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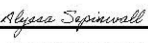
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AUTHOR(S): **Stephanie Williams**

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Jeffrey Charles		12/06/2021
COMMITTEE CHAIR	SIGNATURE	DATE
Alyssa Sepinwall		12/06/2021
COMMITTEE MEMBER	SIGNATURE	DATE
COMMITTEE MEMBER	SIGNATURE	DATE
COMMITTEE MEMBER	SIGNATURE	DATE

Designing Nature: A Uniquely Subtropical Landscape in Balboa Park

Stephanie Williams

History 620

Chair: Dr. Jeff Charles

Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall

Abstract

Viewpoints about nature among the early park designers have influenced the landscape design in San Diego's City Park, later known as Balboa Park. Much of the historiography about landscape and park history across the United States and including Balboa Park, is focused on the two main design trends: those that stressed the pastoral or picturesque during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, and those that were influenced by the City Beautiful movement. While these two landscaping concepts shaped the way many pioneering landscape architects, horticulturalists, and botanists employed and at times created nature in parks, this thesis points out that there were other ideas about design and the uses of nature that shaped the way landscape appeared during the early stages of Balboa Park.

Motivated by European designs, the vision of creating pastoral scenes in parks began on the East Coast. However, not only is the climate different, the type of trees and foliage that grow on the East Coast are more deciduous than the West Coast. Landscape architects like Samuel Parsons Jr. realized they needed to construct a different kind of park for San Diego's City Park. As a pioneering park designer coming from New York, Parsons valued the picturesque. After his first visit, Parsons realized that creating pastoral ideal in the San Diego park would be slightly different than the East Coast in comparison to the sub-tropical southern California climate. With a subtropical climate, steep canyons, and open views of the vistas, early designers for San Diego's City Park sought to create a natural escape appropriate for San Diego.

Keywords: landscape, picturesque, pastoral, nature, City Beautiful, park designers, San Diego, Balboa Park

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Introduction

Balboa Park in San Diego, California, offers a variety of outdoor places to enjoy a purely Californian subtropical blend of nature. People visiting the park can stroll among the large eucalyptus trees, hike outdoors in the canyons, and feel a respite from the grid-like city streets surrounding the park. However, the way we connect with nature in the park today is not what the park was first intended to be. In fact, both nature in the park and the response it is intended to evoke have dramatically changed over the years. Early landscape architects noticed a need for people to escape the city life and connect with a picturesque pastoral nature in parks. Among early park designers, some argued for the park as a place for people to connect with nature away from the city; it had to evoke a romantic, stylized nature known as the picturesque; others argued for a mix of urban and natural elements inspired by the City Beautiful movement. The City Beautiful Movement began during the late nineteenth century and became especially popular during the first decade of the twentieth century. The City Beautiful movement was about beautifying the city with nature and bringing the city into the park, rather than having picturesque pastoral secluded nature in the park. Although the two viewpoints of picturesque and City Beautiful nature designs in parks have been presented as differing, they are related ideas connecting urbanization and landscapes in accessible environments.¹

Historians of Balboa Park have certainly noted the influences of landscaping ideas about the picturesque or influences of the City Beautiful Movement on the early development of the park, but they have been more interested in the design and impact of the Panama-California Exposition, a 1915 fair that brought a set of buildings built in the Spanish Colonial Revival style

¹ Gregory Montes, "San Diego's City Park 1902-1910 From Parsons to Balboa," *The Journal of San Diego History* 25, no. 1 (1979) <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1979/january/citypark/>.

along the El Prado.² This thesis, though, is focused on how early park designers thought about connecting people to nature, and explores ideas about nature influencing the way landscape architects have designed the park over time.³ *Rather than reduce the history of Balboa Park to a simple story of a shift from one idea -- the picturesque -- to another -- the City Beautiful, this thesis argues that the early designers of the park reflect a complex set of ideas about appropriate connection with nature in California, ideas that still influence thinking about nature in urban settings today.*

The two ideas of picturesque and City Beautiful were not the only ideas about nature shaping the way the landscape was designed in the City Park. Some had a slightly different vision of nature in the park, such as horticulturist Kate Sessions who sought to create a botanical type of garden. While Sessions valued some aspects of the picturesque like creating a place of nature away from daily city life, she viewed the designing of nature in a more scientific manner.⁴ With plans to include a diversity of plant life from around the world that were well adapted to the subtropical weather, she sought to create a version of nature in California that was international in scope, where imported plants and native ones mingled in a diverse and beautiful exotic

² On the Panama-California Exposition, see:

Carleton M. Winslow, "The Architecture of the Panama-California Exposition," MA thesis, (San Diego: University of San Diego, 1982); Jonathan D. A. Bechtol, "Balboa Park: An Urban History, 1915-1989," MA thesis, (California State University San Marcos, 2010); Matthew F. Bokova, *The San Diego World's Fairs and Southwestern Memory, 1880-1940*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

³ This thesis focuses on ideas about nature among early landscape designers who developed San Diego's City Park, today known as Balboa Park. It focuses on white middle-class people who were involved in designing Balboa Park. It would be valuable to discover hidden histories about people of color who may have been involved in designing the park. There is also much more that could be written about the LGBTQ culture in the park, especially from the 1940's to the 1970's when a portion of the park was a safe place for same-sex couples to display open affection. I hope that this thesis might help inspire other research that can give us a greater understanding of the nature and history of Balboa Park.

⁴ Elizabeth C. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions Pioneer Horticulturist* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1976).

landscape. Even those landscape designers who had developed parks in other areas of the country and who came out of the traditional pastoral, like Parsons and City Beautiful advocate John Nolen, were deeply influenced by the San Diego environment. In the end, what emerged was a vision of a uniquely California landscape.

Historiography/Literature Review

In order to gain a greater understanding of views about nature in parks over time, this thesis will draw on two themes presented in historical literature. The first includes ideas about nature in parks across the United States; the second looks at parks during the progressive era. Both categories of history are relevant to Balboa Park, this thesis points out that there are other viewpoints about nature in the park outside of the ones most emphasized in the historiography.

Ideas About Nature

The pastoral idea was adopted from the English idea of picturesque parks and developed early in US environmental history. In his book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* published in 1964, historian Leo Marx analyzes ideas about nature in early America. Marx reviews changes in perceptions of the land in America as primitive pure wilderness to open pastoral landscapes. Marx views the idea of the open pastoral as a great myth because people living in early America were more interested in financial profit rather than preserving open nature. His book is relevant to understanding how people have thought about nature in parks over time.⁵

Not only did early park designers reflect different ideas about nature in parks, but Peter Schmitt also points out that nature enthusiasts and scientific thinkers during the early twentieth

⁵ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

century were mystified by wilderness and nature. Similar to Marx's theory of the pastoral myth, Schmitt points out "the Arcadian dream of peaceful forests and undefiled rivers could hardly compete with the industrial epic that occupied the nation."⁶ In his book *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America 1900-1930*, Schmitt notes that nature writers were focused on the unity between "nature and their readers, for arcadia existed as much in an act of will as in objective fact."⁷ He presents nature writers and scientific thinkers who were early influencers of literary commuters. Like Schmitt's observations about nature writers, some of the early designers for San Diego's City Park thought scientifically about creating nature in the park, and this was revealed in the writings of Kate Sessions, Mary Coulston, and Mary Marston among others.

Prior to open lands being recreated into national parks, these open areas of land were viewed as wilderness that needed to be transformed into nature escapes. Environmental historian Peter Coates points out that landscapes during the early nineteenth century in America were open wildernesses of nature to white adventurers, nature writers, and early park advocates. In the book *Nature, Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times*, Coates explores the concept of environmentalism through a post-colonial lens. He suggests that environmentalism was practiced by groups of people such as Native Americans and aboriginals' way before European colonization. His research allows for a deeper understanding of how nature has been privatized and capitalized upon by those who had the power to control it, while others were displaced from their

⁶ Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 15.

⁷ Ibid, 15.

homelands. Coates' analysis of land colonization relates to the story of all National Parks across the US, including Balboa Park.⁸

Pioneering landscape architects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sought to transform lands that were seen as wilderness, or open chaparral like the Pueblo lands originally reserved for City Park, into man made nature landscapes and parks. Many of the early designers involved in creating man made nature parks contributed to magazines such as *Garden and Forest* magazine in New York. In the book *The City Natural: Garden and Forest Magazine and the Rise of American Environmentalism* environmental historian Shen Hou analyzes what nature meant to contributors of *Garden and Forest* magazine. She argues, “the American environmental movement was before 1900 a multifaceted one, unifying urban and rural spheres and joining both aesthetic and utilitarian approaches.”⁹ The contributors of *Garden and Forest* ranged from botanists, horticulturalists, landscape architects, and local nature enthusiasts. The articles in *Garden and Forest* demonstrate changing ideas about nature in parks from a picturesque escape of the city life to a more urbanized vision of the City Natural bringing the city into the park.

Parks in the Progressive Era

During the progressive era in the United States, the vision of nature in parks shifted from open pastoral landscapes, to creating city beautiful parks blending recreation with nature. Architecture and environmental design professor Galen Cranz provides a historical overview of

⁸ George M. Lubick, “Nature. Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times: Coates, Peter,” *History (Washington)* 27, no. 3 (November 1998).

⁹ Shen Hou, *The City Natural: Garden and Forest Magazine and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

park usage in four stages from 1850 to 1965 in the book *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*. She conducts a case study focusing on three urban park systems -- those in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Cranz's study differs from previous historical narratives, as it is the first documentation of the first 130 years of the American park movement in one account. Cranz argues that city parks across the United States are homogeneous in nature, with changes beginning on the east coast and continuing to the west. While she discusses how nature has changed in the park, Cranz is more focused on social history rather than the changes in views of nature in the park. Her research is important in further understanding the goals of landscape designers in helping people connect with nature in parks.¹⁰

As public parks became more urbanized, landscape architects still sought to create natural elements of wilderness for a picturesque experience of nature within the park. The blending of manmade into the natural was popularized as rustic design. A historian of the National Register of Historic Places, Linda Flint McClelland, discusses what parks were intended for and the social usage of parks over time in her book *Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of The National Park Service 1916-1942*. McClelland points out that the need to preserve natural wilderness surrounding park landscapes along with the inclusion of human recreation created a twofold mission, "to protect the resources of the national parks and at the same time make them accessible."¹¹ She argues that the broader concern for national park design

¹⁰ Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982).

¹¹ Linda Flint McClelland, *Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of the National Park Service 1916 to 1942* (Washington: U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resources, Interagency

between the years of 1916 and 1942 was not about maintaining the natural environment, but more about including recreational development among statewide park and recreation systems.¹² McClelland's study is important in understanding the history of landscape architecture and the way nature and structures have changed in public parks over time.

San Diego historian Gregory Montes wrote an article about early urban park planning of Balboa Park that was published in a 1979 issue of *The Journal of San Diego History* entitled "San Diego's City Park 1902-1910 From Parsons to Balboa." In this article, Montes discusses the history of the early years designing City Park up until the planning for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. Montes describes the disconnect from the original picturesque vision in the park with the inclusion of noise from two freeways, a close by airport, and the inclusion of buildings. He argues that during the early years of City Park planning from 1902 to 1910, when it was renamed Balboa Park during the planning of the Panama-California exposition, the seeds of two urban improvements including the Picturesque and City Beautiful were brought to San Diego.¹³ Although Montes presents a history of Balboa Park through the lens of two urban improvements, he fails to acknowledge other ideas about nature influencing the way nature was designed by landscape architects in the park.

Furthering the discussion Montes began, this thesis explores ideas about nature that have influenced the landscape design in Balboa Park as a vision of subtropical Californian nature.

Resources Division, National Register of Historic Places, 1993) [via Hathi Trust]

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015034277825&view=lup&seq=17&size=125> , 1.

¹² Ibid, 4.

¹³ Gregory Montes, "San Diego's City Park 1902-1910 From Parsons to Balboa," *The Journal of San Diego History*, no. 1 (1979), <https://sandieghistory.org/journal/1979/january/citypark/>.

Collectively, he and other scholars detail how the land was utilized in America for health, beauty and leisure. This thesis contributes to the two historical themes of urbanized parks and changing ideas about nature over time with a deeper analysis of the environmental history, nature, and landscape design in San Diego's City Park.

The Story: Picturesque City Park 1868 to 1914, City Beautiful Balboa Park 1915 and Beyond

Prior to landscape architects designing the fourteen-hundred-acre lot of pueblo lands to become City Park, various groups of people have inhabited the landscapes of San Diego leaving layers of stories from the past.¹⁴ The idea of creating a city park in San Diego began in 1868 when city trustee members E.W. Morse, Joseph S. Manase and Thomas H. Bush proposed a plan to use part of the pueblo land owned by San Diego for the implementation of a city park. George White Marston, a well-known philanthropist in San Diego during the late nineteenth early twentieth century, became renowned as the "Father of Balboa Park." When Marston heard about city plans to create a park on the fourteen hundred acres of pueblo lands in San Diego, he immediately offered to fund the beginning of City Park.¹⁵ During the early planning for the park, the landscape was primarily chaparral. To leave City Park as undeveloped natural open space, as might seem desirable today, would risk private developers talking about "wasted" lands. To justify a public space, the city trustee members felt it had to be "improved" nature.

¹⁴ Nancy Carol Carter, "Chronology of the Indigenous Peoples of San Diego County," San Diego Native American, University of San Diego, accessed November 27, 2021, <https://www.sandiego.edu/native-american/chronology/>.

¹⁵ Clare B. Crane, "The Pueblo Lands," *The Journal of San Diego History*, 37, no. 2 (1991) <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1991/april/pueblo-2/#:~:text=The%20pueblo%20lands%20provided%20a,especially%20in%20the%20twentieth%20century.>

Samuel Parsons was hired by George Marston as the first landscape architect to design a picturesque City Park. Among the many people who were involved in the early development of San Diego's City Park, Marston's daughter, Mary Marston reflects the various ideas about nature in a 1956 memoir that details interactions with the people involved in early planning of Balboa Park. What impressed Mary Marston nonetheless was Parsons' minimalist approach to developing the park. According to Marston, "Nowhere in the world, thought Mr. Parsons, was there a park completely surrounded by such magnificent views. By preserving them we could have a park as unique as it was beautiful. We should be very careful not to spoil what nature has done for us."¹⁶ In an interview shortly after his meeting with Parsons in New York, George Marston claimed, "Mr. Parsons is a warm advocate of natural methods of developing park grounds, rather than the formal treatment. No Californian can be more pronounced than him for the use of native growths."¹⁷ Coming from the East Coast, Parsons had knowledge of flora and fauna adapted to parks such as Central Park. The nature in California is more accustomed to a subtropical climate. Parsons was excited to learn about native and adaptable species from local experts like Kate Sessions, T.S. Brandegee, and Mary Coulston. Townshend Stith Brandegee and his wife Mary Brandegee were well known botanists who dedicated most of their life and work to Berkley.¹⁸ With similar interests in horticulture, Sessions became friends with the Brandegee's shortly after they moved to San Diego. Brandegee and Sessions focused on nature in California with a scientific lens in terms of what plants would flourish in sub-tropical climates.

¹⁶ Mary Gilman Marston, *George White Marston: A Family Chronicle* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1956) [via Hathi Trust] <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822008190787&view=1up&seq=21>, 9.

¹⁷ Ibid, 12.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Landscape architects on the East Coast during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries promoted a pastoral image connecting to private countryside pastoral in the middle of a busy city life. While this vision was carried over with the ideas of designing nature in City Park, the outcome of picturesque in the city of San Diego was bound to be slightly different with native species and the social-cultural makeup of the city. During an interview with Samuel Parsons Jr. shortly after he arrived in San Diego, “Parsons said of the unique City Park site with its “spreading mesas” and “rugged, picturesque canyons... There is nothing else like it among other parts of the world.”¹⁹ Parsons viewed San Diego as a place that would captivate people with the beautiful climate and diverse variety of nature. In a 1903 *San Diego Union* publication, Parsons wrote an opinion in the form of a letter to the editor of the *New York Evening Post*. In the letter he describes the layout of land in San Diego with “sweeping landscapes of hundreds of miles of land and sea is simple, grand, and quietly impressive.”²⁰

Open landscapes such as the pueblo lands in San Diego planned to become City Park were often represented by landscape designers as open wilderness ready to be transformed by man, though these areas had already been shaped by human habitation. Parsons valued natural beauty in the park, and he sought to construct open nature landscapes in City Park. Parsons' plan for City Park in San Diego included, “winding walks and roads adapted, as much as possible, to natural contours, including steep canyons, provided a great variety of views to “surprise” and

¹⁹ Mary B. Coulston, “Mr. Parsons’ Impressions,” *San Diego Union* (January 1, 1903), as cited in Gregory Montes, “San Diego’s City Park 1902-1910 From Parsons to Balboa,” *The Journal of San Diego History* 25, no. 1 (1979) <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1979/january/citypark/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

“delight.”²¹ He planned to have rows of trees lining the outskirts of the park, with small lakes and ponds to enhance the natural environment. According to historian Montes, “public buildings and formal gardens were to be few and in the lower, southern parts of the park, nearer to town.”²² Parsons' plan was to, “enhance the natural beauty of the park rather than to detract from it by artificial and conventional effects.”²³ In his book *The Art of Landscape Architecture*, Parsons describes landscape architecture as an artistic expression rather than scientific in nature. He discussed maintenance and gardening in public parks, and posed the question, “What is the picturesque?” And among his explanations he answered, “in a word, the picturesque is the *Conservation of Landscape Beauty*.”²⁴

Because the foliage in San Diego is much different from nature on the East Coast, Parsons' plan designed a sub-tropical version of the pastoral in City Park. A blueprint layout of Parsons' 1903 City Park plans is displayed on the Balboa Park Conservancy site.²⁵ In comparison to the 1875 blueprint of Central Park, Parsons mimics the picturesque design but

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gregory Montes, “San Diego’s City Park 1902-1910 From Parsons to Balboa,” *The Journal of San Diego History* 25, no. 1 (1979) <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1979/january/citypark/>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Samuel Parsons, *The Art of Landscape Architecture*, New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1915, 235 [via Hathi Trust] <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924000022750&view=1up&seq=1>.

²⁵ Balboa Park Conservancy, “Samuel Parsons Jr. - First Master Landscape Plan for A New Park, *Balboa Park Conservancy* (February 27, 2018). <https://balboaparkconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1903-Samuel-Parsons-City-Park-Plan.jpg>.

adds a greater emphasis on open pastoral spaces.²⁶ Central Park in New York had been designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux during the mid to late nineteenth century as the first major picturesque city park in the United States; Parsons had served as its superintendent during the park's early years. In comparison to the 1875 map of Central Park, Parsons' 1903 design incorporated more large open pastoral spaces with patches and thick bunches of trees outlining the entire park. Parsons planned to preserve much of the native landscape, and he agreed with the philosophy of Olmsted Sr. regarding the incompatibility of flowerbeds and buildings in a picturesque city park.²⁷

Around the time the Panama California Exposition was planned, the focus on picturesque in San Diego's City Park changed as Balboa Park became more of a form of the City Beautiful. During the planning for the Panama-California Exposition, Park Commissioners sought to change the name of City Park. Some of the names that were being considered at the time included: San Diego Park, Silver Gate Park, Miramar Park, and Horton Park. In his 1910 report, Parsons suggested that the name City Park should be renamed to Balboa Park.²⁸ The name Balboa Park was ultimately chosen in honor of Spanish-born Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, the first European to spot the Pacific Ocean while on a voyage to Panama. Parsons involvement as a

²⁶ Kenneth R. Cobb, "The Central Park: Original Designs for New York's Greatest Treasure, a conversation with author Cynthia Brenwell," *New York Department of Records & Information Services*, (April 12, 2019).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Nancy Carol Carter, "Balboa Park Transformed: The Panama-California Exposition Landscape," *The Journal of San Diego History*, 61, no. 1 (2015). <http://sandiegohistory.org/sites/default/files/journal/v61-1/v61-1carter.pdf>.

landscape architect for Balboa Park ended as plans moved forward for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, and when the San Diego City of Chambers went a different route with the hiring of the famed Olmsted Brothers. Although Parsons was no longer working with Balboa Park, the Olmsted Brothers respected his desire “to preserve the park on the mesa, and they also followed his recommendations for siting buildings in the south section of the park.”²⁹

Hired by George Marston as secretary for park planning, Mary B. Coulston promoted a uniquely Californian vision of nature being designed in the park evident in several articles she wrote that were published in the *San Diego Union* between 1901 and 1903. Prior to her involvement in San Diego, Coulston had been an editor for *Garden and Forest Magazine* in New York during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, and this allowed her to become acquainted with leading landscape architects, botanists, and horticulturalists in the United States.³⁰ Kate Sessions was one of the people Coulston became friends with during her time as editor for *Garden and Forest*. As a key organizer, journalist, and secretary for City Park planning, Coulston’s involvement in San Diego can be initially attributed to Kate Sessions. When George Marston was looking for a landscape architect to design San Diego’s City Park, Sessions recommended seeking the advice of Coulston. This began a connection between individuals who were passionate about the climate and landscape of San Diego, with the goal of creating a nature preserve park for the people.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ In 1897 *Garden and Forest* ceased publication after one of the magazine’s leading founders and publicist William A. Stiles died. While working for *Garden and Forest*, Coulston became acquainted with Liberty Hyde Bell who later “established the first academic program in horticulture at Cornell University and defined the field.” When her job as the editor for *Garden and Forest* ended in 1897, Coulston enrolled in the horticulture program at Cornell University where she studied under Bailey and assisted in the writing of his monumental *Cyclopedia of American Horticulture*. In spring of 1902 Coulston moved to Northern California. Nancy Carol Carter, “Mary B. Coulston: Unsung Planning of Balboa Park,” *The Journal of San Diego History*, 195.

Coulston's writing sought to attract people to the beauty of City Park; she often discussed native plants in her articles. Historians Shen Hou of *Garden and Forest Magazine* and Balboa Park historian Nancy Carol Carter point out that articles written by Coulston were most likely signed with her initials MBC or M.B.C. In an article published in the *San Diego Union* on October 6, 1902, Coulston compared the possibilities of the new City Park in San Diego to Central Park in New York. She pointed out that like Central Park, the new park in San Diego had the possibility of gaining "national fame."³¹ Furthermore, she discussed the advantages of the park location in San Diego:

The San Diego park tract has advantages incomparably beyond those of the outcropping granite formation which challenged the skill of the artist who conceived the New York park. The swales of the mesa of this large San Diego tract, and the irregular canyons with their limitless possibilities, offer exceptional opportunities for working out a wonderfully picturesque landscape.³²

Coulston was a key figure in promoting a picturesque vision for San Diego's City Park that was uniquely Californian, and her contributions were pivotal upon the early landscaping activities in the park.

Like Coulston, Kate Sessions had her own vision of nature in California. Growing up in Northern California, later moving to Southern California to work as a teacher and horticulturalist, Kate Sessions valued the native plant life up and down the California coast. Instead of thinking about nature in terms of pastoral or city beautiful, she sought to include exotic species from around the world mixed with local plant nativity within her garden designs

³¹ M.B.C. "San Diego's Advantages: A Correspondent Unhesitatingly Declares That They Are of the Best, Not the Least of Having the Finest of Park Sites with Unguessed Opportunities," *The San Diego Union* (October 6, 1902).

³² Ibid.

for City Park. Although she valued local plant life, Sessions saw the land as a sub-tropical garden and studied species that were adaptable to similar environments.³³

In terms of nature and landscape, Sessions thought San Diego was a paradise city like Honolulu, Hawaii. Sessions' life as a pioneer California horticulturalist began with an early interest in studying local plant specimens, but her vision of San Diego as a subtropical paradise began with a trip to Hawaii in her senior year of high school in 1876. As Sessions later recalled, "When I was 17, I went to Honolulu and was thrilled with the wonderful bougainvillea there. In later years when I came to San Diego to teach, I found bougainvillea. I thought this a wonderful place--another Honolulu."³⁴ Poinsettias also reminded Sessions of Hawaii, "she and her brother Frank were among the first nurserymen to cultivate the plant for wide distribution."³⁵ Once she heard about the 1400 acres reserved for San Diego City Park, Sessions had the idea to propose using part of the park as a nursery. By October of 1892, "her chrysanthemums were growing profusely in the park and on one Saturday more than 200 persons viewed the display."³⁶

Rather than just having open pastoral landscapes, Sessions wanted to include more gardens in the park. She viewed nature in a scientific lens, focusing on inclusion of exotic-garden-like flora and fauna from places around the world that were adaptable to southern California climate such as Australia and South Africa. The early transfer of flora and fauna between Australia and California has been further analyzed in the book *True Gardens of the*

³³ Elizabeth C. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions Pioneer Horticulturist* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1976).

³⁴ Ibid, 47.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 52.

Gods by historian Ian Tyrell. During the 1850's, European and British Empire acclimatization societies were concerned with the systematic adaptation of nature from the New World to the Old, and the Old World to the New.³⁷ According to Tyrell, these acclimatizers believed that science could improve the beauty of the newly invaded colonial landscapes. Kate Sessions held similar views to European acclimatizers; she saw nature as being improved by more scientific specification of planting according to climate conditions, soil, and location.

Inspired by exotic flower, plant and tree species, Sessions planted seeds and bulbs from subtropical areas around the world relatable to the environment in California. As Jane Minshall, the first woman landscape architect in San Diego, recalled in a 1956 article about an elementary school being built above Sessions' nursery in her honor, Sessions "was particularly interested in South African plants, believing that with the similarity of climate they should do well here, and many of her introductions are from that area."³⁸ *A Special Supplement of the San Diego Business Journal* titled "Balboa Park Beyond 1915," noted that Sessions "studied our soil and climate and introduced seeds from regions of the world with a Mediterranean climate similar to ours."³⁹

Palm trees were admired by Sessions, and she planned to plant both native and non-native palms in City Park. In a 1926 article published in *California Garden*, "Notes on Kentias and Other Palms," Sessions wrote,

The Cocos Australia [*Syagrus romanzoffianum*] is a desirable palm for both dry and

³⁷ Ian R. Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860-1930* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), 22.

³⁸ Jane Minshall, "A Landscape for Kate Sessions," *San Diego Floral Association: California Garden, Centennial Compilation 1909-2009* (San Diego, San Diego Floral Association, 2009), 90.

³⁹ San Diego Business Journal, Balboa Park Beyond 1915, Legacy of the Exposition, *San Diego Business Journal*, 2015, BP7.

marine situations. The group of about 200 *Etheria* [Brahea] Brandegeei palms in Balboa Park, on the slope northeast of the rose garden, near Laurel Street, is progressing well and is probably the youngest palm botanically in California. Palms planted in groups are much more beautiful and effective and there is no place better fitted for this than our Park.⁴⁰

In her July 1909 article, “*Romneya Coulteri*, or Matilija Poppy,” Sessions said of the poppy, “every Southern California Garden should grow this plant, and it is to be hoped that the nucleus now in the City Park will someday occupy at least ten acres.”⁴¹ Unlike the palm trees, the matilija poppy is native to California and New Mexico. According to MacPhail, Sessions “was one of the first to distribute seeds and cuttings of the spectacular Matilija poppy (*Romneya coulteri*), the golden yellow Flannel bush (*Fremontia Mexicana*), and San Diego County lilac (*Ceanothus cyaneus*).”⁴²

Parsons and Sessions views about nature differed slightly; she was into exotics and succulents, and he was against the idea of having the park viewed as a “botanical garden” rather than a “city park.”⁴³ While they both viewed nature with a picturesque lens, Parsons thought of landscape design as an artistic profession while Sessions was more scientific. Still, Parsons respected Sessions for her horticultural knowledge. Sessions’ goal was to beautify the park; “she

⁴⁰ Kate Sessions, *The Complete Writings of Kate Sessions in California Garden 1909-1939*. Ed.

Barbara Schillreff Jones. San Diego: San Diego Floral Association, 1998, 74.

⁴¹ Kate Sessions, “*Romneya Coulteri*, or Matilija Poppy,” *San Diego Floral Association: California Garden, Centennial Compilation 1909-2009*, ed. Barbara Schillreff Jones (San Diego, San Diego Floral Association, 2009), 226.

⁴² Elizabeth C. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions Pioneer Horticulturist* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1976) 66.

⁴³ Nancy Carter, “The Trees of Balboa Park,” *The Journal of San Diego History*, 56, no. 3 (2010) <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/v56-3/v56-3carter.pdf>.

proposed planting the barren canyon slopes with bougainvillea, California poppies, and morning glory vines, each to be located where they would grow most successfully.”⁴⁴

The roots of the picturesque ideal of Parsons’ plans lay in European and Eastern U.S. landscaping, as carried out between 1902 to 1910 by Kate Sessions, T.S. Brandegee, George Marston, Julius Wagenheim, and others. But what emerged from the arid rocky fourteen-hundred-acre plot of land was a uniquely California landscape; not native, but “subtropical” where cactus from Mexico, palms and eucalyptus from Australia, and bougainvillea from Hawaii highlighted an ocean mesa carved with arroyos. As noted by the San Diego Floral Association, “many of the plants Kate Sessions planted still grow in Balboa Park.”⁴⁵ The cactus garden designed by Sessions circa 1915 for the Panama California exhibition is one of the most notable gardens in the park. In 1932 she designed the Aloe and Agave Garden to be “planted in Balboa Park with thousands of plants donated by botanic gardens, universities, and private citizens.”⁴⁶ In 1998, a bronze statue of Kate Sessions was placed on the southwest side of Balboa Park. The garden surrounding the statue of Sessions is “filled with many of the plants she is credited with bringing to Balboa Park, including Matilija Poppy, Indian Hawthorne, Lily of the Nile, and Hong Kong Orchid trees.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid, pg.144.

⁴⁵ Kate Sessions, “Romneya Coulteri, or Matilija Poppy,” *San Diego Floral Association: California Garden, Centennial Compilation 1909-2009*, ed. Barbara Schillreff Jones (San Diego, San Diego Floral Association, 2009), 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Sefton Plaza,” Balboa Park website, <https://www.balboapark.org/attractions/sefton-plaza>, accessed Nov. 27, 2021.

During the time Balboa Park experienced changes from the pastoral picturesque to a form of City Beautiful urbanization after the Panama-California Exposition, Sessions remained involved with caring for nature in the park and around the city of San Diego. The Olmsted Brothers were hired as landscape designers for the Panama California Exposition in 1901. Shortly after beginning to design the upcoming exhibition in San Diego's Balboa Park, the brothers experienced a similar connection to the unique beauty of the southern California climate. Following in the footsteps of their father, pioneering landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, John C. Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., intended on preserving Parsons' design of picturesque beauty in Balboa Park.

By early November John C. Olmsted was in San Diego to begin park planning. Having lived a rough early life, John lost his father, John Hull Olmsted, to tuberculosis when he was just five years old. Olmsted's mother, Mary Perkins Olmsted, married John's uncle Frederick Law Olmsted in 1859. During the early 1860's, the Olmsted's moved to the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. John C. Olmsted developed a love for the tall sequoia trees in Yosemite, and he enjoyed studying the subjects of topography, geology, botany, and horticulture from an early age.⁴⁸ Henry Perkins Olmsted, who was later renamed Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. by his father,

⁴⁸ Arleyn Levee, "John Charles Olmsted: Landscape Architect, Planner (1852-1920)," *National Association for Olmsted Parks, Saving America's Great Historic Landscapes*, <https://www.olmsted.org/the-olmsted-legacy/john-charles-olmsted>, accessed April 15, 2020.

admired his father's work connecting nature to parks and became active early on in landscape architecture.⁴⁹

While the Olmsted Brothers were the main landscape architects in charge of plans for the Panama-California exposition, two other young professional architects, Frank P. Allen and Bertram Goodhue, had different ideas for how to utilize the land in the park for exposition planning. John C. Olmsted valued traditional picturesque landscape design ideas in parks connected with the open pastoral, with the goal of creating secluded nature away from city life. Unlike his older brother, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. embraced the City Beautiful in parks, and he was among the designers seeking to include man-made structures in parks and beautify them with nature. Even with his involvement with the City Beautiful movement in parks, Olmsted Jr. still promoted traditional ideas held by pioneering architects like his father to preserve open nature in parks.⁵⁰

The Olmsted Brothers were part of the early park planners who intended on preserving Parsons' design of picturesque beauty in Balboa Park. The Brothers plan for the upcoming Exposition included having any buildings or manmade structures placed on the south side near the city. Allen and Goodhue were not in agreement of using the south side of the Park, and

⁴⁹ Susan L. Klaus, "Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.: Landscape Architect, Planner Educator, Conservationist (1870-1957)" *National Association for Olmsted Parks, Saving Americas Great Historic Landscapes*, <https://www.olmsted.org/the-olmsted-legacy/frederick-law-olmsted-jr>, accessed April 15, 2020.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

instead they favored “the park's elevated central mesa as an exposition building site.”⁵¹

According to Carter, “the two men audaciously developed an alternative plan to the Olmsted Plan and used it to garner their support.”⁵² Around 1911 the Building Grounds Committee agreed to the idea of using the central mesa, and immediately the Olmsted Brothers resigned their contract. John Olmsted proclaimed that the Olmsted Brothers firm refused to be a part of “the ruin of Balboa Park.”⁵³ Because the brothers plan for Balboa Park never fully developed, they did not have the chance to transform nature in the park.

Given that neither Allen nor Goodhue were formally trained landscape architects, their views about nature in public places were different from those who sought to create nature escapes in city parks. The Allen and Goodhue plan was solely proposed around the architecture and buildings to be implemented for the exposition, rather than preserving nature in the park. Although Allen and Goodhue slightly altered the landscape, Nolen’s plan reestablished a California vision of nature in the park.⁵⁴

Landscape architect John Nolen was a social person, he wanted to connect people to a vision of nature by beautifying the surroundings in the city and in parks. Nolen’s interests were not purely in landscape architecture, he was also invested in city planning. According to historian

⁵¹ Nancy Carol Carter, “Balboa Park Transformed: The Panama-California Exposition Landscape,” *The Journal of San Diego History*, 61, no. 1 (2015) 284 <http://sandiegohistory.org/sites/default/files/journal/v61-1/v61-1carter.pdf>.

⁵² Ibid, 284.

⁵³ Ibid, 285.

⁵⁴ The Cultural Landscape Foundation, “Bertram Goodhue: 1869-1924,” *The Cultural Landscape Foundation, Connecting People to Places*, <https://tclf.org/pioneer/bertram-goodhue>, accessed Nov. 27, 2021.

Jody Beck, “throughout the majority of his professional life Nolen identified himself as both a landscape architect and a city planner, and his professional positions make this dual commitment clear.”⁵⁵ His professional commitment to San Diego is a prime example of Nolen’s dual commitment to landscape architecture and city planning. Coming from the east coast like many early architects, Nolen pointed out the significance of San Diego in an interview, “Even in Southern California, situation, climate, and scenery make it stand out in a permanent attractiveness beyond all other communities.”⁵⁶ In Nolen’s plan, his main objectives surrounded what he thought would be best for the people and the population.⁵⁷

Nolen continued to promote a City Beautiful vision of nature and urbanization in Balboa Park. His plan in 1926 was the second master plan for Balboa Park after Samuel Parsons’ plan of 1902-1910.⁵⁸ In his 1908 plan, Nolen “criticized the destruction of San Diego’s natural topography.”⁵⁹ He pointed out that “the leveling of hills and mesas removed some of the city’s most unique attributes” and it was a “destruction of a rare opportunity to secure significant

⁵⁵ Jody Beck, *John Nolen and the Metropolitan Landscape* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) ProQuest, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/csusm/detail.action?docID=1143810>, 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Nolen thought the city of San Diego previously had poor planning, and he promoted the idea of having plans to continue making changes to fit the needs of the people. With the prediction of a boost in population, his eight chapter plan included creating new roads and pathways for automobiles with additions of nature such as the planting of palms in the city. He explained that the plantings “aim to dress the street and relieve its barrenness but avoid shading the houses.” Ibid, 147.

⁵⁸ Melanie Macchio, “John Nolen and San Diego’s Early Residential Planning in the Mission Hills Area,” *The Journal of San Diego* 52, no. 3 (2006), 139.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 134.

beauty.”⁶⁰ According to San Diego historian Richard Amero, “Nolen considered the contrast between the mesas and canyons to be Balboa Park’s most striking landscape feature.”⁶¹ In order to preserve the contrast of the trees planted earlier in the park, “Nolen would cut many trees and plant trees only on the mesas and at the top of the hills.”⁶² During the time Nolen was a leading landscape architect, ideas about nature in cities and parks were shifting. Even though Nolen was an advocate for promoting a form of the City Beautiful movement, he still valued the open pastoral of picturesque landscapes.

Not only did he appreciate the landscape and nature in Balboa Park, one of Nolen’s goals was to further extend the park connecting to more people in the city. In 1926 Nolen’s San Diego City Plan was adopted, and in it he suggested “the extension of Balboa Park up the canyon, giving Balboa Park direct contact with East San Diego by attractive parklike thoroughfares.”⁶³ Nolen’s vision of socializing people inside the park remains a part of today’s Balboa Park with the many museums, tennis courts, and multiple sources of entertainment that people interact with while visiting the park.

Balboa Park has continued as a form of the City Beautiful and inhabits a uniquely Californian blend of nature. Nolen was a part of the shifting ideas of picturesque pastoral and the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Richard Amero, “John Nolen Balboa Park”, *Balboa Park History* (January 1997)
<http://www.balboaparkhistory.net/glimpses/nolen.balboapark>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ John Nolen, *City Plan for San Diego, California* (San Diego: np., 1926), 18,
<https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/da-1926-city-plan-for-sd.pdf>.

City Beautiful movement that became popular during the early twentieth century.⁶⁴ The actions of some of the people involved in the early planning for San Diego's City Park later called Balboa Park (including Samuel Parsons Jr., T.S. Brandegee, Kate Sessions, George Marston, Mary Marston, Mary Coulston, John Olmsted, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and John Nolen) show that there are varying ideas about nature in California outside of the picturesque and City Beautiful movements shaping the way landscape was designed in the park over time.

Conclusion

A uniquely subtropical Californian vision of nature was created in San Diego's City Park. There were changing ideas about nature among landscape designers during the planning of the Panama-California Exposition, when newly hired architects envisioned a different future for a City Beautiful Balboa Park with the goal of bringing the city into the park. Early nature designers for San Diego's City Park intended on creating a place for people to connect with nature away from the city. However, these two framed movements were not the only ideas about nature among the early landscape designers for the park.

The landscape in Balboa Park might have been changed; nonetheless these visions of Southern California nature live on in a way that people think about Southern California as a beautiful outdoor place. The appealing climate, along with plant and flower species such as bougainvillea and palms found in the park represent this image of San Diego as a sub-tropical paradise. Today, there are still open spaces for people to enjoy nature, hiking, and having a picnic in the park. The various ideas about nature shaping the landscapes around the park over time can still be seen. Balboa Park in San Diego has continually urbanized into a City Beautiful

⁶⁴ Richard Amero, "John Nolen Balboa Park", *Balboa Park History* (January 1997)

<http://www.balboaparkhistory.net/glimpses/nolen.balboapark>.

park while representing a vision of nature that is purely Californian. The park today accentuates a blending of nature elements, and some remnants of the early park designers remain in the park including open grassy areas for people to enjoy picnics as imagined by Parsons and the Olmsted brothers, along with native or subtropical species originally suggested by Brandegee and Sessions.

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