



## Report from your Supervisor

by Gavin Newsom, Supervisor District 2

# Restoring the Palace of Fine Arts

In San Francisco's countless postcard racks the Golden Gate Bridge, the Transamerica Tower, City Hall, the painted Victorians and the Palace of Fine Arts all vie for symbolic preeminence. But when it comes to architectural landmarks nothing provokes our sense of beauty, grandeur and history like Bernard Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts with its lovely Lagoon. One distinguished guest, Thomas Edison, visited the Palace during the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition and remarked, "the architect of that building is a genius. There is not the equal anywhere on earth." When he spoke these words he spoke for San Franciscans as well. Hundreds mobilized to "save the Palace" from demolition with the rest of the buildings from the Fair. But sometimes things that are most dear are easiest to neglect and today the Palace reflects a disturbing lack of maintenance.

America's unrivaled international symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty, was tattered and worn for decades. It took a sizable public and private effort in the 1980s to restore it. The same effort is needed for the Palace of Fine Arts, which, with the exception of the successful "Light the Palace" campaign a decade ago, has largely been neglected since the early 1970s.

When the decayed 1915 plaster and wood Fair complex where the Palace stands was demolished in 1964, there was a budget to rebuild 60% of it to modern standards. The hope was that the rebuilt concrete and steel decorative structures that we see there today would be supported financially by rental income from the crescent-shaped main building (where the Exploratorium is located) and from ongoing municipal and private support. But the reality has been that San Francisco, like other cities, has so many practical needs that other needs get sidelined. Furthermore it has been the practice of our Recreation and Parks Department — who own the Palace — to support the popular Exploratorium and the neighboring theater by not charging the rents that might make the Palace self-sustaining. And there has simply been no strategy for the building's future.

But a rekindled vision of the Palace of Fine Arts has been developed over the last three years for its restoration, and the initial groundwork has already been laid. In 2000, Mayor Brown appointed Elizabeth Goldstein to be General Manager of the Recreation and Parks Department. Goldstein formerly headed the National Trust for Historic Preservation's western regional office in San Francisco. When Goldstein came on board, she and the Mayor elevated the Palace to one of the City's top priorities for State budget support. The Mayor also made sure that there was no more noblesse oblige for renting Palace space and in the future Palace tenants will pay market-rate rents that will be reinvested in the property.

What's more, with Goldstein's understanding of what is possible in the field of architectural preservation today, Rec & Parks is now tackling the complexities of a master plan for the Palace and cultivating a fundraising partnership with the Maybeck Foundation. Today a much bigger question is being addressed: apart from the ongoing repairs that public funding might be able to underwrite, would it be possible to launch a public/private effort that could actually bring the Palace back to its glory days and keep it there?

Thanks to Gerald Adams of *The Chronicle*, the problem of restoring the Palace has been given the city-wide urgency it deserves, but, as Mr. Adams observed, money is the root of all restoration. The restoration of the Palace will require millions of dollars and that amount increases depending on how faithful we are to the Maybeck's original design. Is the Palace restoration, then, affordable? If what happened with a recent grant from the state is any indication, the answer is no: A 3-million-dollar grant for which Mayor Willie Brown, Assemblyman John Burton and Assemblyman Carole Migden successfully lobbied was awarded, and then immediately snatched away due to the budget crunch from last year's energy crisis.

Still, we are hopeful that in the coming years we can bring the Palace back to its original beauty with the combination of public and private money. Complicating

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this effort is the great care that is required in executing a funding campaign, the technical aspects of dealing with an historic landmark, and the need for a broad consensus as to procedure. But there are two reasons to be optimistic. First, San Francisco has recently proven that public/private capital restoration projects of this size can be successful. The 19-million-dollar, seven-year effort to reconstruct the Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park, which Rec & Parks also owns, is an example. The campaign was executed in a partnership with the Friends of Recreation & Parks, and about one third of the funding came from public sources.

Second, in the 1950s, San Franciscans apparently wanted a beautiful Palace badly enough to pay for it. Inspired by the generosity of Palace neighbor Walter Johnson, the City spent millions in public and other private money to demolish Maybeck's grandiose but dilapidated beauty and reconstruct it, and later, in the 1980s, hundreds of San Franciscans gave a remarkable \$600,000 to the grass-roots campaign to light up the Palace at night.

Today, San Franciscans should stand ready to again support the restoration of the Palace of Fine Arts. The Palace is seen at all levels as an enduring and important part of the soul of San Francisco. As in the effort to restore the Statue of Liberty, we are spearheading a plan that promises to do more than patch up existing blemishes. We want a landmark that inspires us today just as it did back in the days of Thomas Edison.

With the restoration of the Palace, income should be earmarked to maintain it in perpetuity. In the coming months and years San Franciscans will be asked to help make this happen. If you want to be part of this effort please contact:

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