



Libraries through the lens

Mechanics' Institute San Francisco

OUR first Libraries through the lens of 2020 takes us back to the end of the California Gold Rush and the emergence of the Mechanics' Institute San Francisco.

Thomas Guignard explains how the institute helped fill a vacuum left by the Gold Rush when many prospectors found themselves with few skills, no gold and limited options. Thomas says: "Far from the sophisticated tech heaven it is today, California was a pretty wild place for most of the 19th century. The end of the Gold Rush in the 1850s left behind a large unskilled population with no work prospects once the mines closed.

"A place hastily built for adventurers and fortune-seekers, California didn't have

time for libraries or learning institutions, so options to learn a new trade were very limited. To mitigate this situation, the Mechanics' Institute began offering classes in trades and engineering in 1854 with a grand total of four books and a chess room. By the beginning of the 20th century, the Institute had grown in size and importance, and had its own building in downtown San Francisco. Unfortunately, that building was entirely destroyed by the earthquake and subsequent fires of 1906."

That fire meant the institute required a new home, and in 1910 it moved into the Albert Pissis designed building. The architect was one of the first Americans to attend the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Thomas says: "With the city of San Fran-

cisco in full economic boom, the Institute briefly considered cashing out on their prime downtown property and moving to the suburbs. Instead, they opted to design their new home to include rental offices and street-level retail, correctly predicting that rental income would ensure a more stable future than membership fees.

"Today, the Mechanics' Institute is still a member-run organisation, its library and chess room are as beloved as ever. The general public is welcome to come and have a look at no charge, while using the collections and facilities requires an affordable yearly membership. Visitors to San Francisco should definitely consider the free weekly tour offered every Wednesday at noon."