

HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION  
HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE REPORT  
Prepared by Nicole Hernandez, MFA, City Architectural Historian  
March 29, 2022

## 903 ARBOLADO ROAD

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA

**Designation Status:** Added to the Historic Resources Inventory

**Assessor Parcel Number:** 019-113-041

**Constructed:** 1922

**Architect:** Anna Louise Murphy Vhay

**Carport:** Lulah Maria Riggs

**Historic Name:** El Arbolado

**Architectural Style:** Spanish Colonial Revival

**Property Description:** The house is a two-story, L-shaped, Spanish Colonial Revival style house, with an accompanying guest house that was originally a studio. The house features intersecting gable roofs covered in terra cotta tiles. The smooth stucco walls are punctured by recessed openings. There are two openings on the second floor of the front elevation with Juliette iron balconies and pairs of wood doors with horizontally divided lights. There is a projecting window on the front elevation that has wood under the window with aluminum sliding windows. The windows are wood, casement with horizontally divided lights. The front entrance is noted with a large stucco surround and iron and glass doors. The front landscape features walkways, paths, and expansive terraces constructed with native sandstone stone.



**Significance:** The building qualifies to be designated a Structure of Merit under the following criteria provided by the Municipal Code, Section 30. 157.025

**Historic Integrity:**

The building retains most of its original features, other than the front second story window that was originally a balcony and was enclosed and the addition of the carport, so that it has enough historic integrity of location, feeling, setting, design, materials, and association. The building can still convey its 1922 original appearance and original intent of the architect.

**Criterion 3. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, architectural style or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic or historic value, or represents a significant and distinguishable collection whose individual components may lack distinction;**

Designed by noted architect Anna Louise Murphy Vhay in 1922 in the Spanish Colonial Revival style as her personal residence.

On, November 5, 1922, Santa Barbara's *Morning Press* described the house called "*El Arbolado*", "the Woodlands", with its boulders, oaks and sweeping views of ocean, harbor, and islands. The article describes the house, "it's beauty smiling down upon them...this home is one of the showplaces of the country 'round about and adds distinction to the remainder of the tract." The home was submitted by Anna Vhay to an architectural competition in House Beautiful. See story board below.



Window that was once a balcony is now enclosed.



Designed By  
A.L. Murphy Vhay  
Santa Barbara, Calif.

~ LEGEND ~

House situated on hill in Santa Barbara, Calif. Main rooms face east and south with outlook over town and coastline. Road and entrance on west side. Hillside to north.

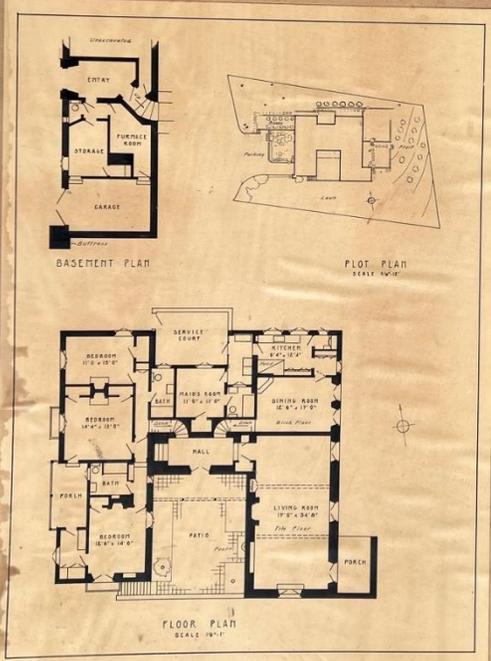
Family of two adults and two children. Special problem: contour of lot, with slope of twelve feet diagonally across desirable site, and several large live oaks that had to be saved!

Interior detail: chairs dining room, old Spanish dresser with poster, and table that can be easily moved to terrace outside.

Construction: Outside walls double with air space, exterior of hollow tile, interior of frame. All foundation and retaining walls, and corner buttress of stone cut on the property.

Outside stucco whitewashed. Roof red tile laid with varying exposure. Sash dark green. All stonework whitewashed.

Day and Night Solar Heater water system with Everhot electric booster. Standard Electric Range Argilio handmade roof tile.



SUBMITTED IN CONTEST HELD BY HOUSE BEAUTIFUL-HOME & FIELD

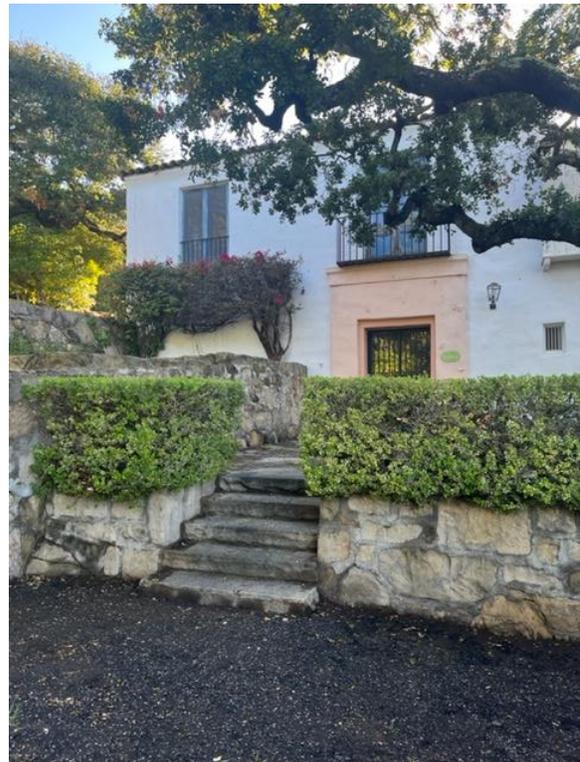
Storyboard by Anna Louise Murphy Vhay to the House Beautiful competition. *Courtesy Architecture and Design Collection, Art, Design & Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.*

### Historic Context

In 1916, Bertram Goodhue, author of a book on Spanish Colonial architecture, helped to kick-start the new Spanish style with his designs for the Panama California Expo in San Diego. Until then, the only Spanish themed architecture mimicked Mission prototypes. Soon, however, architects and

patrons began to look to Spain itself for detailed examples of the Spanish style. Throughout the territories initially settled by the Spanish in the Southwest, as well as Texas and Florida, the Spanish Colonial Revival flourished. Santa Barbara had many architects including George Washington Smith, Lutah Maria Riggs, Winsor Soule, Reginald Johnson, FAIA, William Edwards, and Joseph Plunkett talented in designing in the style. Another key to the success of the Spanish Colonial Revival in Santa Barbara was the Plans and Planting Committee through which Bernhard Hoffman, Pearl Chase, including Anna Louise Murphy Vhay and others helped to sway Santa Barbara towards a more unified architectural style based on the City's Spanish Colonial and Mexican past. As an excellent example of original Spanish Colonial Revival style house that is essential to the identity of Santa Barbara, and a work of Anna Louise Murphy Vhay, one of the noted practitioners of the style, the house is important to the heritage of the City.

The building exemplifies the Spanish Colonial Revival style which emphasizes the interplay of cubic volumes, patios, pergolas, and verandas; each interpreted and redefined by local architects or regions in their own oeuvre of the form, massing, and decorative treatments. Santa Barbara has examples of the Spanish Colonial Revival style throughout the city from the distinct commercial buildings on State Street, to large homes and estates on the Riviera, to multi-family housing and hotels in the West Beach neighborhood along the waterfront. This building is an example of the Spanish Colonial Revival Style, which became an important part of Santa Barbara's heritage in the 1920s when the City deliberately transformed its architecture and look from an ordinary western style town into a romantic Spanish Colonial Revival/Mediterranean style city.



The house employs the following character-defining elements of the Spanish Colonial Revival style:

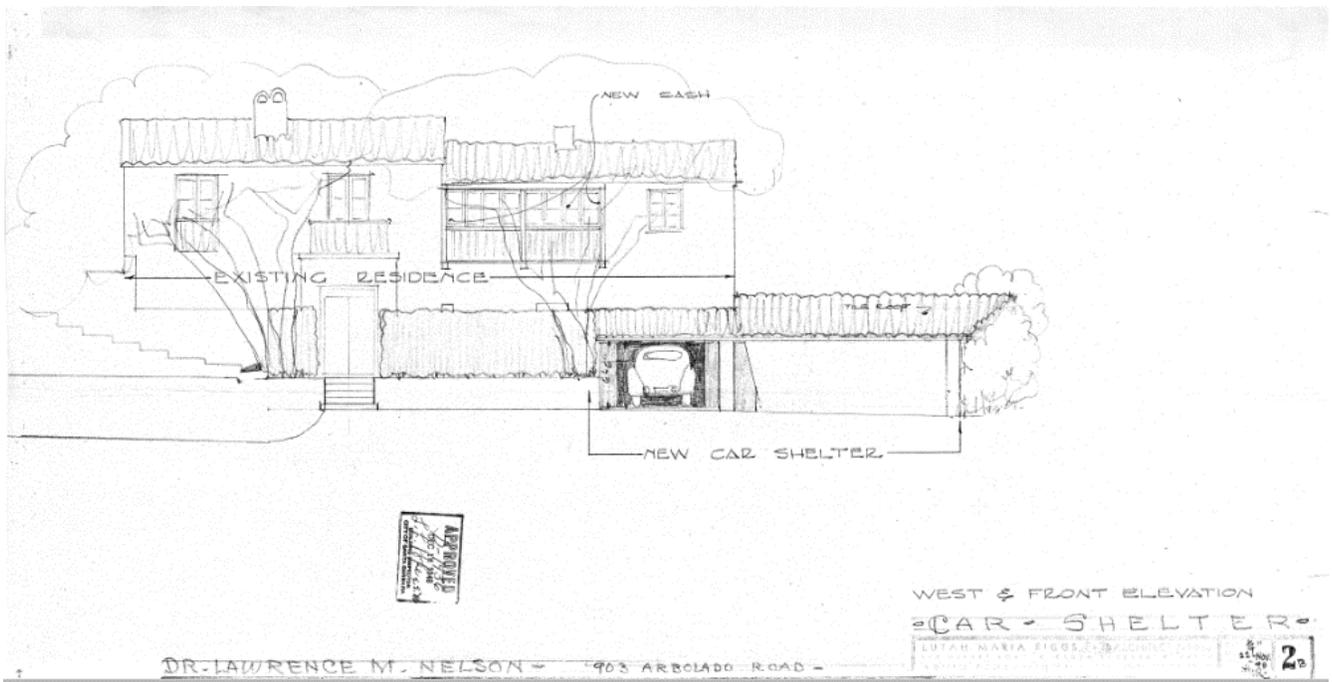
- Roofs covered in terra cotta tiles with emphasis on the terra cotta tile edge that creates a decorative edge from the roof to the wall.
- Emphasis on expansive planer wall surfaces punctured by carefully placed recessed openings.
- A combination of complex voids and masses creating an interplay of volumes.
- Windows and doors open to iron Juliette balconies. The sets of casement windows/doors recess at the wall plane with a stucco return and no trim. Windows are paired casement windows with lights divided by horizontal mullions.
- The wrought-iron Juliette balcony on the front of the building.
- Expressive front entry surround with iron and glass doors.
- Santa Barbara native sandstone features throughout the landscape

### **Anna Louise Murphy Vhay**

This 1922 Spanish Colonial Revival style house is important to the heritage of Santa Barbara as it was designed by one of Santa Barbara's noted practitioner in the Spanish Colonial Revival practitioners, Anna Louise Murphy Vhay. Vhay was born in 1881 to a wealthy Michigan family, and came to Santa Barbara in 1919. Anna Louise Murphy Vhay, artist and architect, was born in Detroit, Michigan on January 1, 1881 to a wealthy Michigan family. In 1919, she came with her husband John D. Vhay to Santa Barbara, in 1922 they constructed their home at 903 Arbolado. In 1923, the Vhay's purchased Casa de Ramirez

was one of Santa Barbara's first adobe homes and was restored by Vhay. They also they purchased acreage off the 900 block of Garden Street and by 1930, that she developed with other noted architects and artists a grouping 9 "studios" or bungalows around El Caserio Lane, a private street. The street became an artist colony called El Caserio. In 1939, she published a book with her husband entitled *Architectural Bynays in New Spain: Photographs & Measured Drawings of Doorways, Windows, Fountains, Balconies, Etc.* Anna Louise Murphy Vhay died in 1964. She went on to design small studio cottages and homes in Santa Barbara in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, one of which was featured in the *American Architect* in 1935. Vhay brought her knowledge and experience to the Community Arts Plans and Planning Committee in the early 1920s, which was responsible for transforming Santa Barbara into a Spanish-looking city.

**Lutah Maria Riggs** designed the carport, redesigned the kitchen, and converted a porch to add in more space for the main bedroom/bath and enclosed the balcony in 1948 for the Dr. Lawrence Nelson, whose office at 30 W. Arrellaga, Riggs also designed. Lutah Maria Riggs was a prominent and important architect in Santa Barbara, however, these minor additions to Vhay's design do not rise to the level that they are now historic in their own right.



1948 Drawings for carport and enclosure of the front wood balcony by Lutah Maria Riggs.



***Sandstone wall:*** There is a two-course sandstone retaining wall abutting the sidewalk, lining the front streetscape. A feature that gives the region such distinction while offering a surprising and pleasing bit of artistry. Walls usually require far less engineering compared to bridges, so they offer more opportunity for stonemasons to express themselves and their artistry in the selection, carving, and setting of stones. Use of masonry for construction in the Santa Barbara area dates back to the time the Spanish arrived. Since it was necessary to travel some distance into the woods to obtain lumber, but rocks were found scattered on the ground, stone became the preferred building material. The tradition of building with stones continued in Santa Barbara County through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This method of construction was often chosen because local brown sandstone was readily available and easily transformed from round or shapeless boulders into symmetrical smooth faced stone for building purposes.



A local stonemason explained in July of 1883, “When a quantity of it is wanted, a blast of powder is drilled into the heart of one of the large boulders and exploded and a number of square edged building stones are produced” (Santa Barbara News-Press July 1883). Many residences, walls, bridges, and commercial structures were constructed out of local sandstone during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Immediately after World War I, Santa Barbara began a concerted effort to revamp its visual image. During this time,

city planners carefully monitored all construction of any new structure to make sure it was consistent with the master plan that was based on Spanish Colonial Revival/Mediterranean streetscape mode (Conrad and Nelson, 1986: 14).

The use of a traditional building material, sandstone, in the construction of the walls built during this period was in line with Santa Barbara's planning and design efforts. In the years from 1870 to 1940, when Santa Barbara was quickly evolving into a vibrant, growing city, the period witnessed an extraordinary explosion of stone construction made possible by the abundant supply of sandstone, cadre of expert masons, and financing by private citizens. This period provided an atmosphere conducive to the building of public and private spaces of all kinds, walls, bridges, gardens, and an assortment of other stone works and encouraged some exceptional expressions of the mason's art. Among the most apparent expressions of the beauty in stone that give the region such distinction are the stone walls.

**Architectural Historian Conclusion:** The house at 903 Arbolado Road qualifies as a historic resource under Criterion 3 because it was designed by noted architect Anna Louise Murphy Vhay in 1922 in the Spanish Colonial Revival style as her personal residence and was part of the House Beautiful competition that was a national program to encourage quality designed housing in the 1920s.

#### **Works Cited:**

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