



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 16, 2016

TO: Historical Resources Board and Interested Parties

FROM: Jodie Brown, AICP, Senior Planner, Historical Resources, Planning Department

SUBJECT: **ITEM 6 – CALIFORNIA THEATRE PAINTED WALL SIGNS**

The Agua Caliente Painted Wall Signs was heard by the Historical Resources Board (HRB) at the April 28, 2016 meeting. The decision on whether or not to designate the signs was not made at the time. The HRB passed a motion requesting additional information. The HRB motion directed:

“...the consultant to supplement the materials related to the two Agua Caliente painted wall signs, in particular, the sign the DPR form refers to as “sign 3” (the large sign located on the west elevation). The Board would like: (1) substantive information and analysis with regard to the context of cross-border tourism and commerce (San Diego and Tijuana) and related economic development in the 1950s and the 1960s, and how the sign may reflect or relate to those historic activities; (2) more information and background about the technique used for painting the wall signs; and (3) more information on the artist(s) responsible, to the extent that there is more information to be found. Additionally, if historic photos of the dog racing sign can be located, they should be included in the report.”

HRB staff received an addendum to the report from AECOM addressing the direction of the Board which continues to state that the signs are not significant. Additionally, staff received an analysis from Legacy 106, Inc. stating that the signs are significant under HRB Criteria A and C. In an effort to keep the information clear, this report will discuss the information from the AECOM report and then the Legacy 106, Inc. Report followed by the conclusions.

- (1) Provide substantive information and analysis with regard to the context of cross-border tourism and commerce (San Diego and Tijuana) and related economic development in the 1950s and the 1960s, and how the sign may reflect or relate to those historic activities.

Per the AECOM report, San Diego and Tijuana’s histories have been linked since the establishment of the international border and the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 when Mexico ceded California to the United States. The population of southern California boomed in the 1880s and Tijuana was formally established in 1889. By the turn of the century, the small town of Tijuana attracted American

tourists and business interests. The area was also considered a gateway for Mexicans looking to immigrate to the United States.

Tourism emerged as an industry in the late 19th century across the country as railroads enabled transportation to points of interest. Promotions by land speculators grasped the romanticized Spanish Colonial and Mexican themes widely popularized by Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona*. Whether real or fictional these themes were engrained in the nostalgic identity of Southern California. A revival of the Spanish Colonial themes surged to the forefront during the Panama-California Exposition of 1915. As visitors flocked to the city, opportunists on both sides of the border capitalized on the influx of tourists. Businessmen invested and promoted Tijuana as a destination. Coincidentally, Mexico allowed gambling in 1915, but moral views of gambling in the United States fluctuated which resulted in a ban of most forms of gambling in 1910. In 1916, the Lower California Jockey Club was established in Tijuana providing a forum for the first horse race track in Tijuana. Shortly afterward, the Casino Monte Carlo was created next to the racetrack. While there were a number of setbacks to these new entertainments, including fire, flood and the year and a half closure of the border during World War I, with the passage of the 18th Amendment, Tijuana became the epicenter for alcohol drinkers, vendors, producers and bootleggers. The number of drinking establishments doubled to 60 in 4 years. The Lower California Jockey Club race track reopened in 1920 attracting more Americans to Tijuana with no visa or passport required.

Tijuana's population grew steadily during Prohibition. In 1928, the Agua Caliente Hotel and Casino was opened followed by the racetrack in 1929. This new destination became the "it" spot for Californians. The racetrack averaged 3,500 attendees each day. Businessmen promoted these destinations on both sides of the border. The golden age of Tijuana declined with the legalization of gambling in Nevada in 1931, the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, the legalization of pari-mutuel wagering at California racetracks in 1933 and the construction of the Santa Anita racetrack in 1934. In 1935, gambling was declared illegal by Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas. The casinos closed and although racetrack betting was eventually re-established, the glamour of Baja California faded. The image of Tijuana as a destination for vice continued despite the expanding economy and population.

As the 1930s progressed, there was a tightening of the border. A wave of nationalism in Mexico pursued economic independence from the US through the 1930s. Between 1929 and 1936, the US deported about 2 million people of Mexican descent primarily from California and Texas. Many of the people who were deported stayed at the border towns which led to the tightening at the border. Despite the contraction at the border, trans-border transportation, communications and tourism continued.

As the US entered World War II, border exchange between the US and Mexico ramped up. The Agua Caliente races drew large crowds. The US also invested in Mexican mines and smelters and hired Mexican labors through the Bracero Program, a temporary guest-worker program established in 1942.

Postwar Tijuana's economy was still dependent on US economic trends. From 1960 to 1980, Tijuana's annual growth rate exceeded 6 percent while San Diego's growth rate exceeded 3 percent, both higher than their respective national growth rates. Several

factors contributed to this growth, including the continued growth of the US-Mexican cross border trade and tourism, the introduction of maquiladoras (foreign owned assembly plants in duty-free border zones), and the development of a border commuter work force.

In the 1950s and 1960s, tourist attractions in Tijuana continued to draw Americans including the rebranded Caliente racetrack. Additionally, bull fighting, jai alai and other unique attractions continued to draw tourists.

John Alessio helped to revitalize the Agua Caliente for 17 years starting in 1953. His revitalization efforts included the introduction of a number of schemes to attract tourists to Tijuana, such as the 5-10 betting system and a six horse daily double. In the mid-1950s, which coincided with renovations to the Agua Caliente, Alessio launched a new marketing campaign. The campaign included print ad materials, billboards, neon signs, and painted wall signs with a new Caliente logo. Alessio claimed that his annual \$400,000 advertising and promotion budget was the highest of any race course in the world. Alessio hired the Barnes Chase Company to manage advertising for the Agua Caliente. Marketing for the racetrack included the "Old Mexico" themes that were the original draw to Tijuana. Alessio commissioned illustrations of the Caliente races from Paul Desmond Brown, a renowned illustrator of equine scenes. Brown produced many drawings that were used in Caliente's advertising and promotional brochures. In 1956, a portfolio of four of Brown's pencil and crayon drawings of Caliente scenes was published. Around the same time Caliente began using a new logo that was likely attributable to Brown based on its style and subject matter. The new logo had an enlarged "C" in Caliente that was decorated with roses with a horse and jockey in the center. The logo was used widely on all material associated with the track.

To further encourage attendance at the track, Alessio improved accessibility across the border. He encouraged bus services from Los Angeles and flights from Long Beach to Otay Mesa. As part of the marketing campaign, the Agua Caliente sign and the dog racing sign were painted on the California Theatre. As evidenced by the historic photos there were a number of signs in downtown for the Agua Caliente. Additionally, an Agua Caliente office was located downtown to help facilitate the flow of tourists to Tijuana. The signs for the California Theatre were painted between June of 1962 and the end of 1963. The south and west faces of the California Theatre were visible in an aerial dated June 13, 1962 and the wall faces were blank. The next available downtown aerial showing the California Theatre is 1963 and both signs appear at that time.

- (2) More information and background about the technique used for painting the wall signs.

The Agua Caliente signs were most likely painted using pounce patterns. Pounce patterns are a method of stenciling. The designs are drawn out on a large piece of paper, tiny holes are pricked in the design, the paper is taped to the surface and chalk is applied to the paper. When the paper is removed, it leaves a pattern on the surface that can be painted. Pounce patterns have been used since the mid-10th century and are continued to be used today to create signs.

- (3) More information on the artist(s) responsible, to the extent that there is more information to be found.

As noted previously, the AECOM addendum attributes the logo and illustrations to Paul Desmond Brown, who was known as a master sporting artist and the preeminent America illustrator of equestrian subjects. Brown's firm, Black and White, produced commercial illustrations with a specialty of depicting horses and dogs in action. Brown's 1956 illustration portfolio of the Caliente races, including a cover folder with the "Caliente! In Old Mexico" logo, indicated that he was the designer of the logo. Brown died in 1958, and the signs were not painted until 1962-63, which has implications about the possibility of Brown's direct involvement in the designs of Caliente and dog racing sign. There is no evidence that Brown specifically designed these signs, it is likely that the marketing campaign modified his designs for application by the Pacific Advertising Company.

Pacific Outdoor Advertising Company was a predominant Los Angeles based billboard company that erected signs throughout Southern California in the 1950s and the 1960s. They were known for hand painted signs. While the Caliente sign and the dog racing sign are representative of the Pacific Outdoor Advertising Company's breadth, they are not notable examples of the company's best or most innovative signs during this period.

Research was also conducted on José Jesus Moreno. While it is known that Moreno was a professional sign painter who painted billboards, houses, planes and taxi cabs throughout San Diego, very little information about his involvement in the creation of the signs is known.


In summary, while John Alessio introduced innovative schemes to attract crowds to the revamped race track and promoted the race track via a blitzkrieg of advertising, the sign and associated activities was only a small portion of the economic development of the time. The introduction of the Bracero Program and later the maquiladoras as well as the commuter cultural were also the impetus for the growth of the area and the cross border relationship. The sign and associated business was one small aspect of this development and was not the sole or even significant catalyst for the growth in the region. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the advertising for the racetrack was prevalent in and around the region. Additionally, it appears that the designer/artist associated with the sign could not be 100% substantiated. However, based on the evidence that was provided it appears that Paul Desmond Brown was likely involved in a portion of the design. Based on the additional research and analysis provided in the AECOM report, the sign does not exemplify or reflect and special elements of the City's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development.

Per the Legacy 106, Inc. analysis, the property is eligible under HRB Criteria A and C. Legacy 106, Inc. states that the Caliente mural represents and reflects a special element of San Diego's historical, cultural, social, economic and aesthetic development and is significant under HRB Criterion A. The conclusion of the Legacy 106, Inc. analysis is summarized as follows. The sign was one of many advertising murals around San Diego aimed at Americans in Southern California in the late 1950s and the early 1960s which promoted the destination and fostered tourism to Mexico. This was part of a large advertising campaign undertaken by prominent San Diegan John Alessio. The mural is the largest, most prominent and only

known extant example of the Caliente sign. The mural represents the cross national relationship between San Diego and Tijuana and is directly related to the earlier 1926 Spanish Eclectic style California Theatre. Under Criterion C, the Caliente mural is one of the few remaining examples of a large scale hand painted wall sign. Legacy 106, Inc. notes that the mural was designed and painted by muralist and artist George Sawders, owner of Dix Outdoor Advertising and is an example of a large scale advertising mural with hand painted detailing.

The brief report provided by Legacy 106, Inc. fails to address the significance of the property under HRB Criteria A and C. The report has made a number of statements but fails to provide background information substantiating these statements. The historic photo that was provided by Legacy 106, Inc. states that the sign was painted on the building in 1957, but the photo is not dated and the information is contradicted by the aerial photos provided by AECOM which clearly shows a blank wall in 1962. The 1962 date of the photo can be substantiated by the date written on the photo and by the presence/absence of the nearby buildings in the downtown area. Legacy 106, Inc. also provided information on the designer and artist of the sign as George Sawders, however there is no background information to support this assertion.

Based on the information provided in the AECOM and the Legacy 106, Inc. reports, staff's recommendation remains unchanged, and staff does not recommend designation of the painted wall signs on the California Theatre.



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Attachments:

1. AECOM Addendum to Report No. HRB-16-026 with Supplemental Information Regarding the Painted Wall Signs at the California Theatre, 122 4th Avenue (under separate cover)
2. Legacy 106, Inc. Historic Caliente Mural Report (under separate cover)



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

Report to the Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: April 21, 2016 REPORT NO. HRB-16-026

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board
Agenda of April 28, 2016

SUBJECT: **ITEM #6 - The California Theatre Painted Wall Signs**

APPLICANT: Sloan Capital Partners LLC represented by AECOM

LOCATION: 1122 4th Avenue, 92101, Downtown Community, Council District 3

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the California Theatre Painted Wall Signs located at 1122 4th Avenue as a historical resource.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Do not designate the painted wall signs on the California Theatre located at 1122 4th Avenue under any adopted HRB Criteria.

BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with a proposed building modification or demolition of a structure of 45 years or more, consistent with San Diego Municipal Code Section 143.0212. While the California Theatre Building was designated on the local register in 1990 and determined eligible for the National Register, the painted wall signs were not addressed. The three signs were painted on the exterior of the building after the 1927 date of construction. This action seeks to address the significance of the signs only as objects and is not addressing the significance of the California Theatre which is a designated resource (HRB Site #291). The "In Spot" (sign #1) sign is located on the north façade, the "Agua Caliente" (sign #2) sign is located on the west façade, and the "Dog Racing" (sign #3) sign is south facade. The building is located on APN 533-521-04 and 533-521-05.

ANALYSIS

A Historical Resource Technical Report was prepared by AECOM, which concludes that the painted wall signs are not significant under any HRB Criteria and staff concurs. This determination is consistent with the *Guidelines for the Application of Historical Resources Board Designation Criteria*, as follows.

CRITERION A - Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's, a community's or a neighborhood's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development.

Sign #1 is located on the north façade of the building. The sign is associated with a business that was housed in the California Theatre with an entrance at the southeast corner of the building. The sign reads "Barbary Coast, San Diego's In Spot, Corner 4th and C." The Barbary Coast Tavern was in operation at this location from 1968 to 1976 outside of the period of significance for the California Theatre. It was during this time frame that the sign was painted on the north façade of the building.

Sign #2 and #3 advertise the Agua Caliente Racetrack. During Prohibition from 1919 to 1933, alcohol consumption was illegal in the United States and many in San Diego would cross the border to Tijuana to visit the local bars. In response to the growing number of visitors, several American investors developed the Agua Caliente casino and resort. The casino opened in 1928 with a dog racetrack followed shortly by a golf course. In December 1929, the Agua Caliente Jockey Club horse racetrack opened with much fanfare. Through the 1930s, these amenities attracted large crowds. After Prohibition, the resort suffered a decline in attendance and in September 1937 the resort closed and was seized by the Mexican government. While the racetrack continued to operate, the property was used as an aviation and industrial school and hospital. The racetrack regained some popularity in 1939 when horse racing was banned in California, but the level of attendance was low compared to the earlier years. The action by the Mexican government to seize the resort and spa was overturned in 1942, but due to the shortage of materials and labor during World War II, the property remained closed. Eventually, the resort and the casino were demolished. In 1947, John S. Alessio became the Assistant General Manager of the racetrack and worked to turn around the operation. Alessio expanded the track and developed innovative gambling strategies. To influence the San Diego market, a public relations office was opened on Broadway Street in the 1950s and 1960s. The Caliente Racetrack launched an advertising campaign that included two painted wall signs on the California Theatre during this time frame. The signs were purportedly completed by the Pacific Outdoor Advertisement Company. The signage features the logo of the ornamented "C" in Caliente with roses and images of racehorses.

Research into the history of the painted wall signs did not reveal any information to indicate that the signs exemplify or reflect special elements of the City's or downtown's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development. The Barbary Coast Tavern is not considered a significant resource and the Agua Caliente wall signs were painted on well past the heyday of the resort, casino and the track. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion A.

CRITERION B - Is identified with persons or events significant in local, state or national history.

Research into the signage at the California Theatre did not reveal associations with any individuals who could be considered historically significant in local, state or national history. Furthermore, no events of local, state or national significance are known to have occurred at the subject property. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion B.

CRITERION C - *Embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period or method of construction or is a valuable example of the use of natural materials or craftsmanship.*

The painted wall signs which were added in the 1950s and 1960s are unrelated to the 1927 Spanish Colonial Revival California Theatre building. The signs were hand painted most likely using “pounce patterns,” a typical sign painting practice employed after 1940, which involved the use of a perforated paper stencil and chalk to create temporary outlines that could be applied directly to the wall’s exterior. The paint application on the exterior walls of the building does not embody a distinctive style, type, period or method of construction, special material or craftsmanship. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion C.

CRITERION D - *Is representative of a notable work of a master builder, designer, architect, engineer, landscape architect, interior designer, artist or craftsman.*

Research into the painted wall sign at the California Theatre at 1122 4th Avenue failed to conclusively identify an artist or designer. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion D.

CRITERION E - *Is listed or has been determined eligible by the National Park Service for listing on the National Register of Historic Places or is listed or has been determined eligible by the State Historical Preservation Office for listing on the State Register of Historical Resources.*

The painted wall signs at the California Theatre were determined to not be eligible for listing on the State or National Registers. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion E.

CRITERION F - *Is a finite group of resources related to one another in a clearly distinguishable way or is a geographically definable area or neighborhood containing improvements which have a special character, historical interest or aesthetic value or which represent one or more architectural periods or styles in the history and development of the City.*

The painted wall signs on the California Theatre are not located within a designated historic district. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion F.

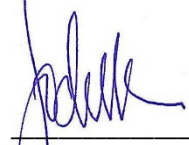
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

If the property is designated by the HRB, conditions related to restoration or rehabilitation of the resource may be identified by staff during the Mills Act application process, and included in any future Mills Act contract.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff’s field check, it is not recommended that the painted wall signs at the California Theatre located at 1122 4th Avenue be designated under any HRB Criteria. Designation brings with it the responsibility of maintaining the building in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards. The benefits of designation include the availability of the Mills Act Program for reduced property tax; the use of the more flexible Historical Building Code;

flexibility in the application of other regulatory requirements; the use of the Historical Conditional Use Permit which allows flexibility of use; and other programs which vary depending on the specific site conditions and owner objectives.



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Attachment:

1. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover