

## Chapter 20

### **REBUILDING THE HOUSE OF HOSPITALITY**



George W. Marston put the case for the preservation of the temporary Exposition buildings in Balboa Park most compelling in 1922 when he wrote

You may prove what you will in facts and figures about the shaky old buildings; the only answer is “They shall not pass.” Somehow, without knowing how to explain it, we are instinctively, subconsciously, incurably in love with them and will not give them up. It’s the grand emotion and is founded, I think, on something real and vital. (1)

Marston was not saying that the Exposition buildings were great architecture nor that they represented great history. Instead they were surrogates for great architecture and great history. They suggested more than they delivered.

San Diegans were in a quagmire. Though they knew the buildings were ephemeral, they wanted to keep them. They realized they had something potent and different. And they were proud of what they had.

G. Aubrey Davidson president of the Panama-California Exposition Corporation, expressed the common thought regarding the buildings when at the inauguration of the Exposition, January 1, 1915, he said

Here is pictured in this happy combination of splendid temples, the story of the friars, the thrilling tale of the pioneers, the orderly conquest of commerce, coupled with the hopes of an El Dorado where life can expand in this fragrant land of opportunity. It is indeed a permanent city and every building fits into the picture.(2)

Professor of decorative design Eugen Neuhaus, like architects Bertram Goodhue, Carleton Winslow, and Frank P. Allen, Jr., was critical of the temporary buildings. Unlike the architects, he thought most of them should be preserved.

One by one I hope to see such buildings as the Sacramento Valley Building replaced just as they stand today, in permanent material, to satisfy the growing need for Museum Buildings. One by one I hope to see many of them replaced to demonstrate the permanent value of the art of the city planner, which is so convincing here in its practical and aesthetic aspects alike.] (3)

The rebuilding in 1997 of the 1915 Foreign Arts Building (1935 House of Hospitality) represents the latest success story in preserving Exposition structures. In a technical sense, the building was not actually preserved as the building was demolished and a new one recreated to take the place of the old. San Diegans in general are elated that a semblance of the old building again stands in Balboa Park. Restorers of the building have told them that everything they liked in the old building has been recreated in the new and that no mistakes were made.

Since architect Carleton M. Winslow, on his own and under Bertram Goodhue's direction, designed the building in a Spanish-Renaissance (more accurately Plateresque) style, it has been said that the style of the building is its most original feature. This was never entirely true as Spanish-Renaissance buildings were put up for the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition of 1901 and the San Francisco Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915.(4)

The exterior was decorated with real and imagined coats of arms of the countries of Latin American in anticipation that these countries would send exhibits. The anticipation did not come about, as the countries were poor and the rival San Francisco Exposition, where many of these countries

exhibited, was an international Exposition whereas the San Diego Exposition was a regional fair.

In the casual atmosphere that prevailed in San Diego—where like philosophers, architects were on holiday—Winslow joyfully drew up plans for the Foreign Arts Building. His was a slapdash, rather than a studied performance.

The principal facade facing the Plaza de Panama on the west borrowed details from the sixteenth century Plateresque-style facade of the Hospital of Santa Cruz in Toledo. As most San Diegans had never seen the Hospital of Santa Cruz, they did not know how its details were transmuted into the building in Balboa Park. At any rate, the most evocative detail—a sculpture above the portal showing the Adoration of the Cross—was not on the Foreign Arts Building as it conveyed a somber religious message out of character with the zestful atmosphere of an Exposition.

To the left of the facade, a second-level pergola supported a hanging garden while on the right a heavily-ornamented tower with prominent pinnacles extended the building's masses to a green border adjoining El Prado, the main Exposition street. Winslow designed the building as part of an overall picture. Across El Prado on the north, the Home Economy Building, also facing the Plaza de Panama, provided a foil for the Foreign Arts Building. Its tower and pergola had their counterparts on the Foreign Arts Building, and its center entrance, derived from Palace of the Count of Heras in Mexico City, was different enough to attract attention. Winslow transplanted the tower of the Palace of the Count of Monterey in Spain to the Home Economy Building, a transplantation architects had done many times before.

The Prado section of the Foreign Arts Building consisted of a first floor arcade surmounted by what seemed to be three stories that were only two. The arcade was duplicated in the arcade of the Home Economy Building. Upper levels on the Prado side of the Foreign Arts Building continued the shield and emblem motifs on the west facade. A squat compact tower at the northeast end of the building balanced a tower with grotesque pinnacles on the Commerce and Industries Building a few feet to the east.

Neuhaus limited his remarks about the Foreign Arts Building to brief comments about the pinnacles on the tower and a favorable comment about the decorative treatment of windows on an upper story.(5) Architect Winslow wished he had exercised more restraint in the application of ornament and had left the cornices bare.(6)

The Foreign Arts Building cost the Panama-California Exposition Corporation \$54,682.73.(7) Director of Works Frank P. Allen, Jr. supervised construction. H. R. Schmohl and family executed the ornament after drawings prepared by Winslow. (8) Winslow probably left the curlicues on the frieze to Schmohl's special care. Watanabe and Shibada, importers from San Francisco, mounted the largest exhibit in the building, an array of commercial products from Japan and China. Italian and Russian importers also displayed arts and crafts from their respective countries.(9)

Planting around the Foreign Arts Building in 1915 was no different from planting around other temporary buildings along El Prado. It consisted of orderly rows of Blackwood acacias groomed to look like candles that were interrupted at strategic points by Italian cypresses. Grass and flowers grew in front of the trees. Behind them a hedge of *Coprosma* covered the railing between the posts of the arcades and *Bignonia* and *Bougainvillea* hung down from the pergolas or clamored up the walls of the arcades. Unlike monochrome palaces in Spain and Mexico, color from the plants gave the building a sprightly air.

U.S. Navy sailors used the Foreign Arts Building as sleeping quarters during World War I and the Museum of Natural History occupied the building in 1920-1922. As the defects of the building were obvious, it was unoccupied most of the time. While the Natural History Museum occupied the building, San Diego artist C. A. Fries painted a background of mountains and forests on a broad expanse of the walls.(10)

Aware of the inadequacies of the building, San Diego city inspectors called for its demolition. After each condemnation, officials appointed committees to show how the building could be preserved.(11)

Matters came to a head when Marston made his appeal for funds for temporary repairs in 1922. After the Southern California Counties Building burned down on November 25, 1925, it was replaced by the Natural History Museum. Deciding to continue in a restored Foreign Arts Building, the

Women's Committee that ran the Southern California Counties Building appointed San Diego architect Richard Requa to oversee restoration of the building.(12) Records get hazy because the City of San Diego decided to hold the California-Pacific International Exposition in 1934 as the restoration was getting started. The women surrendered the building so the Exposition could use it.(13)

Officials renamed the Foreign Arts Building the House of Hospitality so it could serve in 1935-1936 as the reception center for the California-Pacific International Exposition. Requa shortened the building by chopping off a southern section that was about to collapse, using glass salvaged from skylights to repair broken windows on other park buildings.(14) He replaced wood foundations with concrete, repaired roofs, waterproofed the exterior, and remodeled and replaced exterior plaster decorations.(15) His major achievement was to design a garden based on the Garden of the Casa del Rey Moro in Ronda, Spain to replace the section he had demolished. The Balboa Park garden was smaller than its prototype in Spain. It consisted of three terraces leading to a fountain shaded by a pepper tree on the edge of a canyon that was a mere drop compared to the steep declivity at Ronda.(16)

Opinions differ about whether Requa or Sam Hamill, an architect who worked for him, executed the patio in the House of Hospitality that had been hollowed out of a large enclosed hall. It is likely that Requa supplied Hamill with photographs he had taken of the patio of the State Museum in Guadalajara Mexico, which Hamill used as his model for the patio's Tuscan-style arcades.(17) As supervising architect of the Exposition, Requa could not have executed all its details.(18)

Juan Larrinaga a Hollywood set artist and architectural renderer, helped Hamill by designing lanterns and chandeliers for the interior of the House of Hospitality. He used Upson board to suggest more substantial materials. Hamill suggested appointing sculptor Donal Hord, to execute the Woman of Tehuantepec which he placed in the center of the patio and surrounded with banana and other subtropical plants.

Night lighting in 1935 was different from lighting in 1915 which was used primarily to orient visitors, to subdue and to create shadows, and to highlight the deep relief. H. O. Davis supervised lighting in 1935. He gave Maxfield Parrish, a painter of fantasy images in luminous bold colors, as his inspiration.(19) Rather than directing lights on the buildings, which in the

Palisades had plain walls and on El Prado walls encrusted with ornament, Davis directed his lights on plants in front of buildings. Instead of using the blacks and whites of 1915, he used a variety of tinted colors. The presence of long reflecting pools in the Plaza de Panama which captured and inverted the images of nearby buildings must have played a role in Davis's choice of lighting for the House of Hospitality.

In late 1935 Requa recommended that lighting on the House of Hospitality and other buildings along El Prado be focused on main entrances and on entrances behind arcades. Violet, blue and green colors from the lower end of the spectrum would be directed to the right and left of entrances, presumably not to overwhelm brighter lights at the entrances.(20)

Extant black and white photographs do not show the extent of the lighting on the Plaza de Panama. Similarly, colored postcards are more glamorous than conditions allowed.

Problems of lighting are discussed here because, when the House of Hospitality was rebuilt in 1997, attempts were made to illuminate the exterior, using Maxfield Parrish's paintings as a guide.(21)

Exact costs of rehabilitating the House of Hospitality for the California Pacific International Exposition cannot be determined as funds came from many sources including the Women's Committee, the City of San Diego, the State of California, and federal work relief agencies. Costs must have exceeded \$115, 965 as this was the amount known to have been contributed by auxiliary organizations.(22)

The House of Hospitality has many rooms on its two floors. Principal rooms on the first level were the auditorium seating 600, the Cafe del Rey Moro, the Sala de Oro, and a loggia. A small auditorium, a reception loggia, the Flamingo Room, a men's lounge, studios, and rooms used by the Federation of State Societies occupied the second level.

Who did what is uncertain as the Women's Committee appointed decorators and artists to furnish the building. In 1935, Katherine Morrison Kahle chose gold draperies and gold rugs and contrasting light and dark peach and blue-green upholstery for the Sala de Oro on the first floor. She also designed a reception room in blue-green, gold and faded reds and a men's lounge in browns, tans and lacquer red on the second floor.(23) The

women called the reception room the “Mexican loggia” because plants growing in glazed pottery jars reproduced similar features in wealthy Mexican homes. Unknown craftspeople copied Gothic decoration in the cloisters of the 14th century monastery of Montesia, a Dominican convent in Barcelona, on the ceiling and doors of the Sala de Oro.(24)

In 1936, artists Alice Klauber and Esther Barney designed the Flamingo Room on the second floor with images of pink flamingoes on two wall hangings. Barney also painted a screen with formalized patterns of the banana plant for the upstairs loggia, a screen with a luxurious vine bearing blossoms in the shape of cups of gold for the Sala de Oro, (25) and three murals of orange trees for the Cafe del Rey Moro. In 1995, workers discovered Barney’s murals behind a wall and a cover of paint.(26) Restorer Wayne Donaldson did not replicate the murals during the 1995-1997 rebuilding. Barney, Malcolm McDowell, Christopher Hobbs and Daniel Dickey decorated window panels in the Cafe del Rey Moro with semitropical fruits against a background of banana leaves. The decorators used a palm stencil on a niche in the west wall and three representations (presumably stencils) of golden apple trees between glass doors on the south. Workers in 1936 enclosed the upstairs loggia with glass. Conjectures that Juan Larrinaga designed stencil work for the House of Hospitality are conjectures.

The Park Department in late 1935 decided to get rid of Blackwood acacias along El Prado. Park superintendent John Morley wanted to replace them with Queen Palms. He did this sporadically. For some reason, Morley thought the trunks of palms could be improved if they were covered with vines. The effect was as disconcerting as painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa. At this point, El Prado planting got chaotic. Photographs are skimpy, but, from empirical evidence, eucalyptuses, conifers, palms, cycads, ferns, vines, and fruit trees were planted indiscriminately. Growing fast and wild, the trees prevented people from seeing the buildings behind them and undermined the buildings’ foundations. The City was in a bind. It either admired the architectural detail or it did not. Requa talked as if the planting were an improvement over the florid ornament as it represented the real thing.(27)

The Balboa Auditorium Association, composed of women, resumed operation of the House of Hospitality after the Exposition. The Association rented out the auditorium for lectures and rooms and facilities to clubs and

conducted a restaurant in the dining room and on the terraces. Unpaid members of the Association paid a secretary \$150 a month and a janitor, who lived in the building \$100 a month.(28)

The United States Navy occupied the House of Hospitality during World War II.(29) Newspapers claimed the nurses quartered there did not make many changes. The nurses may not have done so, but the U.S. Navy did as Naval personnel converted the auditorium into cubicles containing double-deck single beds and into a lounge that saw double duty as a place for dancing. They closed archways on the upper balcony turning the space into a beauty shop and put partitions in the lower level Sala de Oro so that it could be used by administrative staff.(30) Most distracting of all, they extended a maze of pipes and electrical wiring throughout the building.(31)

After the war the Women's Committee came back.(32) In 1947, City Manager Fred A. Rhodes recommended demolishing the House of Hospitality and replacing it with a new building. The City chose, instead, to use \$75,000 received from the U.S. Navy to patch up the outside and to make repairs to the interior. Saying that they were restoring the building to its prewar beauty, architect William Templeton Johnson and contractors Hazard and Slaughter put plaster board on ceilings, covering up their stenciled wood beams and coffered detailing.(33) In the mid-1950's, architect George Hatch made major changes to the Cafe del Rey Moro, its patio entrance and its south exit to the garden. (34) Apart from excisions and extensions in the Cafe del Rey Moro, most changes were decorative rather than structural until 1967 when the Junior League decided to redo the building.(35) While Junior Leaguers were undoubtedly eager, their changes were mild compared to changes that Sue Cox, an owner of the Cafe del Rey Moro, did to the tune of \$40,000 in 1975.(36) At this juncture the design of the interior was farthest away from its 1935-1936 appearance.

People considered the Cafe del Rey Moro to be the main occupant of the building.(37) The restaurant and its attached garden have been the scenes of many weddings.] (38) After 1937 management shifted from the Women's Committee to the House of Hospitality Association. A professional manager leased office and banquet space and secured volunteer staffing for an Information Center in compliance with regulations set by the Park Department and the City Manager. Politicians complained about the pro-environmental activities of Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 and the Sierra Club and compelled them to leave the building.

Having played a pivotal role in the preservation of the Casa del Prado (1915 Varied Industries and Food Products Building), the Casa de Balboa (1915 Commerce and Industries Building), and the House of Charm (1915 Indian Arts Building), the Committee of 100 was concerned about the deterioration of the House of Hospitality. In 1983, the Committee hired architect Wayne Donaldson to oversee repairs. He in turn hired Architectural Ornamentation Association to strip off 12 coats of paint on the west entrance of the building, to repair crumbling plaster, and to replace termite-ridden beams. He used “hydrocal,” a cement-based plaster, to fabricate missing flags, torches, lances and shields. The project, which cost the Committee \$31,000, was not realistic as the building was living on borrowed time.(39)

In 1987 San Diego voters turned down bond issues for Mission Bay and Balboa Park that included \$11.5 million to renovate the House of Hospitality and sums augmenting to \$20.0 million for the renovation of the House of Charm, the Balboa Park Club, the Museum of Man, the Casa de Balboa, the Old Globe Theater complex, the Federal Building, and the Palisades Building.(40)

The House of Hospitality continued to deteriorate. Ornament dropping from cornices and facades was so hazardous that a marquee had to be built to keep it from injuring passers-by.

A Precise Plan for the Central Mesa completed in 1991 gave top priority to the restoration of the House of Hospitality. (41) Knowing that it could not get the votes to approve a bond, the San Diego City Council in 1991 agreed to dedicate one-cent of a nine-cent hotel-motel room tax to Balboa Park.(42)

The San Diego City Council in 1993 appointed Wayne Donaldson to draw up plans for rebuilding the House of Hospitality.(43) The project cost the city \$15.5 million with the money coming from a series of revenue bonds to be repaid with part of the proceeds of the hotel-motel room tax. Historic preservationists in San Diego and representatives from the United States Department of the Interior began debating the merits of restoring versus rebuilding the structure, though it should have been obvious to them that the only alternative was reconstruction.(44)

With help from art historian Will Chandler, restoration expert Dan Tarnoveanu, art conservator Nathan Zakheim, the lighting firm of Gibson and Gibson, contractor Soltek Construction, landscape architects Garbini and Garbini, and project architect David Marshall, Donaldson attempted to rebuild the House of Hospitality as it looked in 1935. This did not entail much more than duplicating the exterior. It did, however involve considerable research and some guesswork regarding the interior. His assistants discovered hidden, partially obliterated stencil work on walls and beams, and found some of Larrinaga's simulated fixtures. Unlike the original building, the new building would be supported by structural steel and would include a full basement. (45)

In using glass fiber-reinforced concrete for ornamental details originally composed of plaster and hemp, Donaldson altered their color and appearance. The material one uses affects the texture, color, and permanence of the articles created.(46) The House of Hospitality now has a bright, luminescent color that is stronger than that on other buildings along El Prado and in the Plaza de Panama. (In 1915 all the temporary buildings were the same ivory color.) Since the Home Economy Building which had the same scale and cornice line as the House of Hospitality was replaced by the small, boxlike Timken Museum of Art in 1965, the House of Hospitality no longer has a companion building with which to engage in a companionable exchange. Like a dismembered Captain Ahab, it stands alone.

The City of San Diego has not learned the lessons taught by its history. For the most part, eucalyptuses have been removed from El Prado, but palms, cypresses, cedars, twisted junipers, cycads, and ornamental fruit trees have taken their place. Tall trees again make puny the towers behind them.

In 1976 a clash occurred between the Facilities Committee that wanted to get rid of a projecting entrance to the arcades at the northwest corner of the House of Hospitality and the Balboa Park Committee that wanted to keep the entrance and get rid of the trees.(47) Considering the rapid growth of trees in Balboa Park, the same clash is likely to recur within the next ten years.

It is to be hoped that historic preservation standards are now so tight that the Junior League, interior decorators, and the managers of the misnamed "Terrace on El Prado" restaurant will not again be allowed to

show how creative they are by despoiling the interiors of the House of Hospitality. A proliferation of advertisements outside the museums in Balboa Park does not forebode well for the old-world appearance of the House of Hospitality.

San Diegans old enough to remember the California-Pacific International Exposition are being treated to a case of *deja vu*. The adage "you can't go home again" is, however, applicable for not only are memories faulty but attempts to re-create a past decor with 100 percent accuracy are futile. Black and white photographs of the interiors of the Sala de Oro, the Flamingo Room, upstairs loggias, and downstairs salons give only glimpses of their furnishings and say nothing about the colors. Newspaper descriptions of drapes, rugs, upholstery, and furniture are also unreliable. Considering then the practical impossibility of turning the clock back, Wayne Donaldson's architectural firm has accomplished wonders in approximating past conditions. In recognition of the firm's efforts, it has received many accolades, among which awards from the Governor of California, the California Council of the American Institute of Architects, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation testified to the firm's professionalism, on-site inspections, and attention to detail.

George W. Marston saw great romance in the Exposition structures along El Prado. Since he had been in Spain, he must have known how intriguing and significant, the real castles and gardens were. He also knew that the Spanish and Spanish Colonial appearance of El Prado afforded San Diegans escape from unpleasant realities. It is this vision of beauty, romance and mystery that San Diegans have sought to preserve.

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#### NOTES

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9. *San Diego Union*, August 20, 1914, II, 9.
10. *San Diego Union*, December 18, 1920, 5.
11. *San Diego Union*, April 29, 1933, 1.
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13. *San Diego Union*, March 29, 1936, II, 11.
14. *San Diego Union*, September 19, 1933, 9.
15. *San Diego Union*, September 7, 1933, II, 1.
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22. *San Diego Union*, May 19, 1933, 1.
23. *San Diego Sun*, May 21, 1935, D-2.
24. *San Diego Union*, February 24, 1935, Society-Club, 7.
25. *San Diego Union*, March 29, 1936, II, 11.
26. *San Diego Union-Tribune*, October 30, 1995, D-1. This article gives Mrs. Clark (Evelyn) Cavenee as the painter of the murals of the orange trees. The *San Diego Union*, Exposition Edition, March 29, 1936, II, 11, gives Esther Barney as the painter of the murals, a more likely designation as Mrs. Cavenee was not an artist.
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28. *San Diego Union*, October 16, 1938, A-11.
29. *San Diego Union*, August 22, 1943, A-3.
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37. *San Diego Tribune*, July 27, 1987, B-1.
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