



Sierra Madre Historical
Preservation Society
Newsletter

Winter/Spring 2011

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Bella Vista Terrace Turns 100

One of our most famous buildings, Bella Vista Terrace, was completed in 1911 and celebrates its 100th birthday this June. It previously had been a designated Sierra Madre Historic Landmark, but was de-designated by request of present owner, the Healing Light Church, in 1997.

Bella Vista Terrace is the original name of the apartment complex on Mountain Trail between Alegria and Sturtevant that was designed by architect Irving Gill. The two original wings are tight to the sidewalk along Mountain Trail and Sturtevant, with a generous courtyard and community gardens and pergola in the middle. Later additions by others have filled in most of the central space.

Gill was a pioneering California Modernist. Of his considerable body of work, Bella Vista Terrace was his favorite project. Early photos of the building, in its unadulterated state, show a spare, rhythmical and beautifully proportioned composition, that was also cutting-edge for the time in health, sanitation and spatial amenity in workers' housing.

Bella Vista Terrace is often seen in books on housing and city planning. It is listed in *An Architectural Guidebook to Los Angeles* by David Gebhard and Robert Winter. There have also been a number of books featuring Gill himself,

and Bella Vista Terrace is always included prominently. All of Gill's mature work was fairly radical for the time. It was a crossover of the very clean lines and flat surfaces of the Modern Movement taking place in Europe, and what was indigenous to California based on the warm climate and Spanish building; arcades, courtyards, loggias and low, spread out buildings.

The Spanish influence can be seen in the original part of Bella Vista Terrace, in the courtyard with the buildings on the outside edge and the loggias, or arcaded open-air rooms, at the entry to each unit. Gill's complete plan included similar units on the south and east sides of the courtyard that were not built.

What architectural historians find most interesting and unique about this building is how Gill used these architectural forms to create "workers' housing" that was a giant step forward in the quality of minimum housing, that was absolutely remarkable for the time.

While there is a continuous flat wall to the street, on the inside of the courtyard each unit is a very efficiently laid out 22'-6" square, with a 24'-6" long open-air loggia attached. One enters from the street side into the loggia, and can go from there either into the apartment or out into the garden. The loggias, which now have been enclosed with windows, could be used either as patios or open-air sleeping porches.

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Sierra Madre

Historical Preservation Society

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The courtyard space was tiered down with stone retaining walls, some of which still exist. The highest tiers, right outside the loggia at each unit, were private garden and lawn, and the lower ones were community space, culminating in the central pergola that still exists, though with some alterations. The spacing of the units and the stepping in and out of the forms on the courtyard side insured adequate sunlight into the units. These ideas were radically considerate in minimum housing at the time.

Gill's interiors, simple as they were, had great attention to detail and materials that made them sanitary and easily cleaned. The kitchens were large enough to work and eat in, and the living rooms had small fireplaces and window seats.

There was great overall serenity, and the architectural historian Esther McCoy said "There was a reverence for the individual in the plan that has never been equaled in the field of minimum housing. "Publications of the day characterized it as nearly utopian in comparison to the accepted norms in workers' housing. Some thought that Gill was a socialist, but the architectural historian David Gebhard has observed correctly that this housing "reflected (Gill's) commitment not to

a form of socialism, but to the individual, the family and suburbia."

However, the building was so popular that the developer, F.B. Lewis, (It is also known as "Lewis Courts") began raising rents to what the market would bear in an early instance of Sierra Madre Yuppification, far beyond the reach of the workers for whom the project was intended. Angry and disillusioned by this, Gill left the project and the units on the south and east sides were never built according to his plan.

Later on, sometime before the Second World War, additional units were built on the east side of the court, and also farther east along Alegria. After the war, more units were built on the south side of the court, facing Alegria, and also more inside the courtyard.

The spare and rhythmical beauty, and the spatial quality of the original Gill design, was published widely, and artists and Hollywood actors were among the early residents. It has been bought and sold and number of times, added onto, altered and patched. If you look closely though, you'll see a piece of architecture that briefly put Sierra Madre in the national spotlight 100 years ago.

by Joe Catalano

SMHPS Annual Program Meeting Feb. 17, 2011

Dan Richter is best known as Moonwatcher the man-ape in the opening sequence of Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" which he also choreographed. Dan has had a long career as a mime, choreographer, actor, director, producer, memoirist, and for two decades a Hollywood executive. Dan will be the guest speaker at the SMHPS Annual Program meeting on Thursday, February 17 at 6:30 pm in Hartzel Hall at Sierra Madre United Methodist Church, 695 W. Sierra Madre Blvd. (parking lot entrance is on Michillinda).

Dan's talk "Why I Love the Mt. Wilson Trail!" will be the main program and will explore Dan's battle with cancer and the part walking the trail daily played in his recovery. This is sure to be an engaging program by a warm, humorous man. Admission is free and light refreshments will be served.

Dan currently lives in Sierra Madre, where he volunteers on weekends doing trail maintenance and has been leading Sierra Club mountaineering trips since 1991.

