

1224 Oberlin Drive

THE ARCHITECTURAL MYSTERY

From the Owner - Sam Szabla, Historic Preservationist

For more than a year, I have been trying to answer what should be a simple question: who designed this house? I still do not know. The closer I have looked, the more unusual that absence becomes. 1224 Oberlin contains a concentration of architectural, spatial and site-planning decisions more commonly associated with substantially larger estate residences of the period.

A Husband, a Wife - and a Missing Architect

The known story begins with Jalla Cramer and Albert B. Cramer, husband and wife. Albert was a builder/contractor. Yet the 1925 house was held in Jalla's name - a detail that makes the story even more intriguing for its time. Historical research identifies Jalla as the original owner and Albert as the builder/contractor. What has never surfaced in the records we have located is the architect.

Was Albert working from the design of an architect or skilled draftsman whose name was never recorded? Did Jalla have an unusually direct role in determining how the house would function? Could the designer have been a woman whose contribution disappeared from the record? There is not enough evidence to answer those questions. But the house itself keeps raising them.

"The mystery is not simply that the architect's name is missing. It is that the house contains too many sophisticated decisions to make the missing name easy to dismiss."

An Estate Sensibility in a More Intimate Residence

The house is approximately 1,186 square feet, yet its architecture does not read that way. Its proportions, ceiling volume, circulation, storage, relationship to the land and sequence of indoor and outdoor spaces give it the sensibility of a much larger residence. Rather than maximizing room count, the original design devoted space to the experience of living in the house.

The kitchen was unusually generous for the period. The primary quarters were given a substantial walk-in closet. The living room rises beneath an approximately 11-foot barrel ceiling. A second barrel form continues the architectural language in the adjoining room. There is a Juliet balcony, a double-height two-car garage with a mezzanine, and an unusually complete relationship between house, hillside, porches, garden and view.

The Loggia - Another Room, Without Walls

The covered front loggia is approximately 21 feet long by 5 1/2 feet wide - about 115.5 square feet of covered usable outdoor living space - and it is integral to the way the house lives. It is not simply an entry porch. It extends the living experience outward while remaining sheltered beneath the architecture, creating the kind of indoor-outdoor transition usually associated with more expansive Southern California residences.

From the loggia and the front-facing rooms, the house opens toward a broad panorama that includes Griffith Park, the surrounding mountains and the City of Glendale. The view is especially striking because the sightline is not crossed by overhead power lines. Nearly a century after the house was positioned on the hill, the relationship between architecture and horizon remains.

It Was Positioned, Not Merely Built

The siting may be one of the strongest clues to the sophistication of the original design. The house does not simply sit above the street - it rises deliberately away from it. From the principal rooms and the loggia, the sightline projects outward toward Griffith Park, the mountains and Glendale rather than downward toward the roadway. The elevation effectively removes the street from the visual experience of the house: passing cars and everyday traffic largely disappear below the line of sight. With no overhead power lines crossing the panorama, the eye is drawn outward toward the landscape rather than back toward the infrastructure of the neighborhood.

This appears to be more than a fortunate consequence of the hillside. The stone approach, retaining walls, double-height garage built into the slope, and placement of the residence above it all work together to establish the viewing elevation. The street provides access to the house without becoming part of its view. One neighboring house falls below the sightline; the opposite side meets a natural hillside; and the rear opens into greenery and yard. The result is separation and privacy without isolation.

The elevation preserved light, air and outlook while allowing the residence to occupy its lot with surprising presence. The architecture uses vertical dimension, not merely floor area, to create scale. The approximately 115.5-square-foot covered loggia therefore functions as genuine outdoor living space facing a distant landscape rather than passing traffic.

The Details Reinforce the Question

The original living-room fireplace retains its 1920s CALCO (California Clay Products, Los Angeles) Mayan Revival art-tile surround. Four original peacock plaster sconces are integrated into the walls. Original uranium-glass door handles survive as a complete set. Oak flooring, clay roof tile, barrel ceilings and carefully varied ceiling heights form a consistent architectural vocabulary rather than a collection of unrelated period details.

The roof itself is telling: a layered, rising composition of true clay tile that follows the building rather than serving as a decorative front. It gives the house silhouette, volume, ventilation and presence. Again, the decision feels more characteristic of an estate-scale architectural commission than a routine house of this footprint.

Then, in 1933, the Story Continued

A later owner expanded the house in 1933, adding the approximately 12-by-9 1/2-foot sunroom that is now incorporated into the primary suite. The addition is notable because it does not fight the original composition; it extends the way the house relates to light and exterior space.

The Mystery Room - A Century of Changes

One of the most intriguing clues in the house is a room that was originally approximately 5 1/2 by 7 feet. That was its historic footprint; the room does not retain those exact dimensions today after later alterations and the recent reconfiguration. In the original plan, the room was reached from the adjoining owner-facing space and did not have direct access to the kitchen.

The original finishes make its purpose especially puzzling. The room had oak flooring, distinct from the pine flooring used in the kitchen, and its door retained the same original uranium-glass hardware found in the principal rooms of the house. Combined with the absence of direct kitchen access, those details strongly suggest that this was not conceived merely as a back-of-house service closet. It was a finished room intended to be encountered and used by the owners.

Evidence also indicates that plumbing was present from the original 1925 construction. Its first purpose remains unresolved. One possibility is a wall-mounted sink associated with washing china or another household function. The more provocative possibility is that the room was conceived as, or later used as, a Prohibition bar - a discreet, plumbed room separated from the kitchen and finished to the standard of the owner's rooms. There is not enough surviving evidence to establish either explanation, which is precisely why the room remains part of the mystery.

By 1933, the room had been converted into a half bathroom, giving the space a clear documented use. It remained essentially in that configuration for decades.

During the 1980s modernization of the kitchen, the arrangement changed again. A side-by-side washer and dryer occupied the adjacent laundry area, a conventional tank water heater consumed additional service space, and the kitchen needed room for a modern refrigerator and range. Approximately half of the former bathroom was absorbed into the kitchen. The remaining portion was never fully resolved: behind a door survived unfinished space with exposed historic plaster.

During the recent preservation work, that sequence was reconsidered rather than erased. A stacked washer and dryer reduced the laundry footprint, while a wall-mounted tankless water heater replaced the space-consuming conventional tank. That allowed the refrigerator to move into the reorganized service area and freed enough space to return a meaningful portion of the 1980s kitchen expansion to the former bathroom.

The result is remarkably circular: a finished, plumbed owner's room in 1925; a half bathroom by 1933; a room partially sacrificed to the kitchen in the 1980s; and now a functional half bathroom again. The restoration did not simply recreate an old floor plan. It solved the practical problem that caused the historic arrangement to be compromised in the first place, while allowing the kitchen to function better for contemporary life.

Why the Planning Still Feels Remarkably Modern

What continues to fascinate me is not any single feature but the priorities behind them. In 1925, somebody chose a large kitchen, meaningful closet space, dramatic ceiling volume, a sheltered loggia, a Juliet balcony, a two-car double-height garage with mezzanine storage, carefully framed views and strong connections to the outdoors. Those choices consume space and money. They are the choices of someone thinking about how the owner would actually experience the house.

That is why the architecture has transcended its century. The residence does not depend on sheer square footage for impact. It uses proportion, volume, elevation, privacy, outlook and utility - qualities routinely sought in much larger estate homes - and concentrates them into an unusually complete composition.

My Working Theory

After more than a year of researching this house, my working theory is that Albert Cramer's profession may help explain the missing architect. As a builder constructing a home owned by his wife, Jalla, Albert would plausibly have moved within a circle of architects, draftsmen, designers and craftsmen. Perhaps an established architect helped a colleague, an emerging designer was given an opportunity, or someone within Albert's professional circle contributed to the house outside a conventional architectural commission. Somewhere in that network may be the name that explains 1224 Oberlin.

I come to that theory through my experience as a historic preservationist. I have worked in significant historic residences, including homes as large as 11,000 square feet in Detroit's Boston-Edison Historic District, and I recognize at 1224 Oberlin many of the same design decisions found in much larger estate houses: hierarchy of spaces, changing ceiling volumes, generous owner storage and service spaces, integrated architectural ornament, indoor-outdoor transitions, sophisticated siting, privacy and deliberately framed views.

That professional experience is what has kept me searching. At approximately 1,186 square feet, the house contains a remarkable number of decisions that feel disproportionate to its footprint. To me, the physical evidence suggests that there is more to the story - and that the missing connection has simply not yet been found.

What We Know - and What Remains to Be Discovered

We know the house dates to 1925. We know Jalla and Albert Cramer were husband and wife; Jalla was the original owner of record and Albert was the builder/contractor. We know a 1933 addition expanded the house. We know the residence retains an unusual concentration of original material and architectural intent.

What we still do not know is who designed it. After a year, I have not solved that mystery - but I do not believe it is unsolvable. The answer may still exist in an overlooked building record, an architect's archive, a newspaper clipping, a Cramer family document, an old photograph or drawing, or in the history of one of Albert Cramer's professional relationships.

The Story Is Still Open

My research has uncovered clues and narrowed the questions, but there is still another chapter waiting to be found. A future owner may be the person who connects the surviving architecture to the name behind it.

The next owner doesn't simply inherit the mystery. They inherit the opportunity to solve it.

"I have spent more than a year trying to find the architect. I still haven't. What keeps me looking is the house itself - because too many decisions here are too thoughtful to feel accidental."

Historical note: This narrative distinguishes documented information from interpretation. The identity of the architect and the original purpose of the 1925 plumbed room have not been established; the china-washing/service-sink and Prohibition-bar explanations, and the theory of an informal professional design connection, are presented as possibilities rather than established fact.