

## A Summary History of De la Guerra Plaza

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We are standing in the courtyard of the home constructed by José de le Guerra, the fifth commandant of the Presidio of Santa Barbara, the last of four Spanish forts in California. De la Guerra was also a wealthy landowner and merchant, and this was the urban seat of his much larger empire, which included five large ranches. In addition to the house, which still survives, the family owned the land behind it, now El Paseo, and the land in front of it, where many community events and activities took place. These events included the multi-day celebration of the wedding of José's daughter Anita de la Guerra to the American merchant Alfred Robinson, which was famously described in Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s, SBTHP restored Casa de la Guerra to its original appearance in 1828 and we now operate the building as a museum. It is a popular location for our education programs including Dia de los Muertos and Una Noche de Las Posadas and for community events, including a long tradition of wedding festivities harkening back to that famous one in the 1830s. We are here today because this City landmark is one important anchor on one side of what is

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *Two Years Before the Mast* (New York, New York: Signet Classic 1964), 225-229.

now the City's property and we hope to encourage a continuity of the legacy of this special place as we envision something new.

Plaza de la Guerra was declared a public space by City Ordinance number 37 in 1853, three years after Santa Barbara became a city in the new State of California. Santa Barbara's mayor, José's son Francisco de la Guerra, endorsed the ordinance and the plaza was named in honor of the family that had stewarded it for many years.<sup>2</sup> At the time the much-used plaza was ringed by the adobe homes and properties of prominent Californio families including the Yorbas, Carrillos, Leyvas and of course, de la Guerras, constructed after the Presidio had fallen into disuse and disrepair in the 1830s, and following the lead of José de la Guerra who had recently completed his adobe home. The Plaza appears on the 1853 Wackenreuder map, the earliest accurate property map of the City.<sup>3</sup>

In 1874, Santa Barbara's first City Hall and fire house was constructed in the center of the Plaza, its location visible by the two palm trees that still mark the site. The new city needed a permanent city hall, and by that time this was city land, but the construction of city hall in the center of the plaza was a clear and perhaps intentional subversion of Santa Barbara's legacy as a Spanish, and later Mexican, town.<sup>4</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the buildings ringing the plaza shifted from residential to more commercial use.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard E. Oglesby, "Introduction," *Plaza de la Guerra Reconsidered Exhibition and Symposium* (Santa Barbara: SBTHP, 2002), 5; Mary Louise Days, *Histories of Individual Parks, City of Santa Barbara, California* (Santa Barbara: City planning Division, 1977), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Hazeltine and Pam Post, "Historic Structures Report and Historic Landscape Report for Plaza de la Guerra," (Santa Barbara: City of Santa Barbara Community Development Department, 2011), 9.

<sup>4</sup> "Site History of Plaza de la Guerra," *Plaza de la Guerra Reconsidered Exhibition and Symposium* (Santa Barbara: SBTHP, 2002), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Hazeltine and Post, 11.

In the early 1920s, Santa Barbara began a process of reimagining the city's Hispanic past. The conquest of Mexico and development of statehood firmly behind them, leaders were free to imagine an architecture that pulled from the community's roots to set Santa Barbara apart from the many other small and earnestly growing cities in the region. Bernhard Hoffman was the first to publicly propose a new vision of a "City in Spain," in 1922. He imagined a plaza in the Hispanic style, with combination of old and new buildings, which would breathe life into the civic space.<sup>6</sup> Also in 1922 architect James Osborne Craig constructed the Street in Spain and El Paseo Restaurant and presented plan for a new City Hall and reconfigured plaza. Craig's vision for the Plaza included a central pavilion for band concerts. With Craig's untimely passing, his wife Mary Osborne Craig and Carlton Winslow completed his project in El Paseo.<sup>7</sup> The restoration of the open plaza began in 1923 with the construction of the new City Hall designed by Sauter and Lockard, which returned the plaza to its original outline with buildings ringing a central open space. Prominent architect George Washington Smith, working with his talented assistant Lulah Maria Riggs, produced their own vision for the plaza interior, with a less formal, more intimate design anchored by a central fountain. Smith designed the *Daily News* building, now the *News Press* Building, built in 1922, on the site of Sepulveda Adobe, which now anchored the south end of the Plaza.<sup>8</sup>

With three architectural anchors in place, the community continued to explore ideas for the Plaza's interior. Should it include a bandstand, fountain, benches, robust landscaping,

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<sup>6</sup> Kurt Helfrich "Site Work 4: Plaza de la Guerra Reconsidered—The History of a Public Space," *Plaza de la Guerra Reconsidered Exhibition and Symposium* (Santa Barbara: SBTHP 2002), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Helfrich, 14-16.

<sup>8</sup> Helfrich, 17 – 20; "Site History of Plaza de la Guerra," 42.

statues? All of these, or none of these? As the discussion took place, the grass, palm trees and drive remained. Not planned, not agreed upon, but existing, and so persisting.<sup>9</sup> The complex discussions and multiple designs of the early 20s were put on hold, dramatically, by the earthquake in 1925. The focus turned to rebuilding the city and the opportunities the quake provided to implement the Spanish Colonial Revival style throughout downtown. The historic Harmer Adobe adjacent to City Hall was damaged during the quake and eventually demolished.<sup>10</sup> The Bothin building built after the earthquake was constructed on the site of a damaged City Water department building which itself had been built on the site of the 1840s Leyva Adobe.<sup>11</sup>

The onset of WWII distracted the community from plans for a recreation center on the site of the Harmer Adobe. During the 1950s, Cold War worries led to designs for a fallout shelter and underground garage in the center of the Plaza, which were never realized. In 1966 Downtown Santa Barbara proposed closing one block of De la Guerra Street to traffic to enhance pedestrian use of the space, which a *News-Press* article celebrated as a “revitalization” effort for the 800 block. The project, however, did not build enough momentum.<sup>12</sup> In 1973, a narrow alley connecting the Plaza to State Street was donated to the City by the Storke family

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<sup>9</sup> Helfrich, 21-22: “Thus, in spite of all the schemes presented between 1922 and 1925, the question of how best to complete the open portion of Plaza de la Guerra as a civic space for Santa Barbara remained undecided, and instead the space was left as an open expanse of grass, planted with a number of trees;” Hazeltine and Post, 14: “A consensus could not be reached as to an appropriate design for the square itself. In the interim the open space was simply graded and planted with grass within the existing concrete curbing that surrounded the center of the plaza.”

<sup>10</sup> Helfrich, 22.

<sup>11</sup> “Site History of Plaza de la Guerra,” 44-45.

<sup>12</sup> Helfrich, 23-24.

and plans to add shops to the new Storke Plaza were never finalized.<sup>13</sup> In 1974 a planning report commissioned by City Council again recommended transforming the plaza into purely pedestrian space, with connectivity to El Paseo and through to State Street from Storke Placita. Attention on these proposals shifted to the other side of the street and culminated in the construction of Paseo Nuevo in 1988.<sup>14</sup> In the late 90s, Fred Sweeny and Henry Lenny produced designs for a pedestrian-oriented plaza sparked by the open question of how to use Storke Placita. Decorative paving, fountains, and reconstructing the Harmer Adobe for a contemporary use, including possibly public restrooms, all emerged during this visioning process.<sup>15</sup> During this period SBTHP was restoring Casa de la Guerra back to its original appearance and providing a cultural anchor on the plaza.

Generations of talented citizens over the years have put forward visions for the Plaza that remain expansive, creative, and brave. Many of these ideas were revisited again and again and never implemented. Many of them may be ideas you share as well. Like every generation before us, our downtown today faces a set of challenges that are unique to our time. Let's think together about how improvements to this Plaza can help provide a solution. This is our plaza, and our public space. What do we want it to become?

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<sup>13</sup> Edward B. Cella, "Searching for Public Space: Contemporary Projects and Proposals (1982-2000), *Plaza de la Guerra Reconsidered Exhibition and Symposium* (Santa Barbara: SBTHP, 2002), 32.

<sup>14</sup> Helfrich, 25-26.

<sup>15</sup> Cella, 33-34.