

Breathing New Life Into a Historic San Francisco Landmark

Tudor Scolca

Page & Turnbull's Elisa Hernández-Skaggs reveals the story of restoring the 1903-built Aronson Building.

On the last buildable lot in San Francisco's Yerba Buena district, a 43-story luxury development rises, adjacent to a 1903-vintage historic building. Developers of the Four Seasons Private Residences at [706 Mission St. topped off construction in 2019](#).

An affiliate of Westbrook Partners, developer 706 Mission Street Co. LLC sought to preserve the 10-story, Chicago School-style Aronson Building, which still stands today after two major earthquakes and a fire.



Four Seasons Residences 706 Mission.

The mixed-use project was designed by Handel Architects together with Page & Turnbull. The newly constructed residential tower offers 146 residences by Four Seasons. The 120,000-square-foot Aronson Building has been stabilized and includes 18 loft-style residences on its upper floors. The second, third and fourth floors of both the Aronson Building and the new tower will be occupied by the Mexican Museum.

To find out more about the project, *Multi-Housing News* reached out to Elisa Hernández-Skaggs, associate principal with Page & Turnbull. Together with a team of architects and conservators, she worked to preserve the building's identity, while also making it fit for contemporary use.

Please tell us what the vision behind this project was and how the new development complements the surrounding area.

Hernández-Skaggs: The project team is collaborating with the developer to realize a Four Seasons-branded luxury residence, composed of a new 43-story tower that is adjacent and connected to the Aronson Building, which dates to 1903.

Even as the Handel Architects-designed glass- and stone-clad tower soars above the neighborhood, the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Aronson Building is a major project component, as it secures the neighborhood’s architectural legacy.

Through the meticulous restoration of ornamental terra cotta and the reconstruction of the historic entrances that had been partially removed and previously obscured, Page & Turnbull has been working to ensure the Aronson Building’s iconic character endures.

The development also reactivates the adjacent Jessie Square Plaza; the Mexican Museum, which will occupy the lower floors of both the residential tower and the Aronson Building, will contribute to the diverse cultural life of the South of Market neighborhood.



Elisa Hernández-Skaggs, AIA, Associate Principal at Page & Turnbull. Image courtesy of Page & Turnbull



Aronson Building Arch Detail.

What challenges did the restoration of the Aronson Building present?

Hernández-Skaggs: One of the most challenging aspects of this project was the reconstruction of the Colusa sandstone entries, which had been previously altered in an effort to modernize the building. That modification resulted in the removal and concealment of original **ornamental features**. The project team examined extant architectural details and archival photographs to restore the entries to their original appearance. Features that remained were repaired and missing features were reconstructed using cast stone.

Stabilizing the “rope course”—the acanthus leaf-themed terra cotta ornamentation that runs the full length of the Mission and Third Street facades just above the ninth floor—presented another significant challenge. This projecting detail had suffered extensive cracking and would eventually become a fall hazard that could endanger pedestrians below.

Page & Turnbull mapped out the crack patterns and their relationship with the internal structure of the terra cotta units, which allowed us to recommend the best locations for the new anchorage to tie the units together and back to the building.



Aronson Building restored. Rendering by Page & Turnbull

What sets the Aronson building apart from other projects you’ve worked on?

Hernández-Skaggs: The Chicago School-style Aronson Building features beautiful terra cotta ornament at the upper floors that had suffered from deferred maintenance. While it is common to replace terra cotta ornament with cast stone when it is damaged beyond repair, we had the good fortune, in this case, to engage the original terra cotta manufacturer, Gladding McBean, to create replacement terra cotta units.

The reconstruction of the entries also set this project apart—it’s not often that we get the opportunity to reconstruct missing features. The rehabilitation of the Aronson Building and the restoration of the missing entries actually enhanced its historic character and value by restoring the missing entries.



Four Seasons Tower Exterior.

What were the most important factors when determining how to reuse the Aronson Building?

Hernández-Skaggs: A successful [rehabilitation for adaptive reuse](#) must balance proposed alterations with retaining the historic character of a building. In this case, the residential tower is set back so that the massing of the Aronson Building is conveyed visually, connecting to the tower building as a secondary facade. The street-facing facades were restored and the use of modern windows was limited to the rear.

Why is this project a good home for the Mexican Museum?

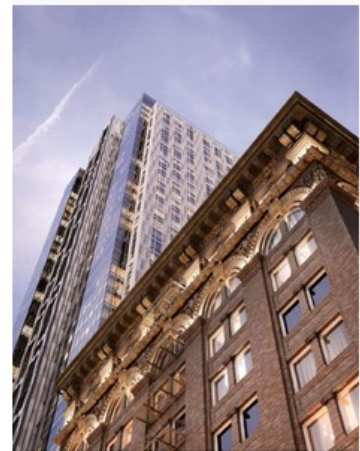
Hernández-Skaggs: The surrounding neighborhood has several other museums, including the Museum of the African Diaspora, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Contemporary Jewish Museum and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. The neighborhood is a perfect fit for the Mexican Museum.

How does the 43-story tower's design reflect the history of the building it is adjacent to?

Hernández-Skaggs: The tower pays homage through the use of complementary materials, glass and Sierra White marble cladding. The marble is expressed as vertical bands that recall the vertical pilasters of the Aronson Building. The podium of the tower is similar in height to the base of the Aronson Building and the new tower is set back to help convey the massing of the historic building.

What impact do you expect the project will have on the area?

Hernández-Skaggs: The Aronson Building is a contributor to the New Montgomery-Mission-2nd Street Conservation District, a product of the post-1906 reconstruction of downtown San Francisco. Its restoration strengthens the character of the district and the residential use adds to the vitality of the SoMa neighborhood, while the Mexican Museum will contribute to the cultural diversity of an already vibrant museum district.



Aronson Building and adjacent tower.
Rendering courtesy of Page & Turnbull