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Elizabeth Shreeve, AICP
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Re: Santa Clara County Fairgrounds
Project No. 2014083
Memo regarding historical findings

To Whom It May Concern:

The purpose of this memo is to present historical information pertaining to the development and design of the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds (SCCFG), specifically the architecture and related infrastructure still present at the site.

A folder with relevant aerial photographs, building imagery, newspaper articles, and other fair ephemera has been included in the SWA Google Drive for review.

Construction chronology of extant subject buildings

1952 Exposition Hall
1956 Gateway Arch
1960 Pavilion Hall
1961 Fiesta Hall
1962 Administration Building
c. 1966 - 1971 Gateway Hall

Early existing site

Located at Tully Road and Monterey Highway, the 97-acre Mira Monte Ranch was to become the site of the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds by the mid-20th century. As early as 1916, San Jose rancher Kirk MaComber had utilized his 97-acre Mira Monte Ranch as a stock farm for racehorses. To the southeastern end of the property, an unpaved one-mile oval served as training grounds for the horses.¹

¹ Denno Mattish. *History of San Jose Auto Racing 1903 - 2007*, 24.

Aerial photographs taken within a ten-year time span (1920- 1930²) show the main frontage of the Mira Monte Ranch along Tully Road. An isolated cluster of mature trees sat in the center of the property providing shade to a ranch house and barn. At least three unpaved paths led from Tully Road towards the southeast extent of the property with Tully Road towards the southeast extent of the property with a central road bisecting the land traveling through the residence and barn and terminating at the San Jose Driving Park. Two of the other frontage-leading dirt roads flanked the northern and southern boundaries of the property and led to well-defined unpaved roundabouts, the original use of which is unclear. These roundabouts were connected to one another by a wide road in a northeast-southwest orientation, with the bisecting road, and at least two similarly oriented roads leading directly to the driving park. With many established paths of access, the layout of the working Mira Monte Ranch and existing San Jose Driving Park most likely served as the basis for the master plan of the new fairgrounds.

Initial site development

The Mira Monte property was purchased by the newly formed Santa Clara Valley Fair Association for the purposes of a new county fair in 1940. Planning began immediately as County Engineer Kobert Chandler prepared an initial map of fairgrounds, while local architect E.N. Curtis devised a plot plan and obtained estimates for park infrastructure including, electrical and sewer systems.³ The extent of Chandler and Curtis' 1940s plans are unknown, but the timing of their contributions to the fairgrounds came just after the Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE) closed in the fall of 1940. The last American international exposition before WWII, the fair featured cultural exploits and promoted American technological innovations. With distinctive flair, the temporary buildings of the GGIE were designed in a whimsical modernist manner, on a meticulously organized site, with corresponding park infrastructure and elaborate landscaping. A scaled down version of this type of over-arching master planning prevalent at World's Fairs can be seen in the utilization of roads, organization of buildings, and complementary landscaping at the SCCFG. In 1941, entrance turnstiles and benches were purchased from the GGIE's inventory for use in the SCCFG.

The first Santa Clara County Fair took place on the new site in the summer of 1941. The fairgrounds were then characterized by unpaved roads, several large canvas tents to the north, and a "midget race track" with two parking lots to the south. The southernmost roundabout became disseminated as a recently designated parking lot utilized the corresponding road as a park access point (which would later become the designated space for mechanical carnival rides). The fair on goings encircled the tree grouping and original ranch buildings, which remained in place. Permanent buildings had yet to be erected, and the site remained largely undeveloped.⁴

Wartime planning

² The date of these early rural photos was estimated by History San Jose to fall within a ten year time period. GA believes that these could have been taken as survey photos prior to or just after the Santa Clara Valley Fair Association's purchase of the Mira Monte Ranch in 1941.

³ Dick Barrett, *History of the Santa Clara County Fair*, 1968, p. 15.

⁴ See aerial image of first fair in 1941

World War II halted summertime fair going activity yet design and planning continued, perhaps in part to boost local wartime morale. A long-range building program was developed in by the fair association in anticipation of post-war funding which was to provide for local employment. Monterey-based architect C.J. Ryland was hired to prepare sketches and detailed plans of buildings and park infrastructure which were, "...to be ready as soon as possible," for construction once the war was to end.⁵ Ryland's contributing plans for the fairgrounds date as far back to 1941.

Architect C.J. Ryland

Born in 1892, San Jose Native, Columbus J. Ryland trained at the Western Normal California School of Arts and Crafts and the University of Toulouse in France. During the 1910s he joined the Bay Area firm of Swartz & Swartz, later to form Swartz & Ryland in 1919, specializing in residential, commercial, and educational projects throughout the Central San Joaquin Valley.⁶ By the 1930s, Ryland had established an independent practice in Monterey, from which his most prominent commissions were built. The projects within his collective portfolio reflect a wide range of architectural styles and motifs, including adaptations of Academic Eclecticism, Art Deco, Neoclassical and period revivals and Streamline Moderne styles. In this, it is clear that Ryland was well versed in following building and stylistic trends of the era, as his portfolio as a whole is not reflective of any one particular genre. This holds especially true of his work at the SCCFG. Ryland would have been nearly fifty years old with an extensive and eclectic body of work behind him as he began to design the fairground's main buildings. The building built here represent a small number of constructs Ryland conceived in this particular architectural language.

Design and construction of mid-century fairground buildings

An 8' x 8' scaled model of Ryland's designs for the fairgrounds was presented to the fair association's board members in 1944. This model included iterations of Exposition, Pavilion, Fiesta and Gateway Halls and the Administration Building. The Grandstand (now demolished) was to be the focal point of the fair, and lay at the end of a highly landscaped pedestrian esplanade with colorful banners and lush plantings. Detailed plans and specifications, again, were to be prepared immediately. The design of horse and other animal barns, in addition to smaller park infrastructure is also attributed to Ryland during this period. The entire project was scoped at \$1,225,000. The buildings were constructed in a prioritized manner in order of park necessity. As post-war funding became available, the building process took nearly two decades to complete. A large purchase of nearby land significantly expanded the total fairground acreage in 1951.

In 1951, James Dean, a board member approved to allocate funding for Exposition Hall, after glancing at the plans, commenting that the design for the building was "simple and practical." Constructed as a long, rectangular volume, the end of the building terminated in a semi-circular open-air area for food vendors. The roof featured polychrome scallops, which had been replaced with a solid colored roof by 1975. Alternatively, the building was seen as potentially

⁵ Barrett, 1968, p. 15.

⁶ A Guide to Historical Architecture in Fresno, California. John Edward Powell, 1997.
<http://historicfresno.org/bio/ryland.htm>

valuable to be used as emergency shelters in the event of a widespread Bay Area emergency.⁷ From this, one can infer that the original interior of the building was utilitarian, featuring simple and durable finishes in the event that a large number of people would need to be accommodated for.

Simplicity of the design and construction methods also extended to nearby Pavilion Hall, built in 1960. State funds were used to create the L-shaped concrete-and-steel building. Decorative concrete and glass blocks served as the building's exterior adornment. A plate-glass viewing room at the elbow of the "L" allowed "occupants the opportunity to overlook activities on the wide terrace lawn," sheltered by the building's extents. Tilt-up concrete panels were poured on site. The method of construction used for Pavilion Hall wouldn't have been novel by 1960, yet was enumerated in a *Cambrian Weekly News* article announcing the building's opening. The interior of this hall featured a few special finishes with a 60' x 80' Maplewood dance floor and a "pleasing" color scheme. With this, the author of the article compared Pavilion Hall to be, "the envy of modern department stores." Similarly, the building was to feature the latest and most efficient interior and exterior lighting.⁸ By 1961, the nicest fair improvement of the year was credited to, "the beautiful new 36,00 square-foot pavilion," Fiesta Hall.⁹ A rectangular building had a flat roof and simple columns to support its extensive overhang.

Landscaping of the fairgrounds

An unknown landscape architect was hired during the initial 1940s planning process, but his plan was never fully executed. With an extensive plant inventory, trees and flowers were meticulously planned and planted along the esplanade, lining the remaining roundabout.

In plan, the surrounding pavement abutting either side of the centralized esplanade mirrored Exposition Hall's semi-circular food court area. Sidewalks with curbs leading from the main fair entrance down the esplanade curved along manicured spans of grass allowing for the building's form to emanate into the park's landscape. It seems as though Exposition Hall's unique form was the impetus for the organic shape of the walkways and landscape surrounding the esplanade.

In summary

While many of the plans for the major buildings at the SCCFG were created between 10 and 20 years before construction, there was still a public reverence for their novelty when the buildings were finally constructed in the 1950s and 1960s. Several newspaper articles written to commemorate the annual fair described the construction methods and technological systems as though they were original for the time. The park's layout and building configuration were a result of deliberate planning, possibly influenced by much larger scaled World's Fairs. Fairground layout and building design is largely attributed to prominent San Jose architect C.J. Ryland. Perhaps these SCCFG examples of local, Streamline Moderne Style being connected

⁷ Barrett, 1968, p. 15.

⁸ New Fair Building to be Used, *Cambrian Weekly News*, 11 August, 1960.

⁹ John Mihalros, Improved County Fair Awaits Grand Opening, *Mercury-News*, 1961.

with the agricultural-centered fair helped to perpetuate main-stream appreciation and acceptance for modernist principles as contemporary architectural practice in San Jose.¹⁰

Possible next steps

Research expansion may include:

1. The extent of Chandler and Curtis' early fairground plans with a comparison to Ryland's plan
2. Analysis of the SCCFG plan and how it specifically drew from World's Fair master planning and architectural ideas
3. How the SCCFG fits into C.J. Ryland's portfolio
4. Individual historic evaluation of each extant building
 - Including a further analysis of building permits, detailing the extent of alterations
5. Context of agriculture and related support buildings within California during this time period

As always, please feel free to contact us with further questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Alison Garcia Kellar
Architectural Historian
Garavaglia Architecture, Inc.

cc: file

¹⁰ A 1947 article in the San Jose Evening News announced the construction of a new J.C. Penney Company building in the Streamline Modern Style as a "radical change...embracing latest architectural ideas," from which one can infer that they style was deemed as new and innovative in the San Jose area in the 1940s. PAST Consultants, LLC. *San Jose Modernism Historic Context Statement*, 2009.