

2003: Wonderful Laidley Street And The Remarkable Harry Steps

In San Francisco, I expected at least some of the houses to have tattoos and piercing, but most of the houses are just painted in boring-to-the-bone-Mediterranean-off-white. The city isn't a white-washed Greek island beached in a pine clime. Its weather and architecture are unique, and so are we. But a repressed side of our nature is exposed in the boring outside decor of our homes.

Laidley Street is a refreshing exception, proclaiming itself like a naked child without self conscience or self censure. Here, individualism, defiance and grit disobey architectural convention and my-mother-told-me-to-paint-white mentality. Visitors to Laidley are attracted by travel books and local reputation. Art students huddle on the windy stoops, engrossed in sketch pads. If you're thinking about breaking loose from orthodoxy or habit and want your neighbors to see the new you by the face you present to your street, San Francisco's provocative Laidley Street is the place to start. The Planning Dept. once called Laidley an architectural freak show. Freak or fashion, fun or fantasy - decide for yourself. Laidley Street is located in the Fairmont, a neighborhood nestled in the hills of Glen Park overlooking Noe Valley with distant views of downtown, and it's within walking range of the center of Glen Park.

The primary credit for Laidley's unique elan must be given to resident architect Jeremy Kotas who designed half a dozen houses and garages on the street and is in the process of designing more. The street's housing stock was originally farm houses and earthquake cottages built at the turn of the century; now some of houses reflect architectural fantasies that envision a grand entry into the next century.

To get to Laidley from Glen Park, follow Chenery (north) from Diamond Street toward Noe Valley. Go a few short blocks to Miguel and turn left. Walk one block uphill to Laidley and make a right, staying on the even-numbered side of the street (the high side of the hill). At No. 228 you'll get a splendid panoramic view of the city. By No. 216 your view will rotate south to Bernal Hill. When you arrive at Fairmount Street, cross over to the other side of Laidley. Remain on odd numbered side of the street for the best views.

A few steps away stands a large purple and pink Victorian at No. 186 belonging to one the "working girls" of Mary Ellen Pleasant in the 1880's, Theresa Houie Bell. Legend suggests that "Mammy" Pleasant, cook, madam, civil rights worker and voodoo queen, ran boarding houses and bordellos, of which the "Mammy Pleasant House" was one. Wealthy men were said to favor the carriage ride out of the city to this mansion to preserve their anonymity and reputation.

To the left of the Mammy Mansion stands a modern, white house without a number. My imagination insists that this house is a present-day "White Knight," which stands firmly guarding dear ol' "Mammy." A bouquet of pink geraniums spill over the "Knight's" black garage door onto the street.

The house I think of as the "Mediterranean Mint" because it is painted in cool shades of green is located at No. 153. Next to it at Nos. 185-187 is a duplex painted in complimentary light green and blue, the "Doublemint Twins," their balcony peeking over the street with tempting glances.

Sitting low on the hill at No. 177 is a tiny pink cottage. Above it shines a crowning view of downtown. I picture the house as a pink vase out of which a city panorama flowers. The cottage's front garden is a garland of beauty and color.

Walking further, you'll come to No. 149, a shingled cottage which you'll see has a modest fern grotto below street level when you lean over its flowered wall. The front kitchen window allows you to peek through the house to a radiant stained-glass window at the back.

No. 148 reminds me of a Swiss chalet dipped in purple chocolate. Its window boxes are filled with yellow Mums.

The lavender window of No. 135 also has Mr. Kotas's touch. It's actually a garage door that opens upwards.

The "Owl" or "Eyebrow" house at No. 140 was designed Mr. Kotas. It peers animatedly down. It's two-tone wall and black gate with blue balls encircle the house in a whimsical embrace.

No. 123, is Mr. Kotas's own home, bathed in royal blues with orange-flowered trim.

At No. 134 sits the "Sand Castle." Beneath its front steps lies a natural spring that bubbles up onto the sidewalk most times of the year, nature's effort to give us a moat to go with the castle.

There is a gracious, white farm house at No. 132 with a large red eye that gazes longingly down at a beautiful woman diving into a swimming pool painted on the garage roof.

Yes, the garage at No. 128 is also a Kotas original.

No. 116 is reported to have belonged to Mammy Pleasant, having been moved to this site from Maiden Lane possibly in the 1930's. It has a chapel-like mansard attic now, but you'll see it's no Victorian maiden any longer.

No. 104 calls itself "Wonderful Laidley" and is painted forest green with purple trim. It's yellow-brick road banister imply that the land of Oz is near at hand.

No. 102 is a Kotas creation. Note the surreal white, picket fence.

Next to No. 100, an Arts-and-Crafts farm house, begins the little-known path of the Harry Steps. As you begin to walk up, note No. 98, the yellow farm house sheltered by the massive eucalyptus tree.

Some say there are 267 steps on Harry, but the number of steps mysteriously seems to change. How many do you count? They reach steeply upward past three houses on the hillside that have no other access to a street.

Residents of Harry Street combine their efforts to preserve a "Sonoma-like" feeling. You'll see giant banana trees as you reach the first landing, cherry and redwoods later. The gingerbread house on your left looks truly edible, and is all the more enticing when you realize that it must sit on one of the largest parceled lots in the city.

Further up, you can look through the giant Cypress trees and see the skyscrapers of San Francisco. The city appears like the Land of Oz far away in the clouds, but it's really only twenty minutes away. When you've reached the top, Beacon Street, turn left and walk to Miguel. Follow Miguel downhill past the gardened walls and quaint houses back to the starting point of the tour at Laidley.