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Authors

Oliver, Richard
Allen, Edited by Gerald

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Imagining a Landscape

Richard Oliver

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 entwining of buildings, landscapes, and the creative imagination. His death in the spring of 1985 meant 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 in the 1880s reveled in its lushness by growing rose bushes so big they would entirely cover the fronts of their houses, making it unclear whether what they were living in was 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 eastern-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.

Illustrations from Whitaker, Charles Harris, Ed., *Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, Architect and Master of Many Arts* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976; First Edition, copyright 1925), except as noted.



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.

4 | **Hotel del Coronado**, illustration from *America's Grand Resort Hotels* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).



2

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 in 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

2 **Hotel del Coronado** with affiliated tent city, illustration from *America's Grand Resort Hotels* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

for material for her book. Helen Hunt Jackson was the first important 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 something 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 Grosvenor Goodhue, in part because Goodhue wanted the commission 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 Eliel 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 reintroduction of a fairly strict stylistic discipline. Architects like McKim, Mead, and White believed in copying the architecture of the past rather accurately and somewhat academically, adapting its patterns as a way of making great architecture 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. Kavin in Traumburg, 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 Kavinsplatz. Similar 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 prizemen 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.

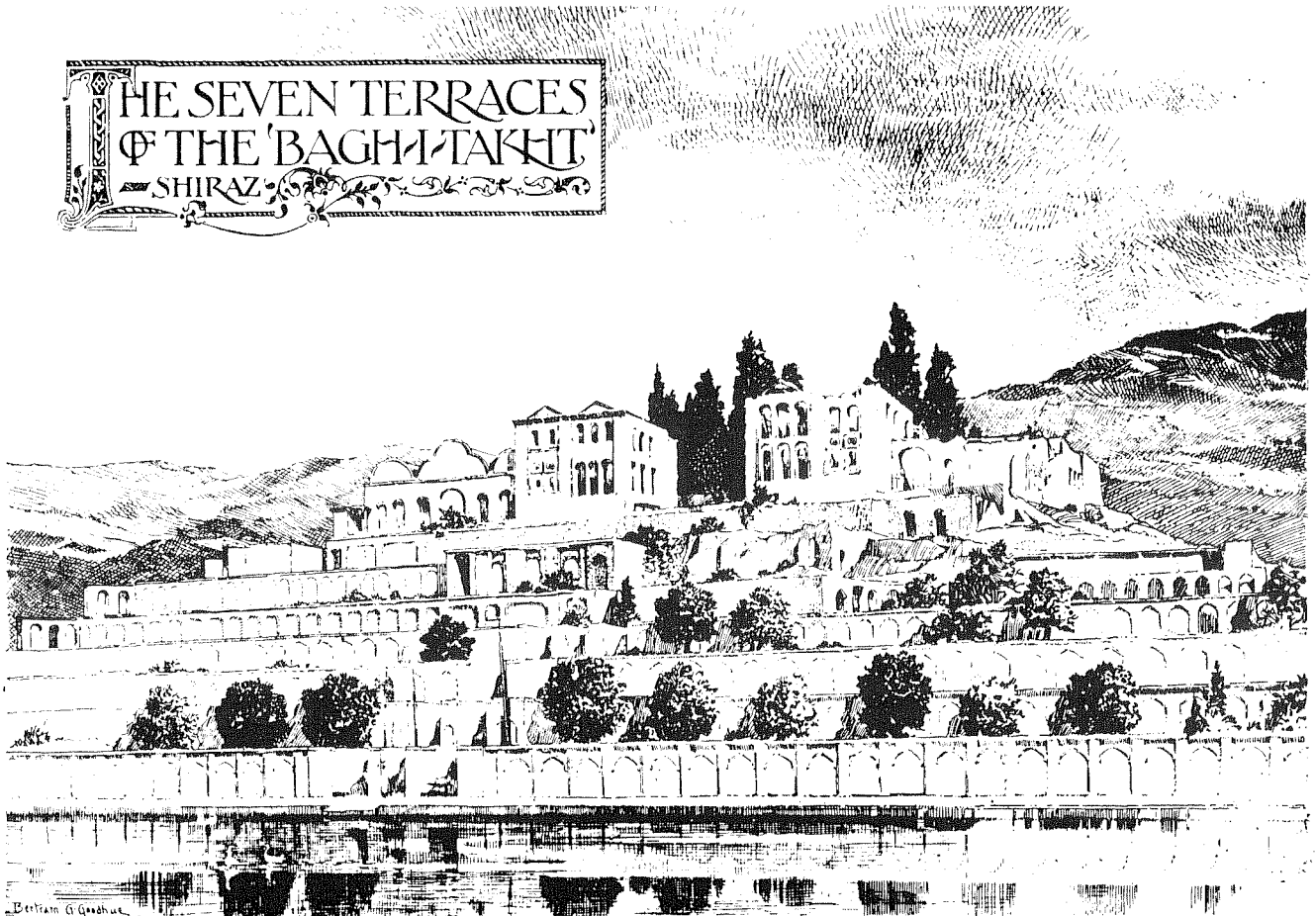
Goodhue’s design for the San Diego fair is most characteristically seen from the great bridge—constructed especially for the exposition—that leaped across the ravine separating the main approach road from the actual site: a mesa topped with a pile of buildings rising from the surrounding vegetation. 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.



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3 Transcept of St. Kavin's, Traumburg, Bohemia

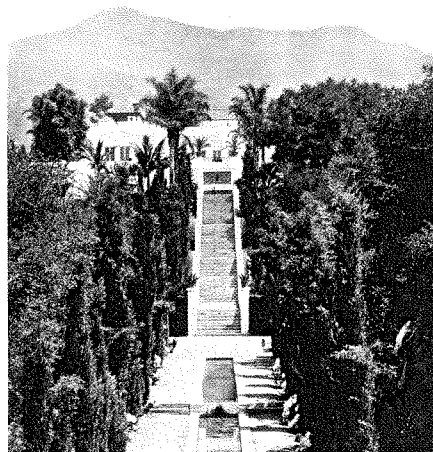
THE SEVEN TERRACES
OF THE 'BAGH-I-TAKHT'
SHIRAZ



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4 The Seven Terraces of the “Bagh-i-Takht”—Shiraz

5 House for J. Waldron Gillespie,
Montecito, California

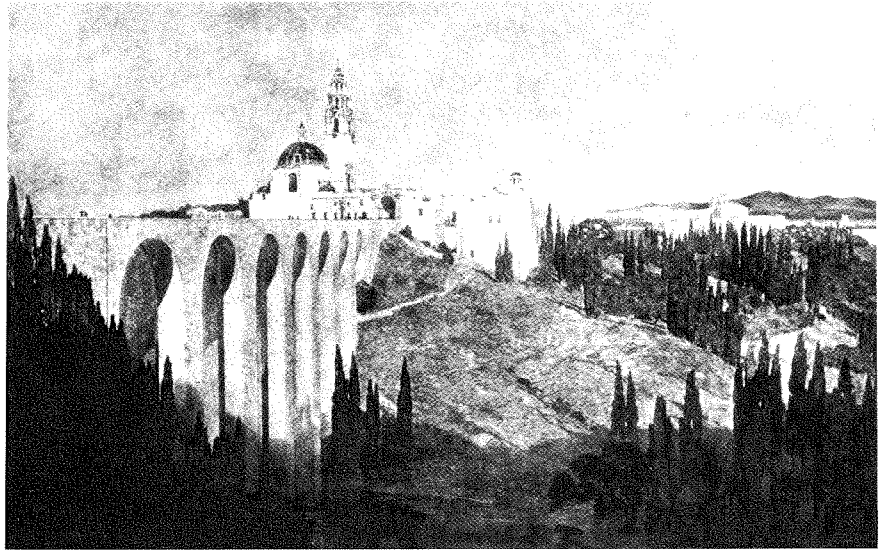


At first glance, the plan of the fair seems Beaux Arts in inspiration, with a major axis (called “El Prado”) and an important cross axis that leads down from a central plaza to the organ pavilion. But the plan is nonetheless very different from what McKim, Mead & White and their graduates might have 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

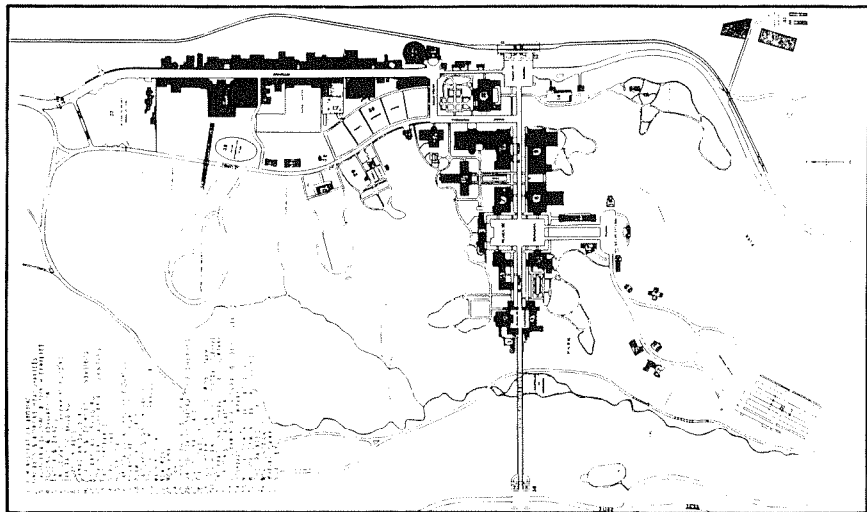
Indies, were laid out on grids. What the plan of the fair really is is a development of what Goodhue and Ralph Adams Cram had been working on in their earlier plan for Rice University: balanced, rather than actual, symmetry. The plan is clearly about a processional route; it is kinetic, and it has to 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.



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6 Entrance approach, Panama-California Exposition, San Diego, California

7 Topographical map, Panama- California Exposition, San Diego, California



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8 “Xanadu”

9 **California Building**, Balboa Park, San Diego, California. Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, architect. Photograph courtesy of San Diego Historical Society—Title Insurance & Trust Collection.



9

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 Rodríguez 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

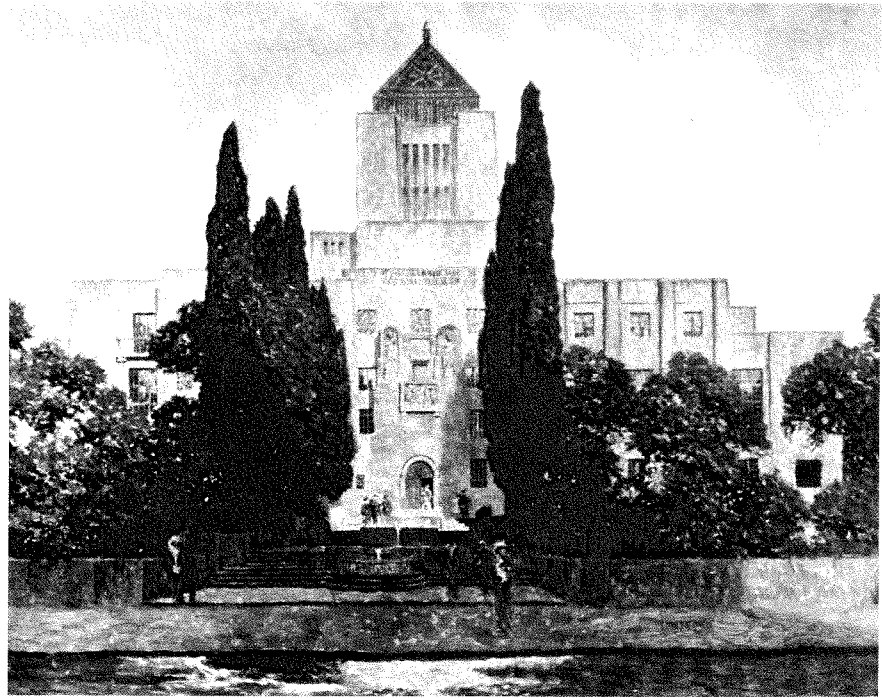
from the Old Testament. It describes the Holy Land, and in the process it also describes California: “A land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of oil, olive trees, and honey.”

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 quad-range, 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



10

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



11

11 **California Building.** Balboa Park, San Diego, California. Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, architect. Photography by Richard Oliver.

could be. They shared the vision, and they set about making California itself “Spanish” in an idiom sufficiently flexible to be interpreted afresh 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 confirmed that that was what California 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 Brice house in Santa Barbara by the talented and original architect George Washington Smith to apartment complexes such as the Andalusia 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 again 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 some 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.