JOHN NOLEN AND BALBOA PARK

by Richard W. Amero

Town planner and landscape architect John Nolen did not begin to address the problems of Balboa Park until 1925 when he was hired by the San Diego City Planning Commission, the Harbor Commission, and the Park Commission to produce a master plan for the City of San Diego and a plan to assuage irregularities in Balboa Park.

In 1907, at the behest of the San Diego Art Association and the Chamber of Commerce, Nolen produced his first plan for the improvement of San Diego. This plan was concerned with the infrastructure of the town and was only indirectly aware of the City Park (renamed Balboa Park on October 10, 1910).

San Diego did not need Nolen to plan Balboa Park as Samuel Parsons, Jr., of New York City, had been appointed to suggest park improvements in 1902. George Cooke, a representative of the Parsons' firm, was in San Diego and was a member of the City Improvement Committee of the Chamber of Commerce that had selected Nolen rather than George Kessler, Warren Manning, and the Olmsted Brothers, who had applied for the job of producing a plan for San Diego.

After the success of the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, enterprising cities in the United States succumbed to the notion that the transformation of their cities into cities of beauty would not only evoke admiration, but would stimulate commerce and industry. Daniel Burnham, Charles Mulford Robinson, the Olmsted Brothers, George Kessler, and John Nolen championed the City Beautiful movement as they broadened its scope to include facets ignored by the World Columbian Exposition, which was a collection of tastefully-arranged Neo- Classical exhibition palaces.

Nolen's concept of city planning, as stated by George W. Marston, was broader in scope than the creation of Imperial Roman civic plazas after the example of the Chicago Exposition.

His [Nolen's] primary purpose is to help build cities for the use, convenience and comfort of the people. The 'City Beautiful' is always in his mind, but he believes that its foundation lies in a rational treatment of all civic needs. To use his own words: "Secure beauty by organic arrangement rather than by mere embellishment or adornment." Such improvement planning involves industries, commerce, transportation, public utilities, public and private housing, and all the cultural and recreational needs of a community.

(Letter, George W. Marston to S. A. Warner, Acting Secretary, Chamber of Commerce, Battle Creek, Michigan, June 12, 1920. Marston Papers, Collection 35, Box 1, File 9, San Diego Historical Society, Research Archives).

After Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Chicago, Baltimore, Cleveland, Honolulu and

other cities had taken the lead by commissioning civic improvement schemes, leaders, such as George W. Marston, Julius Wangenheim, Melville Klauber, and G. A. Davidson, began to bestir themselves over the appearance and future of San Diego.

Like landscape architects of the time, who had been brought up on landscape principles enunciated by Frederick Law Olmsted, Nolen had become aware that expectations had changed since Olmsted had designed his parks and suburban enclaves. Great landscaped parks could still afford people opportunities to recognize their affinity with nature, but even within these great city parks and in smaller parks, people could release their energies in play. Samuel Parsons, the Olmsted Brothers, John Nolen and others began to design parks for active people that offered field houses and outdoor recreational facilities along with quieter natural beauties.

Responding to requests, Nolen's 1908 plan provided San Diego with suggestions to dramatize its main business street, then known as D Street and known as Broadway since 1913. Keeping with City Beautiful ideas, a complex of harmonious buildings around a large plaza between Front and First and C and D Streets would become the center of downtown. and would open into a 300 feet by 500 feet plaza at its west end facing San Diego harbor.

Treatment of the harbor frontage was vital. Nolen supported the dredging of the harbor, the filling in and landscaping of tidelands, the locating of commercial facilities, wharves and docks south of E Street and the laying out of pleasure facilities from D Street north to the tip of Point Loma. At the foot of Date and Elm Streets, he recommended a "paseo" that would lead from the harbor to the Date Street entrance to City Park. The "paseo" would be landscaped and would be bordered by ornate buildings.

The "paseo" and the grand plaza on D Street attracted the most controversy of the many features in Nolen's 1908 plan. His recommendation for a series of parks and playgrounds in Fort Stockton, Point Loma, Soledad Mountain, La Jolla, Torrey Pines, and along the beaches and harbor connected by boulevards intrigued San Diegans who gradually brought many of them into being, often with the help of benefactors, such as George W. Marston, D. C. Collier and Ellen Browning Scripps, or with the aid of the U.S. Government as in the Cabrillo National Monument.

Nothing was done to implement the 1908 plan. This inertia stemmed from a division in San Diego between an educated upper-class and an underclass of working people who were more anxious to secure the good things of life for themselves than to walk in spacious green pastures amidst marbled halls and from the decimating effects of high taxation for water development.

Ironically, the establishment in 1915-16 of a Spanish-Colonial complex in Balboa Park, built for the Panama-California Exposition at a cost of about $2 million, seemed to make Nolen's recommendations superfluous. The City Beautiful had arrived. It was not to be everywhere, but it was in the center of Balboa Park. To many citizens, that

was enough.

While Nolen had many cities to develop, such as Savannah, Ga. (1906), Roanoke, Va. (1907), Montclair, N..J. (1908), and Glen Ridge, N.J. (1908), he was attracted to San Diego because of its striking natural beauties, so like those of Naples and Genoa in Italy and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil with which he compared the city. In 1922, he wrote to Marston asking to be reappointed to update his recommendations.

At this juncture, San Diego had turned its attention to its harbor frontage, that had been filled in after the Panama-California Exposition to promote commerce and U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps settlement. Frank P. Allen, Jr., director of works for the Panama- California Exposition, had drawn up a plan for a waterside roadway from D Street to La Playa in Point Loma. While Allen's plans were feasible, plans for the harbor would be more impressive if they carried the imprimatur of John Nolen.

The offshoot of Nolen's renewed interest in San Diego was his 1926 plan for the city. The plan modified recommendations in the 1908 plan, including the extension of Sixth Street on the west edge of Balboa Park across Mission Valley, the construction of a 11-mile long Harbor Drive from the south city limits to the tip of Point Loma, an island offshore from the Marine Base, a Roseville yacht basin, a municipal landing field on tideland fill between Pacific Highway and Harbor Drive that was built in 1928 with voter-approved bond money, a civic center on tideland fills that was built in 1937-38 with federal relief money, landscaped connections between Balboa Park and the waterfront, parkways and parks throughout the city, a recreation area at the foot of 28th Street, and the provision for commerce and industry from the southern city boundary to Market Street.

Nolen's negotiations with San Diego officials were improved after he persuaded them to hire Kenneth Gardner, from his Cambridge office, as a planner on the staff of the city planning commission. Gardner kept Nolen informed about developments in San Diego that might open up job opportunities and that would affect the future of his plans.

Knowing that they had a professional planner responsible for a wide range of successful projects at their disposal, the San Diego Planning and Park Commission, the State County Parks and Beach Association and private citizens solicited his paid and unpaid advice on the development of Balboa and other city parks, on the construction of roads, and on the improvement of Mission Bay.

George W. Marston, who was instrumental in getting Nolen hired to produce plans for the City of San Diego and for Balboa Park, commissioned Nolen to prepare plans for Presidio Park, which he gave to San Diego on July 7, 1930. Nolen suggested a building to house historical collections to crown the hill above the old Presidio, a suggestion that led to the founding of the San Diego Historical Society in 1928 and the building, at Marston's expense, of a Presidio Park museum in 1929.

Nolen had mixed opinions about Balboa Park. As a landscape architect who adhered to the ideals of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the designers of New York City's Central Park, he knew and valued parks for their civilizing effects in large, crowded cities. As a planner, he saw at first hand that because Balboa Park was in the wrong place it created a massive obstacle to orderly transportation from downtown San Diego to the north and northeast.

He expressed his misgiving in his plan of 1908:

> It is not the purpose of this report to inquire into the justification of this [City] park—the wisdom of withdrawing permanently from use so large a tract in the heart of the city, of separating so completely the business and residence sections, of blocking transportation for twenty-two squares each way; not to estimate the inevitable cost for construction and maintenance in connection with such a property so located. These are questions, however, that the city authorities must consider. It may be advisable, also, to consider the relation of the present park boundaries to the property immediately surrounding it and the extension of the park to Fifth Street, from Date to Grape Streets, so as to give it better frontage and approach.

This is strange advice. He first scores the park for being too large; then suggests it be enlarged.

The caveats of 1908 were still on Nolen's mind when he added these cautionary words to his San Diego City Plan of 1926:

> Balboa Park is one of the largest, most unusual and strikingly beautiful parks in the world and yet, from a broad city planning point of view, considering the whole of the park problem for the City of San Diego and especially considering the other requirements of the city, such as main thoroughfares and the best utilization of all the land of the city, it might be questioned whether Balboa Park as it exists today, is fully justified. The broad extent of the Park, its shape, and some of its unfavorable boundaries, also the great cost of its development and maintenance are factors that should receive open-minded consideration by those in San Diego who are most friendly to an extensive park program. Under present conditions it appears the best policy now is to hold the Park as it is, exclusively and rigidly for well-defined park purposes, without further encroachments, with the exception of two carefully located adequate lines of communication across the park, in general, one north and south and one east and west.

Here the problem of transportation is addressed directly. The proposed solution—more through roads in Balboa Park—is one that would offend park proponents everywhere. Aside from his ambivalent remarks in the 1926 report, Nolen did not enlarge upon them in his written plans for Balboa Park, but it is obvious that they were the motives behind his north-south and east-west road schemes, which were more than the two he had at first projected.

Unlike Samuel Parsons, Jr. and John C. Olmsted, who did not approve of Expositions in public parks, Nolen was delighted with the architectural legacy of the Panama-California Exposition of 1915-16. Along with Prospect Park, Brooklyn, N.Y., Back Bay Fens, Boston, Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C., Faulkner Farm, Brookline, Mass., Sargent Estate, Brookline, Mass., Biltmore Estate, Asheville, N.C., Biltmore Village, Asheville, N.C., the U.S. Capitol Grounds, and Leland Stanford University, he regarded the Balboa Park Exposition site as "among the ten greatest examples of architecture" in the United States.

Controversies regarding Balboa Park did not heat up until after Nolen had completed his preliminary surveys of San Diego and Balboa Park in 1925. The San Diego Zoo was asking for a site for a research building outside the Zoo north of the California Building. While he had no power of decision, Nolen advised the Park Commission that a site south of the Reptile House within the Zoo would be better. The tiff with the Zoo was mild compared to the reaction to the request of San Diego State College for 125 acres in the northeast corner of the park. The Park Board, George W. Marston, Ellen Browning Scripps, and others opposed the request. Nolen joined the opposition.

He specifically addressed the issue in a statement he released for publication on February 5, 1926:

> A dozen of more suitable sites could be found for any of the present non-park uses of Balboa Park, but property like Balboa Park in area and location could never again be obtained by San Diego. No institutions, religious, educational or philanthropic, in the park or likely to be placed there, can in my opinion represent the interests of the population of San Diego now or in the future.

In more general terms, Nolen expressed his dislike of park intrusions in his November 1926 Preliminary General Plan for Balboa Park:

> From time to time part of the original property of Balboa Park has been turned over to other uses. These are the High School, including the Stadium, the Roosevelt Junior High School, the U.S. Navy Hospital and the Children's Home. We are firmly convinced that the use of the property of the Park for other than park purposes should in no wise be extended. All the property of Balboa Park remaining can be most advantageously used by establishing a strict policy "for park purposes only."

Swayed by the arguments of the park's champions, the voters, on November 23, 1926, voted 15,650 to 6,561 against giving land in Balboa Park for a college site.

Nolen was not as adamant about a proposed expansion of San Diego High School that would enlarge the school by 15 acres. He went so far as to recommend that the site should be used exclusively by the High School and not by the general public.

Nolen's would be the second master plan for Balboa Park, the first having been Samuel

Parsons' plan of 1902-10. The Panama-California Exposition, that had taken place in 1915-16, rendered many of Parsons' proposals moot and created problems that Parsons had not anticipated. Nolen's task was to lay out traffic and parking schemes that would ameliorate difficulties imposed by the Exposition, to add recreational features that would meet the needs of nearby residents, and to provide transportation linkages from downtown San Diego to outlying territories. He was not appointed to landscape the park, as this duty was within the responsibilities of John Morley, the superintendent of San Diego's city parks.

Prior to formulating his plan, Nolen had San Diego city engineers draw up maps showing current and potential park boundaries, including the 10-acre Marston tract, accepted by the Common Council on June 16, 1924, and land in a canyon running from Balboa Park to 32nd Street, which Nolen wanted the City to acquire and add to Balboa Park. The map (no longer available in San Diego) indicated the names and locations of trees.

The first preliminary plan of June 1925 called for a north-south truck road, the forerunner of today's Florida Drive, and an east-west road for through traffic. Florida on the north and 22nd Streets on the south were to be connected by way of Switzer Canyon, with a crossing at the lower end of Pershing Drive. This would facilitate extra and intra park traffic.

The east-west connection would extend from Date and 9th Streets with a bridge over Cabrillo Canyon, a tunnel under Park Boulevard and the trolley line, a bridge over Switzer Canyon and a connection to Pershing Drive. Pershing Drive would consist of two roadways, 24-feet wide, divided by a planted median, and would come out on 21st Street rather than 28th and Upas Streets.

Expanding on plans for east-west roads, the November 1926 preliminary plan and February 1927 Final General Plan delineated two additional east-west roads that ran north and south of land occupied by the San Diego Zoo. The south road began at Nutmeg Street, crossed over Cabrillo Canyon, ran north of the Exposition site, and came out on Pershing Drive. The north road began at Richmond Street and Cabrillo Canyon Road and connected with Calle Cristobal (today's Zoo Drive), north of the Indian Village and Painted Desert.

The road south of the Zoo, Cabrillo Canyon Road to the west of the Exposition site, and Park Boulevard to the east of the Exposition site, would separate architectural and landscaped portions of the park.

Another east-west road on the east side of the park ran through the 30th Street Canyon, passed under the Redwood Street bridge, and connected with 32nd Street. Nolen's maps (but not his reports) indicated an extension of 28th Street on the east side to Juniper Street. The proposal is in keeping with Samuel Parsons' wish to have a complete system of roads around the park. It was never implemented because it would have entailed considerable landfill and the construction of bridges. 28th Street still

ends at Maple Street with the land in between being accessible to pedestrians or occupied by a municipal golf course.

Nolen envisioned the expansion of the cultural center and of parking facilities to the mesa south of the Spreckels Organ Pavilion, as was done for the California-Pacific International Exposition of 1935-36, but he did not foresee the need for Zoological Garden expansion. A pergola with flowering vines on the site of today's Ford Building would provide views of the ocean. To mollify the Zoo over the proximity of through east-west roads, a pedestrian entrance from Cabrillo Bridge would allow access from the west and a plaza on Calle Cristobal would be used to exhibit agricultural and horticultural products as part of the park's annual County Fair. As might be expected, these niggardly gifts failed to placate Zoo officials who led a campaign to defeat Nolen's suggested roads.

Park entrances at Laurel Street, Date and 9th Streets, 18th Street and Pershing Drive, Upas Street and Park Boulevard, and Pershing Drive and Upas Street would be landscaped. Ornamental gates at 28th and Upas Streets could function as a memorial to a prominent local figure. The entrance at 18th Street called for a plaza extending from 18th to 21st Street and the expropriation of two privately-owned blocks on A Street.

Nolen's traffic circulation and park entrance plans were doomed to failure as were similar plans to divert traffic from El Prado by the Harland Bartholomew planners in 1960 and the Pekarek Landscape Group in 1983.

As he regarded the architectural complex along El Prado as outstanding, Nolen want the temporary buildings rebuilt in permanent form. He was not, however, specific over whether the re-creations were to be duplicates or interpretations of the old.

Like Samuel Parsons and John C. Olmsted, Nolen considered the contrast between the mesas and canyons to be Balboa Park's most striking landscape feature. Contrary to the advice of Parsons and Olmsted, trees planted in the canyons had grown to such heights that they diminished rather than enhanced the contrast. To remedy this condition, Nolen would cut many trees and plant trees only on the mesas and at the top of hills.

Recognizing that too much of the park had been given to special interest groups, such as the Junior High School, the High School, the Boy Scouts and the golf course, Nolen wanted more land for the general public. To accomplish this aim, plans for the northeast side coveted by San Diego State College and comprising more than 150 acres, called for a field house acting as a gate to a 24-acre athletic field for baseball, basketball, bowling, handball, tennis, roque, a swimming pool, a track with four and one-half mile laps per mile, a children's playground, and a five-acre picnic ground A 1,000 feet oval south of the athletic field would be used as a parade ground and a baseball diamond. An overlook, southeast of the parade ground, would look down on a desert garden of wild lilac, mesquite and cactus. Spaces for automobile parking would be available along Upas Street to the north.

Nolen considered his recommendations for the northeast side to be "the most important single recommendation" in his report.

The Golden Hill section on the southeast side of the park would remain largely unchanged. Playground facilities located there would not be duplicated elsewhere in the park. (Did that mean that the recreational building in Golden Hill was anathema to Nolen?) Nolen had a liking for archery, checkers, peanut wagons, Punch and Judy shows, quoits, and roque and would add them to the park wherever spaces could be found. Why dangerous, land-consuming archery courts should be laid out helter-skelter about the park is a mystery!

Forgetting his intention of not telling park superintendent Morley what to plant, Nolen advocated planting the Grape Street and Palm Street sections on the east side and isolated sections on the north and northeast sides with trees and grass. A lookout shelter, play lawn, roque courts and archery could be added to these areas. He stressed that sage brush already in the park's canyons should be left alone and other native plants brought in.

Contradicting his declared partiality for native plants, he thought that sections of the park near residential or business areas would benefit from the variegated planting that Kate Sessions, Samuel Parsons, and George Cooke had planted on the west side in the 1900's. Dahlia and rose gardens and topiary using Monterey cypresses would occupy space south of the Spreckels Organ Pavilion, currently in use as a parking lot. Live oaks from the back country would be planted in an island between the Organ Pavilion and the New Mexico Building (today's Balboa Park Club), and a garden of yuccas and cactus would be planted behind the New Mexico Building, as was done in 1934 to honor nursery woman Kate Sessions.

The canyon to the south of Calle Cristobal, now called Zoro Gardens, would be planted with tropical plants and decorated with small slabs of native stone and a waterfall, which more or less corresponds to its present appearance. A formal garden was to have been planted on the site of the Women's Club Building, burned down in 1925, which became the site of the present Natural History Museum.

Based on the evidence contained in his park plans, Nolen's knowledge of plant species appears to have been minimal.

Picnic grounds with circular benches were to be placed near trees everywhere in the park. Bridal and pedestrian paths would interlace the park, bringing people rather than automobiles into contact with its attractions.

Looking back over his professional association with San Diego and his personal association with George W. Marston, Nolen wrote to Marston, April 8, 1936:

> My professional association with San Diego extends over twenty-five years. During that time I have had many opportunities to know and love the place and

> the people, and I have seen a remarkable record of civic progress and with so many decisions to make, there have naturally been some mistakes. I believe, however, that a fair-minded person examining the general planning recommendations will find that they have been characterized by soundness, by a true regard for the public welfare, and, in general, by farsightedness, so that later years will prove their merit. Details of plans are naturally subject to change, but such changes should always be fully justified by new or changed conditions.

Nolen's 1926 plan for San Diego was adopted as the official plan by the San Diego City Council and has remained as a guide for city planning ever since. "It has," historian John Hancock has remarked, "a remarkable longevity of image appeal for a modern American city plan." His plan for Balboa Park was largely ignored due to the opposition of the Zoological Society, though parts of it were implemented in the formal recreation areas in Morley Field, built during the depression years with state and federal relief aid and with less finesse than Nolen might have wished.

Since the traffic and parking problems Nolen encountered are with San Diegans still in more gargantuan form, park planners and engineers should consider whether Nolen's solutions are still viable to today's congested, mechanized and frazzled world.

Upon being asked why cities should have public parks, Nolen responded that parks serve distinctly practical purposes by raising land values, by keeping wealthy people from leaving cities, and by preventing the growth of slums. He went on:

> A certain complement of fresh air, of open space, a touch with nature, proves in the experience of cities vitally essential for wholesome development. Response to this need results in high-grade improvements and in sound, unfluctuating values—two of the chief factors in civic well-being.

(John Nolen, "Planning Public Parks and Recreation Centers," article sent to A. S. Hill, San Diego Board of Park Commissioners," March 23, 1926, in Amero Collection, San Diego Historical Society Research Archives.)

January 1997