

50-Year Anniversary:
**One Man's Vision Created a San Diego Landmark and a
Community for Le Rondelet Owners and Residents**

By Bill Heard

The year 1966 was remarkable in the career of San Diego developer Leonard Teyssier. His first accomplishment was completion of construction of the Ocean Beach Fishing Pier, longest pier on the West Coast, which opened to the public on July 2. In November, the College Avenue Baptist Church – built by Teyssier & Teyssier – was dedicated. And he also had just begun construction of what would become one of the city's iconic buildings – Le Rondelet.

Teyssier & Teyssier, had only been in business since 1955 as a partnership Leonard formed with his father, Edward W. Teyssier. “When I got out of college, I didn’t have enough experience to apply for a contractor’s license,” he recalls, “but my father did, so we started a company.” The company became a principal contractor in San Diego, bidding on lots of local jobs.

Teyssier had wanted for some time to build either an office or apartment building. With that in mind, he purchased a one-and-a-half-acre lot at the intersection of Cañon and Shafter streets at the foot of Shelter Island Drive. A former fish cannery occupied the site, which was zoned for either commercial or residential. He decided to build an apartment/hotel that he hoped would attract Hollywood stars for long weekend visits, while also providing housing for those who wanted to live near the water.

The lot was adjacent to a similar sized parcel owned by the Port of San Diego. Under an agreement with the Port, he leased the lot and paid two cents a square foot to develop it for public parking, which included his tenants and hotel guests. “We did all the improvements: curbs, planters, and paving.”

The design phase of the project had its hiccups. At first, Teyssier and his architects Jack Meadows and Terry Reed experimented with a conventional square building. It quickly became obvious, however, that a semi-circular building would be more appropriate – it was a better use of the site, and it would give every unit a view.

Reworked the floor plans

The first interior designs called for units of 950 and 1,000 square feet. But, when the design was almost completed, Teyssier says, “I realized that wouldn’t be where I would want to live, at the price I would have to charge for the rental units.” Late one night, he reworked the floor plans, cutting and pasting the new design over the old one the architects had drawn. “When the architects came in

the next morning, they weren't happy when they saw what I had done, and almost quit."

But, the revised design increased the overall size of the units by 16 percent, with dimensions of no less than 14 feet in any room, with the exception of the dens in some units. Tessier also decided to make each unit different, either by location or by configuration. That way, he could offer prospective tenants a floor plan that would fit their budget by offering them a larger or smaller unit, or by offering one on another floor.

Working with the city fire marshal, who had become increasingly concerned about fire safety following a disastrous casino fire in Las Vegas, Teyssier and his architects planned a number of fire-safety features into the building. It would have outside walkways instead of interior halls to prevent fire from easily spreading throughout the building, and to avoid smoke-filled passageways. The main elevator shafts were exterior to the building, also to prevent smoke and fire from reaching living areas. Emergency stairwells were located at the extreme ends of the building for the same purpose.

There also was an early discussion of whether the building would be six or ten stories. Teyssier decided on a six-story building, and – to ensure earthquake safety – planned for it to be an all-concrete structure with a foundation constructed of 20,000 lineal feet of reinforced concrete piles driven deep into the earth. The foundation, he says, is sufficient to support a ten-story building.

Construction of the still-unnamed building began in May 1966. Among the first elements to be made were the hundreds of balcony posts and railings, which were pre-cast concrete poured in forms on-site, then sand-blasted for texture. Next, thick concrete columns were cast, and made ready to be set in place as each concrete floor was poured.

Textured concrete panels

Key to the construction of the building, Teyssier explained, was the recent development of construction cranes strong enough to hoist the heavy concrete columns and panels to the height of the building. This allowed the builder to use the textured concrete panels that are bolted into place along the building's exterior walls, and the waist-high panels that line the walkways.

Soon, the unusual shape of the building became obvious to observers. It's outside diameter, which stretched almost to the edges of the property, was 550 feet, with an interior diameter of 355 feet – 68 percent of a circle, or about 245 compass degrees. In fact, locals began to compare it to a coliseum. "So much so," Teyssier laughs, "that some neighbors put together a sign that said: Lions 2, Christians 0."

The building, christened Le Rondelet – a name suggested by Teyssier's friend Mrs. Lynn Joseph of Rancho Santa Fe – was completed on April 20, 1967. It opened as an apartment/hotel with a lobby staffed by personnel who greeted residents and escorted hotel guests to their rooms. And Hollywood did come, among them TV star Ben Gazzara, and opera singer and TV personality Anna Maria Alberghetti.

In addition to the building, the property included a swimming pool, a Cabaña, landscaped lawn, and the Australian Moreton Bay Fig Tree that dominates the courtyard. Teyssier had seen the tree growing alongside a road where it was in danger of being cut down. He was given permission to uproot the tree, had it hauled to San Diego, and placed in the Le Rondelet courtyard. A similar tree planted in Santa Barbara in 1876, was registered as a historic landmark in 1970, and is listed on the California Register of Big Trees.

Five years after Le Rondelet opened, it was purchased by Peter Grant and Joe Laudau of Lincoln Properties, a Texas firm, for conversion into 81 condominium units. Condos in the early 1960s were replacing apartments in many cities, including San Diego, because the value of condo units could be as much as double the value of an apartment of the same size, according to Teyssier. The sale closed in August 1972.

A new fee structure

Prior to the sale, Teyssier's lawyer drew up the various governance documents required for conversion of the apartments to condominium units. One issue was the monthly fees homeowners would be charged. At the time, he says, the monthly fees in most condominium complexes were the same, regardless of where a unit might be in the building, ground floor or penthouse.

"I didn't think that was right, and I didn't think the public would buy Le Rondelet units that way," Teyssier says. He gave each unit a different value, depending on size and location, and included the monthly fee schedule in the governing documents – a system that endures to this day. "You can't expect a second floor owner to pay the same association dues as someone on an upper floor in a larger unit."

Just at the time Le Rondelet converted to condos, Teyssier recalls, the economy in San Diego tanked, and interest rates skyrocketed. Many local residents sold their homes and moved into the new condominium complex. And some bought more than one unit at what were then bargain prices.

It's evident in talking with Teyssier that he is very proud of Le Rondelet, and of having been the builder who placed the iconic building in a prominent location in San Diego. "With its location and views," he says, "Le Rondelet is one of a kind!"

In the 45 years since Le Rondelet was converted from an apartment/hotel, virtually every condo unit in the building has been renovated – some more than once. The building, itself, has gone through a number of upgrades as succeeding Boards voted to make improvements to the infrastructure. In recent years, for example, the Lobby and Library/Billiard Room have been remodeled, and – this past year – the Cabaña was modernized with new kitchen equipment, flooring, lighting, and wall coverings.

On April 8, 2017, Le Rondelet will celebrate its 50th Anniversary with a gala event that will begin with champagne toasts, and welcome remarks in the Lobby, followed by a catered buffet, and music in the Cabaña. Special guests will include Leonard Teyssier, whose vision a half-century ago created not only a San Diego landmark, but a very special community for its owners and residents.

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