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Robert and Virginia Stanton at the Merienda in 1970

INSIDE: Robert Stanton, AIA

ROBERT STANTON, AIA

by Donna Penwell

The design policy of my firm is one of cost-consciousness. Wasteful square footages are eliminated in our work by compact, functional planning. The specifying of hardy, natural, tough material, without the use of elaborate detail and finishes, cuts down initial costs and future maintenance.

Saving clients money is our desire, and has been done by expert estimating during the design stages. Obtaining low building costs has been accomplished in various ways depending upon the architectural problem at hand.

This policy has proven very successful since we have enjoyed the patronage of our clients over a period of many years.

Robert Stanton¹

Robert Stanton is fondly remembered by members of the Monterey History and Art Association as President for the years of 1965 and 1966. During his tenure, Bob presided over the Merienda with the able assistance of the eloquent Father Farrell and clever newspaperman Ted Durcin, declared the Sloat Landing Ceremony of 1965 to be "a truly professional job thanks to the work of Adm. C. Tod Singleton" and enthusiastically received the donation of the Allen Knight's maritime collection.²

However, the world remembers Robert Stanton for reasons other than those so affectionately recalled by Association members - the world has his buildings.

Robert Stanton is recognized by architectural historians as an innovator, a point that his wife Virginia and son Michael reminisced about recently during a spring afternoon at the family home. Virginia repeated Bob's design philosophy with pride. (Quoted at the beginning of this article.) And, if you know Virginia, you know that she continues to abide by his words and preach the message of *practicality combined with creativity*.

The family home is a perfect example of Robert Stanton's genius. Featured in an entire issue of *House Beautiful* during July of 1949, the home was touted as "the probable direction of change for the 1950's."³ The magazine covered "the significant story of how one family, willingly and thoughtfully, simplified their way of living. Their case history, carefully documented by *House Beautiful*, is of great social significance as a symptom of America's future."⁴ The building innovations made by Stanton revolved around the blending of two concepts - the reduction of work and consideration of aesthetics.

Stanton started with the idea that their house had to be beautiful - so beautiful that every time they came home to it "their hearts would swell with

gladness that they lived there."⁵ Only materials that nobody, or nothing, could damage or spoil were utilized. Their three children, Susannah, Shannah, and Michael, were to feel free and natural when they were home for "in that way they would want to be at home."⁶ Radiant panel heating was laid into the colored concrete floors. The exterior trees served as the wallpaper seen through enormous glass walls, tall and unbroken; the shadows of the leaves served as curtains in the evenings. Landscaping was easy: no painting, no grass cutting, no walk edging, no flower-bed fussing; yet beauty was everywhere. Stanton declared that "the secret is knowing how to use Nature and common materials with the eye of an artist."⁷

House Beautiful printed the 11 reasons why the Stanton's managed to have " - a little work - a lot of play!" The messages are useful even today.

1. Everyone sharing the work.
2. Bedspreads the children, the dog and cat can lie on.
3. All fabrics are washable. Slipcovers are made in duplicate.
4. An automatic laundry.
5. No dishwashing.
6. Engineered storage, and enough of it.
7. Every appliance that could possibly save labor or reduce housework.
8. Plenty of hot water.
9. A big freezer (32 cu. ft.) and quantity buying.
10. No curtains or draperies.
11. No floor maintenance.⁸

Career Innovations

Stanton's philosophy of design is most apparent in his efforts to create efficient yet beautiful government buildings, schools, military establishments and hospitals. It is easy to see why Stanton won numerous contracts financed by public funds; his declarations of practical cost-saving measures and distaste of the grandiose gave him a reputation in Washington, D.C. as an architect to be appreciated. And yet, this attitude also had a very human side. When asked what he first considered when designing a new hospital, Stanton's remark was "the care of the patient."⁹ In the world of architecture, this statement was unique! Was it not the beauty of the building, the comfort of the doctors or the convenience for the hospital staff? Most enthusiastically, "NO," according to Virginia Stanton. Bob was "a different kind of guy. He was very practical about architecture."¹⁰

Certain features which Stanton regularly included in building design are included in the new Stanton Center, home of the Maritime Museum and History Center on the waterfront in Monterey. At Virginia's insistence, architects Esherick, Homsey, Dodge and Davis utilized colored concrete in the lobby of the building, and almost two years later the floor appears to be brand new!

Stanton spearheaded movements in the architectural field to include the use of natural elements. Bilateral lighting, an architectural technique which allows the sun to shine naturally from above through skylights and windows, augmented with artificial lighting from below, appeared first in the Thomas Larkin School

located on the hill above downtown Monterey. A-frame structures were an ingenious and practical solution to the problems of the enormous growth in the school populations during the 1950's; Stanton introduced this simple building design to the school districts of Monterey County. Featured first in the Christian Science Monitor in 1934, Stanton's "Honeymoon Cottage", showcased by Hollywood screen star Mary Pickford, was one of the first "portable houses" or, as we know them now, pre-fabricated homes. After it first appeared in the World's Fair at Treasure Island, the home was installed in Pacific Grove where it remains to this day.

Stanton's interests did not just include the practical, however. Stanton greatly admired artisans, authors and eccentrics. When Salvador Dali wished to have the "party of the season" at the Hotel Del Monte in 1939, he turned to Virginia and Robert for assistance. Dali wished to turn the grand ballroom into a grotto for an evening to entertain hundreds of his close personal friends. Virginia and Bob were commandeered to transform the room - what a challenge! With his usual ingenuity and cleverness, Stanton managed to procure some goal posts from a local high school football field to serve as the headboard for a giant bedstead - in which Dali and his wife would be positioned.

Utilizing red velvet and thousands of gardenias, Virginia decorated the giant bedstead. The enormous ceiling was covered in burlap sacks filled with paper to represent a cave-like setting and Bob was heard to pray that the Fire Department would not inspect that evening. Guests were served their dinners along the sides of the giant bed - with Dali at the head, laying in a prone position and presiding over the activities of the evening.

Stanton's collaborations with Jo Mora created an architectural legacy for the residents of Monterey County. The Monterey County Courthouse (1937) and the auditorium of the King City High School (1938) are adorned with decorative sculpture by Mora. It was Stanton who convinced the W.P.A. to, for the first time, include a sculptor in a government building contract.¹¹

A sentimental side of Robert Stanton was also apparent within the context of his architectural career. In March of 1965, the following article appeared in the Noticias.

In memory of Professor Frank Elilio La Cauza, a small, attractive pool has been added to the garden at Casa Serrano. Our president, Robert Stanton, drew the plan for the pool which fits in beautifully with the St. Francis shrine, the lattice arch and the planting on the south wall of the adobe. . . . We hope you like it.¹²

The fountain has brought great joy to all members of the Monterey History and Art Association since that time, thanks to Robert Stanton.

How have the architectural designs of Robert Stanton withstood the test of time? Virginia shared her most recent and favorite story along these lines. After the devastating earthquake which hit Los Angeles last year, good friends Dolores and Bob Hope called Virginia to report that they were safe despite the fact that their

home was heavily damaged. Dolores continued her tale. "We lost almost 300 porcelain cups and saucers from my collection. But, you will never believe the part of the house which escaped unscathed and unharmed. Bob's chimney and fireplace are still standing!"¹³

Career Summary

Robert Stanton's architectural designs were innovative, creative and comfortable. House Beautiful asked questions of their readers in the issue devoted to Robert Stanton which can still be asked today. "Is your home a refuge - a peaceful haven? Are you paying too big a price in tension and worry to improve your standard of living? Is your home a place of beauty and loveliness? Will your children - and you - look back on their childhood as an era of don'ts or as the most wonderful time in your lives? If any of these dilemmas apply to you, the trail-blazing Stanton's may throw light on your own problems. They have faced up to the existence of these conditions in their own life and have taken courageous steps to solve them."¹⁴

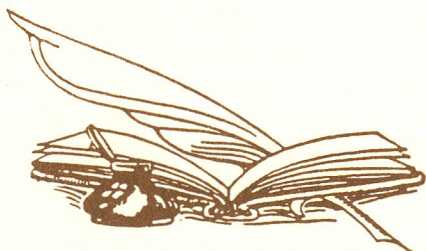
The Stanton's philosophy of living summarizes their style. *This is a happy house. To us it has been medicine for body and soul. We hope we shall see the day when its spirit is translated not only into homes everywhere by into schools, hospitals, public buildings. Because it is more than a new kind of shelter. It's a better way of life.*¹⁵

Robert Stanton designed 32 residences throughout California including 10 homes in Pebble Beach, 6 in Carmel, and 1 each in Pacific Grove, Monterey and Carmel Valley. Following is a list of public buildings, schools and hospitals designed by Robert Stanton:

- Monterey County Courthouse, Salinas
- King City High School Auditorium
- Monterey County Hospital
- Monterey Peninsula College
- Monterey Peninsula Country Club Bar
- Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital
- David Avenue Elementary School, Pacific Grove
- Monte Vista Elementary School
- Del Rey Elementary School
- Gonzales Union High School
- Pacific Grove Union High School
- Thomas O. Larkin Elementary School
- Mark Twain Hospital, San Andreas
- Fresno High School Shop Buildings
- Marin General Hospital, San Rafael
- John C. Fremont Hospital, Mariposa County
- Westwood Elementary School, Napa County
- Alta Heights Elementary School, Napa County
- St. Francis Hospital, Lynwood, Orange County

San Benito County Hospital, Hollister
 San Bernadino County Hospital
 Paso Robles Memorial Hospital
 P.A. Walsh Intermediate School, Morgan Hill
 Branciforte Junior High School, Santa Cruz
 Bayview Elementary School, Santa Cruz
 Mission Hill Junior High School Gymnasium, Santa Cruz
 Corralitos Elementary School
 Kenilworth Junior High School, Petaluma
 McKinley Elementary School, Petaluma
 Stanislaus County Memorial Hospital.¹⁶

The Monterey History and Art Association joins all of the Monterey Peninsula in wishing Virginia Stanton a very happy 90th birthday. This article appears during this very important year in memory of someone who was very dear and important to her, her husband Bob. His architectural treasures are a living memory of his philosophy of life and an inspiration to those of us who view them today.



FOOTNOTES

1. Robert Stanton, Stanton Family Private Papers
2. "A Tremendous Opportunity Offered to Monterey"; Noticias, Vol. IX, Number 1, March 1965, Editors, D.M. Craig, Mrs. A.W. Elkinton, Mrs. W.M. O'Donnell; Monterey History and Art Association., Ltd.
3. House Beautiful, July 1949.
4. House Beautiful, July 1949.
5. House Beautiful, July 1949.
6. House Beautiful, July 1949.
7. House Beautiful, July 1949.
8. House Beautiful, July 1949.
9. Interview with Virginia Stanton, May 1994.
10. Interview with Virginia Stanton, May 1994.
11. Monterey Herald, January 28, 1990.
12. "A Memorial"; Noticias, Vol. IX, Number 1, March 1965.
13. Interview with Virginia Stanton, May 1994.
14. House Beautiful, July 1949.
15. House Beautiful, July 1949.
16. "Resume of Robert Stanton", American Institute of Architects.

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