Julia Morgan (1872–1957) was one of California's most influential architects. Remarkable not only as an independent woman working in what was traditionally a man's field, she was also a meticulous engineer and a talented designer.

Julia Morgan was born in San Francisco in 1872. Her mother was an heiress, and her father hailed from a well-connected East Coast family. At a time when few women sought professional careers, she graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in 1894 with a degree in civil engineering. At the urging of her mentor, architect Bernard Maybeck, she attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, becoming the first woman to earn a certificate in architecture from the prestigious school.

While in Paris, Morgan spent time with Phoebe Apperson Hearst, a wealthy philanthropist active in women’s issues and education. Mrs. Hearst became an important client, supporter, and friend. Her son, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, would give Morgan her most famous, and largest, commission: the extraordinary La Cuesta Encantada (“the Enchanted Hill”), better known as Hearst Castle, built between 1919 and 1947.

When Morgan returned from Paris to San Francisco in 1902, she went to work in the office of architect John Ga len Howard. In 1904, she became the first woman granted a license to practice architecture in California and shortly thereafter started her own business. A high-profile commission to rebuild the Fairmont Hotel following the 1906 earthquake solidified Morgan’s reputation, leading to a dramatic increase in clients and to financial success.

As a woman striving to succeed in a man’s field, Morgan relied on many women’s organizations for support over the years. Indeed, she began her professional career during a time of significant women’s activism and progressive reform. Her affinity for women’s organizations—and theirs for her—led to many commissions, such as Mills College (1903–1923) and the Berkeley Women’s City Club (1929). Throughout her career, Morgan maintained a strong connection to the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), for whom she designed over thirty buildings.

Although her training at the École stressed classicism, Morgan was comfortable working in many styles, and her designs range from Craftsman bungalows to the Beaux-Arts grandeur of Hearst Castle. She was also adept at working with different types of clients, from educational institutions to wealthy patrons. The fact that many of Morgan’s buildings still stand today, retaining both their beauty and functionality, demonstrates her ability to design buildings that worked.
The 1918 Julia Morgan-designed YWCA of the Harbor Area and South Bay is a clubhouse in a residential neighborhood near the harbor in San Pedro. The unassuming board-and-batten structure differs dramatically from Morgan’s most iconic commission, Hearst Castle. These two projects demonstrate Morgan’s chameleon-like ability to suit the style of her buildings to the needs and budgets of each individual client.

The story of the YWCA in San Pedro begins in November 1917 with six women coming together to form the San Pedro War Work Council. The Councils were part of a program sponsored by the National YWCA to address unique needs of women during World War I. Issues of concern included access to housing and recreation in urban areas with the influx of war work; meeting places around training camps where women could visit friends and relatives in the service; and concern for social morality issues, especially around military bases.

In 1917, the San Pedro War Work Council commissioned a detailed report outlining the social conditions in San Pedro. Although War Work Councils were erecting mostly temporary facilities specifically for wartime use, the report strongly advised that permanent facilities were needed in San Pedro, since Fort MacArthur was located in the area and would continue to be active after the war.

Julia Morgan had already designed several YWCA-related projects when she was brought in to design the San Pedro facility. At a meeting in January 1918, she received the recommendations from the report that called for “a club and recreation center to compete successfully with public dances, motion pictures shows, and streets filled with men in uniform; housing with facilities for laundry and cooking breakfast; and rooms for 20 girls [to] provide for the acute emergency.” A swimming pool was a key part of the recommendations, as it offered young women a recreational outlet not available elsewhere in San Pedro. A budget of $5,000 for land, $12,000 for the building, and $2,500 for furnishings was established at the meeting.

The Hospitality Center, as it was originally known, opened in late October, less than a month before the armistice ending World War I. The finished building had housing for twelve girls, as well as an indoor swimming pool, recreational space, and kitchen and laundry facilities.

In 1921, members petitioned to become an independent YWCA. A special exception was granted, since the YWCA had a policy of having only one independent association per jurisdiction (in this case, Los Angeles). In 1926, Julia Morgan returned to the San Pedro facility to draw up plans for an addition to the building that would have created more housing. Ultimately, the project was dropped due to lack of funds.

As the needs of the facility changed over the years, the YWCA made a number of modifications to the building. In 1927, the indoor pool was covered over and converted into recreational space with a small stage. The six small rooms originally used for girls to keep their personal belongings have since been turned into offices and storage. A communal sleeping porch at the rear of the building was later enclosed and is now a child care center. Exterior access to the basement was created in 1954 by excavating and reconfiguring the front landscape. Designed for laundry and bathing facilities, the basement is now used as retail space.

The YWCA of the Harbor Area and South Bay, despite many modifications over the years, retains the comfort and charm of Julia Morgan’s original design. After more than ninety years of continuous use by the YWCA, the building still provides services to women in the community as originally intended.