

# The Balboa Theatre: A Preservation Project Completed

Iris Engstrand

“The seats are in. The season is set. The decades of hand-wringing and foot-dragging are done, and a new era for downtown’s Balboa Theatre is almost begun,” exclaimed James Hebert, Arts Writer for the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, as the historic Balboa Theatre prepared to open its doors for the first time in 22 years.<sup>1</sup>

The historic Spanish Colonial Revival theater designed by architect William H. Wheeler (1873-1956) and completed in 1924 has welcomed the public for the first time since 1986. Mayor Jerry Sanders used the new facility to deliver his State of the City address on January 10, 2008, and public performances began on January 11. Wheeler, who continued the Mediterranean style of Balboa Park, served for three years as an architectural atelier in his native Australia before emigrating to Vancouver, BC, at age 20. He moved to San Francisco in 1900 to study engineering at the University of California Berkeley and from there to Arizona to work on the San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railway. An association with John D. Spreckels and a visit to San Diego kept him in the southern city to design such well-known



Original theater stage with a replica of the Nuñez de Balboa family’s Coat of Arms and a sketch of a Spanish sixteenth-century caravel featured on the curtain. ©SDHS Sensor #2363-A.



*According to former employee Dan Whitehead, "The waterfalls would turn on when the title curtain closed at the end of the show and turn off when the show started. Some time in the early '80s the water supply to them was cut. After that, I used to take a tall A-frame ladder and fill them with a hose about once a week (twice in the summer)." ©SDHS Sensor #2363-G.*

buildings as The Eagle's Hall, Temple Beth Israel at 3rd Avenue and Laurel, Immaculate Conception Church in Old Town, San Diego Athletic Club, the Four Square Gospel Angelus Temple in Los Angeles,<sup>2</sup> and homes for Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink and Thomas Sefton.<sup>3</sup>

The downtown property was part of Alonzo Horton's Addition and faced his Horton House Hotel and plaza. Several lots in the area had been purchased by Dr. Hiram Gould, a Maine immigrant who settled in San Diego in mid-1883 after spending time in San Francisco and the Cerro Gordo mining area in the Inyo Mountains. His property in downtown San Diego included the corner of Fourth and E, upon which he built the Gould Hotel.<sup>4</sup> It was torn down in 1923 to make room for the Balboa Theatre, named in honor of Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, first European to discover the Pacific Ocean in 1513. It failed to be renovated when the new Horton Plaza Shopping Center took shape in 1985.

The Balboa Theatre, first built in the 1920s when vaudeville and silent movies were popular, survived the Great Depression by offering the latest Hollywood films, World War II as a haven for sailors, and the post-war period as a movie palace with some live performances. But by 1986, the theatre, even though well preserved, seemed to have outlived its usefulness and was closed without ceremony. The city condemned the property but could not decide on its future use; no plans for its use as an art gallery, retail shop or restaurant were

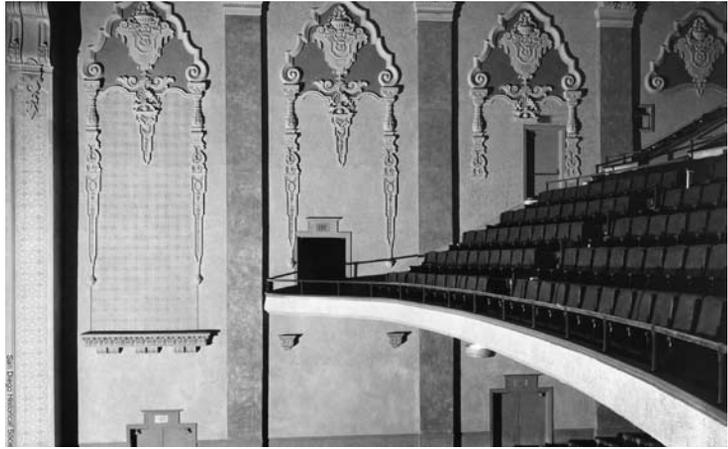
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approved. Finally, when demolition threatened, the Balboa Theatre Foundation came into being to fight for preservation. Others joined in but the money raised was not enough.

Fortunately, the Centre City Development Corporation (CCDC), San Diego's nonprofit organized to redevelop the

downtown area, took on the job of saving the theater. Still, according to James Hebert's interview with CCDC's Project Manager Gary Bossé, "that was just the start of a long, painstaking process of design, planning, construction and seismic retrofitting."<sup>5</sup>

Kay Porter, President of the Board of Directors of the Balboa Theatre Foundation, noted that the foundation had played a significant role in placing the theatre on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996: "Twenty years of



*The décor along the sides represented Spanish Colonial Revival in a rather bold motif with bright colors. ©SDHS Sensor #2363-F.*



*The outside of the Balboa Theater at Fourth and E has been faithfully restored with a marquee that gives light to the whole corner. ©SDHS Sensor #2363-E.*

advocacy of our Foundation and many others in the community gave purpose to CCDC's magnificent restoration of the Balboa Theatre." She added that said that the foundation encouraged the theatre's use by both local non-profit performing arts groups and traveling theatrical productions. "The downtown theatre district is significantly enriched by this elegant historic venue," she concluded.<sup>6</sup>

Renovation architect Paul Westlake of the firm Westlake Reed Leskosky had worked on about seventy-five pre-1930 movie palaces nationwide but was still amazed at the sound quality of the Balboa and its potential for becoming a first-class venue. Wheeler's ornate design scheme, based on Spanish and Moorish revival styles, incorporated some spectacular elements: twin 28-foot recirculating waterfalls that flanked the stage, a color scheme with striking hues (lavender, orange, aqua) and bold bronze accents, 1,513 seats to keep in mind Balboa's discovery date,<sup>7</sup> and soaring 90-foot ceilings. It featured large painted murals on the lobby walls and a ramp to the second floor balcony seating.<sup>8</sup> The tiled dome influenced the architectural designs for Horton Plaza.<sup>9</sup> Renovation architect Westlake and the City of San Diego are to be congratulated for preserving this historic monument to the city's past which Don Telford, president and COO of San Diego Theatres, has called a "beautiful, beautiful venue."<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. "A Classic Revival: Balboa Theatre Returns to its Former Splendor," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 6, 2008.
2. Hired by evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson in 1922.
3. Francine Bryson-Mortenson, "William Wheeler," typescript, San Diego Historical Society Research Archives, 1986.
4. Also known as the Gould House, it was managed by Charles W. McAllister. Hiram Gould's grandchildren Elwyn B. ("Jay") Gould, Leslie Gould, and Grace Gould Klauber all became prominent members of the San Diego Community. See Iris H. W. Engstrand, "The Gould Family of San Diego," *Journal of San Diego History* 51, nos. 3 and 4 (2005): 97-122.
5. Gary Bossé, CCDC's senior project manager for the restoration. Quoted by Hebert in "A Classic Revival," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 6, 2008.
6. Kay Porter, interviewed by Iris H. W. Engstrand, March 7, 2008.
7. The number of seats is apparently in dispute, but no matter since people are larger now and there are fewer seats (1,350) than there were in 1924.
8. The original organ is in San Diego's Copley Symphony Hall.
9. Matt Perry, "A Classic Revival," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 6, 2008.
10. Quoted by Hebert in "A Classic Revival," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 6, 2008.