

Fashion—Conservative Chic  
Chasing Yul Brynner • Imogen Cunningham

# SAN FRANCISCO

THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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**The Bay  
Area's  
100  
Most  
Eligible  
Men**

**Dwight Clark  
and 99 More**



# Journal

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA



After: The day they took down the scaffolding at Neiman-Marcus.

## ROTUNDA

*A nightmare that became the miracle on Union Square.*

I'D NEVER even heard of the City of Paris store before 1982, much less seen its celebrated rotunda. As far as I knew, Paris was still in France. And I knew very little about those folks from Neiman-Marcus or their proposed store on Union Square. As for San Francisco, well just maybe, with a good map and a week's vacation, I might be able to find my way around there. Yet through a rather convoluted series of circumstances, that rotunda came to occupy most of my waking hours for the better part of that year.

The first day I went to see it was one of those overcast January afternoons. As I pulled up to the warehouse in San Leandro, next to a bankers' auto repossession yard and behind a Levitz store, it occurred to me what a paradox it was to keep something as elegant as the rotunda alongside alligatoring asphalt, oil slicks, and fenders. But there it was, its segments strewn about the cold concrete floor, resting on old wooden pallets and on top of oceangoing shipping containers.

The plaster pieces lay face down. You could see only the wiring, steel ribbing, decaying metal lath, rust, dust, and pigeon droppings. It was hard to see what all the fuss was about. It looked like something that had been taken apart by a bomb squad. As I stood there among the broken

plaster chips, which looked more like the bleaching bones of some ancient dinosaur, it crossed my mind perhaps to look for another job. Little did I know.

My actual involvement began on January 18, 1982. Since 1977 I'd been living in Sacramento being a good little architect, trying to make a living and to build a couple of good buildings along the way. Suddenly, one day the whole economy got sick and threw up all over a lot of nice people, myself included. I had no idea that survival was going to become a national pastime. The last time I checked out the economy, it looked just fine.

So there I was, with a wife, five sons, and an office staff of 13, with all hell breaking loose. I did the only thing I could: I fired everybody. But the kids



**Before: The rotunda as it was seen in the City of Paris. The building opened March 15, 1909.**

of black-and-white photos and a set of meticulous drawings of what was originally a crudely constructed dome and rotunda.

We managed to get the rough plaster hung by the first week in July, which allowed me a much-needed week's vacation. By mid-July we were beginning the plaster repair work with a vengeance, ripping off all the busted, cracked, warped, and hanging plaster. By the time we had a piece hung we had cracks on top of cracks; if it wasn't cracked, it was falling off.

The plaster guys were working away and the riggers were welding the rough plaster in place through the fireproofing when the alignment problems began. You see, we had to align each piece of plaster up and down, end to end between columns, front to back, and check each piece for twist, rotations, and drooping. We were trying to do brain surgery with a forklift and it wasn't working too well.

**T**IME WAS becoming a serious problem. There could be no turning back. If a piece was welded in place it had to be right, even if it was wrong. We'd just have to find another way to solve the problem.

By the first of August, we were buried in an ongoing battle—problems, solu-

tions, and personalities. We had 70 people in various trades slaving away, with staggering amounts of overtime, to build San Francisco's most expensive air space. The trades were inadvertently cutting one another's work to pieces in an attempt to get their own work done on time, and Neiman-Marcus was paying dearly. Things were a little tense. Sometimes the only bright moments of the day were those spent staring across Stockton Street at the women changing in the dressing rooms at I. Magnin.

The floor was the only place anybody could store anything. We didn't have any site; everything was building. Everywhere you looked there was stuff. All five floors were covered in junk. If it hadn't been for the 20 or so full-time clean-up men, we'd have drowned in it in less than a week. Those guys worked early, late, and most weekends, and they managed to keep the debris to a minimum. The only problem was that our rotunda stuff always looked like debris, so they kept throwing it out with the other junk.

The weatherproof skylight wasn't installed over the rotunda until late July. Up to that time we just worked out under the sky and prayed that it wouldn't rain. We managed to get the stained glass and steel framework for the dome repaired and in-

stalled while the concrete floors were curing. By June 1 the stained glass had been releaded, so it was trucked out and stashed in a local warehouse until the dust began to settle on the job site.

The two 5,000-pound masks went in early, about the second week of June. We trucked them in and lifted them into position in 30 minutes each. After that we spent a full week each with three men to weld them to our engineer's satisfaction.

Andy Merovich of URS/Blume was the engineer in the trenches with me. On just about everything else I made changes, but on the masks he had it all his way. Everybody was screaming at me for it, since the steel supports were installed every 12 inches, but we both sleep better at night knowing that 5,000 pounds of plaster won't come crashing down. I was inventing my way through the whole thing, hour by hour, piece by piece. I'd dream it up, have it welded into place, and call Andy to come over and look at it before we closed it up forever.

**T**HEN CAME the biggest problem of all. The local plastercasting shop set up by the plaster consultant from Boston failed to perform as expected. We had 45 plaster people standing

around with the meter running and very little to do. We were in big trouble, and my first thought was of our local plaster subcontractor, Joe Meiswinkel, of Frederick Meiswinkel Inc.

Joe and his two whiz kids, Bob McKoy, who had been the chief plastering foreman on the State Capitol renovation, and Phil Block, a gent in his seventies who was our chief lathing foreman, had already worked wonders for us. So when Joe hit the job site that morning, I was on him like flypaper with an urgent request for someone with casting skills, a casting shop and who was immediately available. Joe had just the guy—a local sculptor named Manuel Palos who had done a lot of work on the Palace of Fine Arts restoration. I dragged him over to the job site from whatever it was he was doing and had him look over the San Leandro casting operation and report back to me that afternoon. The report was dismal and I ordered all of the molds in San Leandro moved to Manuel's shop in San Francisco. Meiswinkel and I made him an offer he couldn't refuse. We were going to meet that deadline.

Meiswinkel sent a man over to Manuel's shop to help out. Manuel recruited a couple of other local mold makers and forced his younger brother to take a premature two-week vacation from Disney Studios in Los Angeles. In less than 48 hours we were in business, and every day Meiswinkel's truck was hauling dozens of cast pieces to the job for mounting. In three weeks we had all our much-needed castings. The steel framework for the intricately detailed third-floor cove pieces was already in place, so we threw a small army of plasterers onto that level. In a week the castings were in place, touch-up and all.

It was now late September, only five weeks from opening—something akin to the two-minute warning in football—and we were still scrambling for building permits. The interiors people had been painting and hanging wallpaper for weeks. Casework was everywhere. Merchandise was beginning to arrive, and the carpeting that had started in the rear of the store was now rolling toward the rotunda like some great pink and gold tidal wave. We were getting buried in the finishing touches.

At that precise moment, in the middle of painting and papering, we were still trying to get the rotunda scaffolding down so that the marble flooring at the entry could be laid. That was also the day we were preparing to pump concrete to form the huge curb below the handrail at the fourth floor restaurant.

To attack the curb, handrail, and balusters, it was "everybody on the top floor" time. That's when I ordered the stained glass installed, dust and all. The frame-

work for it had been sitting idle for several weeks, waiting for things to be cleaned up a bit, but there was no time left. We'd invented a hanging system earlier and tested the fit of our glass with masonite templates so as not to damage the glass itself.

Bill Cummings, the glass man, flew out from Massachusetts. It was he who had made the templates, after 3,100 measurements. He set about cleaning the glass framework, which was filthy from the fireproofing over spray and the pigeons. That's right. The building was still open and the pigeons had taken up housekeeping in the rotunda's dome again. It was getting tough to tell their stuff from the fireproofing stuff, so you were afraid to touch anything at all. We drove the pigeons out with an ultrasonic sound gadget, and the glass work started. Eleven days of stained-glass work and the scaffolding came down.

Five days more and the marble on the main floor was in place. Four days later the jewelry display cases were sitting proudly on the marble floors, ready for merchandise. But we were still working on the upper floor, and proceeded to drop a ten-pound piece of metal right through one of those gleaming glass cases. Crash helmets were the order of the day.

**W**E FINALLY finished most of the loose ends on the plastering the third week in October. By this time the painters had been hot on our heels for a month, slapping two coats on anything that didn't move. They were painting plaster not even 24 hours old.

The masks and capitals were in the final stages of gilding. On the second and third floors we continued to paint and weld in place the metal railings until the merchandise took over all available working space.

A quick fix on the problem-ridden second-floor railings, a temporary occupancy permit in hand, life safety systems operational, lights on in the rotunda, 300 zombies walking in circles looking for a place to nap—it was 11:00 A.M. on November 4 and we were ready to open. A new place had been born in San Francisco and it was called Neiman-Marcus. I headed home to pick up my wife and don my tuxedo for the gala opening.

—WILLIAM D. MITCHELL

## STADIUMANIA

*Site seeing—You can't play ball on a freeway.*

**B**OB REEVES, city planner, is a large man with a quick stride. He has friendly blue eyes, and if you were able to graph his voice, you'd probably

track down all the places in which Bob Reeves has lived—Arkansas, St. Louis, San Francisco. He's wearing loafers, a three-piece blue and white pin-striped suit, a white shirt, and a red, white, and blue striped tie. On his left hand, he wears a walrus tusk ring.

We are driving south on Eighth Street on a rainy morning in December so Reeves can take us on a stadium feasibility tour. "Go down to Townsend and turn left," he says. Last year, the Giants, who have played baseball in this city the last quarter-century, released a study called "The Future of Candlestick Park," which stated more or less that Candlestick Park had no future. The Giants presented the report to the mayor and the mayor established a stadium task force, consisting of five municipal agencies—Real Estate, Planning, Recreation and Park, City Attorney, and Public Works. Bob Reeves has sat in on all the task force's meetings. "Right now," he says, "I am project coordinator, whatever that means."

It means for one thing that Reeves is privy to the details of how the \$300,000 allotted to the feasibility study is being divided: "\$209,750 is going to the consultants; \$35,000 to the legal department, which is going to do some exploration of bonds and financing questions and try to piece together the financial strategy; \$5,000 for a financial consultant; and \$38,250 is going to the real estate department, which is going to be trying to establish the cost of acquiring the land at the various locations we're going to be looking at, and also the nature of the relocation problem and the cost of the relocation program. There's \$12,000 going to be set aside for adding to the I-280 transfer study and making an alternative site search."

The prime site for a new sports stadium is in the shadow of a disaster—the Embarcadero Freeway, which went nowhere because it blocked the citizenry from the bay.

You might say the prime site, titled "site seven" by the city planners, is nestled between a nightmare and a dream, which might make it close to a reality. The nightmare is full of ghosts of dead projects—Embarcadero Freeway, Seals Stadium, Kezar Stadium, Candlestick Park. And the dream, Southern Pacific's 195-acre Mission Bay, if realized, would totally change the city's southern face. Construction of a new stadium on site seven could involve Caltrans, Southern Pacific, and the Redevelopment Agency, through a web of oblique financial and jurisdictional interests.

We stop the car. Site seven is at the end of Townsend. "It starts at King," says Reeves, staring through the raindrops collecting like spider sacs on the window, "all the way to the ship there, which is the