

Field Guide to Coronado History:

A School For Excellence

By Bruce Linder



If awards were given for the most handsome practical architecture in all of Coronado history one building would stand out above all others. This building was a marvel, well ahead of its time and fondly remembered by thousands.

When it was finished in late 1913 and early 1914 it was called, simply, Coronado School.

Coronado's first official public school was, famously, a tented structure set up on E Avenue and the city's first permanent schoolhouse was a five-classroom framed building built around 1888 on Sixth Street between E and F Avenues, about where the BBMAC pool is today.

But as Coronado's population expanded, it was obvious that a five-room schoolhouse would never make it. The Coronado School Board sprang to the challenge and offered the voters a whopping \$80,000 school bond for a new school. It passed by a big majority.

This new “Coronado School” was a marvel. Called the “most perfect structure of its kind,” by one reporter, and “embodying practically all the features of a modern school building and a number which are exclusive,” this building would serve as Coronado’s educational core for over fifty years.

Why was this building so exceptional?

First, the architecture was stunning. Designed by the San Diego firm of Quayle Brothers & Cressey (who had also designed the historically prominent San Diego Police Station and Balboa Stadium), the mission style school featured a centerpiece two-story building with a large open space for lectures, sports, and assemblies. Multiple attractive classroom buildings surrounded this core.

Second, the Coronado School was designed to fit an entire city block located at the exact geographical center of the city. The main buildings fronted on E Avenue and would stretch from E to F Avenues and between 6th and 7th Streets.

The design originally incorporated instruction for all grades from kindergarten through high school. It was entirely of concrete construction with steel doors throughout to make the school “fireproof” – a high priority for theaters and schools during this time.

The schoolhouse held specialty classrooms devoted to “manual training for the boys and domestic science for the girls”. The girl’s “laboratory” featured marble counters, gas stoves, sewing machines, and hot and cold water” to “afford means for giving the prospective housewives actual training” (with efficiency undoubtedly in mind, a portion of the girl’s efforts was planned to be redeemed as school lunches).

As the school had been centered on an entire vacant city block there was a tremendous amount of open space for playgrounds and athletics. An inside space within the school was set aside for daily calisthenics and another for medical and dental inspections.

The two-story main building was the centerpiece of the entire design. It's large open central space with hardwood floors and a small elevated stage was perfect for assemblies and also became Coronado's first indoor basketball court. Many Coronadans remember the multipurpose nature of the space as the site for rainy day lunches, school dances, and (perhaps) that first kiss.

Each classroom featured high transom windows and full-length French doors that opened directly onto playgrounds, all designed specifically for "a maximum amount of pure fresh air and the best natural lighting." The school also held a busy library with reference and textbooks.

Probably the most intriguing feature of the school for modern readers was its unusual levels of advanced technology. An automatic electric clock and bell system (the first in Southern California) kept all on a tight schedule and a full telephone system (quite rare for this era) linked every classroom with the school office and principal. Most surprising of all, a room had been set aside to provide the absolute latest in schooling know-how: motion pictures. To put this into proper perspective, Coronado's very first motion picture theater had only opened the year before.

Interestingly, in an effort to heighten student alertness and retention, steps were taken to improve that most fundamental element of classroom design, the common student desk. Each classroom was fitted with a row of adjustable desks so that all shapes and sizes of schoolchildren could comfortably use their desks.

All in all, Coronado School represented a bold and uncompromising dedication to excellence. Its design was well conceived and well received by residents. Its central location in the city reflected sensitivity for walking or bike riding to school and its overall planning and distinction set the tone for all Coronado schooling to come ... as a centerpiece of community life.

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