

## Addendum to Brecheen House Master List Application Uniqueness and Importance

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### Summary Conclusion

At its May 2022 hearing, the CHC asked applicant for clarification of how 1133 Pismo in the Old Town Historic District meets the “most unique and important” standard of the Master List. The clarification required analysis of the house in comparison with its class. I used a data set of the 57 Contributing List one-story Colonial Revival bungalows in the district, focusing on where the Brecheen House was restrained by physical and stylistic considerations, and where its designer took it in unique directions to embody its genre.

The data shows the house to be a rare subtype of the Colonial Revival bungalow stripped of structural but nonfunctional roof decoration. Within this minimalist form, the anonymous designer lowered the roof pitch to the greatest extent of any of these bungalows; extended the eaves further than any other; accentuated both with a *japoniste* bellcast; created the district’s most sophisticated geometric pattern of fenestration; successfully experimented

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with minimizing columns and doors; and framed the whole with a unique pattern of frieze, architrave, corner boards, and baseboard. These are details, but as the great Modernist Ludwig Mies van der Rohe said, “God is in the details.”

The result is minimalist, linear, curvilinear, and unified: empirically the district’s most streamlined bungalow in our National Revival style at the cusp of America’s suburban bungalowization. Embodiment of core stylistic goals, juxtaposed to revolutionary ability to stretch the envelope and to find complexity in simplicity, simplicity in complexity, are what make the Brecheen House not just unique but important—San Luis Obispo’s bungaloid forerunner to Purcell and Elmslie’s 1912 “Airplane House” at Woods Hole and equally worthy of distinction, despite—or because of—its modest size and anonymous designer.

*James Papp, PhD, on behalf of Christopher Frago and Heidi Howland-Frago / 2 August 2022*

## Methodology and Statistical Results

**Data set** To address the CHC's question in a statistically unbiased way, I selected as a data set all one-story Colonial Revival bungalows on the Contributing List in the Old Town Historic District. This is a large list—57 properties—because almost no one-story Colonials were originally placed on the Master List, and almost no one-and-a-half or two-story Colonials were originally placed on the Contributing List. In the Old Town Historic District, the Master and Contributing Lists were essentially distinguished by size.

**Period** A quick check of permits and newspapers shows 1900–1913 construction dates for 15 of the 57 bungalows. The 1907 Brecheen House falls in the middle of the range.

**Contemporary commonalities in Colonial Revival, with departures from American Colonial architecture** What is remarkable about the 57 bungalows is their consistency. Each one has (or originally had) a columned front porch. Each one has a hip roof that appears pyramidal on the street façade, with roof ridge running front to back.

53 (93%) of the porches are asymmetrically placed, a departure from actual American Colonial architecture, as Neoclassical entry porticoes were centered, quite often under a pediment. 31 (54%) of these bungalows also have a front-facing pediment, though a majority (55%) of these pediments are placed over the window bay rather than the porch: another departure from Colonial architecture. Only one of the pediments is centered, with the other 30 (97%) asymmetric.

A hip roof with a pyramidal front façade is also an extreme outlier among American Colonial structures, particularly the New England ones on which McKim, Mead, and White originally based the Colonial Revival style. Most New England Colonial houses are side-gabled; the few hip roofs have the ridge running parallel to the street.

McKim, Mead, and White revived these broad-façade Colonials for the landed plutocracy, but a broad façade is impractical on a narrow suburban lot. Some ur-suburban architect may have borrowed the form from Southern Colonial houses, whose H-form wings more often have pyramidal façades; these were being published around the turn of the century.



*Rear of Thomas Pinckney's 1797 Eldorado, South Carolina, sketched before burning in 1897. Wings present a pyramidal roof to the garden, like the Colonial Revival bungalow to the street (C. R. S. Horton, Savannah and Parts of the Far South, 1902, The Georgian Period, vol. iii). At right, one of Emil John's three adjoining Eastlake cottages, Santa Cruz, 1884. Two survive.*

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But asymmetric pyramid-and-gable Eastlake cottages—unpedimented—were in Santa Cruz by 1884 (Santa Cruz Historic Building Survey [San Francisco: Page, 1976], p. 70; see photograph above).

In short: Colonial Revival suburban bungalows are likely to be inconsistent with actual American Colonial architecture but overwhelmingly consistent with one another.

**Seven subtypes** These 57 porched and pyramidal bungalows fall into 7 subtypes (percentages add to 102% due to rounding):

1. asymmetric pedimented porch (23%)
2. asymmetric pedimented window bay (30%)
3. symmetric pedimented porch (2%)
4. unpedimented full-width porch (5%)
5. asymmetric and unpedimented with centered pyramidal dormer (20%)
6. asymmetric and unpedimented without dormer (11%)
7. Japanese *irimoya* roof, hipped with gablet (11%) (This is the only subtype covered in *A Field Guide to American Houses* [under Queen Anne], but all can be found across the US.)

The Brecheen House is subtype 6, a bungalow with neither pediment nor dormer. Photographs of all 57 bungalows appear under their subtype on pages 4–8 following, in order to make the similarities and differences visually clear.



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### I. Asymmetric pedimented porch (13, or 23%)



1. 641 Buchon



2. 1132 Buchon



3. 1137 Buchon



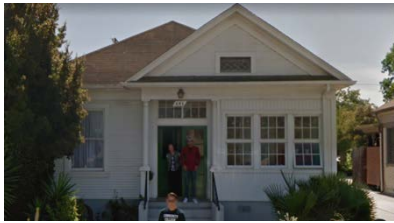
4. 985 Pismo



5. 663 Pismo/Chapek 1913



6. 657 Pismo/Chapek ca 1913



7. 481 Islay (later porch enclosure)



8. 572 Islay

*With pyramidal dormer*



9. 1035 Islay



10. 1045 Islay

*With torii-inspired entry*



11. 1160 Buchon



12. 1512 Santa Rosa



13. 1053 Islay/Akin 1909



**II. Asymmetric pedimented window bay (17, or 30%)**



14. 578 Buchon/Esplin 1910



15. 1051 Buchon



16. 1165 Buchon



17. 1190 Buchon



18. 683 Pismo



19. 1005 Islay



20. 1035 Leff



21. 1606 Santa Rosa



22. 1504 Santa Rosa/1900



23. 1627 Santa Rosa



24. 1543 Morro



25. 1520 Morro (later porch enclosure)



26. 1428 Morro/Storz 1908



27. 1720 Morro (later second pediment and porch enclosure)



28. 1624 Santa Rosa (later enclosure)

With pyramidal dormer



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*With pyramidal dormer*



*29. 972 Church*

*With second pediment*



*30. 1029 Islay*

### **III. Symmetric pedimented porch (1, or 2%)**



*31. 533 Buchon/Lyman 1909*

### **IV. Unpedimented full-width porch (3, or 5%)**

*With dormer*



*32. 1145 Buchon*



*33. 1151 Buchon*

*Without dormer*



*34. 1157 Buchon*

### **V. Asymmetric and unpedimented with centered pyramidal dormer (11, or 20%)**



*35. 1171 Pismo*



*36. 1176 Buchon*



*37. 1011 Islay*

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38. 1040 Islay



39. 1044 Islay



40. 1059 Leff/Wallis 1909



41. 1045 Leff



42. 1027 Leff



43. 1705 Santa Rosa (later porch enclosure)



44. 1512 Morro



45. 1535 Morro

## VI. Asymmetric and unpedimented without dormer (6, or 11%)



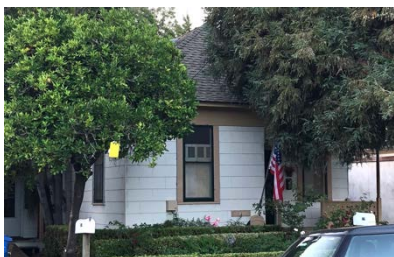
46. 880 Buchon/1904



47. 1042 Pismo (later porch enclosure)



48. 1527 Nipomo



49. 878 Islay



50. 1017 Islay/Truesdale '08



51. 1133 Pismo/1907



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### VII. Asymmetric with *irimoya* roof (6, or 11%)



52a. 770 Islay (west façade)/  
Strickland 1904



52b. 770 Islay (south façade)



53. 870 Islay



54. 1542 Osos



55. 1533 Osos



56. 1529 Osos



57. 1535 Nipomo

## The Brecheen House: Uniqueness and Importance



**Stripping of decorative, nonfunctional roof structures** The Brecheen House is one of only 6, or 11%, of Colonial Revival bungalows in the Old Town Historic District with neither pediment, dormer, nor *irimoya* gablet topping the roof. These decorative structures on the other 89% of bungalows normally exhibit even more interior complexity: e.g., 74% of the pediments in the data set have decorative wall shingling and 61%, attic windows or vents.

**Low roof pitch** The 57 Colonial Revival bungalows have roof pitches up to 40%. The absence of pediments and dormers allows the roofs of subtype 6 to be lower-pitched. Of their 6 roofs, 3 (figs. 46, 49, and 50) are within the normal range of pitch for the complete data set of 57, at 25–30%, but the other 3 (figs. 47, 48, and 51 [the Brecheen House]) are the lowest pitched for the complete data set, at only 12% pitch. This minimal-pitch subset represents 5% of the complete data set.

**Bellcast** Only 12, or 21%, of the the complete data set's roofs are bellcast. Of sybtype 6, all three of the high-pitch roofs are bellcast, but the Brecheen House has the only low-pitch bellcast roof, creating a unique effect, with the vanishing pitch at the eaves accentuating horizontality.

The pyramidal bellcast roof is clearly a Japanese aesthetic reference—a *hogyo* roof—in the context of increasing visual knowledge of Japanese architecture through Japanese entries in American World's Fairs. San Luis Obispo's *irimoya* roofs, a number of which are bellcast, also emphasize this origin (see the Hazzard and Minnie Root House at 770 Islay, figs. 52a and b; the Master List Strickland House at 1152 Buchon in the main application, the Contributing List Page House at 1344 Mill, and the Master List Payne House at 1144 Palm).

**Deep, soffited eaves** All but 5 of the 57 bungalows in the complete data set appear to have soffits or closed eaves, the exceptions including the overtly *japoniste* 1705 Santa Rosa (fig. 42, bellcast roof), 1535 Nipomo (fig. 56, *irimoya* roof), 770 Islay (figs. 51a. and b, *irimoya* and bellcast roof), and 1054 Islay (fig. 13, *torii*-inspired entry arch), all of which have exposed rafter tails, whether faux or not. In addition, 5 of the soffited houses have faux rafter tails attached to the soffits for decorative effect. Thus the Brecheen House is not particularly rare for the clean lines of its soffited eaves.

The Brecheen House is unique, however, for having the furthest extending eaves—in comparison to its clad wall height—among all 57 bungalows, accentuating its linear horizontality. The Brecheen house's eave-to-wall ratio is 1 to 4, compared to 1 to 4.5 for the data set's *irimoya* roofs, to as low as 1 to 7 for the more traditional Colonial Revival bungalows.



**Complex window geometry** One of the most unusual and skillfully designed features of the Brecheen House is its street façade windows, comprising a single window in the porch and triple window on the bay, the latter consisting of a central window identical in size and configuration to the porch window, flanked by windows of half the width and half the number of rectangular muntined lights. This achieves the balance of a semi-octagonal bay window but flush to the wall rather than protruding, to emphasize planarity. The muntined upper sashes are half the height of the lower plate-glass sashes, and all sashes are functioning, with meeting rails of the same height, emphasizing horizontal lines. Head and sill extend slightly to the side, a further subtle accentuation of horizontality.

This flush, triple-window arrangement is rare, its details unique. In the 57 bungalows, 22 (39%) of the windows on asymmetric bays are protruding semi-octagons, a common feature of Colonial Revival (though not of actual Colonial) houses. Another 17 (30%) are single sash windows, 9 (16%) double windows, and only 5 (9%) triple windows flush to the wall, as in the Brecheen House. The 4 symmetrical bungalows all have flush single or double windows.

The other 4 houses with—like the Brecheen House—flush triple windows treat them with dramatically less precision and creativity. 1042 Pismo (fig. 47) has no clear proportional relation between its central and side windows, the upper and lower sashes are the same height, and the porch window is obscured by subsequent enclosure, so any relationship is unclear. The triple window at 1051 Buchon (fig. 15) also lacks a clear proportion between center and sides, the bar across its nonfunctioning center window doesn't match the height of the meeting bars of the side sash windows, its double porch window doesn't echo elements of the triple window on the bay, and all the panes are plain plate glass.

The triple windows at 663 and 657 Pismo (figs. 5 and 6) do have side sashes half the width of the central sash, as with the Brecheen House, but in each case triple windows are merely duplicated in bay and porch, rather than the Brecheen House's creative echo of its single window on the porch in the center of its triple window on the bay. Decorative muntins at 663 Pismo and leading at 657 Pismo are reserved for the upper part of the nonfunctioning center windows, and the bars separating the decorative from the plate-glass sections (two-thirds up the window) are a different height than the meeting rails of the sashes (halfway up). Muntined diamond panes at 663 and leaded diamond-topped panes at 657 don't contribute horizontal linearity. They are not bad design, but they are—compared to the precise geometry of the Brecheen House fenestration—careless.



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*The flush triple windows of 1051 Buchon (top left), 1042 Pismo (bottom left), and 657 Pismo (above) do not match the attention to proportion, rhythm, and continuity of the Brecheen House triple window (below).*



The Brecheen House's rectangular muntined lights are rare. 32 (56%) of the 57 bungalows have plain plate glass sash windows, 12 (21%) have diamond-topped vertical lights, and only 4 (7%) have rectangular lights. But the Brecheen lights are not random: they have an aesthetic function directly related to their form and proportions: nearly double in height to width, they almost exactly echo the proportions of the porch and central bay windows themselves, providing a subliminal geometric harmony.



Stacked double, twelve across, and repeated on the porch at six across, their effect is rhythmic horizontality. Compare the off-square lights in only the center window of 1042 Pismo, a perfunctory attempt at decoration with no thought to greater structural effect.

Taken together, the geometry of the windows on the Brecheen façade is varied but unified, aesthetically subtle but forceful, and entirely unique in its relentless attention to geometric

detail among the 57 Contributing List Colonial Revival bungalows—or for that matter the Master List Colonial Revival houses—in the Old Town Historic District.

**Invisible door** The Brecheen House hides its door by turning it to the side, one of only 7 (12%) in the complete data set that do so, leaving the singular window to center and dominate the porch wall, just as its twin centers and dominates the bay.

**Single column** All 57 bungalows have (or had) porch columns, ranging from a maximum of 8 to a minimum of 1. There are 43% with 2 columns, 23% with 3, and 14% with 4 columns. Only 9% have a single-column design, and in the 4 cases apart from the Brecheen House, the single-columned porch is a minimal entry porch rather than, as with the Brecheen House, a wide porch for sitting.



*Brecheen porch*



*1044 Islay, one of two single-column duplex entries*



*1533 Osos entry porch*

The Brecheen porch's single, slightly bulging Tuscan column has a triple function: to express (1) minimalism and (2) counterpoint and (3) not block the view of the aesthetically crucial porch window and its relationship to the center window on the bay.

59% of the data set use Tuscan columns, but it's nonetheless an intentional choice of the Brecheen designer: projecting, like the bellcast roof, a combined linearity and curvilinearity, along with Neoclassical reference that was considered compatible with *Japonisme* (e.g., 1053 Islay [fig. 13] uses square columns with Tuscan base and capital to form a Japanese *torii*-inspired entry arch). Of the 6 bungalows of the Brecheen subtype 6, 3 use Tuscan columns; 2, busier spindle columns; and 1, plain 4x4 posts. 12 (21%) of the bungalows in the overall data set use spindle columns, and 12 use the square columns better known on contemporary Craftsman houses, some of them in elephant leg form. Of these, the Tuscan column is clearly the apposite choice for the Brecheen House.

**Solid parapet** Like 38 (67%) of examples of the data set, the Brecheen House has a solid porch parapet rather than an open balustrade (15, or 26%) (others, altered, are unknown). So the solid parapet is not rare but is still an architectural choice that enhances linearity, horizontality, and streamlining.



**Frieze, architrave, corner boards, and baseboard** Key to the house's streamlined effect is the linearity and unity of its wide accent boards against the narrow novelty siding.

A blank frieze below the eaves occurs in 43 (75%) of the data set. 37 (68%) have defined corner boards, and 39% have defined boards for the base of the wood wall. Very rare, however, is a façade-wide architrave below the frieze: the Brecheen House is one of only 6 (11%) that have them, 3 of these from subtype 6.



As well, the Brecheen House is 1 of only 2 bungalows employing frieze, architrave, base, *and* corner board. The other is Charles Strickland's 1904 *japoniste* Colonial Revival Hazzard and Minnie Root House at 770 Islay (figs. 52a and b), a forerunner to Strickland's own 1906–1907 *japoniste* Colonial Revival Master List house at 1152 Buchon. The Root House, like the Brecheen House, is a strong candidate for Master Listing, though with less integrity than the Brecheen House because of new fenestration.

The Brecheen House's unique innovation is to use the same width of board for architrave, corner boards, and base to create a unifying and streamlining frame for street and side façades. The window casings also use the same width, further accentuating the unity.

**Integrity** No example of the Brecheen House's subtype 6—the pedimentless and dormerless bungalow—is on the Old Town Historic District's Master List. Of the 6 possible Contributing List candidates, 1042 Pismo had its porch enclosed in the 1930s or '40s, 880 Buchon has had a deck added to the front, 1527 Pismo has new fenestration on its façade, and 1017 Islay has an overtopping stucco addition that has subsumed part of the original house. There is evidence that 878 Islay was moved from a different location, and has an addition on the side. Of the 6 of subtype 6, the Brecheen House is not only the best-



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designed example, in its original location and with an addition conforming to the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation—at the rear, differentiated, and compatible in materials; features; size, scale, and proportion; and massing—it retains the best integrity to communicate its significance.

## Conclusion

Analyzing the complete data set of 57 Old Town Historic District Contributing List Colonial Revival bungalows allows us to define what is unique and important in the Brecheen House. As Mies said, “God is in the details.” The anonymous designer of the Brecheen House had a keen sense of the streamlined aesthetic goal of the Colonial Revival and the potential of the small suburban bungalow within that genre. But the designer also had the extraordinary command of rare and unique structural and decorative detail—from roof pitch to corner board width—to make sure the result would demonstrate, as Mies also said, “Less is more.”

The Contributing List and Master List data sets, in juxtaposition, also demonstrate that admission to the Old Town Historic District’s Master List was largely a matter of size, abundance of decorative features, and proximity to Nob Hill. The Brecheen House—as the distillation of streamline Colonial bungalow architecture at the opposite end of the district—was destined to be excluded. It may be the finest but is not the only bungalow that merits Master List protection for embodying a character-defining style of San Luis architecture. After forty years, we need to take a more systematic look.



*The 1907 Brecheen House may have been influenced by Prairie style aesthetics (as displayed in the 1912 Airplane House below), but Purcell and Elmslie may equally have borrowed from the bellcast roof, deep eaves, and clustered windows of japoniste Streamline Colonial*

