

The San Diego Union-Tribune

July 16, 2011

Moving Forward in Forefathers' Footsteps



By George Mullen

On Tuesday, it will be exactly 100 years since July 19, 1911, when San Diego officially broke ground on the 1915 Exposition construction projects, hosting a spectacular three-day celebration to mark the groundbreaking. This was the groundbreaking of the very projects that made Balboa Park what it is today.

To mark this noteworthy (but sadly unrecognized) centennial anniversary of San Diego moving forward on its most ambitious city project ever, we are bizarrely facing a Wyatt Earp-styled political showdown between the Promoters of Progress & Vision and the Defenders of the Status Quo.

If you remember only one thing from this article, please let it be this: If the ever-present defenders of the status quo had been allowed to rule the day in the 1910s, the Balboa Park we know and love today wouldn't exist.

The status quo-ers are no doubt good people striving to do what they think is best for Balboa Park and San Diego. But preservation does not mean permanently locking oneself into a time capsule. And even if it were so, who has the right to say what year or era we lock ourselves into? If we refuse to adapt to the times and needs of future generations, we create an environment by which the park's major philanthropists and benefactors leave for concerns that do appreciate their efforts, funding steadily deteriorates, infrastructure needs go unattended (there is already a backlog of \$240 million needed repairs in the park), and ultimately the viability of the park comes into question. Sound alarmist? This has happened to many great parks in America over the years, including New York's Central Park.

In 1910, when the modern-day Balboa Park was under consideration, the city of San Diego had a population of 39,578, San Diego County 61,665, and tourism was minimal. In 2011, the city has a population over 1.4 million, the county has over 3 million, the greater Tijuana region has over 2.5 million, and the tourism business is off the charts in comparison. (The Convention Center & Visitors Bureau reports that in 2010 San Diego County had over 29 million visitors, with 15 million-plus overnight visitors.) Balboa Park attracts more than 10 million visitors a year. Clearly times have changed and the park needs to adapt by both preserving its past and providing greater accessibility to a population that has grown exponentially. From the park's beginnings, it has been the major philanthropists who have made great things happen – it was G. Aubrey Davidson and the San Diego Chamber of Commerce who originally proposed the Exposition idea, the Spreckels, Sefton and Marston contributions in time and money that gave it traction, and so on. Today, we are blessed with another great philanthropist family in this line of promoting progress – Irwin and Joan Jacobs. Their reputation for great deeds in San Diego is without question, and they have now proposed a plan aimed at both preserving the park and providing greater access to millions of visitors. Furthermore, they have pledged to raise \$25 million of the \$40 million cost of the project themselves. If this plan is embraced, countless generations will enjoy the Plaza de Panama as the pedestrian plaza it was originally intended to be.

When the 1915 Exposition opened on Jan. 1, 1915, George Marston (the civic leader largely responsible for the California Tower) gave a speech with these words: “On this rise of Balboa Park we here today dedicate the California Building to noble uses – the study of life, the history of man, the sciences and the arts, the high things of the mind and spirit.” The study of life, indeed – we are a city that is living, breathing and adapting to the times and needs of our expanding population. The status quo is now and forever unacceptable.

I appeal to the San Diego City Council and all San Diegans, that on this centennial anniversary of the groundbreaking of Balboa Park, we join together again and stand firm for continued progress in our beloved park. We have a spectacular Centennial Celebration in 2015 to look forward to and prepare for. Let's start our preparation on July 19 – just as our forefathers and mothers did in 1911.

Mullen is an artist and writer with StudioRevolution.com