

Palace of Fine Arts  
Baker Street between Jefferson & Bay Streets  
San Francisco, San Francisco County  
California

HABS No. CAL-1909

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction  
450 Golden Gate Avenue  
San Francisco, California

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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT  
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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PALACE OF FINE ARTS

San Francisco, San Francisco County, California

ADDRESS: Baker Street between Jefferson and Bay Streets  
OWNER: State of California  
OCCUPANT: Division of Beaches and Parks, State of California;  
City of San Francisco  
USE: Uncertain (Disposition Pending)

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Rarely has an ephemeral structure elicited so much interest as the Palace of Fine Arts: a complex of structures which includes a central domed Rotunda and flanking peristyle or Colonnade, and the exposition hall or "picture galleries" - a curved building behind the Rotunda and Colonnade. The master designer was Bernard R. Maybeck working in an interesting Period blend of Baroque and Classical, with certain highly personal touches. Built for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, the complex stood far longer than anticipated. It served a bewildering variety of uses - from display area to wartime motor pool. Constantly threatened with destruction or revision, it has managed to survive as a "noble ruin" into 1964. Since 1953 there has been agitation to restore the complex; and since 1957 this agitation has been supported by a State and City budget of some magnitude. Unfortunately, due to inevitable political and architectural delays, current funds (\$5,800,000) are still short of necessary building monies. The present Mayor of San Francisco, John Shelley, has declared himself unsympathetic; and although excellent restoration plans have been made, implementation is uncertain.

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#### HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Without any question, the Palace of Fine Arts is one of the major ephemeral buildings on the west coast. Its historical setting and raison d'etre was the Panama-Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco in 1915 (official opening date February 20). As part of that brilliantly conceived and unevenly executed fair, a building complex to house the fine arts was indicated. Willis Polk had accepted the original commission for the structure; however, at a meeting of the second conference of Architectural Commissioners, he produced a drawing made by Bernary Maybeck and suggested that Maybeck be given the project. The Commission enthusiastically agreed.<sup>1</sup> Maybeck has given a long statement about his ideation and rationalization of the project.<sup>2</sup> After characterizing the various "courts" of the fair, Maybeck states that: "The Fine Arts suggest the romantic after the classic renaissance...These nomenclatures, 'romantic', 'classic', etc. are usually covered by the word 'atmosphere'...For instance, when the director of the Fine Arts (John E. D. Trask) explained what he felt was necessary for a Fine Arts Building, he said that he did not want the visitors to come directly from a noisy boulevard into galleries of pictures...Mr. Trask not only wanted the mind of the visitor to be in a tranquil mood, but he worried lest the high coloring on the outside of the building would dull the eye of the visitor to the delicate tones and shades of some of the pictures. In the same way Mr. Trask wanted all the smaller details to be harmonious with the rest of the architecture, ~~the pedestals, the water pools,~~ the rubbish cans, the color of the walls, all to fit in...Nor what Mr. Trask wanted was a frontispiece to his art collection which would anticipate the general impression as a whole...Summing up my general impression, I find that the keynote of a Fine Arts Palace should be that of sadness modified by the feeling that beauty is a soothing influence...To make a Fine Arts Building that will fit this...impression, we must use those forms in architecture and gardening that will affect the sentiments in such a way as to produce the same modified sadness as the galleries do...you examine a historic form and see whether the effect it produced on your mind matches the feeling you are trying to portray...a sentiment in a minor key".<sup>3</sup>

After the fair, the majority of buildings were torn down to make way for the residential developments that the newly "made" land now promised. Only the Palace of Fine Arts lingered on - a handsome

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remnant of the Fair's promise and perhaps the only architecturally significant building of that Fair.

The complex of buildings was preserved and repaired during the 1930's by the firm of Maybeck and White with city funds of about \$500,000. Some work was done during World War II by the United States Army; but the structure became increasingly time-battered.<sup>4</sup> Maybeck, himself, was never entirely certain how he felt about the building. In 1951, he said that a preservative coating should be applied to the exterior of the building of the Palace and that corrugated plastic on the exhibition hall roof might aid in reducing the weight problems of that roof. In 1952, he said that if the structures must be torn down and replaced, the replacement should be in Golden Gate Park where John McLaren had originally envisaged the Fair.<sup>5</sup> In 1953, a Bill was introduced at the State Legislature by Assemblyman Casper Weinberger to declare the thirteen and one-half acre site a State Park; funds in the amount of about \$2,819,700 needed for restoration were to come from oil royalties in the tidelands dispute settlements. The Bill was pocket vetoed by the Governor.

Various reports had already been issued, suggesting that the building be torn down altogether, and either replaced or not.<sup>6</sup> The Northern California Chapter of the American Institute of Architects prepared a report (dated December 1952) under the chairmanship of Frank Ehrenthal; a twelve man committee recommended that the Rotunda and Colonnade be torn down, and that the exposition hall at the back be repaired for modern use. (The estimated demolition costs were \$50,000; the estimated repair costs were \$1,000,000.) The lagoon was to be saved, and modern sculpture placed about it. This report which reflected the crass business-esthetics of most practicing architects was later repudiated by certain members of the committee.

In February of 1959, Walter Johnson, A San Francisco financier, headed a new Palace of Fine Arts League to save the Palace - after the bond issue of November 1958 for \$3,600,000 had failed. The League, which published a Bulletin to inform voters about its activities, tried to raise \$2,000,000. When this was unsuccessful, Johnson offered \$2,000,000 in negotiable securities as a personal gift - to be part of the proposed new \$3,800,000 bond issue. (The State of California had appropriated \$2,000,000 for restoration in 1957; this was to be matched by \$3,600,000 from the City of San Francisco. When the bond

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issue of 1958 in this amount failed, the new bond issue was raised to \$3,800,000 to cover increased costs since 1958.) The city accepted Mr. Johnson's offer and immediately "cashed" his securities. 1

The successor to the Maybeck firm name William Merchant, AIA and Associates was chosen to do the work, but Mr. Merchant died and Mr. Hans Gerson was hired to prepare plans for restoration (in co-operation with Walton Becket and Associates). Approximately \$600,000 had been spent by the end of 1963 on these plans and related efforts. The hope is to make the rebuilt complex of buildings a permanent part of the State Park System - leased for a period of fifty years to the City of San Francisco, and administered by the Recreational and Park Department of San Francisco. The City Attorney has ruled that all of the complex must be saved to make legal use of the funds available, but that the funds do not have to be used for interior rehabilitation or each ornamental detail. Mr. Gerson's plans call for a complete restoration of the exterior in steel, concrete and plaster (ornamental details). The paintings in the Rotunda dome may or may not be saved; they were done in the 1930's by WPA artists to replace the originals destroyed at that time. As with all projects which have taken far longer than anticipated there have been innumerable tragic errors and delays. The original molds for the ornamental sculpture were still in storage as late as 1960, when they were broken up and taken to the city dumps. 8

The present low bid on restoration is \$7,200,000. Other bids range up to \$12,000,000. There is still no definite plan for what to restore and what to use. (Fanciful schemes to convert the old exposition hall into a group of theaters, etc., as a cultural center have been criticized on various levels - principally because of the lack of parking in the area.) The Mayor of San Francisco, John Shelley, has said he is opposed to restoring the Palace. The future is uncertain, although it is still possible that the Rotunda and Colonnade will be restored as a monumental memento of Maybeck's classicist-Baroque concept of "modified sadness". Maybeck, himself, became more nostalgic about the Palace as he grew older; originally indicating that it should molder into graceful ruin and become a haunted park, he gradually came to feel that preservation was desirable. Where once a famous San Francisco spa - Herman's Harbor View Park<sup>9</sup> - once stood, there may still be a charming memory of an even more famous Fair. 9

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NOTES (Historical Information)

1. Todd, F. M., The Story of the Exposition, New York City, Putnam's, 1921, Vol. I p. 304.
2. Maybeck, "The Palace of Fine Arts" - Commonwealth Club Transactions, Vol. X, No. 10, San Francisco (August 1915), pp. 369-374.
3. ibid., pp. 369-373 (selected phrases).
4. In the early 1920's the San Francisco Art Festival used the Palace briefly. In 1927, the United States Government deeded the Palace to the City of San Francisco for "educational, art, exposition and park purposes"; certain qualifications in this deed were not removed until 1951. (The Palace was built on Presidio - United States Army - land, with the possibility of reversion to the Federal Government.) From 1933 to 1941 it contained 21 tennis courts. It was used as an Army motor pool during World War II. In 1951-1942 it was used for the San Francisco Art Festival again. An incredible variety of activities have continued off and on in the exposition hall since 1952. See Bulletin of the Palace of Fine Arts League, unpaginated; also map at end of Bulletin with proposals for future use of the hall.
5. McLaren had hoped for a connection between the park and the Marina, via a scenic boulevard through the Presidio, which would link the Marina district with his proposed site for exposition grounds in Golden Gate Park.
6. George Wagner, of the contracting firm of Wagner and Martinez, made a report in about 1938 to the effect that the Palace should be torn down, and only rebuilt if the actual materials, "imitated" in the original buildings (travertine and various marbles), were used. (Interview in 1963 with Mr. Wagner confirms this idea; and he states that such materials would weather well in San Francisco.)
7. Other gifts for restoration of sculpture have been made by Mrs. Marcel Chovin of Oakland and Mr. Charles Dondero of San Francisco.

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8. Herb Caen, San Francisco Chronicle, January 6, 1964: "Chuck Maisel, researching the plaster-restoration idea for (designer Walter) Landor, discovers that Henri Gregoire, who worked with Maybeck on the construction of the Palace, had stored the molds in a warehouse at 12th and Folsom. In 1960, the warehouse people had them broken up - sob - and carted to the dumps. As for the warehouse itself, it, too, has been torn down and is now a parking lot."

9. Rudolph Herman was the only private owner of the land near where the Palace was later built (on Government land); see Margot Patterson Doss, "The Palace of Fine Arts: A Lovely Ruin", San Francisco (Magazine), August 1962, pp. 17, 18, for old photographs of the spa. The Law brothers later bought most of the Marina land, prior to the building of the Fair.

#### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

##### Books:

- Adams, Ben, San Francisco: An Informal Guide, New York, Hill and Wang, 1961, p. 50.
- Baird, Joseph A., Jr., Time's Wondrous Changes: San Francisco Architecture, 1776-1915, San Francisco, California Historical Society, 1962; pp. 42, 43; plate 44.
- Barry, John D., The City of Domes, San Francisco, Newbegin's, 1915, pp. 61-71.
- Benet, James, San Francisco and the Bay Region, New York, Random House, 1963, pp. 151-152.
- Berry, Rose V. S., The Dream City, San Francisco, Walter N. Brunt, 1915, pp. 101-107, 109, 110-329.
- James, Juliet, Palaces and Courts of the Exposition, San Francisco, California Book Company, 1915, pp. 17, 133-141.
- Maybeck, Bernard R., "Architecture of the Palace of Fine Arts", Art in California, San Francisco, Bernier, 1916, pp. 161-164. (see also the article by Mullgardt, L. D., "Architecture of the Exposition", p. 155.)
- Neuhaus, Eugen, The Art of the Exposition, San Francisco, Paul Elder, 1915, pp. 16, 17, 56-59.
- Todd, Frank Morton, The Story of the Exposition, New York, Putnam's, 1921, 5 Vols., Vol. I, p. 304; Vol. II, pp. 22, 23, and pp. 315-320 (basic description); Vol. IV, pp. 10-31.

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Woodbridge, John and Sally, et al., Buildings of the Bay Area,  
New York, Grove Press, 1960, unpaginated (under Marina,  
section 5 San Francisco).

WPA: San Francisco, in American Guide Series, New York, Hastings  
House, 1947, pp. 308, 309.

Bulletin, Report and Brochure:

Bulletin of the Palace of Fine Arts League (Walter Johnson,  
President).

Palace of Fine Arts: Past, Present and Future, Brochure (plan of  
proposed use of the Main Building behind the Rotunda, no date,  
(ca. 1959), issued by the Palace of Fine Arts League.)

Report - Northern California Chapter, The AIA, December 1952  
(prepared by Frank Ehrental, Chairman, and twelve man  
Committee).

Interview:

J. A. Baird with Hans Gerson, August 1963.

Newspapers and Periodicals:

Architectural Record, November 1953 (Western Section, pp. 48-6  
to 48-10 - "Dilemma on the Marina").

Commonwealth Club, Transactions - San Francisco, 1915, Vol. X,  
No. 10, (article by Bernard Maybeck, "The Palace of Fine Arts").  
Craftsman, Vol. XXVI, No. 5 (August 1914), pp. 465-480 (article by  
Jules Guerin. "The Magic City of the Pacific". Note especially  
the general view of the Palace of Fine Arts on p. 475, from a  
drawing by Guerin).

San Francisco Chronicle, March 29, 1959, Sunday Bonanza Section.

San Francisco Chronicle, May 26, 1959 (Walter Johnson's  
\$2,000,000 gift).

San Francisco Chronicle, November 17, 1961 (cartoon p. 34).

San Francisco Chronicle, May 24, August 22, September 20, 1963.

San Francisco (Magazine), August 1962, Vol. V, No. 24, pp. 16-18:  
Margot Patterson Doss, "The Palace of Fine Arts: A lovely Ruin".

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#### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

An extremely complete and graphic account of the actual construction and architectural character of the Palace of Fine Arts is to be found in the monumental "Story of the Exposition", by Frank Morton Todd. It is wise to simply quote this virtually contemporary (1921) account, or to paraphrase its principal details. Note the following material:

Todd, Vol. II pp. 317 ff.: "The Palace of Fine Arts was the most original creation in the architecture of the Exposition, as it was the most beautiful." (This aesthetic opinion was virtually unanimous among all critics and writers of the Fair.) Here the highest dome of the Exposition crowned an open loggia in which sculptures were displayed without other shelter, a thing that would have been quite unsuitable in a rougher climate. The pictures were hung in the curving building behind the loggia. The semicircular peristyle between (actually framing the domed Rotunda) bore at salient points what struck the imagination more forcibly than any other feature of the whole study...These were certain tall chests, or coffer, paneled with colored staff, with women standing at the corners, looking in and possibly weeping ("modified sadness")...the curved building sheltering the picture galleries was about 950 feet long on its central arc, and about 135 feet wide, with a floor area of 126,208 square feet; and... it was 48 feet high, from the floor to the peak hinges of the steel frames.

"The peristyle ran in a crescent equidistant from the main building, along the edge of the Lagoon, except for a gap of 209 feet behind the Rotunda. The columns of this magnificent, curving file were of two sizes; the taller forming the end piers and supporting the coffer with the averted figures. The smaller columns stood 47 feet 5 inches, over all, with bases 2 feet 1 inch high and capitals 6 feet 3 inches high, the shafts between them rising 39 feet 1 inch in the clear, and diminishing from 5 feet 4 inches diameter at base to 4 feet 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches at the capital.

"The larger columns of the colonnade rose 55 feet, overall. Their capitals were 7 feet 2 inches in height, and their shafts rose 45 feet 8 inches in the clear, diminishing from 5 feet 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  inch diameter at the base to 5 feet 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches at the capital...The shafts had an almost imperceptible entasis, and the capitals were Corinthian in general form and spirit, though composed of other than Corinthian elements.

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"The Rotunda, or Loggia, the 'Temple of Sculpture', occupying a broad tongue of land that extended eastward into the Lagoon just forward of the peristyle, was  $163\frac{1}{2}$  feet in outside and 90 feet in inside diameter, and its dome  $160\frac{1}{2}$  feet in exterior height, supported on eight large piers of triangular section, with the apices inward.

"Each of these piers was flanked (or faced) by the largest and stateliest columns built in any of the Exposition structures - two against the outer face and one standing just within the inner, vertical edge. They were fluted, and were cast of a staff to imitate Numidian marble, so that they were very rich in color, while they had the porous surface texture of the travertine.

"The inner columns were a trifle the larger. They stood 56 feet 9 inches overall, rising from a base two feet in height to a capital 7 feet 2 inches in height. The shaft, of 47 feet 7 inches height, was 5 feet 7 inches in diameter at the bottom and 5 feet  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches at the top. Each bore, before the springing of the arches, the bland, intellectual figure of the Priestess of Culture, by Herbert Adams.

"The columns standing in pairs at the outer faces of the piers were an inch longer in the shaft than those within the Rotunda, but two inches shorter as to base and capital. In diameter the shafts were larger: 6 feet 2 inches at base and 5 feet 6 inches at the top. The capitals were just 7 feet high, so that the slender nude figures standing amid their leaves and shell forms, were greater than life size...

"Every pair of outer columns of the Fine Arts Rotunda supported a section of entablature, and above its cornice was an open niche occupied by a decorative Greek figure of Art, by Ulric H. Ellerhusen, who did the friezes around the flower boxes and the base of the Rotunda, and who made the figures of the women looking into the caskets above the colonnade.

"Between the Greek figures of Art, and above the Roman arches opening into the Loggia were panels 14 feet high and 31 feet long, containing some bold, clear reliefs illustrating Greek culture...their symbolism was...interpreted by their sculptor, Bruno L. Zimm (see Todd, Vol. II, p. 319)...

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"The dome was low and broad. The ribs supporting its outer surface had a span of  $116\frac{1}{2}$  feet, while the inner surface approximated a hemisphere with a radius of  $52\frac{1}{2}$  feet.

"The coffering of the dome ceiling, which rose 117 feet 10 inches above the ground, was deep, and varied in design, and colored in blue; and the divisions were enriched with intricate modeling. In eight large polygonal panels were the mural paintings of Robert Reit (op.cit., p. 318)...

"Mounting from a ledge that emerged from the pool, just before the Rotunda, was a broad and massive composition terminating in an altar, where knelt Ralph Stackpole's figure of 'Art Tending the Fires of Inspiration'."

The building for the picture galleries is described earlier in Todd, Vol. II, pp. 22, 23: "That part of the Palace of Fine Arts in which the pictures were hung had to be fireproof, in order to house millions of dollars' worth of irreplaceable beauty collected the world over, and loaned by people well aware of a risk that no amount of insurance could cover. The sculpture loggia (the Rotunda) and colonnade parts of the Palace of Fine Arts were of wood (and plaster), but the "art gallery" (or exposition hall) was one of the few steel framed structures on the grounds...

"The building was curved in plan...covering an area of...nearly five acres (error: about three acres), exclusive of the colonnade and sculpture loggia (or Rotunda) which, together, covered 78,000 square feet.

"M. C. Couchot, Member of the American Society of Civil Engineers, was commissioned to design the frame for this building...three-hinged arches of 131 foot span, set 36 feet on centers, rising from cast steel hinged bases on wooden grillages carried on piles. The height from floor to center hinge was 48 feet...The arches weighed approximately 25 tons, and were erected in halves...

"Walls and roof were of cement plaster on metal fabric, and very thin, for economy; the roof slab three inches thick and the vertical walls two and a half inches. This was cheaper than concrete, which would have had to be thicker. The plaster was made of one part Portland cement to three parts of sand, with a little hair, and was tempered with lime mortar. The metal lath was an inch in depth.

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"These very thin reinforced walls were built without forms...The first coat of plaster was applied to the outside, and when it had set so that it could stand alone, the studding was removed and the inner surface was plastered, allowing for a total thickness of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches... The architect was Bernard R. Maybeck. J. G. Williams and Company were the erectors of the steel. J. D. Hannah had the general contract."

The total cost of the Palace of Fine Arts was \$631,929. The principal building and ornamental sculptural material of the entire Exposition was "plastic travertine", composed of gypsum from Nevada combined with hemp fiber and a coloring pigment; it had been invented by Paul Denneville of New York City. This material was used in part only on the Palace of Fine Arts complex - notably on the Rotunda and Colonnade, which were not intended to be fireproof. Minor additional information includes the fact that the wood piles at the foundation of the curved building ("picture galleries") were capped with concrete to a level below the water table.

Maybeck wrote a curious article, "Architecture of the Palace of Fine Arts at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition", Art in California, pp. 161-164. Any serious student of this complex of buildings will need to read the article in its entirety, as it throws light on the planning of the complex and certain ornamental details. Stylistically, the Palace is a fascinating combination of Classical and Baroque features; the great Rotunda is clearly Classical in inspiration, although without specific Classical precedent. The Colonnade suggests the Classical, but is used in a monumentally Baroque manner, reminiscent of Baalbek or Palmyra. The whole ensemble breathes the spirit of the late Roman Near East.

#### INTERIOR

Square footage for various parts of this complex have been already given. (The Rotunda alone covered 15,874 square feet.) In the "picture gallery" (or exposition hall) there were 114 galleries with 142,000 square feet of hanging space. A special annex contained 26 galleries more with hanging space of 27,200 square feet. There is a full description of the various exhibitions in Todd, Vol. IV, pp. 10-31, under the following headings: pp. 10-31, "Assembling Exhibition"; pp. 18-22, "in a Palace Garden"; pp. 23-31, "Within the Palace of Fine Arts". Additional material on the exhibitions and interior fittings

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of the Palace, as well as the sculpture in various parts of the complex are in: Berry, The Dream City, pp. 101-107, 109, 110-329 (floor plan of gallery on p. 109); James, Palaces and Courts of the Exposition, pp. 133-141; Neuhaus, The Art of the Exposition, pp. 56-59 (mural decorations of the Palace). Barry, The City of Domes, pp. 61-71, has some general impressions and description; and the monumental Catalogue De Luxe of the Department of Fine Arts, edited by John E. D. Trask and J. Nilsen Laurvik, contains a complete listing of all exhibitors and their work.

#### DRAWINGS AND PLANS OF THE PALACE OF FINE ARTS

The original plans for the Palace of Fine Arts are at the Architectural Library, University of California, Berkeley, California. (The architectural Department is now a part of the School of Environmental Design.) The drawings are marked: "B. R. Maybeck, Architect", but also "Revised, November 8, 1913, George Kelham". Copies of these drawings were obtained for the proposed reconstruction of the Palace by William G. Merchant and Associates. (The firm was originally Maybeck and White - Maybeck's brother-in-law; later it became William Gladstone Merchant and Associates. It is now owned and run by Hans Gerson, who is responsible for directing the plans of reconstruction.) New drawings and details of the highest quality were prepared for the reconstruction. An original charcoal rendering of the Palace (changed in proportions and in certain details of construction) was given by Maybeck to William G. Merchant; it is still in the offices of the firm (1963). This drawing is dated December 26, 1914. There are some related drawings, not specifically assignable to the Palace of Fine Arts as it was built, at the School of Architecture and Allied Arts, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. An original painting by Colin Campbell Cooper, N.A., of New York City, is illustrated in Neuhaus' Painting, Pictures and People, San Francisco, Philopolis Press, 1918, plate XXVII.

There have been literally hundreds of drawings, paintings and photographs made of the Palace of Fine Arts; most are in collections in the Bay Area. One general rendering of the Fair by Jules Guerin which shows the Palace before 1915 can be seen in "Magic City of the Pacific", The Craftsman, Vol. XXVI, No. 5 (August 1914), p. 475.

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Prepared by,

*Joseph A. Baird Jr.*

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June 1964

APPROVED: *Charles S. Pope*  
Charles S. Pope, AIA  
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures  
Western Office, Design and Construction  
National Park Service

DATE: *November 1964*

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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