



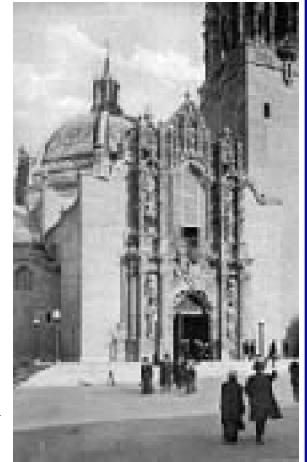
Museum of Man & California Tower

Balboa Park, San Diego, California

San Diego Historical Society
History of the California Building in Balboa Park
by Richard Amero

Though built for the State of California as its contribution to the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, the California Building did not house state exhibits. Twenty-eight counties of California exhibited in buildings about the Exposition grounds but the Departments of the State of California confined their exhibits to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 in San Francisco.

Very few people appear to have looked carefully at the south facade of the California Building in San Diego's Balboa Park. H. K. Raymenton described it as Plateresque in style. Trent Sanford thought it better than anything in Mexico or Spain. William Templeton Johnson called it the finest Spanish-Renaissance facade in existence, and Thomas E. Tallmadge hailed it as the best example of Churrigueresque architecture in the world.



An article in the San Diego Union, January 1, 1915, asserted the California Building was "copied in many essential details from the magnificent cathedral at Oaxaca, Mexico." Christian Brinton repeated this suggestion in June of the same year. After checking with Bertram Goodhue, who designed the California Building, C. Matlack Price referred to the comparison as "palpably absurd." The Late-Renaissance Cathedral of Oaxaca, rebuilt in the early eighteenth century, has a compartmentalized facade with three horizontal tiers and five vertical bays which hold one principal and two lateral doorways, and is flanked by two squat, single-stage towers. None of its details resemble those on the California Building.

Exposure to elements over the years caused bonding and dowels, holding facade to wall, to loosen and concrete to crack. Soot and acids from the air and salts in the original sands, pervaded the cast-concrete surface, blanching and speckling the design. In 1964, the Art A. Gussa Construction Company of El Cajon replaced the plaster base of the tower with gunite concrete and braced the upper stages in an \$80,000 project. In 1975, general contractors Claude F. Williams, Incorporated of Torrance, with Lew Anderson as project superintendent, undertook another tower, facade and west entrance archway renovation for \$550,000. When built in 1913-14, the California Building cost the State of California \$250,000.

The California Building has probably been mentioned more often than any other building in San Diego in studies of American architecture. The building is included in the National Register of Historic Places, as part of the California Quadrangle. In addition, the California Building tower is recorded in the Historic Buildings Survey in the Library of Congress.

Today, after almost one-hundred years of experimentation with Spanish-Renaissance and Baroque scrolls, grills, columns, estipites, cornices, gables, moldings, niches, shields, saints, shells, cupids, garlands and fruits, the facade of the California Building still surprises. It may be academic and constrained, compared to its predecessors in Mexico and Spain, but it is better than anything ever attempted since in the "decorative toothpaste" or Churrigueresque version of the Spanish-Revival style in Florida, Texas, Arizona, and California, including at least two attempts at direct imitation (St. Vincent's Church, Los Angeles, 1923, Albert C. Martin, architect, and the Garfield Park Administration Building, Chicago, Illinois, 1928, architects Michaelsen and Rognstad.)