

# **Balboa Theatre Feasibility Report**

Horton Plaza Redevelopment Project (San Diego Calif.)

Published by Munroe & Reeves, 1974

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FEASIBILITY STUDY REPORT PREPARED BY:

ARCHITECTS MUNROE & REEVES A.I.A.

BALBOA THEATRE/OFFICE BUILDING EXHIBITS

For The

REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY OF THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

NOV 15 1974

Prepared by  
City Staff

SCIENCE & INDUSTRY

I. Background

Completed in 1924; occupies 15,000 sq. ft. parcel at 4th Avenue and "E" Streets; four floors and basement; theatre now seats 800 - potential of 1,000. Commercial space has 6,700 sq. ft. of leasable space.

II. Existing Conditions

General - Due to fire in 1965 the three upper floors used as a hotel, were closed; balcony also closed due to violations of safety codes. Auditorium in "poor condition due to lack of maintenance"; major problem concerns lack of adequate exits. Stage area "stripped" - space in basement for dressing rooms. Balance of building unused "and is slowly deteriorating".

Structural - Concrete frame; hollow tile filler walls. No plans or specifications available. Earthquake forces "ignored" in design. The design is a "fail-unsafe mechanism," "...where once the failure has commenced, its continuance is assured - progressive and irrevocable."

Mechanical - Supply air blower is in "fair condition", and "requires considerable maintenance." Ventilation of the theatre "is not satisfactory." The hotel/office portion has cast iron radiators..."in extremely poor condition... and probably could no longer be used."

Plumbing - "Plumbing appears to be in generally poor condition and requires much maintenance." "Fixtures and piping are in poor condition."

Electrical - "No major improvements since 1923..." "A significant portion is inoperative..." "There is no emergency lighting system and no fire alarm system."

III. Alternate Solutions for Rehabilitation

A. Retain the Building in Its Present Condition and Use

Comment: Not possible to continue use in present condition due to code violations.

B. Renovate Theatre, Continue Present Use

Comment: New seats, paint, carpet, electrical and plumbing modifications - no structural modifications - possible if additional structural testing certifies compliance.

Estimated Cost: Not provided. San Diego Public Library

*San Diego (city). Redevelopment agency*

# I BACKGROUND

## 1.1 HISTORY

Balboa Theatre opened on 28 March 1924. This Spanish Renaissance Revival style building was designed by San Diego architect, William Wheeler, for the owner, Mr. Robert E. Hicks. Mr. Hicks had been a newspaperman in Colorado before moving to San Diego in 1913. His interest in theatrical enterprises started in Denver where he managed several expositions and outdoor enterprises. He leased and operated the Plaza Theatre in 1913 and built the Cabrillo Theatre which was completed in 1915.

Of note is the fact that this Spanish Renaissance Revival style building was produced by an all San Diego team. In addition to the owner, Mr. Hicks, and the architect, William Wheeler, the general contractor was Wurster Construction Company, and a Mr. J. Campbell did the sculpturing and modeling.

Other San Diego sub-contractors were:

Pioneer Truck Company	- Excavating
Spreckels Bros. Commercial Company	- Portland Cement
John Hanson	- Rock and Sand
W. C. Merritt	- Plumbing
M. J. O'Neil	- Brick Contractor
McCormick Lumber Company	- Lumber
Benton Roof and Paint Company	- Roofing and Paint (Material)
Ed Thayer	- Plastering Contractor (Material)
W. J. Baily Company	- Plasterer
National Iron Works	
San Diego Tile and Woodstone Company	
Southern Electrical Company	
Austin Safe and Desk Company	- Theatre Seating

The building combined a theatre with 34 offices and six stores on the Fourth Avenue side. The Theatre was designed primarily as a movie house but had complete facilities for live stage performances. When it opened, the Theatre contained a magnificent Robert Morton 4-32 pipe organ made in Van Nuys, California, in 1921-22. In 1928 the organ was moved to the Fox Theatre where it remains to this day. The Theatre represented an investment of \$800,000 and was heralded in the press as "a gem of a theatre". The entrance floor has a tile mosaic commemorating Balboa's discovery of the Pacific Ocean in 1513.

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The interior was elaborately decorated in a Polychromatic Spanish Renaissance theme on walls and ceilings. The decoration was executed by the same artists who decorated the Theatre Internationale in Mexico City. A major feature of the decor was two twenty-foot high working waterfalls, one on each side of the proscenium.

The lighting was elaborate and could be adjusted to create a great variety of effects.

The ceiling of the auditorium and the foyers are a perforated grille. Through a system of wooden ducts, the organ music was "piped" to echo chambers in the rear of the house and through the perforated ceilings -- the combined effect must have literally filled the building with sound, surrounding the patrons with music.

The Spanish motif was carried out by the usherettes in costumes including bolero jackets, toreador pants and flat Spanish-styled tasseled hats.

In 1930 the Theatre was remodeled and was converted into a Spanish Language Theatre by Fox West Coast Theatres. For a while

the partial wall. Subsequently solid walls have been added and a snack stand has been imposed on this area.

Somewhere in its history the office building portion was converted into a hotel and was used as such until 5 June 1965 when a fire in one of the rooms forced discontinuation of use of the hotel occupancy. This suspension of use was due primarily to the lack of adequate safe exiting. One of the organ pipe chambers was used for a time as a broadcast studio for a radio station. The balcony is no longer usable as there is no provision for safe exiting on the east (Fourth Avenue) side. This balcony exiting systems was designed to exit into the office/hotel corridor and there is no adequate safe exit from this side of the structure. All seating has also been removed from the balcony. In its present configuration the Theatre main floor has seating for about 800. If the balcony area was to be provided with adequate exiting, the Theatre might be expected to accommodate approximately 1,000 seats.

The most predominate feature of the Balboa Theatre is the multi-colored tile dome soaring above the roof at the corner of Fourth Avenue and E Street.

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#### IV STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

A thorough search was made to find any architectural or structural drawings showing some design criteria for the building. No drawings of any sort were found.

The lack of any structural documentation prevented doing a rigorous analysis of the structure for this report.

Balboa Theatre building is of reinforced concrete frame construction with hollow clay tile filler walls and some brick framing of the arches and around window openings. The method of construction is shown in the series of photographs taken while the building was being erected in 1923 and the hollow clay tile filler walls on the south wall are clearly evident today. During the era of construction between 1910 and 1930, unreinforced clay tile as filler material in concrete frame construction was used for many important structures in Southern California. The nature of earthquake forces, particularly as associated with structural elements of varying rigidities, was ignored in the design of these buildings. The buildings were designed with concrete beams and

and columns proportioned to take the gravity loads to which they were subjected, and seismic forces were generally not addressed. Wherever walls occurred in the line of primary concrete framing, the clay tile filler material was often used. Many exterior walls were built in this fashion. Where the building codes required that walls have no penetration, the clay tile material completely filled the spaces between columns and beams. Wherever windows or other penetrations were incorporated, the clay tile material was used to fill the balance of the area, as with the Balboa Theatre building.

An assumption that is made in the design of this type of wall is that the clay tile will not be subjected to any appreciable load. However, it can be shown that a considerable percentage of the gravity live loads to which a beam is subjected is taken by the clay tile filler where this material has been placed below the beam line, whether internal or external. Live loads are those loads superimposed by the use and occupancy of the building not including the wind load, earthquake load, or dead load. It also can be shown

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V MECHANICAL ANALYSIS

The Theatre portion of the building is heated and ventilated by a central supply and exhaust system.

Fresh air is drawn into the system through an open shaft located near the southwest corner of the building. The large supply air blower is located in a blower room in the partial basement. It was not possible to trace the complete air distribution system but pieces of ductwork are visible in various locations throughout the building. It would seem that most air distribution into the auditorium was through the perforated grille in the ceiling. The supply air blower is in only fair condition and requires considerable maintenance. This supply air is heated with low pressure steam supplied to the building by the San Diego Gas and Electric Company.

A large exhaust air blower is located in the tiled dome on the roof; the exhaust air appears to be removed from the auditorium through a great number of small mushroom capped exhausters located under the seats. The entire space under the balcony serves as an exhaust plenum. This supply and exhaust equipment was of high quality

manufacture and it operates quietly. The ventilation of the Theatre is not satisfactory, however, and a musty, stale odor pervades the entire Theatre.

The office/hotel portion of the building is heated by a low pressure steam distribution system with cast iron radiators in individual rooms. This steam heating system which has not been in use since 1965 appears to be in extremely poor condition and probably could no longer be used.

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