Tower of Jewels (Thomas Hastings, architect). Hand-colored.
Photographs of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1915
BANC PIC 1969.035:4—PIC

Room Five: Reconstructing a New City

Celebrating Rebirth: The Panama-Pacific Exposition

The rebirth of San Francisco was complete when the city hosted the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) in 1915. The exposition's official purpose was to commemorate the completion of the Panama Canal and the 400th anniversary of Balboa's discovery of the Pacific Ocean, but the renaissance of San Francisco underlined the entire celebration. Before San Francisco was formally designated as host, it had to compete with other American cities for the honor. City officials lobbied extensively, pleading their case with eloquence and fervor.

Open for nearly an entire year, the Exposition was a tremendous success, San Francisco having risen to the occasion with typical panache. 635 acres of fairgrounds stretched from the Presidio to Van Ness Avenue (much of it the landfill that now comprises the Marina District). Buildings celebrating the fine arts, industry, mechanics, as well as each of the 48 states and some foreign countries housed exhibits and attractions. The Tower of Jewels was perhaps the most impressive structure. Its four stories soared above the Exposition's other edifices, a height emphasized by the faceted glass crystals that covered the Tower's exterior.

The PPIE provided San Francisco with a much-needed financial boost, but more importantly, it proved to the entire world that the city was indeed an urban phoenix arisen from the ashes. The "Victorious Spirit" depicted in Arthur Matthews's mural was that of post-1906 San Francisco.