History of the Casa de Balboa Building in Balboa Park

by Richard Amero

The Casa de Balboa has gone through many changes of names during the course of its history . . . Commerce and Industries Building, Canadian Building, Museum of Natural History, Palace of Better Housing, Electric Building . . . and one remarkable metamorphosis; for the Commerce and Industries Building, constructed for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, was not the building that architect Carleton M. Winslow had envisioned in drawings in 1912.

As first planned, the Domestic Liberal Arts Building, the name of Winslow's original building, had much going for it. While not being derived from buildings in Mexico, it was Spanish Renaissance in style. Walls and arcades were plain and simple with the ornament being concentrated on a large concave central entrance flanked by two towers with open belfries. The building's mass and elevation corresponded with that of buildings nearby and its complicated and capacious entry, suggestive of the architectural follies of Piranesi, acted as a foil for the concentrated ornament on the Varied Industries and Food Products Building on the other side of El Prado.

Plans for the building were jettisoned and a new and different building was constructed at a cost of $74,403 in an elegant Venetian Renaissance style that did not correspond to the 1912 drawings. Winslow said the style was "more in keeping with the usual conception of a world's fair exhibit building" than the Spanish and Spanish-Colonial styles of other buildings on El Prado. Phillip L. Gildred, president of the Fine Arts Society in 1972, added: "It isn't Spanish architecture, it isn't Mexican, it isn't colonial, it isn't anything but stage scenery." Why then did the Exposition Corporation abandon Winslow's original schemes and go for the present pastiche?

It is obvious that Director of Works Frank Allen, Jr. intervened. He had been given a contract to supervise the construction of buildings designed by architect Bertram Goodhue of New York City. Winslow was Goodhue's assistant in San Diego whom Goodhue had appointed to design temporary buildings. The catch was that he worked in Allen's office as part of Allen's staff. In the middle of 1913, Goodhue instructed Winslow to devote his entire time to monitoring the construction of the California Building, the only building in Balboa Park that Goodhue designed. William Wurster Construction Company of San Diego (and not Frank P. Allen, Jr.) was the contractor. Even before 1913, Allen had arrogated designing duties. This may have been because Winslow could not handle the work load for all the temporary buildings, or it may have been that Allen wanted to enhance his reputation by doing the work.

Allen's design for the Commerce and Industries Building was not original. For the two projecting pavilions near the northeast and northwest corners, he took as his model the 17th- century mansion, made of honey-colored stone, of the Marques de la Villa del Villar del Aguila in Queretaro, Mexico. He used freestanding arcades to connect the pavilions to the main mass of the building. Windows with French doors on the second level above the arcade entrances, floating scroll-work above and ironwork balconies, displaying the Habsburg eagle, are as close to their originals in Queretaro as it was possible for them to be. The arcades continued on to join those on the Foreign Arts Building. A tower at the northwest corner was topped with an

awkward collection of urn-like pinnacles that are daring in their design. They were almost certainly concocted by plasterers to balance the restrained Spanish-Renaissance tower on the northeast corner of the Foreign Arts Building.

In his book *Architecture and Gardens of the San Diego Exposition*, Winslow reported that Allen got his ideas for the cornice on the pavilions from the Italian Renaissance treatment of Casa Consistorial (Town Hall) at Palma de Mallorca. Winslow did not identify the building in Queretaro as the source for the general mass of the pavilions. Cornice and eaves are indeed indebted to Casa Consistorial. As Allen had never been to Palma, he must have found photographs of the eaves of Casa Consistorial, which considering the paucity of material at the time was no mean feat. Paneling on the soffit and frieze and the hermes that function as brackets on Casa Consistorial may have suggested to Allen what he could do on the Commerce and Industries Building. Hermes on Casa Consistorial consist of men and women. The women are fully clothed and the men clothed by cloth at the pelvis. The figures are stretched out horizontally; therefore, if they hold up the eaves, they do it in a prone position. The paneling is striking and consists of carved motifs surrounding a circle from which hangs an angular-shaped pendent. Allen's paneling consisted of whorls of curlicues surrounding suspended urns. Gorgon faces that are repeated in alternating panels on the frieze in Palma are repeated in every panel on the frieze in Balboa Park. The frieze was close in design to the frieze on Casa Consistorial, the soffit less so.

Allen's hermes were naked muscular women who appear as busts beginning at the waist over the pilasters and as kneeling whole figures over the windows between the pilasters. In each case, the women hold their arms horizontally above their heads. It is the arms clasping one another that presumably hold up the eaves. This task is, however, really done by concealed beams that project from the walls. Some people have called the hermes men, but their breasts which hang down like gourds belie this assertion. Unlike the wooden figures at Palma, the nude women in Balboa Park are made of chalk and lime. Dark wood paneling under the eaves of Casa Consistorial was painted in bright blue, red, green and gold. Allen used the same colors on the plaster-covered Commerce and Industries Building, but they have long since disappeared. They were not reused when the building was reconstructed in 1981-82.

The naked women have been described as caryatids, atlantes, hermes and consoles. The term that seems most accurate is hermes, which is defined by Michael Kitson in *The Age of Baroque* (McGraw Hill Book Co., New York, 1966) as "the technical name for a statue representing the upper part of the body which ends in a pedestal or plinth out of which the body appears to spring." Hermes are consoles as they do the work of brackets. They have an interesting ancestry. The name comes from the Greek god Hermes (Roman, Mercury). Statues of hermes were originally set up as mile posts. Subsequently, they were so modified that they became a generic name for male, female and hermaphroditic supports for cornices and balconies, choir and organ lofts, and arches and domes, inside and outside buildings. Atlantes, which do the same work, are men. The name is derived from Atlas, the Titan in Greek mythology condemned by Zeus to hold the world on his shoulders for all eternity.

H. R. Schmohl was the plasterer in change of creating ornament for the Panama-California Exposition. While he made ornament behind his back for the benefit of reporters, 26 workers

from Central Europe, France and Italy did most of the work. It is likely that figurative consoles on Baroque and Rococo buildings in Central Europe and Italy inspired the creation of the hermes on the Commerce and Industries Building.

While guides taking people through El Prado like to point out the nude women, this does not mean they are viable artistic or architectural creations. The Schmohl team created the naked ladies to amuse themselves and visitors. They were not created for artistic effect or with an awareness of their mythological, historical and architectural significance. The *San Diego Union*, May 31, 1914, claimed the Schmohl team used a woman as a model, but, considering the posture of the nudes and their prominent breasts, it is doubtful that they used a model, unless it was to create facial features. The *Union* went on to describe the nude women as "typifying the woman of toil, a patient powerful mother of men, a hewer of wood and a drawer of water."

Except for the arcades, the north facade of the Commerce and Industries Building is out of kilter with those on other buildings. Its most serious defect is that its details do not share the flamboyant, deep-set relief on the Varied Industries and Food Products Building, across the street. In a thesis written for the University of San Diego in 1976, Carleton Winslow, Jr., the son of the architect, commented that "the surface appearance of this building appears smoother and harder than that of the other temporary buildings." The Commerce and Industries Building is a stranger that got invited to a costume party in the wrong clothes. Paradoxically, the rear facade of the building, which was devoid of ornament, was more in keeping with the rear facades of adjacent Foreign Arts and San Joaquin Valley Buildings. In Winslow's words, "the planting and the paths [behind these buildings] give the impression of picturesque outskirts of a Spanish or Mexican town." This was nonsense, as Winslow's knowledge of the "outskirts" of such towns was negligible. A lower corridor or arcade at the south level of the Commerce and Industries Building was not reconstructed in 1981-82. More's the pity, as people liked to sit there to listen to music coming from the Organ Pavilion.

San Diego natives prefer not to dwell on discords. To them the Commerce and Industries Building was part of an irreplaceable complex. During the first season of the Panama-California Exposition, the building was used to house American industrial exhibits, among which many considered the Burroughs Adding Machine Company exhibit to be outstanding. The National Cash Register Company, Mills Novelty Company, Shaw Walker Company, and Moreland Truck Company also mounted exhibits that occupied considerable floor space. Among U.S. Government exhibits --- including a Gatling gun and a one-pounder rifle and a post office in operation --- the most popular and the most likely to arouse interest among souvenir collectors today was a machine set up by the U.S. Mint that turned out 90 coins per minute. As the government did not allow the making of coins outside its regular mints, the coins given to visitors bore an image of Uncle Sam with a pick and shovel on one side and a drawing of the Panama Canal locks with a ship coming through on the other. A second machine printed the American eagle on paper and handkerchiefs.

In the second year of the Exposition, the government of Canada mounted an impressive exhibit that took up most of the Commerce and Industries Building; thus making it necessary for the Exposition Corporation to rename the building the Canada Building. The exhibit of live beavers making dams captured the most audience interest. Other exhibits showed topography and

mineral, animal and vegetable products from Vancouver to Halifax. To increase authenticity, Canadian authorities covered beams, rafters and posts inside the building.

During World War I, the Commerce and Industries Building was used as a barracks for recruits who were being trained as sailors at San Diego's first U.S. Naval Training Center. The training center was not close to the ocean, though attempts were made to make the small lily pond in front of the Botanical Building do duty as a place for exercises, such as swimming and the launching of boats. Recruits hung their hammocks wherever they could and kept outside the cold and drafty building as much as possible.

Between World War I and the opening of the 1935-36 California-Pacific International Exposition, the Commerce and Industries Building was generally vacant until the Natural History Museum in 1922 elected to use its wide spaces for exhibits. Museum people discovered that the building was not adequate for its expensive collection, primarily because it was a firetrap, but unstable foundations, termite-eaten beams, a Rube Goldberg electrical system, poor plumbing, and leaking roof were also powerful arguments in favor of moving out.

The Museum was able to move into a new Natural History Museum, on the site of the former Southern California Counties Building in 1932, after Ellen Browning Scripps donated $125,000 for a new building.

Repairs in 1922 and in 1933 postponed the day of reckoning for the Commerce and Industries Building. The repairs were cosmetic, but they managed to lull people into complacency. As always, there were architects and engineers in San Diego who told City authorities what everyone knew wasn't so . . . that the buildings were not as unsafe as they appeared and that the money needed to repair them was much less than that estimated by the City Building Inspector.

During the 1935-36 California-Pacific International Exposition, the 1915 Commerce and Industries Building was renamed the Palace of Better Housing. It housed the administration offices of the Exposition and a small number of exhibits dealing with "better housing," to complement a Federal Housing Administration show behind the building. Among these "housing" exhibits, San Diego Mirror & Glass showed the application of mirrors and glass, Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Co. displayed plumbing supplies, and Klicka Lumber Co. set up a 2-room bungalow, made, naturally, of lumber. Realtor F. J. Hansen Co. of San Diego and La Mesa encouraged customers by showing a motion picture of changing styles in California housing from 1542, the date of the arrival of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, to the present.

Notwithstanding the ostensible emphasis on "better housing," "The Official Guide Book of the California-Pacific International Exposition" listed exhibitors and concessionaires concerned with religion and charity --- Pacific Union Conference of Seventh Day Adventists, Church of Latter Day Saints, Salvation Army, Rosicrucian Fellowship, and Goodwill Industries ; with education --- F. E. Compton & Co. (Encyclopedia), Encyclopedia Britannica, W. F. Quarrie & Co. (World Book Encyclopedia), and Bookhouse for Children; with art and culture --- Foreign Antique & Art Co., Bowen Unique Handicraft; Sullivan’s Art Gift, and Gefrog Studio (specializing in butterfly art); with gems and minerals --- J. W. Ware of San Diego; with yarns and folding looms --- Naomi E. Cleaves; with communication --- Nassau Pen and Pencil Co. and Western Union;

with signs --- I. Jacobson Sign Studios; and with novelties --- Morbeck of London (Shoolman Bros.). The presence of so many miscellaneous concessionaires indicates that to fill the 36,200 sq. ft. Palace of Better Housing, the California-Pacific International Exposition Exhibition Committee chose many non-compatible enterprises..

Behind the Palace of Better Housing, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) set up at an out-of-doors exhibit at a cost to the U.S. Government of $350,000. Among these exhibits, a Model Town consisting of 30 miniature antiquated homes on a platform turned over periodically to reveal 30 modern homes, each of which could be built by a maximum loan of $2,000. Close to these reversing homes, 56 miniature modern homes were made of wood, stucco, brick, concrete and steel. Under terms promulgated for new construction by the National Housing Act, the cheapest of these homes could be built and owned for $30 a month, the most expensive for $60 per month. By offering examples of practical, hygienic and economical homes equipped with the latest in appliances, the FHA showed people how happy they would be once the gloomy clouds of the present dissipated and the rosy tomorrow arrived.

A 20 by 60 ft. fabricated steel building, designed by architect Richard J. Neutra, and set up by the Palmer Steel Company was also located behind the Palace of Better Housing, a short distance from a Persian Wall Fountain. A Radio Building, in which Exposition news items were broadcast, was also attached to the west back side of the Palace.

For the 1936 re-run of the California-Pacific International Exposition, Weston Settlemier, in charge of finding exhibitors, tried to exclude "fake merchandising" and "gyp religious booths" in favor of exhibits dealing with the gas industry and the Redwood Association. (Letter, January 20, 1936, to Belcher; Box 9 Folder 36, California-Pacific International Exposition, San Diego Public Library.) Among these more relevant exhibits, Marvelaire explained how its air-conditioning units worked in government offices in Washington, D.C., Dixram demonstrated pressure cookers, Pacific Clay Pottery displayed pottery, San Diego Fire Equipment Co. presented fire extinguishers; and San Diego Consolidated Gas & Electric Co. advertised the advantages of modern gas and electric appliances.

After the 1935-36 Exposition, the Palace of Better Housing was used to house industrial and electric shows, which were similar to those during the Exposition but on a smaller scale. In 1941 a guidebook to Balboa Park stated the "main portion of the building is now used for various special exhibits and shows, notably the electrical shows each April and December; the northwest section is occupied by San Diego Chapter of the American Red Cross as offices and headquarters."

The United States Naval Hospital took over the Palace of Better Housing during World War II. A map published in the hospital magazine *Drydock* stated the building was divided into two sections, numbered Buildings 213 and 214. Building 213, the east half, was used for wards and Building 214, the west half, was used for a chaplain's office and for administrative offices.

Costing $60,000 from Navy Restoration funds and $10,000 from the City of San Diego, patch-up work after the war left the building in a perilous state, but this did not deter businesses in San Diego from putting on more industrial, trade, cat and poultry shows. Conventions having an

attendance of 25 percent or more from people living outside San Diego County could use the building free of charge. Fire walls added in 1950 divided the building into four large rooms. Twelve-foot doors were wide enough to allow people to move from room to room. Electric shows became such a prominent feature that newspapers unofficially changed the name of the building to Electric Building.

The San Diego Aerospace Museum moved into the Electric Building in June 1965. The building was inadequate for the display of exhibits, but there was no other place for it to go. Museum members kept up a clamor for a new building with the Ford Building in the Palisades being the most likely choice. The stumbling block was a lack of money to rehabilitate the building, though the recommendations of the Harland Bartholomew planners in their City-approved 1960 Master Plan for Balboa Park did not help matters. The Bartholomew planners wanted the Ford Building demolished. Their view of the Electric Building was equally pessimistic:

The Electric Building is the largest of the temporary type buildings remaining from the 1915 Exposition. A complete analysis of the building indicates that it is in poor condition, in serious violation of the building code and presents difficult and expensive maintenance problems. This building is obsolete and should be removed --- within the next several months if possible. The site should be appropriately landscaped until such time as it is used for the new building for the Museum of Man.

Having been successful in rebuilding the Food and Beverage Building in 1970-71, the Committee of 100 transferred its attention to the Electric Building. Its first effort was to get the City Council to permit it to make molds of the decaying ornament on the building, a repeat of the same tactic it had used on the Food and Beverage Building. The Ninteman Construction Company got the contract to remove and make molds of the ornament. Voters defeated a bond issue on the November 1972 ballot that would have authorized a $5 million bond issue to rebuild the Electric Building as the new home for the Museum of Man.

The Committee of 100's efforts to preserve and replace the ornament took place in the nick of time . . . for on February 22, 1978, the Electric Building burned down, a result of arson caused by two San Diego teenagers, who watched the building burn for a while before they made their escape. The Aerospace Museum and the International Aerospace Hall of Fame, the prime tenants, lost a replica of the Spirit of St. Louis, a 1928-PT-3 Army trainer, and a library of aviation books. A moon rock sample collected by astronauts on the Apollo 17 moon flight survived the fire.

After the fire, the Committee of 100 and the building's tenants set about getting funds to rebuild the Electric Building, as well as the Old Globe Theater that burned down on March 8, 1978, also the result of arson, the suspects this time being transients. Although a reward of $15,000 was offered for information about the person or persons who set the two fires, the culprits were never apprehended. Ironically, the best thing that ever happened to the two buildings was the fires as the impact of the catastrophes galvanized public support. Money for rebuilding the Electric Building aggregating to $8 million came from the Economic Development Administration ($4.9 million), a return of $1 million previously allocated to the County of San Diego, an

Environmental Growth Fund ($614,000), a fire insurance settlement ($200,000), and other public and private agencies.

To reduce costs and to take advantage of new technologies, the ornament was reproduced in an amalgam of fibreglass, gypsum and concrete rather than in the cast concrete used on the Food and Beverage Building. Cast concrete was not the ideal material that its proponents had claimed. Sculpture on the California Building -- made of this material --- was pitted and corroded. Aside from the great saving, it was hoped that fibreglass reinforced plastic on the Electric Building would be a dependable material. As she had done in the reconstruction of the loggia on the Casa del Prado, Mrs. Jeanette Pratt donated $50,000 to the cause. Michael Matson of San Diego, a commercial artist, fabricated and finished the ornament after a process he had invented.

After the name Casa del Pacifico was discarded when the Museums of Man and Natural History lost interest in occupying the building, a citizen advisory group selected Casa de Balboa as the new name for the Electric Building on October 5, 1981. An attempt by three present and one former congressmen in February 1982 to get the City Council to change the name to Evenson Building (after Bea Evenson, founder of the Committee of 100) was discreetly shelved.

There were disputes over who would occupy the building. For a while the Museum of Man and then the Museum of Natural History seemed likely choices. This did not, however, work out because the Museums could not afford the cost of setting up exhibits dedicated to the Pacific Oceanic studies. After jockeying for position, the following institutions were selected to occupy the Casa de Balboa, which formally reopened on May 17, 1982:

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The San Diego Historical Society . . . . . 55,000 sq. ft
Model Railroad Museum . . . . . .  21,500 sq. ft.
Museum of Photographic Arts . . . . . 6,000 sq. ft.
Hall of Champions . . . . . 4,500 sq. ft.
Food concessions . . . . . .  1,850 sq. ft.
Committee of 100 . . . . . .  200 sq. ft.
Balboa Park Art Conservation Center . . . . Not Available
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(The square foot figures were supplied by the San Diego Park & Recreation Department, July 1993.)

As constructed by the Olson Construction Company after plans by Richard George Wheeler Associates, the front and sides of the Casa de Balboa are much the same as they were in the old building. Wheeler used a steel frame and a mixture of chopped and alkaline Portland cement on exterior walls rather than the block concrete he had used on the Varied Industries and Food Products Building (Casa del Prado). Tenants used wooden walls to divide space inside the building. The footprint of the rear of the building was shortened by loping off two wings that extended beyond the main rectangle. Even with this loss of space, the building has 63,000 more square feet than the 52,000 square feet in the old due to the creation of basement, main floor, and upper floor levels.

The appearance of the front facade has been partially changed by the use of black medallions to anchor flag supports at the sides of the upper level windows. Walls are streaked with stains caused by grout that had been used to anchor ornament to the building. The so-called "superior"

fiberglass ornament has shown signs of wear and tear. The roof has leaked and trees have fallen on the building during winter rains.

In 1991, the Hall of Champions decided to move into a reconstructed Federal Building in the Palisades. The City Council granted the request on September 23, 1991 provided that the sports museum would allow the public "regular free access." The new facility is scheduled for completion in 1999. The Museum of Photographic Arts seized the opportunity to extend its quarters into the vacated space. A revamped Museum of Photographic Arts will stimulate public interest in photography as an art form.

Visual blight in El Prado and the Palisades would be eliminated if the City would appoint a park manager conscious of aesthetic values who would require institutions within the park to accept a design code. Too many cooks have decided that their special new ingredient is just what Balboa Park needs . . . the reinstallation of temporary banners put up by architect Richard Requa on the roofs of buildings in 1935, the extension of museum exhibits into public spaces --- a practice begun by the Aerospace Museum and quickly copied by the other museums; trees in a jumble of shapes and sizes blocking views of the front of buildings. And so the list goes on, with more extraneous details being added each year. A manager in charge of aesthetics would get rid of the clashing signs and banners and the park would once again look like the "dream city" that Goodhue created in 1915 and not the deranged phantasmagoria it has become.

The reconstruction of the Casa de Balboa did not give El Prado the Spanish-Colonial appearance it once had because there have been too many intrusions added by people who either did not appreciate what had gone before or were so eager to get their special interests satisfied that they didn't care. Despite its inconsistencies, the Casa de Balboa should be regarded as part of a whole to which it contributes. As the Committee of 100 has stated, San Diego should try to re-create the "dream city" that Goodhue, Winslow and Allen established on a mesa in Balboa Park, overlooking downtown San Diego, the harbor and ocean.

The 1915 buildings were not only part of a unified work of art, they were also part of a continuum that stretched back to early San Diego, Vice Regal Mexico, and the Spain of Moors and hidalgos, and that stretches ahead to cities and homes in Southern California that share the same desire for harmony and beauty.

The author closes this essay with a quotation from Gerard Manley Hopkins as a tribute to the efforts of the Committee of 100 to preserve the perishable beauties of Balboa Park.

> How to kéep—is there ány any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, láce, latch or catch or key to keep
> Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, … from vanishing away?
>
> *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo*