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The House of Dreams Awakens

Abstract

La Jolla's "House O'Dreams" (1911-18) is a palatial East Asian-style house built from architectural materials most likely sourced from San Francisco's Panama-Pacific International Exposition (1915) which featured a Chinese Village and a three-acre Imperial Japanese Garden.

Keywords

East Asian architecture, La Jolla, Panama Pacific International Exposition

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The House of Dreams Awakens

by Molly McClain and Heather Crane

La Jolla boasts landmark houses in a range of styles, from English Tudor to Spanish Colonial and even Moorish Revival. One of the most unique, however, is the palatial East Asian “House O’Dreams” at 1428 Soledad Ave. Built between 1911 and 1918, it is a striking testament to the fascination with non-Western cultures in the early 20th century.

House O’Dreams was built by Florence White Howard (1855-1937), a free-spirited artist known for her public readings of Theosophical texts. The daughter of a wealthy manufacturer from Hanover, IL, she lived in Chicago with her husband John Urquhart Howard, a wool merchant, and two children. She traveled internationally and was a frequent visitor to world’s fairs, starting with the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Like

The entrance to the House O’ Dreams features eye-catching curved eaves with exposed rafter tails, characteristic of East Asian hip-and-gable roofs. *Photos courtesy of Berkshire Hathaway*

many of her contemporaries, she fell in love with “the Orient” and sought to replicate an idealized vision of beauty and serenity along the shores of the Pacific.

The house was built in two stages. In the summer of 1911, Florence hired contractor Perl Acton to build a one-story, six room bungalow. The living room, with its deep stone fireplace, looks much like the Green Dragon’s “Wahnfried.” Five years later, she rebuilt the house, turning it into a three-story palace topped by an East Asian hip-and-gable roof with multiple eaves painted black and red. Inside, rooms were remodeled to incorporate a “Chinese balcony” and mezzanine floor, a sun parlor, and an observatory with panoramic views. The house remains substantially unchanged after more than 100 years.

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Florence may have sourced her architectural materials from San Francisco's Panama-Pacific International Exposition (1915) which featured a Chinese Village and a three-acre Imperial Japanese Garden with five large buildings and eight small pavilions. Designed and built by Asian architects and craftsmen, the structures were intended to be temporary. When the fair ended, they were disassembled and, eventually, sold. The Formosa Tea House became a residence in Belmont, CA, while the Japanese Commissioners' Office was shipped to Ardenwood farm in Fremont.

Inside the House O'Dreams was furniture and bric-a-brac collected from expositions in Chicago (1893), Buffalo (1901), St. Louis (1904), and San Diego (1915-16). These included Indian block-print curtains; bamboo stools; Chinese tea tables and chairs; and screens from the Japanese Tea House in Balboa Park. The house retains oil paintings of the Panamanian jungle built into the wall (perhaps a souvenir from one of the Panama Canal exhibits) and a portrait of a gypsy girl on the back of a door.

In addition to building her dream house, Florence developed a Japanese-style garden. Paths leading up the hill crossed an arched bridge wound through clusters of cherry trees, cedar, pines, and black bamboo. The garden also included several torii, or Japanese gates, traditionally used to mark the entrance to a sacred landscape.

House O' Dreams became a tourist attraction visited by hundreds of people who stopped on their way to La Jolla to view its many unusual features. It may have been conceived as a tea house like George Marsh's Japanese Tea Garden near the Hotel del Coronado. Or it may have



Top: The living room evokes Japanese aesthetics with the use of woven tatami mats on the walls and ceiling and pastoral bonsai tree patterned wallpaper. Below: The rustic fireplace, with its uncoursed random rubble masonry, is the focal point of the living room.

Photos courtesy of Berkshire Hathaway

“
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”

been a piece of performance art staged by Florence Howard to display her artistry and taste.

In a 1921 publication writer Eleanor Stanford called the house and gardens “an Oriental dream of fairyland” and “one of the most charming sights of La Jolla.”

Sadly, the dream house turned into a financial nightmare. Burdened with debt and facing foreclosure, Florence sold her home and its contents at auction in 1921. She moved to Long Beach to live with her daughter before traveling to India, possibly to visit the headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, near Chennai. She lived in Long Beach until the Great Depression when she and her daughters moved to Bellflower where a relative had a poultry ranch. She died in 1937 at the age of 82.

The House O' Dreams remains a history-evoking La Jolla house that has changed remarkably little in over 100 years. It is hoped that future owners recognize its unusual history and architecture and find it a treasure to be cherished into future decades.

Above right: The home was designed to take advantage of La Jolla's temperate climate. The two-story volume at left is a sunroom over an open porch, whereas the one-story volume, center, and the second-level room at right, were once open porches that have since been enclosed.



Photography courtesy dirt.com

In the distant years of 1911-13 Florence Howard – an adventurous world traveler – purchased several lots on a barren hilltop knoll above La Jolla village with panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean and cliffs and caves to the north. There she built a most unusual house – a house of multiple pagoda-shaped rooflines, curved-tail rafters, sunrooms and sleeping porches with much of it painted a conspicuous persimmon red. She called it her “House ‘O Dreams.” A few years later she abruptly left La Jolla, supposedly bound for India after selling in foreclosure. For many decades and into the present-day the house – referred to as the “Chinese” or “Japanese” house for its many Asiatic design influences – remained an anomaly, sleepily content in its own secrets hidden behind a forest of overgrown shrubs and trees. A death in the family that owned the house for decades after Howard's departure led to the property's recent placement on the real estate market. In the following article scholar Molly McClain reveals some newly discovered history and the exotic switchback life of the woman who built it.

– Carol Olten