The Valley Economic Alliance

Seismic Safety Retrofit Meeting

Featuring: Dr. Lucile M. Jones, Seismologist, U.S. Geological Survey
To Discuss: City of L.A.’s Resilience By Design Plan & Building Retrofitting

Workforce Connections, Inc. will share how to get $12,000 salary reimbursed for hiring a new architect, construction manager or engineer.

Thursday, May 14, 2015 — 4:30pm-6:00pm
Location: Burbank Association of Realtors
2006 W. Magnolia Blvd. Burbank, 91506 (free parking)

Registration: $40
Includes drinks & appetizers
(AIA 1.5 continuing education credits awarded)

Email aamirkhanian@economicalliance.org to register
Phone: 818-379-7000 — www.TheValley.net
Please make checks payable to The Valley Economic Alliance

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ANNOUNCEMENT:
Angelus Block Posts First Type III EPD for CMU

Angelus Block is the first producer to publish a Type III EPD under ASTM’s new Product Category Rules specific to concrete masonry units.


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The design challenge is to create a zero net energy housing project on the campus of UC San Francisco at Mission Bay. This competition, sponsored by Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), serves to inform the public of the need for more energy efficient buildings and the value of design excellence in resolving the challenge. All submissions will be included in an exhibition held in the fall of 2015.

Eligibility
Architects, designers, urban planners, landscape architects, engineers and interns and students of these disciplines.

Awards
Up to $25,000 in total prize money will be awarded to winners to students and professionals.

Registration Fees
$225 professional early bird deadline 7.24.15
$275 professional fee deadline 8.28.15
$25 student fee (no early bird) deadline 8.28.15

Submission Deadline:
September 25, 2015 1:00PM PST

Submission guidelines and Registration:
http://www.architectureatzero.com/
An illuminated glass countertop designed by glass artist Steven Lenchner. The AIA/SFV February program at Lenchner Studios in Reseda showcased a number of architectural glass installations for countertops, windows, room dividers, art pieces in fused glass and more. And the participants got to design cabochon glass pieces (above) that were later fired and given to participants. The evening was also highlighted by a short history of glass making throughout the ages. Please visit www.lenchnerglass.com. Visits to the studio are welcomed (818) 609-9406.

blueist May Class Schedule:

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For Class Registration, Custom Classes and pricing, call (818) 649-1817.

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The Multifaceted Octagon House

The Octagon House, built 1799–1801, was the home of John and Anne Tayloe. It was the first grand private residence in our nation’s Capital. This remarkable structure, six-sided in fact, stands today as a monument to the ingenuity of its architect, Dr. William Thornton, in the earliest years of the republic and as a museum offered for the various needs of today.

As one of Virginia’s wealthiest landowners, Tayloe was looking to build a home near the new seat of presidential power and was the first to do so after the White House was completed in 1800. At the suggestion of George Washington, Tayloe hired Dr. William Thornton as the architect. Originally trained as a doctor of medicine, Thornton was a true polymath and a favorite architect among Washingtonian elites. He was the choice of friends and descendants of George and Martha Washington, and he designed Woodlawn Plantation and Tudor Place. An interesting historical footnote is that architecture was regarded as a gentleman’s hobby as we know from the life of Thomas Jefferson. Impressively, Thornton’s design for the Capitol building beat out Jefferson’s (who had entered his plan under an assumed name).

Octagon House is famous in Washington and in the nation’s history for many “firsts.” It was the nation’s first historic home to be turned into a museum, as well as the first house museum to do scientific paint studies, and paint the house correctly according to its historical era. The house has remained in its original location, at the intersection of E St. 18th St. and New York Avenue, as the city grew around it and, unfortunately, much bigger buildings now dwarf the stately home. Still, it is the large building behind the Octagon house, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) headquarters, that makes possible its financial stability and cultural sustainability.

The home dominates the corner of a major intersection only minutes’ walk away from the Executive Mansion. Proximity to power was the desired statement for the Octagon House, and this goal makes its location understandable. Plans for the house were drawn up even before a parcel of land had been purchased. Thornton created an urban plantation of unrivaled design and ingenuity, and it was built with the facilities to sustain such a household.

Mr. Tayloe was proud of his success, which afforded a grand and cosmopolitan home. Modesty was not the style of the late Empire period at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. The rooms of Octagon House are well proportioned and, like those of many substantial homes of the time, designed with entertaining in mind. The details inside the house reflected the special care lavished on it by John Tayloe himself. Everything from the molded Coade stone fireplaces to the grand, central staircase with Venetian marble urns demonstrated the wealth, prominence, and taste of the house’s owner.

The Tayloe’s urban plantation originally also included a laundry building, a smokehouse, stables, an icehouse, and slave quarters. These buildings once stood behind the house within the property’s formidable walls. Although the Octagon House was spared during the War of 1812, today only the Octagon and its icehouse remain. The AIA decided to demolish all but one of the original outbuildings. The AIA prioritized their need for a national headquarters over preserving the entirety of the Octagon’s site. Therefore, the large and “somewhat brutal” headquarters now sits uncomfortably near to the Octagon House.

The museum’s Web site is helpful to familiarize visitors with the house and its history (www.aia.org/conferences/the-octagon). Especially engaging on the Web site, are the audio tours, with themes such as “the Restored Octagon House” or “the Upstairs/Downstairs” of The Octagon. The official Web site is supplemented by the House’s Facebook page.

The Octagon House, in fact, does not have eight sides. It derives its name either from the unusual six-sided exterior or more likely from the shape of the elliptical entrance hall constructed with eight flat-angled panels, smoothed with plaster, creating an “octagonal salon.” The two sets of entrance doors, meant certainly to impress visitors, also serve as an air lock, keeping inclement weather out and the indoor climate controlled. Additionally, the two sets of doors create a vestibule, which allowed the servants to ascertain whom the visitor was calling on.
The innovative architecture of the Octagon House includes marked features of “sustainable design.” Sustainable architecture makes the most efficient use of the free energy provided by the elements. Over two centuries later, the concerns of Thornton when designing the Octagon are just as relevant for any new sustainable homes today, since homes are the greatest source of energy usage in the United States today. The Octagon’s twenty-three front facing windows (not counting eight for the English basement,) all face the southwest. This maximizes natural light in the house, and during summer, lets in cool breezes. Consistent with this functionality, there are no windows on the chilly, northeast face.

Many other stylistic details in the house were built with sustainability in mind. The window shutters, which fold flush to the wood in the windowsills, are quite ornate. At the same time, those shutters serve as noise prevention, for privacy, and as another natural insulating method for climate control. What has been described as a “thermo barrier” between shutters and the window glass, created by an 18th century architect, is remarkable for both its complexity and practicality. One problem Thornton could not have foreseen is the Octagon’s present moisture problem, as the house is not heated as it was 200 years ago. Because the fires that were always burning in the basement are no longer, spalling paint is a major problem as it flakes off from the masonry walls all over the house but especially in the basement. The modern heating system does not compare to the effectiveness of the original heating fire, which evaporated the moisture in the walls.

The contemporary Octagon House museum is not a public institution but one that serves to promote appreciation of design and the architectural profession. The administration of the museum by the AIA Foundation runs programs for high school students interested in architecture and also sponsors exhibits that have gone on to travel and win awards. Octagon House gets most of its funding from the AIA. While, the Foundation might do some fundraising, it has resources of the AIA with solid networks of contacts among architects, developers, and others in the construction industry (Durel and Durel 2007, 12). While, in general, the very purpose of a historic house museum and the experience it provides offer a way to survive (Janssen, Hosely, and Potvin, 2010), this is not a problem for the Octagon House, which has found its affinity group as a patron.

Today the house is a quiet operation preparing for a renaissance. At present, the house has only few visitors a day. The visitors’ experience is largely “laissez faire” unless a private tour is scheduled or requested. The Octagon museum had detailed signage, with quotes from the Tayloe family and their grandchildren that inform and enrich the experience.

Historic homes have the benefit of having had important occupants, who would be writing themselves or written about by others. Historicity becomes harder to confirm the farther back in time a subject is. The Octagon House, however, uses documents from the time when prominent families lived there to guide our understanding of the historical experience. A well-established and busy feel characterizes a visit to the museum.

The grand first-floor rooms with their exceptional Coade stone mantelpieces and ornate furniture are an effective way to display the elegant atmosphere of the house. In the basement, props allow the visitor to imagine how the downstairs of the house felt and would have functioned in the early 1800s.

The second floor of the Octagon House is used for regularly changing award-winning traveling exhibitions on topics of interest to the AIA membership. Its temporary exhibit space emphasizes the present day and makes the experience of visiting the house more dynamic and varied. The AIA Foundation’s office is in a lovely, rounded room on the third floor, which had been an informal family room, later an extra bedchamber, and originally had views of the Potomac and Arlington.

With its curatorship housed on the third floor, the second floor available for temporary shows, and its past exhibited on the first floor and the basement, the “multifaceted” Octagon House thrives as a structure from the past serving the needs of the present and the future. Although the general public is not the primary audience, the Octagon has an effective approach to its museum exhibit devoted to the history of the house, defining its significance in Washington’s architectural history.

— Nicholas R.B. Sorensen, March 11, 2015

References:
- Octagon House. Signage, Web site (http://www.aia.org/conferences/the-octagon), and audio tours