

Plaza de Panama

While there is some confusion over who first prepared the plan for the Panama-California Exposition held in Balboa Park during the years 1915-1916, most historians agree that the architectural firm of Bertram G. Goodhue finalized the plan that now exists. Since Goodhue's primary skills were devoted to plans for buildings, he assigned the plot plan to Clarence Stein. Stein was to become one of this country's foremost town planners. His specialty was the design of plaza-like enclosures surrounded by buildings. Thus there is a continuity between Stein's enclosed park-like plazas in Sunnyside Gardens, New York, and Radburn, New Jersey and the Plaza de Panama in San Diego. Stein was explicit about his role in planning San Diego's Panama-California Exposition and about the purpose and charm of the open-air Plaza de Panama as it was discovered after moving from the shadows of arcades along both sides of El Prado, the Exposition's main avenue, to the sunlit airy and brilliantly-colorful spaces of its central plaza. Whether Stein saw the Plaza de Panama's similarity to the Piazza San Marco in Venice is doubtful; nonetheless commentators quickly seized upon their resemblance. As in San Marco, pigeons were the chief attraction in the Plaza de Panama. Since the architectural motif of the Panama-California



Plaza de Panama, 1915, looking east: Home Economy Building (left) and Foreign Arts Building (now House of Hospitality, right)

Exposition was to be a reminder of towers, palaces and gardens in Spain and Spanish-America, it was fortuitous that grand ceremonial plazas were features of towns and cities in both places.

What finally emerged in San Diego was a blend of architecture, open space, and landscaping that was unlike anything that had ever been seen. So it seemed and so it was praised by visitors who had been to Mexico and to Spain, including a viceroy from the King of Spain and merchant prince and philanthropist George W. Marston.

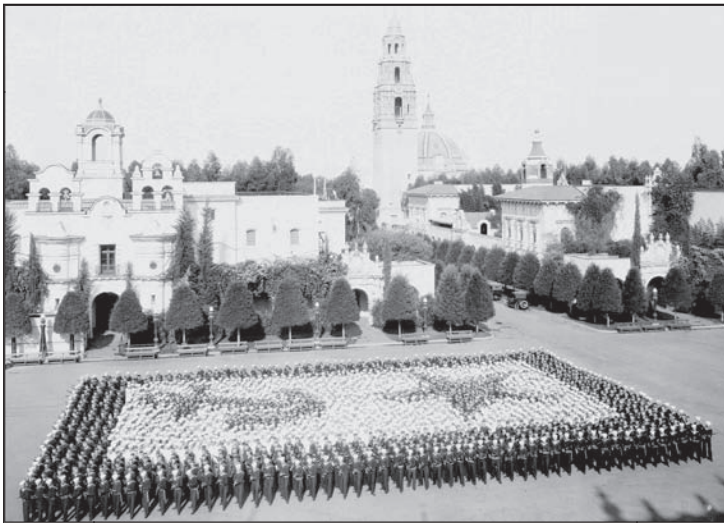


The Plaza de Panama was renamed the Plaza del Pacifico in 1935, with added Arch of the Future and shallow pools

The Plaza de Panama was the focus around which the happenings of San Diego's Panama-California Exposition revolved. It extended south to the Plaza de los Estados, in front of the Organ Pavilion. On special occasions, such as the opening night ceremony, a sea of humanity filled the area. When it was not being used by dignitaries for speeches, by the armed services for drills, by acrobats and athletes for sports, by bands for concerts, by soldiers, sailors and civilians for dances, or by exhibitors for shows, the Plaza de Panama was

filled with strolling musicians, guards dressed as Spanish grenadiers, ladies with bright parasols, children and adults, and pigeons. While there were many never-to-be-forgotten events during the Exposition, the most memorable were the visits of Henry Ford and Thomas Alva Edison on October 29, 1915 and the patriotic appearance of the Liberty Bell from Philadelphia on November 13, 1915.

For Balboa Park's California Pacific International Exposition of 1935-1936, the Plaza de Panama was renamed the Plaza del Pacifico and El Prado, the long avenue that led to it, got the name Avenida de Palacios. The re-designed Plaza



Plaza de Panama served as a parade ground for the Naval Training Station, 1918

functioned differently from 1915-1916. San Diego architect Richard Requa put a Moorish style Arch of the Future in the middle with large, low pools on the north and south sides of the arch. The most notable Plaza activity during the Exposition was the appearance of fan and bubble dancer Sally Rand from April 11 to April 26, 1936. She was at the peak of her glory. While her stay was short, the impression of fleeting nudity she left lingered long in the minds of observers.

In between and after Expositions, there was much talk about what to do with the temporary Exposition buildings and with the Plaza de Pan-

ama. By default, automobiles soon took over the Plaza. Many people sensed that the automobiles were out of place in the Plaza because Balboa Park was a park and because automobiles were being removed from plazas and their open spaces were reverting to former uses as places of public assembly in famous plazas in Europe and South America. The desire for change in the status of the Plaza de Panama recurred with every study of the Park since the Bartholomew Master Plan of 1960; when Delawie, Macy, and Henderson and Joe Yamada were commissioned in June 1975 to redesign El Prado and the Plaza; when landscape architect Ron Pekarek prepared a plan for Balboa Park in 1991; and when Estrada Land Planning, Inc. completed a master plan for the central portion of Balboa Park in 1992. Estrada's plan is still the City of San Diego's adopted plan for Balboa Park. It favors the pedestrian and eliminates parking in the Plaza de Panama, recalling the spellbinding uses of El Prado and the Plaza de Panama during San Diego's first and most innovative Exposition. A pedestrian, automobile-free Plaza de Panama is in keeping with the magical Spanish Colonial setting that entranced visitors in 1915-1916 and charms visitors today.

— Richard W. Amero



Liberty Bell comes to Plaza de Panama, November 1915