

Palace of Fine Arts

The Ruin that Refuses to Crumble

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By Lorraine Grassano

We may live in an urban jungle, but there are still some forces more powerful than the real estate market. Case in point: the Palace of Fine Arts in the Marina district, where some cyclone fencing was recently removed after a two-year overhaul of an ancient temple built in 1915 – A.D. that is.

Originally constructed out of burlap and burlap-type fiber over a wooden frame, the neo-classical beauty housed part of the Panama Pacific International Exposition. The event commemorated the opening of the Panama Canal and the rebirth of San Francisco after the 1906 Earthquake and Fire.

Twenty-seven countries and 42 states and territories participated in the World's Fair, which encompassed 635 acres and attracted over 18 million visitors.

The replica of the temple was meant to last only the length of the exposition. However, San Franciscans couldn't bear the thought of tearing it down, so it was left standing until the 1960's. But before demolishing this burlap creation, a plaster caste was fashioned around it, allowing engineers to duplicate the shrine, this time in reinforced concrete. Philanthropist Walter Johnson, a Marina district resident, underwrote much of the renovation effort, with support from the City.

Now, almost another half a century later, the rotunda replica is receiving a much-needed facelift, thanks to the San Francisco-based Maybeck Foundation and the Recreation and



All photos by Lorraine Grassano.

The temple at the Palace of Fine Arts is a favorite backdrop for local photographers and wedding parties.

Parks Department. The two entities have teamed up to restore the jewel and the lagoon alongside which it sits.

A riparian ecosystem has flourished over the years at the site, attracting dozens of avian species, including herons, hummingbirds and a variety of ducks.

Back in the olden days, this was a pond where children caught frogs to sell as bait to fishermen. The 1915 exhibition plans initially called for the area to be filled in, but the local architect who designed the Palace later changed his mind and decided to expand the body of water to its current size.

According to Harold Gilliam's history book, *The San Francisco Experience*, the architect, Bernard Maybeck, strived "to find the spiritual meaning of things and to transmit that secret to the layman." The enduring ruin is testimony to Maybeck's brilliant foresight and sense of esthetic.

I noticed that the fencing had come down at the Palace in December. So I journeyed over there and circled the lagoon, praying that the spirit of the place had not been chased away by all the construction

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and dredging.

To my delight, the Black-crowned Night-Herons were back in force, roosting in one particular tree on the little island near the north bank. I'll never forget the first time I had noticed the colony, perhaps 5 years ago. I spotted one, then two, three, four and more, finally counting 13 birds crouched among the branches.

They were hardly noticeable in the foilage. It reminded me of that game in *Highlight* magazine where you had to find the hidden objects in a picture.

Before the area was fenced off, I sat near the same tree one evening and waited as, one by one, the handsome birds emitted a throaty "quark!" and flew off into the purple sky to go fishing at the Marina or Mountain Lake Park or wherever else they might snag a good meal.

My other companions that evening were the concrete maidens that adorned the Palace rotunda. Some danced in a circle and seemed to hold up the world in their arms. Others stood with their backs to me, weeping into empty urns that had been intended to hold California live oaks.

By the time the last heron had



taken flight, even these lively ladies had faded into the landscape. Only the silhouette of the dome remained. I vowed to return one day at pre-dawn to herald in the return of the night hunters. The birds, that is.

Back in the present, I continued my walk, impressed with the recent repair work that had shored up the crumbling edge of the lagoon and preserved the old cobblestone wall. I missed the basking turtles, but there are plans to add soft edges to the lagoon so they will once again have easy access in and out of the water.

A pair of swans floated dreamily by, legendary mascots of the Palace, as dear to visitors as the rotunda itself. I strolled past the geyser at the south end of the lagoon, which shoots up a good 20 feet in the air, and attracts wedding photographers from all over the world.

The grounds are well-manicured. Nonetheless, I was aware of a wildness lurking: a Red-Tailed Hawk perched on a Roman pillar might suddenly cry out, swoop and grab a Rock Dove in mid flight; barely visible in the

cattails, a Great Egret poised in utter stillness, intent on stabbing a minnow; the long, feathery necks of two Great Blue Herons courting in the treetops, could all at once emerge, stretching up to the sky in unison.

Nature, it seems, is the finest art of all.

Unfortunately, I also began to notice the presence of garbage in the greenery and the water. How long would it be now before graffiti and makeshift camps would return to mar these sacred grounds? I found myself contemplating matters far less esoteric than are commanded by the Rotunda's "steps to nowhere" on a foggy night.

Namely: once the renovation of the Palace of Fine Arts has been completed, what special measures will be taken to maintain and protect it? Because special measures *will* be warranted.

Hopefully, the Maybeck Foundation has included a little something in its restoration budget for extra city gardeners, custodians and park patrol officers.

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The next phase of the renovation will begin in August and once again, the Rotunda area will be fenced off. Although the dome has been restored to its former glory - including the burnt-orange paint job that should make a twilight visit even more spectacular - additional work is needed to restore the structure.

So, come on out while the area is fully accessible, and if you're so moved, check out the following website: www.lovethepalace.org, for more information.

You, too, can join a century of concerned and impassioned citizenry in preserving so romantic a piece of the San Francisco skyline.

The Palace of Fine Arts is located at 3601 Lyon Street, between Bay and Jefferson. It's accessible by Muni Lines 30, 28, 45, 76. Lines 22 and 43 stop nearby, and the path around the lagoon is wheelchair accessible.

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