

Theodore L. Pletsch: Architect of Pasadena

Theodore L. Pletsch (1901–1994) was one of Pasadena's most prolific and adaptable architects, leaving an extraordinary imprint on the architectural landscape of Pasadena, Altadena, San Marino, and the surrounding San Gabriel Valley. Pletsch designed an estimated 1,300 buildings over a career spanning more than five decades, including more than 500 custom residences. His work ranged freely across architectural styles—from Spanish Colonial Revival and traditional revival houses to Art Deco, Ranch, and Mid-Century Modern—and his buildings remain an important part of the character of the Pasadena area.

Born in Iowa Falls, Iowa, in 1901, Pletsch came to California with his family in 1912 and grew up in Pasadena. He graduated from Pasadena High School in 1920 and studied briefly at Caltech before earning a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Southern California in 1925. During the formative years of Pasadena's great architectural flowering, he gained practical experience in the offices of several of the region's most influential architects, including Bennett & Haskell, Wallace Neff, and Marston, Van Pelt & Maybury. Sources also associate his early professional experience with Clarence Jay. This apprenticeship gave Pletsch an unusually broad understanding of the revival styles that were shaping Southern California architecture in the 1920s.

Pletsch received his California architectural license in 1930 and soon established his own practice in Pasadena. His approach was notably different from that of architects who sought to develop a singular, recognizable aesthetic. Pletsch believed that an architect's responsibility was to understand the individual client and solve that client's particular needs. In his oral history, he described his philosophy in essentially practical terms: an architect should solve people's building problems much as a doctor solves medical problems. He was known for sitting down with clients and drawing directly as they discussed how they wanted to live. As a result, his houses can look remarkably different from one another while sharing a consistent sense of proportion, livability, craftsmanship, and responsiveness to their sites.

Pletsch and Pasadena

Pletsch's importance to Pasadena is particularly evident in the sheer breadth of his work. In the 1920s, while working for Bennett & Haskell, he helped redesign the facades of numerous commercial buildings along **Colorado Boulevard** as the street was widened. He later became responsible for one of Pasadena's most distinctive early commercial landmarks: **Hen's Teeth Square**, built in 1930 at Los Robles Avenue and Woodbury Road on the Pasadena–Altadena border. Designed in a Spanish Colonial Revival vocabulary, the complex incorporated a market, shops, parking, and a gas

station and is recognized as one of the earliest suburban, automobile-oriented shopping centers in the region. It is now a City of Pasadena Historic Landmark.

Another important early commission came in 1935, when Pletsch won a competition sponsored by Pasadena's Better Housing Bureau to design a model home. The project, undertaken during the depths of the Depression, proved to be a turning point in his career. Pletsch later credited the house with bringing him approximately **400 subsequent commissions**. The house was eventually relocated to Holliston Street, where it became part of Pasadena's **Bungalow Heaven Landmark District**. The district's current inventory also identifies a 1932 Mediterranean Revival residence at 778 N. Chester Avenue as a Pletsch design.

His residential work spread throughout Pasadena's neighborhoods, from modest houses to substantial custom residences. The City's historic context report identifies Pletsch-designed houses at addresses including **361 Rosita Lane, 1650 and 1695 Knollwood Drive, 1560 Knollwood Terrace, 1535 Kenmore Road, 184 N. San Rafael Avenue, and 1715 Knollwood Drive**, among others. Collectively, these projects demonstrate the range of his practice and his ability to work comfortably within Pasadena's varied architectural traditions.

A Designer Rather Than a “Style”

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Pletsch's legacy is that it is difficult to categorize. He designed Spanish Colonial houses, Mediterranean residences, traditional English-inspired buildings, Art Deco commercial structures, Ranch houses, and modern homes. His 1931 office building at **609 E. Green Street**, for example, is a striking two-story Art Deco structure distinguished by its black tile façade. Decades later, the Crowell Residence on La Loma Road demonstrates his fluency with Mid-Century Modern architecture.

Pletsch also frequently incorporated landscape into his architectural work and collaborated with prominent landscape designers including **Florence Yoch and Ruth Shellhorn**. This sensitivity to site is particularly evident in his Pasadena residences, where gardens, courtyards, terraces, swimming pools, and views were treated as integral components of the architecture rather than as afterthoughts.

By the time of his death in Pasadena in 1994, Pletsch had designed an extraordinary number of buildings, many of them in Pasadena and San Marino. He remained remarkably active and continued practicing into his later years. He was also an avid outdoorsman who reportedly hiked tens of thousands of miles in the San Gabriel

Mountains and lived for many years in the Altadena house he designed for his own family in 1936.

Pletsch's true legacy may therefore be less about a signature style than about the remarkable diversity and enduring presence of his work. He helped shape Pasadena during the transition from the romantic revival architecture of the 1920s and 1930s into the more relaxed, modern Southern California architecture of the postwar era. His buildings are woven into the fabric of the city—not as monuments to a single architectural idea, but as thoughtful, highly individual places designed around the people who lived and worked in them. In that sense, Theodore Pletsch was quintessentially a Pasadena architect: deeply connected to the community, attentive to its history, yet continually willing to adapt architecture to the way Southern Californians actually lived.