

“The City that Knows How,” Then and Now



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

Awonderful celebration is underway in San Francisco of the centennial of the Panama Pacific International Exposition. With typical style, San Francisco is revisiting the history of this extraordinary 1915 world’s fair that commemorated the 1913 completion of the Panama Canal. The San Francisco Historical Society, the Exposition Centennial Committee and Heyday Press published the magnificent book *San Francisco’s Jewel City*, by Laura Ackley. A Commonwealth Club panel in early March, with historian Kevin Starr, Ackley and others, explored the lasting significance of the event.

Through the ongoing events and reading Ackley’s book, we refreshed our memory that San Francisco was selected by the U.S. Congress to host the exposition in part because of the rapid rebuilding the city accomplished after the 1906 earthquake and fire, which prompted President Taft to christen San Francisco “The City that Knows How.” Discussion of an exposition had begun before the canal’s completion in 1913, but the outbreak of World War I in 1914 delayed the project’s start. San Francisco was chosen as the city in the United States best suited to accomplish the massive preparations for the exposition in a very short period of time.

True to the nation’s trust in the “City that Knows How,” in just two years land leases were negotiated on 200 parcels held by 175 different owners. Tidal marshes were drained and landfill added. In 1913 and 1914, an entire district of San Francisco was prepared for development and 400 buildings, even if ersatz and temporary, were constructed for the exposition in what is now the Marina District. Eighty thousand exhibits were created, and 19 million people visited the exposition over 288 days, learning about new technology, agriculture, transportation, the economies and cultures of other countries, the fine arts and many other fields. And then very rapidly, the entire exposition was dismantled and the land returned to its private owners – except the Bernard Maybeck-designed Fine Arts Palace, which was retained as the symbol of the exposition. “The City that Knows How” more than lived up to its expectations for drive, style and efficiency.

Many of the civic boosters who raised funds for the exposition, designed it, and built it were Commonwealth Club members. These

included architect Maybeck, banker William Crocker, *Chronicle* publisher M. H. de Young, the owners of Levi Strauss, department store proprietor Marshal Hale, and banker Isaias Hellman. After the exposition was over, the Club advocated for preserving some of the buildings. A hundred years later, Club Board Member Tad Taube donated the funds to gloriously light up the Fine Arts Palace, the Ferry Building and other landmarks around the city as they had been illuminated during the exposition.

A century later, San Francisco is still “The City that Knows How.” The mayor and Board of Supervisors provide great leadership to get things done effectively. When seeking to attract more tech company headquarters to the city a few years ago, San Francisco devised creative tax breaks that brought Twitter to the Mid-Market area, increased the net tax revenue from this district and boosted revitalization of the area.

The Club experienced “The City that Knows How” in the recently concluded process to obtain its building permits for our

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new headquarters on The Embarcadero. A statutory process allows multiple appeals of building projects, and if individuals or groups take advantage of this process, it forces even those trying to do ultra-responsible development to go through repeated hearings before public bodies.

The Club is renovating an unoccupied, dilapidated building into a modest LEED Platinum or Gold building, well under the waterfront height limit, with historic preservation and commemoration and broad support among neighbors, businesses, non-profits in the area, historians, beautification organizations, architects and unions.

It took eight months for the Club to go through the process of approvals for its building, with two hearings before the Planning Commission and one before the Board of Supervisors. From start to finish, the city of San Francisco ensured that the Club’s project had the appropriate public oversight, but that it also moved along as effectively as possible. This took leadership by the mayor, the city planning staff led by Planning Director John Rahaim, the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors. The supervisor representing the district where our building site is located, Jane Kim, was both a stringent reviewer of our project and a great help in seeing that the Club was able to address all questions and move through the process effectively.

On a daily basis, The Commonwealth Club plays a role similar to the exposition, bringing information about many subjects to the public. Its new headquarters will expand this role. Today, “The City that Knows How” continues to move forward with projects for the public good. 🌟