned outright, but she also decided to move forward with developing the land. She commissioned the Reid Brothers once again to design buildings for the disputed properties. One of these buildings was the two-story Classical revival Colombo Building, which stands at the gore of Washington Street and Columbus Avenue and has served as a gateway to North Beach since 1913. That year, the Reid Brothers filed a new building permit.³¹ Other permits for the construction of the Colombo Building filed in 1913 include those for electrical, plumbing, sheet metal work, steam heating, plastering and concrete work. McDonald & Kahn are listed as the contractors.³² An advertisement in *L'Italia* in December 1913 shows the newly completed building. The ground floor had sixteen retail spaces; the second floor, twenty-five offices. As in the buildings that preceded it, the early tenants were primarily Italian American businesses and included Zappetini & Peraaso, agents for the Pacific Coast branch of the Italian Steamship Lines, who maintained their office in the gore; auto dealer E. Jacopetti; immigration-assistance agency Gerali-Marchi; Vedovi Insurance and Realty office; Crudo-Ditto Realty; accountant P.A. Galioni; attorneys J.J. Mazza, C.V. Riccardi, C.A. Pedrazzini, and E.P. Anderlini; and Cuniberti's cigar store.³³

The Colombo Building is unique in the extant physical landscape of Elise A. Drexler's biography. The three Reid Brothers-designed buildings from 1907 still stand, as do the high rises in which Drexler kept her office (though the *Call* building is unrecognizable for all of the alterations it has undergone), and houses designed by Willis Polk (1 Russian Hill Place, San Francisco, 1915-1916) and Warren Charles Perry (2585 Pacific Avenue, San Francisco, 1922-1923). A Julia Morgan-designed house in Woodside, south of San Francisco, has been demolished. While all of these buildings are representative of master architects and some stand as testaments to Drexler's unusual foray into the world commercial real estate

³¹ San Francisco Landmark Designation Case Report, Drexler Building/Colombo Building, Attachment #2 – Building Chronology, 12/26/01.

³² Building & Industrial News, 18 June 1913.

³³ Platt, et al.

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development, none of these buildings resulted in legal disputes. As the owner of many buildings and a vast amount of property throughout California, Elise Drexler found herself embroiled in legal issues virtually all of the time – collecting rents, verifying titles and boundaries, addressing complaints. All of these cases went unnoticed by the press and lasted for a short time. None of them had to be argued in front of the State Supreme Court. The controversy surrounding the property on which the Colombo building stands drew Elise Drexler into a public role that she otherwise consciously avoided. One would expect to find significant media coverage about a woman of Drexler's stature, but she was virtually absent from the Society Pages. She also explicitly requested that the endowment for one of her most important charitable causes, the children's hospital wing in San Francisco, be accepted anonymously. From the outset, Elise Drexler similarly tried to avoid publicity and quietly navigate the legal system, but this case, which lasted six years, captured media attention and resulted in newspapers articles with somewhat sensational headlines. Finally, while Drexler's life course defied gender norms, she was not a vocal advocate for women's rights. This legal case, which seemed so straight-forward at first, eventually evoked that exact issue and has left a permanent and public record of Elise Drexler as advocate for women's rights during the Progressive Era.

When the California State Supreme Court released her from her biological destiny in 1916, Elise Drexler took fewer than three years to dispense with the disputed properties. Whatever stood on the properties along Front Street have long been demolished and replaced by the monumental Embarcadero Center. Thus, while she owned the Colombo Building for only six years, it stands as the last remnant to a defining moment in the biography of Elise A. Drexler, an eminent woman of San Francisco, and as a local monument to the history of women in the early twentieth century.

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GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundaries of the Colombo Building property consist of the triangular lot on which the building sits. Starting at the west corner of the intersection of Columbus Avenue and Washington Street, the lot boundaries run 110.4 feet to the west along Washington Street; then 112 feet to the north, along the edge of the neighboring lot; then eleven feet to the northeast, also along the edge of the neighboring lot; then 156.3 feet to the southeast, along Columbus Avenue to the point of beginning.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

These boundaries have been determined for the nominated property because they correspond to the Assessor's parcel on which the Colombo Building is located. This parcel is known as Lot 4 of Block 195. The boundaries are further defined by neighboring features, such as the two streets (Columbus Avenue and Washington Street) which run along the northeast and south sides of the building, as well as the vacant lot located on the west side of the Colombo building which effectively isolates it from other nearby structures.

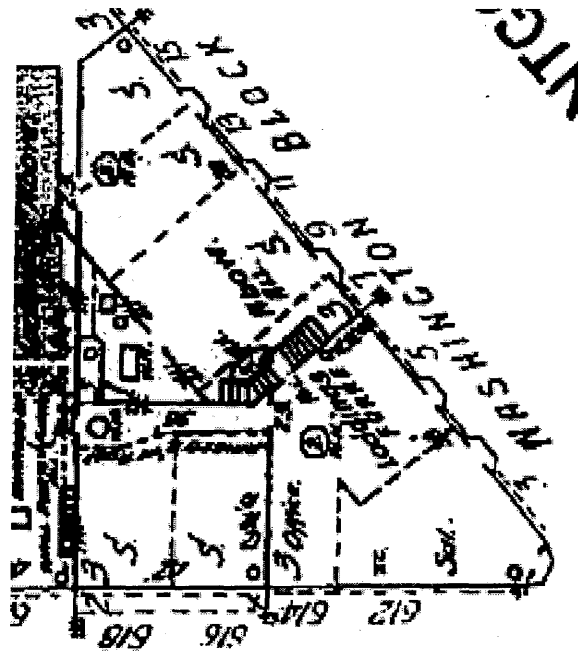
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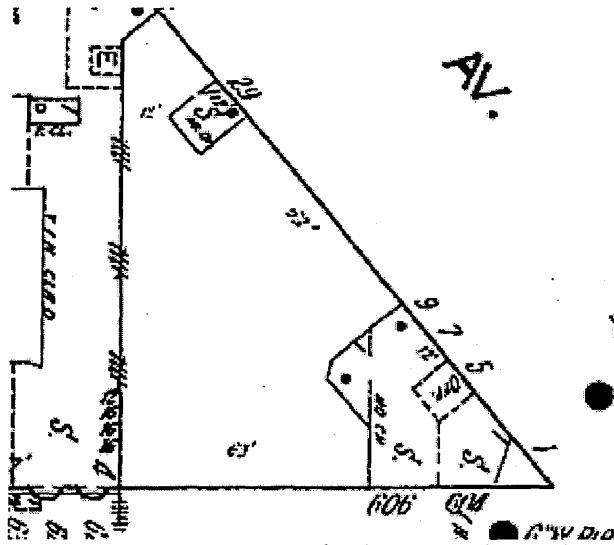
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SANBORN MAP IMAGES



1899 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map image of the Drexler Building.



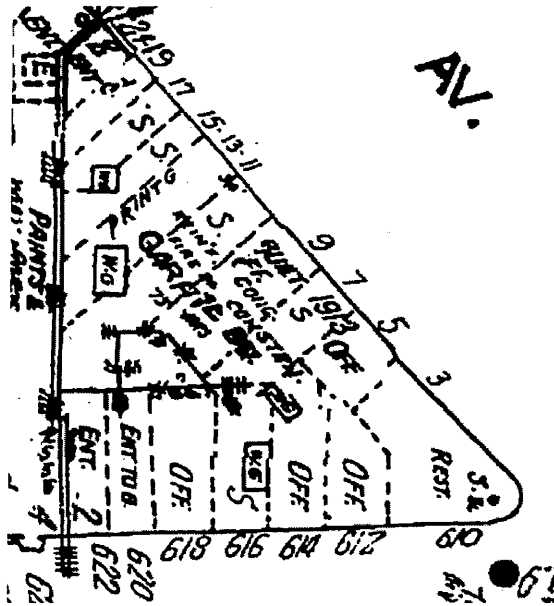
1913 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map image of Colombo Building under construction (?)

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1948 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map image of Colombo Building.

BUILDING CHRONOLOGY³⁴

- 1877 – Columbus Avenue appears on city maps as an extension of Montgomery Street. It is the first diagonal street introduced into the city street grid after the initial 1847 survey.
- 1911 – Permit application for construction of eight foot fence around vacant property.
- 1913 – Reid Brothers submit permit application for construction of a two-story reinforced concrete building at the northwest gore of Columbus Avenue and Washington Street.
- 1916 – Permit application to remove plaster partition. (Exact location unknown)
- 1916 – Third floor addition across the street at the Fugazi Bank Building by architect Italo Zanolini.
- 1917 – Permit application for alterations to storefronts and demolition of plaster partition combining stores 9 & 11 Columbus Avenue. Electric double face sign “Western Union” installed. (Exact location unknown)
- 1919 – Alterations to show windows, front doors, and adapting 9 Columbus Avenue for a general insurance office. New door at 11 Columbus Ave.
- 1920 – Part of show window cut and doors moved flush to facade at 11 Columbus Ave. Cloth sign installed

³⁴ Excerpted from Page & Turnbull, Inc., *Colombo Building Architectural Assessment for the City College of San Francisco Chinatown/North Beach Campus*. San Francisco, 8 Dec 2000.

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Colombo Building
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- at 15 Columbus Ave.
- 1921 – Galvanized neon sign in wooden frame installed at 15 Columbus Ave.
- 1924 – Permit application for interior alterations and construction of concrete ramp from First Floor to Basement for parking garage at 620 Washington St. Wall (14" thick) installed at Basement from First Floor slab to Basement floor along Columbus Ave. side to support street.
- 1932 – Permit application for installation of mezzanine floor and wood window screens. (Exact location unknown)
- 1933 – Permit application for neon sign on Columbus Avenue elevation.
(Exact location unknown)
- 1934 – Permit application for electric sign on Columbus Avenue elevation.
(Exact location unknown) Barber pole installed at 17 Columbus Ave.
- 1938 – Permit application for alterations and additions. (Exact location and scope unknown) Flue (8") installed at 5 Columbus Ave.
- 1941 – Installation of wood stud partition with concrete base faced with marble at 13 and 15 Columbus Ave.
- 1942 – Permit application for lowering original ceiling and addition of partitions and arch above lunch counter at café. (Exact location unknown)
- 1944 – Vestibule eliminated and doors moved flush with building façade at 7, 17, and 19 Columbus Avenue using second hand material.
- 1945 – Permit application for neon sign on Columbus Avenue elevation.
(Exact location unknown)
- 1948 – Partitions removed and new storefront installed at 7 Columbus Ave. At 9 and 11 Columbus Ave: existing storefront was replaced with new wall finished with tile and stainless steel window and door; removal and installation of interior partitions; and new acoustical tile ceiling.
- 1949 – Permit application for removal of plate glass storefront. Opening closed with metal studs, lath and cement plaster. Additional plate glass storefront removed and opening closed with hollow clay tile with cement plaster and glass block at the gore.
- 1954 – Permit application for resetting plate glass windows at ground floor. Wood sill and marble face removed and replaced with roman brick. (Either at 5 & 7 or 1 & 3 Columbus Avenue)
- 1964 – Permit application for construction of steel and canvas canopy above sidewalk on Columbus Avenue elevation. (Exact location unknown)
- 1965 – Canvas and steel tube awning at 13 Columbus Ave. Second Floor alteration at gore office - removal of lath & plaster partition walls and patching.
- 1968 – Sidewalk canvas & steel tube canopy installed at 13 Columbus Ave.
- 1971 – Electrical re-wiring, new rail installed at mezzanine, re-paneling part of wall at 13 & 15 Columbus Ave.
- 1977 – Glass block skylights in Columbus Avenue and Washington Street sidewalks removed. Openings filled in with concrete.
- 1979 – Double-faced sign installed at 7 Columbus Ave.
- 1980 – 9 Columbus bathroom alteration: Fixtures and tile replaced. New acoustical tile ceiling, sheet

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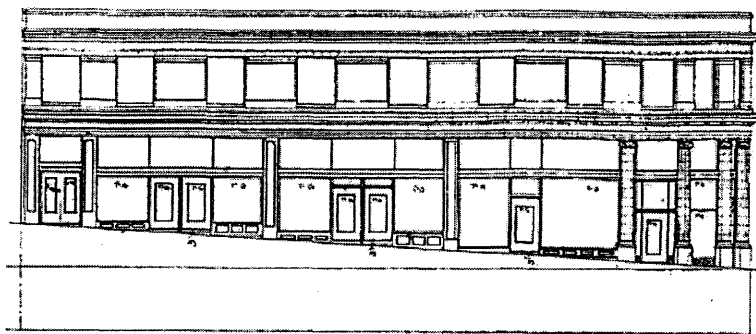
rock/metal stud partition wall and duplex outlets.

1992 – Re-roofing of building: loose gravel swept, new roof material installed.

1997 – Neon sign installed at exterior north wall adjacent to 21 Columbus Ave.

2000 – Installation of kitchen vent hood for 15 Columbus Ave.

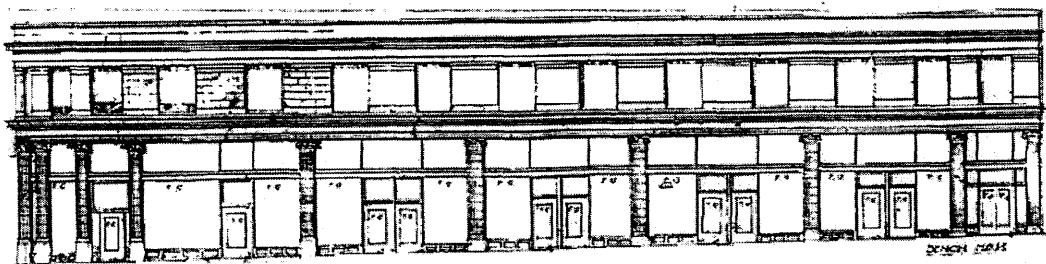
ORIGINAL PLANS



WASHINGTON ST. ELEVATION



STREET INTERSECTION



COLUMBUS AVENUE ELEVATION

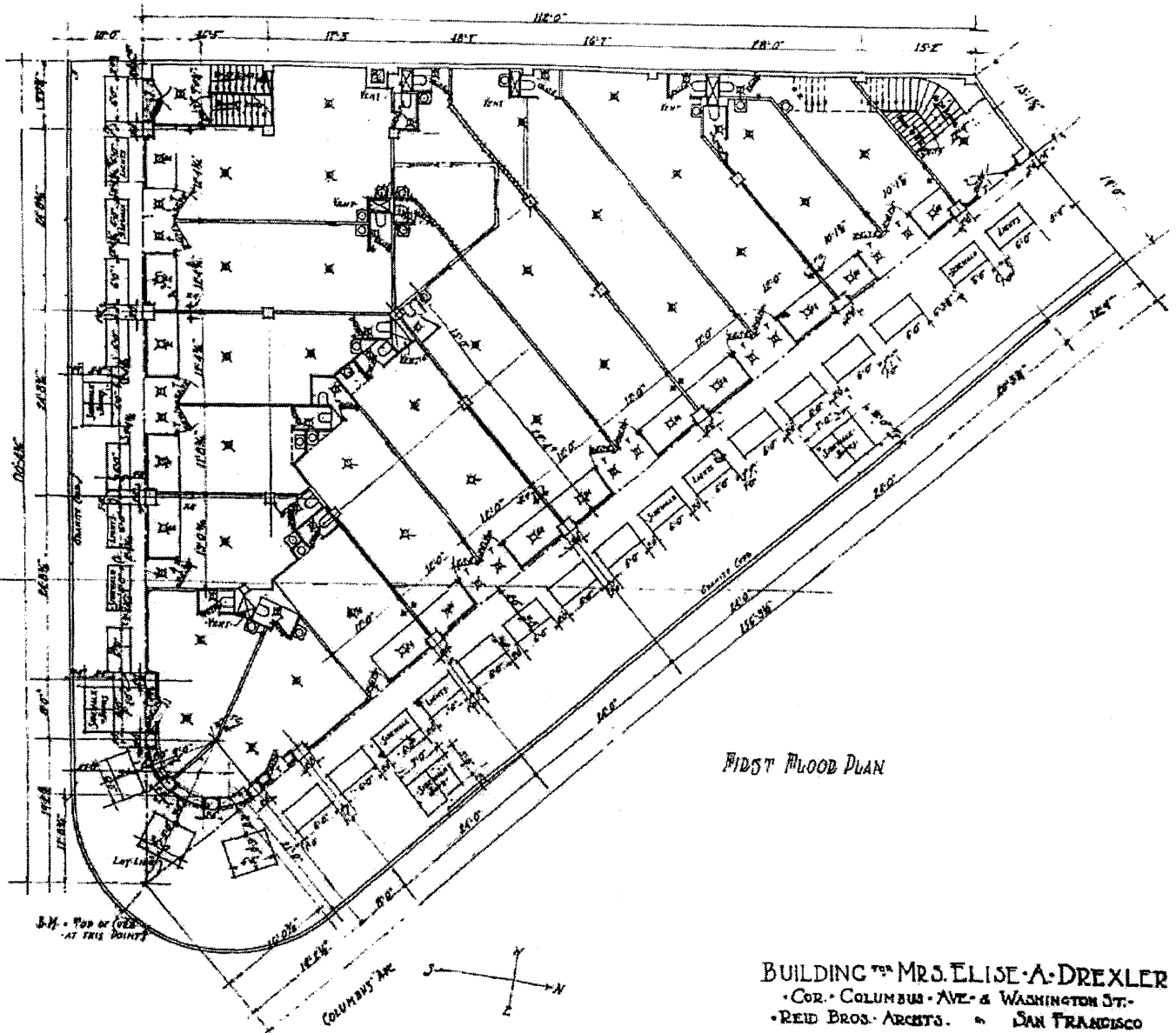
BUILDING BY MRS. ELISE A. DREXLER
COR. COLUMBUS AVE. & WASHINGTON ST.
FRED DUO ARCHT. • SAN FRANCISCO

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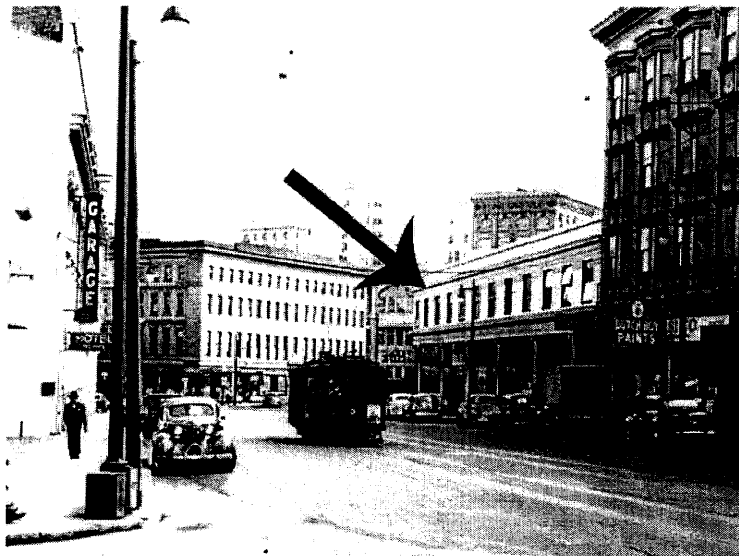
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HISTORIC PHOTOS



*Colombo Building, c. 1930s. Looking south down Columbus Avenue. Arrow points to Colombo Building.
Note, Orsi Co. paint shop located in bay windowed building at right.
(San Francisco Historical Photograph Collection, San Francisco Public Library)*



*Colombo Building, c. 1960. Looking northwest, up Columbus Avenue. Arrow points to Colombo Building.
(San Francisco Historical Photograph Collection, San Francisco Public Library)*

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PHOTO LIST

Photographer: Michael Falser, Carey & Co. September 2006.
[Negatives in possession of nomination preparer.]

1. Southeast corner, looking northwest.
2. Detail of rounded southwest corner.
3. Columbus Avenue façade (northeast elevation), looking south.
4. Columbus Avenue façade (northeast elevation), looking west.
5. West elevation, looking southeast.
6. South elevation, looking north.
7. Detail of exterior wall, south elevation.
8. Detail of upper exterior wall, northeast elevation.
9. North entry vestibule, showing stairs to second floor and door to basement stairs.
10. North stairs to second floor.
11. Second floor landing at top of north stairs.
12. Second floor corridor, looking west from southeast corner of building.
13. Second floor corridors, looking northwest from southeast corner of building.
14. Second floor window from interior.
15. Southeast corner office, interior.
16. Lavatory cabinet, second floor office.
17. Interior of men's restroom, second floor.

SLIDE LIST

Photographer: Michael Falser, Carey & Co. September 2006.

1. Southeast corner, looking northwest.
2. Northeast elevation, looking west.
3. South elevation, looking north.
4. West elevation, looking northeast.
5. Detail of exterior wall, northeast elevation.
6. North stairs from north entry lobby.
7. North stairs to second floor.
8. Second floor corridor, looking northwest from southeast corner of building.
9. Second floor corridors, looking northwest from southeast corner of building.
10. Second floor corridor, looking southeast from landing at top of north stairs.
11. Doors to second floor offices from corridor.
12. Detail of second floor window from interior.
13. Interior of men's restroom, second floor.
14. Lavatory cabinet, second floor office.