

Reclaiming the Past

San Francisco's public art gets a facelift.

Art may be long, and life fleeting, but even art has its allotted life span and needs the periodic facelift. San Francisco is experiencing a renaissance of public art restoration, from monumental sculpture to Jazz Age skyscrapers to New Deal murals that barely survived the McCarthy era.

Each work of art is a record of what was important to past San Franciscans. Many tell us as well about the eternal conflict between history as it happened and history as we wish it to have been. By restoring that record, we pass it on to future generations who will continue to reinterpret it.



PACIFIC TELEPHONE BUILDING

140 New Montgomery Street

When the art deco PT&T Building was completed in 1925, it was the largest and tallest commercial building in the West. It was also the best, and its assured composition and detailing continues to damn its postmodern neighbors by comparison. Until recently, PT&T rose, isolated, like a gleaming white exclamation point south of Market Street. Architect Tim Pflueger said he was inspired by Sierran crags, and as the morning sun strikes its crest, you can see the simile. It was sheathed in glazed terracotta, the 1920s wonder material whose life span was supposed to approach eternity.

In fact, terra-cotta skins age, too, and Pacific Telesis has undertaken an eight-year, \$13-million restoration of its handsome landmark. As with the monumental overhaul of New York's Woolworth Building, each terra-cotta panel must be sounded with a rubber mallet and replaced when found defective. Much of the work proceeds at night when it won't disrupt business. Pflueger's deco-Gothic ornament—inspired, he claimed, by telephone components—is being refabricated by Gladding McBean. But the most notable feature of the restoration is the replacement of the terra-cotta eagles.

Sculptor Manuel Palos has recreated in steel-reinforced fiberglass the deteriorating bald eagles that were stripped from the top of the building. The fabrication and installation took Palos a year, after which he moved on to restore six classical figures on the Palace of the Legion of Honor. The magnificent eighteen-foot predatory birds once again survey pedestrians from their twentieth-story aerie.

Restoration: *Pacific Telesis; Garcia-Wagner; architects: Degenkolb Associates; engineers: Manuel Palos, sculptor.*

Eagles' eye view from atop their aerie on the Pacific Telephone Building (building details on facing page).

