



# San Fran Georgian

**PROJECT:** RESIDENCE, SAN FRANCISCO, CA

**ARCHITECT:** ANDREW SKURMAN ARCHITECTS, SAN FRANCISCO, CA; ANDREW SKURMAN, PRINCIPAL; EDWARD WATKINS, PROJECT ARCHITECT

**CONTRACTOR:** COVE CONSTRUCTION, SAN ANSELMO, CA

Andrew Skurman Architects designs a Neo-Georgian townhouse in San Francisco.

**T**he concept, at first blush, appears to be a bit of a non sequitur: the creation of a Neoclassical city house, not in Boston, New York or Washington, DC, but in the center of San Francisco, renowned for its exuberant displays of Victorian ornament. The house features a row of Doric columns, a broken-arch pediment that frames the front door and a series of alternating peaked and arched lintels on the second floor windows that all boldly promote a style rarely seen in residences in this city. The architect, Andrew Skurman of Andrew Skurman Architects, says, “This may be the first house with columns built in San Francisco in 50 years.”

As with all unusual projects, it begins with a story. “We were commissioned by a young, single man to build a townhouse on Jackson Street in Pacific Heights,” says Skurman. “It’s a remarkable site – the front of the lot faces Alta Plaza while the rear overlooks the San Francisco Bay. It was a very rare opportunity to build a new house in San Francisco, and we were excited about the chance.”

Pacific Heights is an amalgam of many architectural styles, often closely juxtaposed. Skurman says that the firm drew from elements found throughout the neighborhood, as well as historical precedent, to bridge the gap between the traditional and the contemporary. A non-descript 1960s house on the site was torn down, and the choice of Georgian styling was determined by the close proximity of the abutting buildings. “To the west is a traditional Georgian style apartment building, and a sleek modern home with piers supporting a large overhang to the east,” says Skurman. “I’m a big believer in houses fitting into the context of a neighborhood, and this house has a great conversation with its two abutters with the modern cantilevering on one side and the Classical elegance on the other.”

**Top:** The family room and kitchen of this new townhouse in San Francisco designed by Andrew Skurman Architects lead to a terrace overlooking Alta Plaza. *All photos: Matthew Millman*





**Above: The front façade draws its form from the Roper House in Charleston, SC, and the LaGrange Terrace rowhouses in New York City.**

*Rendering: courtesy of Andrew Skurman Architects*

**Above right: The double-story colonnade of the front façade provides both shade and depth.**



Skurman says that designing a new townhouse in a way that reflects upon both of these adjacent structures was a challenge. “The modern townhome had incorporated a deep inset terrace on its front façade that relates well to the double-height colonnade we designed for the front façade,” he says. “In order to relate to the apartment building and other contextual aspects throughout the neighborhood, we chose an antique Cushwa brick in a Flemish bond pattern and Georgian detailing on the exterior of the townhouse.”

Goals for the design included accommodating the client eventually raising a family and providing sufficient garage space for the client to work on his cars and motorcycles. The firm didn’t want to encroach on the back garden and its views by pushing out the garage in that direction. “We spent a great deal of time reflecting on how to accomplish this, and then I had a moment of inspiration: the LaGrange Terrace rowhouses on Lafayette Street in New York City,” says Skurman. “I was a student at Cooper Union, and I walked by them frequently.” Skurman also drew references from the Roper house in Charleston, SC.

“Ultimately, we pushed the garage out to the front of the building, into the yard, and used it as a plinth to support the two-story columns,” says Skurman. “Our twist is that instead of a solid roof, we specified an open pergola that permits sunlight into the upper bedrooms. This is a departure from the solid roofs, in the New York or Charleston examples, wherein the upper floors are somewhat shielded by the overhang.”

It is this open pergola that is perhaps the most unique characteristic of the dwelling, and Skurman’s play on Classicism. He says that a townhouse of this style would traditionally have a solid roof overhanging the outdoor terrace, but due to the northern California climate, a trellis was designed to sit atop the double-height colonnade. Due in part to the local building codes and close proximity to neighboring structures, the trellis was constructed out of powder-coated aluminum, a fire resistant product.

**The front door, with a broken pediment as the focal point, was inspired by the George F. Baker house in New York City.**





The scale of the terrace echoes the townhouse style prevalent in Charleston, SC. The pergola atop the colonnade allows light to enter the townhouse.

Skurman and his firm, who are well known for their interpretations of Classicism, then created the finer points of the interior and exterior detailing. “It’s not a large home, more of a jewel box,” says Skurman. “We referenced some of our favorite Classical structures in the design. Several of the exterior details and materials, including the front entry and exterior light fixtures, were inspired by the George F. Baker house in New York City, designed by Delano and Aldrich, and the ironwork of the front gates also features classic Greek key details that relate well to the Georgian character of the town house.”

The interior is equally Classical in style. One of Skurman’s hallmarks is the placement of an elegant stairwell, and this dwelling is no exception. Here, it spirals up through three floors and is lit from above by a circular skylight. A single brass chain drops from its center, with a lantern strategically placed at each landing, resulting in a graceful, uncluttered solution for nighttime illumination.

The formal living room, resplendent with carefully selected art, is located at the rear of the second floor, while the third floor is reserved for the main living areas, and here, the kitchen and family rooms are connected as one open room that then leads to the south-facing outdoor terrace overlooking Alta Plaza. At the front of the house on the third floor are two smaller guest bedrooms each with en suite baths. The master suite is located at the back of the house away from the street, giving it more privacy and softer light, as it faces north with a view of the bay.

Skurman states that his love of Classical design for domestic applications is the muse that drives him, and this house in particular was a commission of which he is exceptionally proud. (The house will be featured in a monograph of the firm forthcoming from Princeton Architectural Press.) “I believe in a different solution for each person within the unique harmony of Classicism,” says Skurman. “The project was a great success on all levels – we were very pleased to be able to produce a beautiful addition to the streetscape in San Francisco.” – *Dan Cooper*



The kitchen opens to the family room to the right and to the outdoor terrace beyond.

Left: The three-part chandelier and laylight can be seen from the base of the main stair.

