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Imagining a Landscape

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The accompanying article is based on Richard Oliver's lecture at a conference sponsored by the American Institute of Architects Design Committee. Gerald Allen, who organized the conference, has edited this version from transcripts of the talk. Richard's insights have helped us to understand better the relationship between buildings, landscapes, and the creative imagination. His death in the spring of 1985 means the loss of a lucid voice. We are grateful to Gerald Allen for helping us to hear it once more.

There is a tradition in Southern California of thinking of the place as a promised land, an Eden, an Arcadia, or—in the legend that goes back to sixteenth-century Spain—El Dorado, that fabled land of fantastic beauty west of the Indies. This tradition has resulted in two Southern California landscapes rather than one: the semiarid desert, which is actually native to the place, and the dreamed-of landscape, willed into being by the people and made possible by modern technologies that bring water down from the distant north to keep the land green.

Because it is also surrounded by high mountains and deserts to the east and by the ocean to the west, Southern California has also seemed like an island. Helen Hunt Jackson, who wrote Ramona, called it that, and the label has stuck, galvanizing the notion that this was a special place, remote, desirable, and difficult to reach from afar.

Because with water and care the land can sustain vegetation of the most extraordinary sorts, the early impressions it made on East Coast Americans was of an exotic world of orange groves set against views of distant mountain ranges. Some early Yankee immigrants brought visions of the 1880s of its beauty by growing rose bushes so big they would entirely cover the fronts of their houses, making it unclear whether they were living in a house or just shrubbery.

Some of the biggest and earliest planning gestures in California were of a landscape, rather than an architectural, nature. One of them is Euclid Avenue, in which the citizens of Ontario planted four rows of trees in a straight line for sixteen miles to the foothills. Today the legacy of those early plantings is found in the palm-lined boulevards that grace many parts of San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Los Angeles.

The 1880s witnessed the completion of the Southern transcontinental railroad, which made it possible for people from the east to come to California in large numbers for the first time. It was their first contact with a truly exotic landscape, since Florida was developed as a tourist mecca somewhat later. The building of the railroads often included the building of grand resort hotels at the end of the line as well, so tourists who rode the trains would actually have somewhere to go. The Hotel del Coronado, which opened for business in February 1888, is an example. In its time, the Del was not particularly special, for there were equally wonderful hotels at the end of railroad runs all over America, particularly in the west and later the south. Like them, the Del was itself a kind of island in the landscape. People came to California to enjoy the exotic landscape, but this they would do during the daytime. At night they preferred retiring safely to cistern-style luxury. The Del was thus patterned on East Coast models, and its whole point was to be familiar, reassuring, and filled with all the conveniences East Coast visitors would expect.
Very often resort hotels were meant also to be anchors for surrounding real estate developments. Thus the completion of the Del in 1888 coincided with the first big real estate boom in San Diego's history, a boom during which most of the city, like the hotel, came to be made up of buildings that looked like they were from the East Coast.

The plan of the Hotel del Coronado is remarkable in its utility and in its lack of uniqueness: it worked in the 1880s, it works today, and in all essential features the plan is like that of any other resort hotel of its time. The rooms are laid out efficiently, in this case on three sides of a courtyard one acre in size. Big and imposing public rooms are on the fourth side. Over time, many aspects of the building have been altered. There have been, for example, all sorts of subtle changes in the glazing; windows have generally gotten bigger, and some dormers have been taken away and others added. Yet many things remain the same, including the imposing conical shape of the ballroom, which is still almost a symbol of the hotel. Through it all, the building has survived in its overall shape.

The courtyard at its center is a constant, yet it keeps changing too. Once it was almost wildly overgrown with exotic plants, a miniature version of that Californian Arcadia. A decade ago it was trimmer. Now it has a little Victorian gazebo in the center where weddings occur almost hourly during weekends.
What Elijah Babcock, builder of the hotel, wanted—and what James and Merritt Reed, his architects, gave him—was a building that was not in any way provincial. It is no way represented Coronado, but instead it stood for the best in contemporary architectural style, representing everything that was both proper and current therein.

But at the very moment the Hotel del Coronado was being built, the new immigrants from the east were discovering—or in some cases investing—the Indian and Spanish pasts of Southern California. They were also beginning to pay attention to the few archaeological relics, chiefly the twenty-one mission churches that Father Junipero Serra had helped establish. Among these, the mission at Santa Barbara was the grandest and the one at San Juan Capistrano the most revered and romantic. This rediscovery of Southern California’s sometimes real, sometimes imagined, and always romanticized history was very much helped along by the publication, in 1884, of Ramona, the work of an industrious woman from Boston who tramped over most of San Diego county looking
for material for her book. Helen Hunt Jackson was the first impor-
tant popularizer of the rustic
Spanish architecture that later
became the rage of the region.

In the aftermath of the publication of
Ramona, Californians became
determined that their buildings
should look like missions. The
railroad companies in particular
followed suit in their stations so
that tourists arriving from the east
would be alerted to the Southern
California milieu as soon as they
stepped off the train. At a more
domestic scale, talented architects
such as San Diego’s Irving Gill
looked to the missions more for
inspiration rather than as some-
thing to be copied directly, and the
results were wonderfully original
buildings, such as his La Jolla
Women’s Club of 1906.

The idea that California had a
Latin heritage was made to order
for San Diego’s Panama-California
Exposition of 1915 and 1916. The
decision to sponsor the fair was
made by a group of enlightened
citizens at a time when the city had
no more than 35,000 inhabitants
and led by men such as George
Morriston, who thought holding
an exposition to celebrate the
opening of the Panama Canal was
an obvious opportunity to boost
the city’s image. After all, San
Diego had the first American
harbor north of the canal, and it
was therefore a prime place for new
trade with the eastern United States
and the Orient.

There was considerable feeling that
Irving Gill, the local architect,
should design the fair. In the end,
the commission went to the well-
known New York architect Bertram
Grossenhorst Goodhue, in part be-
because Goodhue wanted the commis-
sion so badly that he enlisted the
help of friends, who got him an
interview in which he succeeded in
charming the San Diego committee.

Goodhue was born in 1869 and
was therefore a member of what I
like to call the “Class of 1870.”
This was a group of extraordinarily
talented architects who shared a
certain common purpose even
though they worked in widely
different styles and in widely
different places. Included among
them was Edwin Lutyens of England,
Frank Lloyd Wright of the United
States, Auguste Perret of France,
Peter Behrens of Germany, Josef
Hoffmann of Austria, and Eiel
Saarinen of Finland, all of them
born around 1870. In California,
the class of 1870 included the
brothers Greene and Irving Gill.

What they shared was a strong
individualism in their designs, and
this was developed, no doubt, in
response to the challenge laid down
by their elders. In America, this
challenge was epitomized by the
work of McKim, Mead & White,
which enforced architectural
discipline through the retro-
duction of a fairly strict stylistic
discipline. Architects like McKim,
Mead, and White believed in copy-
ing the architecture of the past
rather accurately and somewhat
academically, adapting its patterns
as a way of making great architec-
ture for contemporary America.

Goodhue and his generation, by
contrast, though they were inclined
toward historical discipline in
buildings, were at the same time
anxious to move beyond the
canonical works of European
tradition toward something much
freer, and toward something more
personal as well.

Nowhere in Goodhue’s work do we
have a clearer clue to this attitude
than in his sketches of imaginary
places. The Church of St. Kavín in
Traunburg, Bohemia, drawn in
1896, shows an imaginary place
treated as though it were a real
travel sketch. Goodhue derived
much pleasure watching friends
pour unfruitfully over maps of
Bohemia trying to find it. A striking
thing about the church is that it
looks like a mountain, with a tall
tower rising out of it to stand high
above the Kavanplatz. Similiar
towers show up again and again in
Goodhue’s later work, such as at the
exposition buildings in San Diego
and in his last building, the
Nebraska State Capitol. Another
imaginary project was his Villa
Fosca, set on an obscure isle in the
Adriatic, where it would vex Paris-
trained priestmen on their Rome
tour when they realized they had
missed visiting and studying it. This
kind of gesture helps suggest what
Goodhue thought of the Ecole and
its strict teaching methods, which,
on the whole, was not much. But in
his design for the Villa Fosca, with
its buildings and gardens each as
rich as the other, Goodhue was also
setting forth his ideas about an
architecture and a landscape that
merged one into the other, and he
was proposing something that he later actually realized in Southern California.

His first chance came in 1902. He was asked by James Waldron Gillespie to design a Mediterranean villa—with Persian gardens—in Montecito, near Santa Barbara. To make sure the architect understood what was wanted, Gillespie took him on a trip to look at real Persian gardens. Riding on horseback four hundred miles from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf, Goodhue and his patron visited a number of gardens, then continued on an around-the-world trek through India, the Orient, and finally back across the Pacific to the United States. The house that resulted—to say nothing of the images that were stored in Goodhue’s mind for abundant use later—perched at the top of its site, with Persian terraces and gardens spilling down a steep ravine. It is probably more Mediterranean than specifically Spanish, but in 1903, when it was completed, it was the first of its kind in California.

Goodhue’s design for the San Diego fair is most characteristically seen from the great bridge—constructed especially for the exposition—that leaped across the ravine separating the main approach road from the actual site: a mesa topped with a pile of buildings rising from the surrounding vegetation. The citizens of San Diego dubbed it “Nueva Espana” and the “Garden Fair.” Clarence Stein called it the triumph of the romantic in city planning.
At first glance, the plan of the fair seems Beaux Arts in inspiration, with a major axis (called "El Prado") and an important cross axis that leads down from a central plaza to the organ pavilion. But the plan is nonetheless very different from what McKim, Mead & White and their graduates might have drawn. Neither, in fact, is it much like a city in Spain—its "Nueva Espana" title notwithstanding—for there is no irregularity in it. It isn't Mexican either, because Mexican cities, following the Law of the
Indies, were laid out on grids. What the plans of the fair really is is a development of what Goodhue and Ralph Adams Cram had been working on in their earlier plan for Rice University: balanced, rather than actual, symmetry. The plan is clearly about a processional route; it is kinetic, and it has to do not with cross axes but with the movement of the body through space and the provision of views of buildings and gardens to the left, to the right, and beyond. The plan is relaxed and informal, held together by the idea of the long processional path.

The idea for the fair—a basically romantic one—shows up clearly in Goodhue’s earlier sketches of imaginary places: in a watercolor called “Dream Cities of the East” and most particularly in a drawing called “Xanadu,” which, if you squint, seems almost to become the San Diego fair. Goodhue’s idealized city is a dreamlike mountain of buildings, a place in which there are shady places and sunny ones, with passages between arcades that connect plazas and gardens and in which there is the spirit of a Mediterranean city without all of its details.

The city fathers of San Diego had first assumed that the fair would be in the rustic and quaint “mission” style of California, and it was at this point that Irving Gill had seemed a logical choice as architect. Goodhue convinced them that what was really needed was something much more festive, more theatrical, with richer and more varied gestures.
All these things are present in the major building of the fair, the California Building. Its facade is full of statues, and on the very top is Father Junipero Serra himself, rising above busts of Charles V and Philip II, kings of Spain who ruled during particularly significant moments in California history. Then there are statues of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, the first white man to set foot on the West Coast, and the navigator Sebastián Vizcaíno. There is also California’s first holy martyr. All these figures speak of California’s history, and they stand there as reminders of the purpose of the fair, which was to connect the city of San Diego with its past of choice. On the dome of the California Building is a Latin inscription from the Old Testament. It describes the Holy Land, and in the process it also describes California: “A land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of oil, olive trees, and honey.”

The California Building stated the theme of the fair. Beyond it lay the rest of the idealized Latin city, stretching out along the Prado. All of the buildings were painted a kind of pearl gray (which they are not painted today), and this provided a uniform backdrop for the colors of the plants and flowers, the awnings, and the tiled domes and towers that rose from various parts of the grounds. Along the Prado were arcades that were a unifying element and guided the visitor from
one building and one garden to another. Their surfaces had on them a wonderfully dappled light, constantly changing with the moving sun. There was also a series of secondary major spaces. The most charming of them was the lagoon, at one end of which stood the botanical building, a structure made of wood lath over a steel frame that had originally been designed as a train station but somehow wound up here.

In designing this idealized Latin city, Goodhue had intended that what would remain after the end of the two-year fair would be only the bridge and the California quadangle, including the California Building, with its dome and tower. Everything else would be demolished and replaced by gardens, so that the entire place—already richly landscaped for the fair—would become a 200-acre park, with the bridge and California Building as its gateway. The people of San Diego did not buy this idea. Instead they liked the buildings so much that they refused to let any of them be removed, and they set about finding new uses for them when the fair was over. Most of the buildings had been built cheaply and quickly of wooden frames and plaster that was not intended to last. Only the California Building was built of concrete. Goodhue was naturally unhappy that all the buildings remained and that his original idea had failed to catch on. Nonetheless, what happened proved good for his reputation, because his buildings came to stand as a potent influence on subsequent California architecture.

The fairgrounds have continued to change over the years. Some buildings have been replaced by others. The San Diego Art Museum, for instance, was built in 1925 to designs by William Templeton Johnson. In 1925 a second fair was held on the same site, and so many of the original buildings were altered then. This time there was a “Spanish Village,” at more miniature scale than the previous Latin city but perhaps in keeping with the 1930s quaint thinking about California’s heritage. In the 1960s other buildings were constructed that have very little to do with what was there. They are troubling buildings, partly because they seem evident strangers in this place and partly because, being smaller than the buildings they replace, they allow more room for gardens and are thus in keeping with Goodhue’s original goals for the park. Some of the original buildings have recently been reproduced in more permanent materials, but inevitably with some loss of romantic quality, their details seeming somewhat hard and fast, and the overall effect somewhat machine made.

The San Diego fair was a wild, popular success. Visitors saw in its fusion of an exotic landscape with an equally exotic “Spanish” architecture a vision of what California
could be. They shared the vision, and they set about making Califor-
nia itself “Spanish” in an idiom sufficiently flexible to be interpreted
fresh by many kinds of people and in almost every kind of building
type. Kevin Starr, in his book
California and the American
Dream, notes that the San Diego
fair, though it may not have actually
started California on its quest for a
Spanish image, nonetheless con-
ﬁrmed that that was what Califor-
nia should be—a place with an
architecture of simple line, drama
of mass, and in peace and harmony
with its lush landscape.

Many subsequent examples of the
dream exist, from sophisticated
buildings such as the Price house
in Santa Barbara by the talented
and original architect George
Washington Smith to apartment
complexes such as the Andalucía in
Los Angeles, long a favorite of
movie producers. In the Los
Angeles Central Library, his last
work in California, Goodhue
shifted the dream back closer
to Persia. Still the image of the San
Diego exposition’s California
Building, seen in all its evocative
power against a golden sunset,
remains in many ways the most
memorable of all. The gestures of its
tower, its dome—fundamental
architectural gestures rising above
the landscape of Californian
Arcady—give it the power to be
memorable. And these gestures have
worked their magic. The building
has become an icon deeply loved
by the citizens of San Diego. It is
the symbol of the city, just as its
progeny became symbols of the
state.