

THE JACOBS/CIVITAS PLAN FOR THE PLAZA DE PANAMA

San Diego citizens and consultants have debated the problem of automobile traffic and parking in the Exposition portions of Balboa Park even before the Panama-California Exposition opened on January 1, 1915. The first prominent opponent of locating the Exposition on the central mesa section of Balboa Park was John Charles Olmsted, the landscape architect who had been appointed to layout the grounds for the Panama-California Exposition. Landscape architect John Nolen also pointed out the mistake of putting the Exposition complex on the central mesa, though he praised the Exposition architecture and its plazas which provided places for public assembly and highlighted the architecture of the buildings. Nolen was the first to propose bypass roads that would divert automobile traffic from El Prado, the Exposition's main avenue, by way of north and south routes. This plan ran afoul of opposition from the San Diego Zoo. Still later the planning firm of Harland Bartholomew and Associates and landscape architects Ron Pekarek and Vicki Estrada proposed schemes that would bring automobiles away from El Prado and its plazas and would provide ample parking spaces and/or garages for automobiles in locations that would not impede the flow of pedestrians. These schemes were opposed by some who did not want to surrender the accessibility afforded to them by automobiles and by institutions in the park that feared a decline in visitor attendance. In the case of Vicki Estrada his Master Plan for the central mesa was actually adopted by the San Diego City Council in 1989. The City Council's adoption was meaningless, however, as nothing was done to implement Estrada's traffic and parking proposals and money for this purpose was siphoned off for convention use.

Now comes Dr. Irwin Jacobs who has proposed another plan to divert traffic away from El Prado. Dr. Jacobs proposes a bypass bridge at the eastern end of Cabrillo Bridge that would divert automobiles away from the Plaza de Panama by way of a lot south of Alcazar Garden that would funnel automobiles to underground parking south of the Spreckels Organ Pavilion. An underground parking structure is a feature of Vicki Estrada's Master Plan for the Central Mesa.

If Dr. Jacob's plan, that has been vetted by landscape and planning firm CIVITAS, were to be accepted, the Plaza de Panama would revert to its use during the 1915-16 Panama-California Exposition as a pedestrian plaza where people could take in attractions that would be added based on public suggestions and on prototypes of successful plazas elsewhere. Project for Public Spaces a national organization devoted to the betterment of public spaces in the United States, has endorsed the concept of an automobile-free Plaza de Panama and has effusively praised Balboa Park as one of the greatest public parks in the world.

The Dr. Jacobs/CIVITAS plan has been opposed by some citizens who fear that an underground parking structure would cost them money and would serve as a precedent for additional paid parking in Balboa Park. This now mumbling opposition would be expected to grow if the Jacobs/CIVITAS plan should survive the established stages for public scrutiny.

The principal objection to the Jacobs/CIVITAS plan is currently coming from SOHO, the Save Our Heritage Organization, with backing from a park committee of Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 and with the concurrence of the Committee of 100, whose board of directors favors extending the automobile-free zone to the western end of Cabrillo Bridge. SOHO is concerned that the bypass bridge would ruin the historic appearance of Cabrillo Bridge by adding an

unsightly bypass. Its objection is thus primarily historic though it also objects on esthetic grounds. Traffic engineers might differ with SOHO's esthetic conclusions and be able to show where changes to nineteenth-century bridges have enhanced their appearance and utility.

Reservations about the Jacobs/CIVITAS plan should not be taken lightly as the bypass would indeed be a non-historic intrusion if by "historic" one means the western Cabrillo Bridge entrance to El Prado as it appeared in 1915. Judging from an actual survey of the grounds in question today the western approach to El Prado no longer looks as it did in 1915; however, changes can be attributed to the growth of eucalyptus and palms and not to man-made alterations. SOHO knows how to wage preservation campaigns in San Diego and how to engender emotional expressions of outrage. Among their tactics is to get the Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places to condemn the Jacobs/CIVITAS plan. It remains to be seen if the Department of the Interior will be involved in a classic local battle of "ancients versus moderns".

There is only one way that the Plaza de Panama can be opened to unrestricted public enjoyment and that is by the removal of automobile traffic lanes and automobile parking spaces. To suggest, as does some members of Citizens Coordinate for Century 3, that all automobile ingress to El Prado and the Palisades should be by the way of Park Boulevard with a parking structure on the site of the former parking lot for the Naval Hospital is absurd for it ignores the need of visitors and citizens who live on the west-side of Balboa Park, a region that stretches from Sixth Avenue to La Jolla. While many of the people living in this region may use alternate routes afforded by freeway exchanges, an overwhelming number of people living in this region enter El Prado by way of Cabrillo Bridge. To suggest that they can find a way to park their automobiles to the west of Balboa Park and that they can enter the park by means of a frequently running shuttle is absurd. Even to think of a parking structure on the west side of Balboa Park to accommodate automobiles that would displace present "historic" landscaping is the height of irresponsibility and vandalism.

In view then of the physical problems entailed by preventing automobiles from crossing over the Cabrillo Bridge, it is well to look at feasible alternatives if one wishes to get rid of automobiles on the Plaza de Panama. **The only feasible alternative is the bypass bridge.** The question then is whether this change in the appearance of the bridge and of the grounds in Balboa Park that would be used for a bypass road is worth re-creating the "historic" 1915 appearance of the Plaza de Panama. Along with CIVITAS, academic historians in San Diego and residents on the Westside of Balboa Park, this writer maintains the replenished use of the Plaza de Panama is worth the monetary and physical price. If the Jacobs/CIVITAS plan is rejected the Plaza de Panama will still serve as the only traffic route into the west side of El Prado. Even if parking spaces are eliminated on the plaza, automobiles will still infringe on the movement of pedestrians. In other words, the citizens of San Diego will be forced to accept the status quo and SOHO and its supporting organizations will have themselves to blame for the unsightly and dangerous gridlock that now exists on the Plaza de Panama.

When the citizens of San Diego are presented with a plan that would increase the attractiveness of the central portion of Balboa Park and that is supported by the institutions that border El Prado it is folly not to accept this plan which may cost citizens a small fee for parking.

As the City of San Diego has shown itself incapable of paying for the maintenance of Balboa Park, it is up to citizens to up the ante or to watch their park deteriorate into a wasteland and asphalt graveyard. Like so many well-thought out plans for civic improvement that are meant to increase pedestrian use and enjoyment of Balboa Park, it is stupidity of the highest order to allow obstructionists to prevent this plan from accomplishing its lofty goals. Balboa Park, the “jewel of San Diego”, can once again number itself among the finest public spaces in the world and citizens can consider themselves lucky to enjoy its open-space amenities.

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