

## The Mechanics' Institute Library Commission and Construction: 1906-1912

### I. Introduction

Greetings, my name is Chris VerPlanck. I am an architectural historian and partner in the preservation architecture firm of Knapp & VerPlanck Preservation Architects (**Slide 1**). I am also a proud member of the Mechanics' Institute and have been so for going on a decade. I am a big fan of the library and its mission. In addition to holding several full runs of my favorite architecture and engineering journals the Mechanics' Institute provides an oasis of calm and civility in downtown San Francisco. You will often find me here haunting the stacks or curled up in a chair with a bound volume or two of Pacific Coast Arts and Architecture in my lap.

I was asked by Laura Sheppard to assist with the planning of this event and to prepare a paper on the history of the Mechanics' Institute commission. I jumped at the chance to learn more about the history of this institution, and especially the building at 57 Post Street, where, with any luck, I will have my next office.

In an unprecedented effort to be concise, my talk will center solely on a brief window in time, beginning with the destruction of the 1866 Mechanics' Institute on this site in 1906 and the installation of the last shelving units and official dedication in March 1911. I will concentrate on the commission and the construction itself, leaving the story of Albert Pissis to Bill Kostura who will follow me. I have also omitted much of the pre-1906 history of the Mechanics' Institute because this topics was so ably covered by Richard Reinhardt in his talk.

### II. Prologue: Destruction

As described by Richard Reinhardt, the Mechanics' Institute that stood on this site from 1866 onward was destroyed in the 1906 Earthquake on April 18, 1906. According to contemporary accounts, the brick building collapsed in the quake. Only the James Lick bronze and some papers were saved from the wreckage (**Slide 2: Destruction**). Flames swept the site a few hours later, destroying anything left intact beneath the rubble, including most of the Institute's 140,000-volume library in addition to the 60,000 volumes of the recently absorbed Mercantile Library. About 5,000 volumes were saved by virtue of being checked out. The Mechanics' Institute Pavilion – a massive wood-frame exhibition hall located on the block bounded by Hayes, Polk, Grove, and Larkin streets – lasted a bit longer (**Slide 2: Pavilion**). During the first day it was commandeered as a field hospital for injured San Franciscans but the Ham and Eggs Fire destroyed that evening (Reinhardt, 69).

The 1906 Earthquake and Fire also destroyed the Pioneer, Public, Bohemian Club, B'nai B'rith, French, German, and the SF Law Library, and others. The total loss of books was probably around 700,000 ("Great Libraries Swept by Fire," San Francisco Chronicle, April 29, 1906).

### III. Prologue: Aftermath

Now, I know that stories of pluck and fortitude in the face of adversity have always been popular. But I can't help but imagine that the level of destruction was more than a little disheartening for the Mechanics' Institute and all the other cultural institutions that lost nearly all of their cultural patrimony in a matter of hours. And I don't blame those institutions that decided to call it quits or relocate out of San Francisco. Nonetheless, much credit is due to the pluck of the Mechanics' Institute's president Rudolph J. Taussig (**Slide 3: Rudolph J. Taussig**) and the board of trustees who all gathered On May 1, 1906 at Taussig's house to authorize the head librarian to purchase \$5,000 worth of books to keep library going until a new temporary structure could be opened. The head librarian cabled book dealers on the East Coast requesting books on architecture, engineering, and other volumes deemed useful for reconstructing San Francisco (Reinhardt, 70).

Three days later, on May 4, 1906, President Taussig announced that as soon as their insurance settlements arrived that the Institute would rebuild its library and office building on Post Street ("To Rebuild the Library," San Francisco Chronicle, May 4, 1906). Little did Taussig and the other trustees seem to know how difficult this would be. As is so often the case, the good ol' days were never that good, and then as now insurance companies were in business to make money, not to help their clients recover from disaster. Unfortunately for the Mechanics' Institute and many other San Francisco policy holders, their insurance companies – especially those Back East and in Europe – frequently denied payments to their clients, claiming that the earthquake was an "Act of God," somehow thinking that his exempted them from responsibility.

Nevertheless, eager to resume operations, the Mechanics' Institute opened a tiny temporary, wood-frame and brick library on Larkin Street between Grove and Hayes (the site of Bill Graham Auditorium) on May 23, 1906, a little over a month after the disaster (**Slide 4: first temporary library**). The structure, which measured 12 x 20 feet in plan, sat on the easternmost portion of what had been the Mechanics' Pavilion, itself destroyed in the Ham and Eggs fire (Reinhardt, 70).

Three months later, in August 1906, the Mechanics' Institute erected a more permanent "temporary" library at 99 Grove Street – the southeast corner of Grove and Polk streets (**Slide 5: second temporary library**). When it opened the wood-frame and corrugated steel structure, which measured 60' x 120' in plan, housed 5,000 books on its shelves. The Arts and Crafts-style entrance and façade detailing were designed by the artist, and close friend of president Taussig, Arthur Mathews. The library occupied nearly the entire footprint of the building, except for a small corner where the boardroom and secretary's office were located. The building was paid for in part by an \$87,000 insurance settlement ("Mechanics' Library Erects Handsome New Building," San Francisco Chronicle, September 19, 1906).

On September 18, 1906, the Mechanics' Institute board met to discuss the prospects of permanently rebuilding their library and office building on Post Street. Finance committee secretary Joseph M. Cumming discussed the financial difficulties facing the Institute and how reconstruction could not take place until the Institute could either compel all of its insurers to pay or until the Pavilion lot could be sold or leased. ("Mechanics' Institute Trustees Discuss Problems," SF Chronicle, September 19, 1906). Difficulties with delayed insurance payments were compounded by a plummeting membership – the Mechanics' Institute had lost 1,000 members since April. Some had left the city entirely and others found the temporary location inconvenient.

Reacting to the pent-up demand for the Mechanics' Institute downtown, an editorial appeared in the February 27, 1908 edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle* exhorting the Mechanics' Institute to rebuild its Post Street property (SF Chronicle, February 27, 1908). By this time, nearly two years out since the disaster, much of the once-destroyed downtown had either been rebuilt or was in the process of being rebuilt. Indeed, a map of the burned zone titled "Two Years After" indicates that the entire block had been rebuilt except for the Mechanics' Institute (**Slide 6: Two Years After**). Reasons for the inaction of the Mechanics' Institute were varied, including the Institute's financial woes, uncertainty over whether to rebuild on Post Street (some trustees thought that the Institute should relocate to Van Ness Avenue or Fillmore Street, closer to the residential districts), uncertainty over what to do with the pavilion lot, and also the temporary absence of Taussig as president. **When was Taussig president?**

#### **IV. Decisions**

More than two years following the disaster, the board of trustees voted on May 22, 1908 to rebuild on Post Street. Recently re-elected President Taussig announced that he would call a special meeting of the full board and membership to authorize mortgaging the Institute's Post Street and pavilion properties to obtain the necessary funds to rebuild (SF Bulletin, May 23, 1908).

A few days later, the trustees of the Mechanics Institute unanimously approved a motion to borrow \$400,000 to build a new library building on the Post Street property. In the meeting, President Taussig stated: "We proposed to erect a nine-story building on the old site. The first floors will be devoted to stores, the two next floors for the library and the remaining six floors for offices, which will yield us a lucrative income."

This is the earliest documented description of the Mechanics' Institute's program for the building. At the same meeting, President Taussig stated that an architect would be "secured at once to make plans for the new library building" and that a loan had already been arranged and that "within a year a handsome structure would grace the site where the old library once stood on Post Street, a landmark of the old city" (SF Chronicle, May 27, 1908).

Following this announcement in May 1908, the board of trustees began considering various local architecture firms. However, within a short time

controversy erupted among them over which firm to hire. By the middle of June 1908 all of the local newspapers were reporting on the rift between two factions on the board (**Slide 7: Taussig and Mauzy**). The first was represented by attorney Livingston Jenks, a well-known Democrat, bohemian, and bon vivant. He, five other trustees, and token “staunch Republican” president Taussig, supported the selection of Bliss & Faville, a prominent local firm responsible for the St. Francis Hotel and various other high-profile office buildings, theaters, and club buildings. Meanwhile, the opposing camp – led by Byron Mauzy, a prominent Republican, piano merchant, and vice-president of the Lincoln-Roosevelt League (as you can tell from his “Bull Moose” appearance) – supported Cunningham & Politeo, a lesser-known and arguably less-talented firm. Nevertheless, Mauzy enjoyed the support of six Republican-leaning trustees, effectively deadlocking the board. An article in June 20, 1908 edition of the *San Francisco Examiner* discussed the controversy:<sup>1</sup>

It is not a disagreement over rival architects plans. The matter has not yet reached that stage, for no plans have been asked for or submitted. Livingston Jenks, as chairman of the building committee, favors engaging Bliss & Faville as architects for the new building without competition. This is said to be acceptable to one-half of the board of trustees, including President Taussig. The other half of the board, led by Byron Mauzy, would like to see the firm of Cunningham & Politeo, architects, get the plum.

“It is nothing more than a normal difference of opinion,” explained Mauzy yesterday. “The other fellows think their firm the best, and we hold an equally strong opinion regarding the firm we favor. My own opinion is based on personal knowledge of the quality of Cunningham & Politeo’s work and ability because they are putting up my firm’s new building: and one naturally favors men whose work one knows to be good. I suppose we will all get together before long (SF Examiner, June 20, 1908).

Several days later, on June 23, 1908, the Building Committee held a special meeting to hammer out the architect question. Secretary Cummings mentioned that the Institute might be compelled to hold a competition if the committee could not agree on an architect and architect Loring Rixford gave advice on how to set up an architectural competition. In addition, numerous unsolicited proposals submitted by various architects were opened and read at the meeting. Evidently, as one of the city’s best-known cultural institutions, the Mechanics’ Institute was a plum job worth fighting for (SF Chronicle, June 24, 1908).

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<sup>1</sup> The trustees of the organization are Rudolph J. Taussig, president; George Beanston, Livingston Jenks, James G. Spaulding, James H. Lyons, J.J. Dolan, Tiley L. Ford, E.P. Heald, Byron Mauzy, Robert W. Neal, Dr. Arthur W. Scott, James Spiers, Otto von Geldern, and Luther Wagoner. The building committee consisted of Livingston Jenks, Byron Mauzy, James Spiers Jr., Dr. Arthur W. Scott, Otto von Gelden, and Rudolph Taussig, president of the institute.

The architect controversy was not resolved on the June 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting, so two weeks later, on July 8, 1908, the Building Committee held another meeting at which they selected “dark horse” Albert Pissis (SF Bulletin, July 8, 1908). The decision was apparently mutually agreeable to all parties involved: Said Chairman Jenks of the building committee: “Finding ourselves unable to agree, we did what seemed to us the most sensible thing by amicably adopting a middle course. We gave up considering further the two firms over which we were divided and recommended three new names of first-class architects to the board of trustees. One of them was Mr. Pissis, and the board selected him” (SF Chronicle, July 9, 1908).

You will soon hear a good deal more about Albert Pissis from Bill Kostura (**Slide 8: Albert Pissis and Hibernia**). Suffice it to say, Mr. Pissis was one of San Francisco’s top architects from the early 1890s until his death in 1914. Pissis was also a local, homegrown talent. Although born in Mexico to a French father and a Mexican mother, he came to San Francisco as a child and came up through the ranks of local architects. And he was the first San Francisco-based architect known to have graduated from the Ecole des Beaux Arts. After an early career of designing Victorian houses, Pissis scored a coup with the Hibernia Bank commission. Built in 1892 at 1 Jones Street, the Hibernia Bank remains one of the best example of the Beaux Arts/American Renaissance style in the city, perhaps equaled only by Arthur Brown Jr.’s City Hall of 1912.

Pissis’ experience in designing first-class office buildings in downtown San Francisco was clearly a factor in his selection. In recent years he had completed the James Flood Building at 870-98 Market Street (1904), The Emporium Department Store at 835-65 Market Street (1896 & 1908), the Rosenstock Building at 28-36 Geary Street (1908), as well as several others.

The Building Committee held its first meeting with Albert Pissis on July 10, 1908. The committee described its desired program to Pissis, which entailed the construction of 9-story (10-story if you account for the two-level library), mixed-use skyscraper, the lower portion of which would be devoted to stores, the first and second floors for the library, and the other six floors for offices. The article mentioned that Pissis had just returned from a research trip to New York where he had visited various private and public libraries and Washington, D.C. where he had visited the Library of Congress, suggesting that he had been preparing for this job for some time. The following passage from an article in the July 11, 1908 edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle* sheds some additional light on the commission:

“...President Taussig, as well as the members of the building committee, is anxious to develop the library feature of the building as much as possible, without damaging the facilities for stores and offices, and Pissis will make this a special point in his plans....The new building will represent an outlay of between \$200,000 and \$400,000, and ready funds were secured from Eastern capitalists. The institute hopes to begin construction within a few months, and

then push the work to completion within a year" ("Make Plans for New Building," SF Chronicle, July 11, 1908).

As evidenced by the dozens of contemporary articles in local newspapers and journals, the Mechanics' Institute was held in great esteem by many San Franciscans and the building project was consequently of interest to all. Another quote from the July 19, 1908 *Chronicle* summarizes the role played by the Institute in turn-of-the-century San Francisco:

The Mechanics' Institute always has been a part of the history of San Francisco, and it is the board of trustees' intention to make the new building a credit to this fine old institution, which was founded for fostering and encouraging the mechanical arts. Plenty of space will be devoted to the Institute's famous library. There were two subscription libraries, and they were being merged into what would have been the finest library west of Chicago when the great fire came and destroyed many literary and artistic treasures that never can be replaced or reproduced (SF Examiner, July 19, 1908).

The considerable public affection and respect for the Mechanics' Institute failed to shield it from criticism, and criticism there was plenty after the trustees unilaterally selected Albert Pissis to design their new building. Articles and editorials in various contemporary periodicals ignited a new controversy over the lack of competition. An article in the September 12, 1908 edition of the *San Francisco Newsletter* described the Mechanics' Institute as a "quasi-public institution" whose primary mission is "the developing and bettering of the arts and sciences." The article pointed out that the failure to hold an architectural competition hardly developed and bettered arts and sciences and that the Mechanics' Institute board's decision contrasted unfavorably with the Native Sons of the Golden West, which opened up its new building to a competition open to any qualified architect (SF, Cal. Newsletter, September 12, 1908).

The howls of local architects and press corps did not deter the Mechanics' Institute, for on October 2, 1908 the Board of Trustees adopted the preliminary plans submitted by Albert Pissis (SF Call?, October 3, 1908).

Pissis, who took a trip to the East Coast to study contemporary libraries, was apparently inspired by New York's General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen. This building was originally constructed as the Berkeley School for Boys but was purchased by the Society in 1899 and extensively remodeled in 1903 by Ralph S. Townsend. Pissis' design embodies many characteristics of the New York building, which itself embodied the latest thinking in library design of the early twentieth century (**Slide 9: New York General Society**). Signature features of both libraries include their open, tiered stacks; ample natural lighting, and oak and plaster detailed interior designed in the Beaux-Arts-influenced American Renaissance Style. They also share similar façade detailing, including Indiana limestone cladding articulated in a restrained Beaux Arts, classical mode with double-height, arched windows and a tripartite façade arrangement

consisting of a rusticated base, smooth shaft, and more heavily embellished attic story.

## V. Finances Secured

The Mechanics' Institute was not out of its financial hole however. Still struggling with recalcitrant insurance companies, the Institute suddenly found itself facing the ambitions of the California Promotion Committee – an arm of the California Chamber of Commerce. Desiring a site for a large civic auditorium and convention center, the California Promotion Committee advocated the acquisition of the Mechanics' Institute's pavilion lot to build it, taking it by eminent domain if necessary. Unfortunately for the Mechanics' Institute, this lot was its primary nest egg and President Taussig was actively trying to lease the lot –valued at one million dollars – to a developer to help pay for the new building ("Let Us Have an Auditorium," SF Chronicle, October 19, 1908). Indeed, in November 1908, Taussig announced that the Institute had granted an option on the lot to "the representative of a syndicate of local capitalists" for a long-term lease amounting to \$39,000 a year ("Will Construct Large Pavilion," SF Chronicle, November 17, 1908).

As of early 1909, the construction of the new Mechanics' Institute Library and Office Building was still not assured, especially when the long-term lease of the pavilion lot fell through in December of the previous year. Construction was only made possible after the Mechanics' Institute mortgaged all of its real property in exchange for a loan of \$300,000 (other accounts say \$400,000) from the German Savings and Loan Society (undated article in unknown periodical). As a German immigrant himself, Taussig was probably instrumental in securing the loan, which used the pavilion and the Post Street lots as collateral.

## VI. Design Completed

With the funds in place, the Board of Trustees approved the revised plans submitted by Albert Pissis in January 1909 (**Slide 10: 1909 Rendering**). On January 28, President Taussig announced "...it is now a matter of a very short time when the steel frame of this structure will make its appearance among the downtown skyscrapers." The specifications were also made ready that day and the following week Pissis was to begin calling around to contractors for bids ("Ready to Build Library," SF Chronicle, January 29, 1909).

Articles that appeared in the *San Francisco Globe* in February described the plans in some detail. The ground floor would be allotted to the use of two stores (**Slide 11: 1<sup>st</sup> floor plan**). The first floor, intended for stores, would have stone columns and a glass front, with a spacious entrance to the library (**Slide 12: detail of façade**). The library was to occupy the second and third stories and would include a reading room, offices for the Mechanics' Institute, and rooms for the directors. Meanwhile, the upper floors were to be ninety "handsome office rooms, all to be equipped with all of the latest modern conveniences (**Slide 13: office floor plan**)." The article mentioned that the new building would be of Class A construction, "absolutely fireproof," and with a "handsome exterior of cut white stone, giving the building a classic outline (**Slide 14: façade drawing**)."

“Light wells on each side of the building would give the structure the shape of a T and provide natural light to all off the interior spaces **(Slide 15: section drawing)**. The cost of the edifice was estimated at about \$300,000 (SF Globe, February 4 and 11, 1909).

## **VII. Construction**

With finances and plans in place, things finally began to move on the new Mechanics’ Institute Library and Office Building. In early February 1909, the board of trustees requested bids from qualified contractors (SF Call, February 11, 1909). Two months later, on April 9, 1909, contracts for construction were let (SF Examiner, September 5, 1909). Construction began a few days later, on April 15, 1909, under the able supervision of superintendant of construction Roger H. Meredith **(Slide 16: Construction)**. According to the contract, the Lewis A. Hicks Construction Company of California and Nevada was the primary contractor. The company, led by principals John D. McGilvray and Ernest V. Cowell, promised to have the building completed in a year (Building Contract). Subcontractors included the American Bridge Company of New York (steel contractors), the American Marble & Mosaic Company (marble and tile), Arlett & Brigham (brick work), City Construction Company (excavation and shoring), Callaghan & Manetta (plastering and exterior cementing), McGilvray Stone Co. (exterior stonework), Pope & Talbot (lumber), Pacific Mfg. Co. (carpentry), Smith-Rice Co. (steel erection), D. Zelinsky (painting) and several others. In keeping with Mechanics’ Institute policy, materials and contractors were sourced locally as much as possible and all maintained local offices.

Five months after construction got underway, the cornerstone of the Mechanics’ Institute was cemented into place with a silver trowel in a ceremony held on September 5, 1909 (Sunday at 2:00 PM) **(Slide 17: Cornerstone)**. Placed under the white Manti sandstone cornerstone was a time capsule containing city reports, lists of members and employees of the Institute, newspapers, photographs and other ephemera, and a Mechanics’ Fair medal of 1893 granted for the first piece of California native grown silk ever produced (SF Call? September 6, 1909).

The ceremony was held in the presence of the officers and a large number of members of the Institute. Rudolph J. Taussig, president of the Institute, and Prof. Henry Morse Stephens of the University of California both made speeches as part of the day’s festivities **(Figure 18: Brochure)**. President Taussig stated “Joined together as it is with the old Mercantile library association, I can not help thinking that the Mechanics’ institute has a great future before it, not merely as a library, but as one of the factors in the educational system of San Francisco.”

Stephens described an even more idealistic view of the Mechanics’ Institute:

The men who have made great names in scientific and engineering branches are largely self-educated. Such education does not proceed from loose reading. There should be in the library a mass of technical and professional literature for those who

haven't time and opportunity to attend college – means for guiding young men who seek to educate themselves.

A library is above all a poor man's college. Its greatest source of influence is that it is not restricted by conditions, examinations and degrees – the hideous business of getting one subject off one's hands to be forgotten before the next is attempted. I look back enviously on the famous old Irish universities, where the students came and went and studied as they pleased, and the professors were paid with the milk of four cows.

Construction proceeded throughout the rest of 1909 and well into 1910. Even before it was complete, the Secretary Cummings had advertised the offices for lease. The Institute endeavored to complete the offices first in hopes of securing the first steady rental income the Institute had enjoyed since 1906. An Undated press release announced some features of the building:

We beg to inform you that the new Mechanics' Institute Building on the first block of Post St. will soon be completed and reservations of offices may now be made. Should you contemplate moving, early applications will enable us to locate you satisfactorily.

The Institute Library will occupy two floors and will be of much value to tenants. It has an extensive collection of books on accounting, advertising, business practice and other subjects of special interest to professional and business men and this department is to be greatly increased.

In addition, the central location is unexcelled, the building is first class in every respect, rents are reasonable and it is the intention to admit none but the highest class of tenants.

Elevators are running and offices can be seen on application at temporary office on ground floor. Whether you contemplate moving or not, we should be pleased to have you call and inspect the offices.

### **VIII. Completion**

An article appearing in the February 26, 1910 edition of the *San Francisco Call* mentioned that the Mechanics' Institute was nearly completed. The article supplies a good deal of information on the building, including information on the storefronts, which measured 30 x 100 feet by 21 feet high, and that the offices were arranged so that they could be combined into suites of any size. Furthermore, all the offices were finished in dark oak and had matching furniture.

According to the article, the stores and offices were to open in April but that the opening of the library would be delayed due to problems with steel shelving arriving from New York (*San Francisco Call*, February 26, 1910). According to the

supplier – the Art Metal Corporation of Jamestown, New York – the delay was due to a strike but correspondence in the files of the Mechanics' Institute indicates that the Trustees believed otherwise. At any rate, by summer of 1910, the Board of Trustees decided to open the library at 57 Post Street – shelving or no shelving. On June 10, the Mechanics' Institute had its last meeting at 99 Grove Street (Palo Alto Californian, June 10, 1910) and on June 29, the library at 99 Grove Street was closed.

An undated article in the San Francisco Examiner described the logistics behind opening the new library. Foremost was the need to relocate 35,000 books from 99 Grove Street. To maintain the proper location of the books, special boxes were built and labeled to indicate their future location in the new library. The books were then hauled over to 57 Post Street by library staff and day laborers. Because the steel shelving had still not arrived from New York, the Mechanics' Institute brought the wood bookshelves from 99 Grove Street and installed them on the third floor (SF Examiner July 1910). The plan was to move the books again to the second floor when the steel shelves finally arrived.

#### **IX. Dedication**

Once the books were moved and installed in their new location, the Mechanics' Institute Library was dedicated on July 15, 1910 (**Slide 19: reading room and stairs**). The final cost of the building and its furnishings was \$316,331.69. A series of articles published in local and national papers celebrated the event. Although the second floor reading room was still as yet unoccupied by books, the steel stacks were in installed, although room was left to expand them as the Institute's collection grew. The main room of the library proper measured 60' x 90' and 21' high from floor to ceiling. The second floor also contained librarians' offices, cataloging rooms, and the women's retiring rooms (the library was evidently a favorite meeting place for women). The interior of the reading room was fitted in oak. The third floor contained the reference desk and chess rooms.

An article published in the *San Francisco Call* the day after the library opened said that the interior work "is in bold relief, the French Renaissance being in evidence." The furniture and woodwork were of matching shades of oak, the steel shelves were "japanned" in French gray, and the chandeliers were of solid bronze – each weighing 500 pounds. The librarian's office and "charging desk" were located to the right of the main entrance. The stacks were made of steel and two tiers high. The lower tier housed philosophy, theology, social science, natural sciences, literature, poetry, drama, travel, biography, history, and fiction. The upper tier was for bound periodicals and government documents. The third floor, not yet finished, was to house reference, patent office reports, technical and works of fine art, and unbound newspapers and periodicals. The third floor also contained the chess and checker room, as well as the Board of Trustees board room and the secretary's office. The library was open from 9 AM through 10 PM.

Although the Mechanics' Institute Library did not fully reopen until February, 16, 1911 when the metal shelving units finally arrived from Back East, the provisional

reopening in July was greeted with enthusiasm by San Franciscans of all stripes. An article in the July 8, 1910 edition of *California Weekly* described the Mechanics' Institute as perhaps "the best subscription library in the United States." The article concluded: "To know that the Mechanics' Institute is at home again downtown is to assure old-timers that the physical rehabilitation of the city is near completion. This, one of the oldest and worthiest landmarks, is to be congratulated on its new home" (California Weekly, July 8, 1910).

By 1912, all ninety offices and the two storefronts were fully leased (**Slide 20: Mi ca. 1915**). The first storefront tenants were Heynemann & Co. stationers and office furnishings and Babson Brothers, photographers (Keegan, 7). That same year the Mechanics' Institute sold its pavilion lot to the City and County of San Francisco for the new Civic Auditorium for \$700,000 ("Institute Takes Offer of City," SF Chronicle, September 18, 1912). These funds allowed the Institute to retire its debt with cash reserves of \$51,228. It took more time for the library and membership to recover. When the building reopened, the Institute had 35,000 volumes and 2,500 members, down from the 200,000 volumes and 4,000 members it had before the quake (SF Chronicle, July 16, 1910).

## **X. Epilogue**

The Mechanics' Institute survived the odds; in addition to physically rebuilding its facilities bigger and better than before the quake, it did so using the services of one of San Francisco's foremost architects, Albert Pissis. In the final analysis, Albert Pissis' Mechanics' Institute was a very successful commission, both for the architect and the Institute. Not only did he design a modern, mixed-use building that would ensure a steady source of income for the Institute, he created an elegant visual landmark in downtown San Francisco that continues to serve as a tasteful yet prominent icon of the Mechanics' Institute, itself one of America's last and most ambitious subscription libraries.