

New Balboa Park Projects Lack Transparency and Design

Posted By *Howard Blackson* On October 18, 2019 @ 1:22 pm



Food trucks line Balboa Park on Friday nights throughout the summer. / Photo courtesy of the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership

Balboa Park is a jewel in continuous need of attention and stewardship. It suffers from years of deferred maintenance with the estimated shortfall of \$285 million and rising ^[1]. Recent projects and improvements have become controversial, and the reasons are perhaps twofold. First, there's no clear public process to discuss park proposals. And second, clear design standards are absent for new projects.

The world loves Balboa Park. Set aside as "city park" in 1868 to be a great civic space of 1,400 acres, its grandeur was conceived of during our nation's mid-19th century era of "great parks." Its contemporaries are New York City's Central Park (843 total acres), San Francisco's Golden Gate Park (1,017 acres) and St. Louis' Forest Park (1,371 acres). Balboa Park is currently the nation's fifth most visited urban park ^[2], with 14 million visitors annually.

COMMENTARY

The Voices of San Diego

Repurposed as Balboa Park in 1910 during the era of world's fairs and expositions, San Diego's 1915 California-Panama Exposition is a direct descendant of the nation's most important design moment, Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition ^[3]. Our iconic buildings introduced Spanish Colonial Revival architecture ^[4] with the world's latest technical advancements and varied cultures to millions of visitors.

This new Spanish Colonial Revival style was used to promote a romanticized version of San Diego. It was purposely crafted to express San Diego as a utopian garden to directly compete with San Francisco's rival Panama Exposition, which expressed its older, more East Coast neo-gothic and Victorian styles. Acclaimed architect Bertram Goodhue's California Building Tower and Quadrangle are the archetype of San Diego's design aesthetic now recognized throughout the world.

What Goodhue embedded into Balboa Park is the understanding that building toward social and cultural value always equates to economic value, while the converse is not as true. A century-plus later, San Diego needs to revitalize that sense of civic stewardship and celebrate the park as an expression of local values. The designs should achieve a familiar beauty that connects and resonates with us as a culture.

When the city solicits projects, officials prioritize low-bid and design-build procurements, which put economic values first. And by doing so, the current process is limiting desired outcomes of high-quality designed places. The resulting aesthetic chaos is not the inevitable fate of Balboa Park's future.

A recent example is the West Mesa Comfort Stations project, where the bathrooms have been going through the design process for several years. Even so, community groups in the Bankers Hill neighborhood have complained about a lack of engagement and clarity when it comes to the building's façade and overall appearance.

Unfortunately, excellent designs are perceived as too expensive and exclusionary in a city where fiscally conservative values have long dominated public policy discussions. And for decades, San Diegans didn't want to pay.^[5] to maintain the park. The city's approach to building in Balboa Park inevitably appears to be haphazard because it lacks a dedicated source of funding.

Balboa Park's promise is to provide a variety of experiences that allow people of different classes and backgrounds to mix comfortably while mitigating the insensitivity of city life. Better designs at the building level help us experience a deeper sense of belonging to places and people. At the park level, good design provides a unique experience and keeps people coming back.

To mediate the expectations of locals, advocates, business interests and visitors, Balboa Park needs an authoritative design review board. It is important to have a transparent body with decision-making authority to serve as stewards of the public's design decisions. The city charter gives the Planning Commission the authority.^[6] to form a design review board that would ensure that new projects are architecturally appropriate and consistent^[7] with the 1989 Balboa Park Master Plan. The city would continue to manage the delivery of projects once the quality of larger design decisions is vetted.

The 2017 Balboa Park Benefits Study concluded that its economic impact is \$356.4 million annually.^[8] and a majority of its visitors are repeats (56 percent). The park is a regional economic, social and cultural dynamo that influences the entire region while being managed and operated at the local scale. A Balboa Park design review board would provide the stewardship needed until a long-term funding source is found by being able to coalesce the efforts of the many of the park's institutions, committees, advocacy groups and citizens still reliant on the 30-year old master plan. This way, the park's long tradition of design excellence is maintained.

Howard Blackson is an urban design director at AVRP Skyport in downtown San Diego, and former Civic San Diego board member. Mike Stepner is a professor of architecture at the New School of Architecture and Design, and former San Diego city architect. René Smith is a retired U.S. Navy program analyst and parks advocate.

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[1] \$285 million and rising: <https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/government/the-biggest-challenges-facing-balboa-park/>

[2] the nation's fifth most visited urban park: https://www.tpl.org/sites/default/files/files_upload/2014_CityParkFacts.pdf

[3] Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/history/ct-the-white-city-20170503-htmlstory.html><https://www.chicagotribune.com/history/ct-the-white-city-20170503-htmlstory.html>

[4] introduced Spanish Colonial Revival architecture: <https://pancalarchive.org/>

[5] San Diegans didn't want to pay: <https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/government/a-tale-of-two-parks/>

[6] gives the Planning Commission the authority: <https://docs.sandiego.gov/citycharter/Article%20V.pdf>

[7] architecturally appropriate and consistent: https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/bpmasterplan_0.pdf

[8] economic impact is \$356.4 million annually: <http://balboaparkconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Balboa-Park-Benefits-Study-2017.pdf>

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