

# Santa Barbara County Courthouse

## Landscape Context

Campbell & Campbell  
April 2015



Courthouse – Sunken Garden , June 2013

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*“A public landscape is a living entity, which the community utilizes and enjoys in the present and holds in trust for the future. Its ongoing health bears witness to the careful guidance and stewardship of countless individuals and well as the community as a whole.”*

*– Campbell & Campbell<sup>1</sup>*

*“Certainly the public monument from the 1920’s Spanish Colonial Revival in California. The design consists of three separate building loosely tied together. Each of the buildings is composed of fragments—everything is meant to be seen separately amid the lush, meticulously kept vegetation of the courthouse. The interior, with murals in the former Board Room by Dan Sayre Groesbeck, is as exciting as the exterior. It is a building which, along with the distant Mission dominated the town when it was built and fortunately still does.”*

*– David Gebhard<sup>2</sup>*

# Introduction

This document was prepared as an initial introduction to the context of the landscape of the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, a resource for the community and a cultural landmark of local, regional, national and international importance.

## I. Background

### Goal and Objective

The goal of this effort is to ensure that the landscape elements of the Santa Barbara County Courthouse continue as fundamental and essential components of the overall composition of *this internationally important public landmark*.

The landscape elements that define the character of the Courthouse, described in detail below, exist in a dynamic harmony with the buildings and the accommodation of activities of the site. The objectives of the maintenance and management of all of these defining elements – **spaces, vistas and sight lines, topography, vegetation, pathways, furnishings, and effects associated with scale, massing, light and shadow, texture, color and fragrance through the passage of time, seasonally and over the years** – must together be taken into consideration.

Attention also must be paid to requirements of public safety, security and access, both in terms of the accommodation of the day –to– day business and tourist visitors to the site, and also the accommodation of large numbers of people attending and participating in the variety of events held on the grounds. The maintenance impacts of the transport and provision of supporting portable infrastructure for events: seating; stages; tents; portable restrooms; etc. all must be taken into consideration, as must the potential effects of changing climate, advances in sustainable management practices and horticulture.

## Summary of the Role and History of the Courthouse in the Community

Since its opening over eight decades ago, the Courthouse has served as a proud symbol of the County of Santa Barbara and a setting for celebrations and gatherings, commemorations and rites-of-passage for the community.

The Courthouse is an internationally famous landmark attraction for visitors and a central place of great importance for the people of Santa Barbara. Its design embodies and expresses the unique spirit and values of the community, and simultaneously serves as the setting and backdrop for public celebrations and rituals of community life –fiesta, pageants, concerts and ceremonies of all kinds, and also for the public celebration of rituals of individual life – as a favored place for weddings.

The original 1875 courthouse building on the site was situated centrally on the block (its foundations generally marked by the walls of the present Sunken Garden) in a park-like setting much enjoyed by the community as a public garden, featuring lawns profusely planted with specimen trees and exotic plants in the manner common to many 19<sup>th</sup> century county courthouses. <sup>3</sup>

By 1919, the need for a new, larger courthouse led to the planning of a new facility, culminating in an architectural design competition. At this time, new ideas for the facility had evolved in the community, surrounding Santa Barbara's re-discovery and re-expression of its Hispanic cultural origins. Santa Barbara's architectural embodiment as a Spanish colonial town – its Mission church, royal presidio and principal residences and its mediterranean layout of buildings, courtyards and streets – had all been admired by visitors since the early 1800's. <sup>4</sup>

Even after the Americanization of the town through the mid nineteenth century, enough of the red tiled and whitewashed adobe architecture and gardens of the past remained to serve as an authentic local source of inspiration for the Spanish Colonial Revival Style of architecture. This style, which gained great popularity throughout the southern part of the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was derived from the ancient architectural forms and styles of the Mediterranean world. Characterized by plain white walls, simple massing with low pitched tile roofs, complemented by use of decorative ironwork, tile and stone, with a limited number of openings, yet closely related to the outdoors through arches, courtyards and axial gardens, this style became increasingly used in Santa Barbara for both public buildings and private residences. <sup>5</sup> This movement was encouraged in many levels publicly and privately, but principally in an organized way by the local Community Art Association's Plans and Planting Committee, that led in educating the public concerning the value of the goals of *“preserving the city's early nineteenth-century buildings, the eventual remodeling or replacing of non-Hispanic-Mediterranean building with those which reflected Santa Barbara's “local tradition”; the utilization of this imagery for all new buildings; of a landscape architecture*

*compatible with that tradition; and finally, and most important, an approach to planning which would maintain the needed scale and size of the community, both public and private.”<sup>6</sup>*

*A contemporary description related an effort that was “... made to influence property owners and builders to adopt the style of architecture already so well established in and about the city. It is a style variously named – perhaps the word ‘Latin’ best expresses it – for it emanates from the Mediterranean countries and is sometimes called Spanish, Italian or southern European .... It is the architecture of the tile roofs, and extensive plastered surfaces with concentrations of ornament, deep shadow and deep reveals. It permits of light colored walls which reflect the sunlight and cast off rather than retain the best and forms a fitting background for foliage which is so much a part of the California landscape.”<sup>7</sup>*

The Spanish Colonial Revival style of buildings and gardens was appreciated locally for its appropriateness to the climate and close engagement with the outdoors, authentic resonance with a rediscovered, romanticized past, and at the same time a simplicity and relaxed expression that was also somewhat paradoxically appealing as “modern” and abstract. This is particularly apparent in asymmetrical and abstract variants derived from the ancient Moorish and vernacular rural architecture of southern “andalusian” Spain. Landscape forms were also derived from the Mediterranean and earlier Persian traditions, featuring strongly integrated relationships with building forms, rectilinear spatial organization with major and minor axes, a predominance of evergreen plants and restrained use of water elements. In Santa Barbara, these landscape forms were differentiated by a more relaxed and sometimes asymmetrically appearing spatial organization, and also through the use of a “wide array of plant material, ranging from the tropical to temperate, the inclusion of orchards within the scheme, and finally the way in which many of the gardens took full advantage of the views of the ocean or the mountain backdrop.”<sup>8</sup>

In the context of this enthusiasm for a “new” architectural expression, the winning entry in the 1919 design competition for the new courthouse was a formal exercise in Spanish Colonial Revival style, featuring a large enclosed garden.<sup>9</sup> It was not however until after the earthquake of 1925, when the damaged old courthouse required demolition, (along with many other buildings in the community) that plans moved forward, with a commission awarded to the second place finisher in the competition, William Mooser and Company of San Francisco.<sup>10</sup>

The design that eventually went forward was a radical departure from that firm’s earlier entry, and was influenced by community leaders, notably George A. Batchelder, and sketched by local architect Wilmer Hershey.<sup>11</sup> This design, about which much has been written, was not only an abstracted “andalusian” version of the Spanish Colonial Revival style, but departed from the traditional formal concepts for a county courthouse of the day in other significant ways, including: 1) rather than organizing the function in as a single monumental building massing centrally located on the block, using a massing that instead distributed functions into separate buildings and moved them to the perimeter of the site; 2) the employment of an asymmetrical, informal composition; 3) the creation of a garden and

building as a single integrated composition, with the buildings serving as a backdrop to gardens and a central sunken lawn designed to be used for both daytime and evening events.

Key characteristics of the new landscape that resulted include:

- 1) the continued role of the site as a public garden, with the new design incorporating in place or by transplantation some of the existing specimen trees, and by retaining the original four diagonal entry paths and stone corner monuments;
- 2) the continuation and enhancement of the original landscape as a place for horticultural display, enriching an extraordinary variety of exotic trees and plants that can be grown locally, and
- 3) the continuation and enhancement of the courthouse grounds as a community gathering place, with the creation of a great ceremonial open space made up of a collection of stepped and sunken lawns, stairs and terraces, pathways and portals, which is used with great flexibility as a setting for an array of large and small public daytime and evening gatherings.
- 4) the relaxed yet complex and dynamically balanced abstract asymmetry of the elements of the new landscape in conjunction with the buildings in spatial form and detail, monumental in scale yet intricate in detail, expressed in changing light and shadow and color.
- 5) the openness of and connection to the landscape of the Courthouse with its surroundings, including not only the adjacent street corridors, but in the case of the vistas through the Great Arch and from the Sunken Garden, connections to the surrounding hills of the Riviera and mountains beyond.

## **General Description of the Evolution and Current Conditions of Landscape Elements**

### **Evolution**

The landscape of the Courthouse has evolved to its present state over many decades. The commemorative booklet produced for the Courthouse opening in 1929 states:

*“Against the building stand tall palms and dark pines, many of which did service around the old courthouse. Ralph T. Stevens, landscape architect of Santa Barbara, gave generously of his services in directing the transplanting of trees and arranging the planting around the building. The effectiveness of the landscape treatment of the grounds is due largely to his skill and taste.”*<sup>12</sup>

The photographic record shows that the Courthouse landscape planting composition in the original Stevens design did not reach its present level of richness and complexity until the sixth and seventh decades after the opening festivities in 1929. As with the design of the

building, the landscape of the Courthouse is result of the work of many individuals. While much of the present massing was in place by the early 1940's, contributions were made by County staff including Elmer Awl through the mid 1950's and Henry Bauerschmidt and Richard Riffero through the early 1970's, followed in the 1980's and 1990's by Ron Aquistipace and later Guily Villasana <sup>13</sup>

In the late 1980's and early 1990's Consultant architects and landscape architects Campbell & Campbell added additional layers to the composition, including further enriching of the collections of palms and exotic flowering trees, in connection with their designs for ramps, steps and perimeter areas surrounding the sunken garden, Santa Barbara Street Jail, Hall of Records and Main Building entrances as a part of the Courthouse seismic and universal access upgrade project led by architect Charles Moore and overseen by David Gebhard. <sup>14</sup>

## NOTES:

1. Santa Barbara News Press, March 5, 1992
2. A Guide to Architecture in Los Angeles and Southern California, p. 529.
3. The Santa Barbara County Courthouse, p. 54
4. Santa Barbara, The Creation of A New Spain in America, p. 10
5. A Guide to Architecture in Los Angeles and Southern California, p. 700.
6. Santa Barbara, The Creation of A New Spain in America, p. 19-20.
7. Op. cit., P. 20.
8. Ibid., P. 23.
9. Ibid., p. 19.
10. Ibid., p. 22.
11. Ibid., p. 22.
12. The Santa Barbara County Courthouse, Board of Supervisors, p. 11.
13. Santa Barbara News Press, selected articles (Courthouse Docents files)
14. The Santa Barbara County Courthouse, p. 27.

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