

## Unique City Hall Re-opens After a Decade of Restoration

(Atascadero CA) The historic Atascadero City Hall is open again after 10 years of restoration following the 2003 San Simeon Earthquake. In 1914, the brand new colony of Atascadero, under the leadership of its founder Edward Gardner Lewis, began work on the Atascadero Administration Building, a double-domed Italian Renaissance structure destined to become an icon for the city. Eighty-eight years later that building was seriously damaged during the San Simeon Earthquake. The San Simeon Earthquake was a 6.5 magnitude temblor that rocked houses off foundations in Atascadero and killed two people under falling rubble in the neighboring city of Paso Robles. It was the most destructive quake to hit the United States in nearly 10 years.

Established in the middle of a cattle ranch in 1913, Atascadero represented a vision of sustainable agrarian living coupled with urban amenities. E.G. Lewis envisioned people living in custom built homes on large lots, each relying on the bounty of the agriculture of fruit, vegetables and livestock to cover, or at least defray, the cost of living. Lewis housed early residents and prospective landowners in a “Tent City,” incorporating under canvas all the services of city life: general store, laundry, individual residences, even a movie theatre.

But the first brick and mortar structures would not be homes. They would be the anchors of industry, health and municipal government. Three of those anchors still stand: The Printery, which housed the only rotogravure presses west of the Mississippi; the Hospital, which today

houses government offices, and the grand Administration Building. Designed by prominent San Francisco architect Walter D.Bliss, the four-story building was inspired by those of the 1904 St. Louis Exposition where, nearby, Lewis had founded his first community, University City, in 1903 around his publishing complex for Woman's Magazine and Woman's Farm Journal. In 1906, the city incorporated and Lewis served as its first mayor.

Lewis planned to use the Atascadero Administration Building to house local government offices, the Chamber of Commerce and real estate offices. The building would be fronted by a “Sunken Garden,” also inspired by the St. Louis Exposition. When you take a look at the original plan, the community was master planned to provide the best of urban amenities with healthful rural living and to accommodate the automobile. The building would be built by F.O. Engstrum at a projected cost of \$250,000 using locally-produced bricks on a concrete frame at the lower levels. Above the fourth floor, the masonry was the primary structure.

The cornerstone was laid July 12, 1914. The building was finally finished in 1918. It would serve as the center of Lewis’ master planned community for just nine years, until Lewis was forced into bankruptcy.

Frank Moran of Seattle purchased the building in 1927 for use as a prep school. He added four penthouses, which housed an apartment for the headmaster on the west side of the building, a cafeteria and kitchen on the north side, a workshop and storage space on the east side. The purpose of the eastside penthouse is unknown. The apartment contained two bedrooms, a living room, fireplace and a kitchen. Additional major modifications were made to the interior of the building during this time. Two more private schools and a bank used the building before it was

purchased by San Luis Obispo County in 1954 when it was renamed the Atascadero Veterans Memorial Building.

The building served as an icon for the community for decades; home to dances, parties and community meetings. Access to the upper floors was achieved primarily via stairs and a small, original elevator. In 1967, the Boy Scouts met in the basement. The local historical society established a museum on the first floor. For years, the building also served as the community library.

In 1979, the Colony of Atascadero incorporated, becoming the City of Atascadero. The new City Council reserved the upper Rotunda for its meetings. The new city Police Department moved into the first floor. On March 4, 1984, the Atascadero Administration Building/Veterans Memorial Building was designated as California Landmark No. 958. In 1975 the Atascadero Historical Society submitted an application for the 1918 Administration Building to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination was accepted by the National Park Service and in 1977 the building was added to the National Register as Landmark #77000336.

At 11:15 am on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003, the San Simeon Earthquake struck the Central Coast of California. At a magnitude of 6.5, it pushed the building to its limits. Bricks flew from the sides of the building and internal columns twisted. Ceilings fell and bricks crashed into the fourth floor kitchen area. Previous seismic upgrades installed in 1984 prevented catastrophe. Steel elements in 1984 buckled, but prevented collapse of the upper Rotunda. Likewise, the balustrades around the upper perimeter that had been installed previously with concrete block broke but were held suspended by steel and wire, which had been added in 1984. None of the city employees at work that day was injured.

After the earthquake, city officials immediately started planning to deal with the damaged building. Damage assessment, documentation, FEMA negotiations and design for the repair work took six years. Assessments completed after the earthquake confirmed significant damage to the structure, especially the upper dome. It soon became apparent that repairs would cost dearly in time and money... three years of planning and construction at a project cost estimated at \$43-million. Some residents said that was too much; that the building should be torn down and replaced with a new structure. The building's historic status made that impossible. The city faced two options: leave the shattered building abandoned behind security fencing, a blight to the downtown community, or fix it. After much public debate, the city decided the building, which stood in the center of the community and in the center of the City seal, would be saved.

The City brought in experts led by Pfeiffer Partners Architects to make a detailed evaluation, meticulously mapping every crack to plan repairs and document the process. Bernard's Construction out of San Fernando CA was engaged to manage the project and the many construction companies that were involved. After a painstaking process of coordination with the Federal Emergency Management Administration and other agencies, the City brought in experts to evaluate the building in depth, meticulously map every crack and plan necessary repairs and document the process. One major obstacle to repairs was the fact that no construction drawings of the building existed. That means workers would have to crawl through every nook and cranny of the condemned structure and create a new set of plans.

To secure the foundation of the building crews worked in the hot, noisy confines in the basement, drilling 248 micropile anchors as much as 60 feet down into bedrock. Miles of eight inch diameter pipe were lowered into the 10-inch diameter holes. Each micropile was then pumped full of as much as 150 bags of cement. It took seven workers to do the drilling - as much

as 28 to remove groundwater and mud. All of this work was a precursor to an amazing feat of engineering vital to the entire project: installing a brand new second foundation under a four story building of brick and concrete.

It took workers six months to complete this below ground level first phase of repair. During this phase the entire building sank 2.5 inches into the ground, burying the first tier of entry steps. When workers were finished they had drilled a total of three miles into the ground, three feet at a time, removed thousands of cubic yards of mud and debris, and constructed a new foundation for the historic Atascadero Administration Building, making it more stable and better able to withstand earthquakes than it was on the day it opened, brand new, in 1918.

While the lower portion of the building - constructed as a reinforced concrete cage - withstood the quake surprisingly well, the flexing took its toll on the upper dome, interior walls and staircases and the building's single elevator. Outside, thousands of bricks clinging to the structure's walls were cracked, crushed and, in some cases, spewed onto the ground below. Brick and mortar facades and parapets suffered extensive damage. Replacement would be a slow, painstaking process. The bricks were made of local materials at a brick plant that existed nearly 100 years ago. The challenge: create new bricks to match the old and install them so no one could tell them apart.

Pacific Clay Products, Inc., located near Lake Elsinore, California, was selected to match the original brick. With a century of tradition behind them, the people of Pacific Clay Products utilized the many kinds of clay prevalent around Alberhill, California to create the replacements. This area is geologically unique in that both sedimentary and metamorphic clays are present. There is no other deposit of clay like this in the world... some more than 200-million years old.

The process required multiple trial-and-error mixtures of clay and a variety of firing temperatures and durations. The plant produced 50,000 bricks searching for the right combination. The final number of “matching” bricks delivered: 10,000. Charles Kibby, the founder of Preservations Arts, was put in charge of matching and replacing the damaged brick and marble on the building. It took 14 months to evaluate the damage to the bricks on the building, select a company to produce the replacement brick, and to deliver and install the bricks. The result: a clever mixture of new brick and old brick, securely anchored to the structure of the historic building, giving the observer the impression there was never any damage at all.

The interior walls of the historic Administration Building were damaged in the quake and it would take more than cosmetic repairs to restore them. The major reason: The external walls of the building were providing resistance to earthquakes, and simply rebuilding the walls wouldn't meet current building codes. The only way to repair the building's ability to resist earthquakes was to build new, inner walls behind the old walls and secure these walls to the rebuilt existing walls, and then attach all of that to the new foundation in the basement that is anchored to bedrock some 60-feet below the surface of the earth. Bit by bit, old surfaces were removed. A lattice of steel rebar was constructed anchored to the walls. This lattice would strengthen the interior walls and be the girding for thousands of pounds of shotcrete.

After all the original wall had been exposed, cleaned and prepped, and rebar had been installed... crews got to work applying the shotcrete into every crevice. When process was finished, new drywall or plaster would be installed over the inner wall. The process would brace the building in every direction and anchor it to bedrock. One side-effect that would probably go unnoticed when the project is finished: each of the building's offices will be slightly smaller than they were when they were constructed 100 years ago.

The dramatic domed presence of the Atascadero Administration Building has been impressive since the beginning of the city. Reminiscent of Italian Renaissance and inspired by the architecture displayed at the 1904 Exposition in St. Louis MO, the building holds a secret. There are actually two rotundas, one set above the other, the apex of each some 40 feet above the floor. Each would require a certain amount of acrobatics to repair. After repairs were completed on both rotundas, workers added the dazzling final touches. For the upper rotunda: special acoustical plaster to reduce echoes in the City Council Chamber. For the lower rotunda, a breathtaking stylized treatment designed to have visitors craning upward in the area that will become the public reception area of City Hall.

The repair of the interior domes of the Atascadero Administration Building would be a work of art in itself, restoring the glory of the structure that has stood as the center of the City of Atascadero, physically and mentally, since the beginning.

For decades the single elevator in the Atascadero Administration Building was unique... it was the only elevator in the city. The narrow, cable-borne elevator was seriously damaged in the San Simeon Earthquake. Replacing an elevator that was installed in the early 1900s hundreds was no easy task by 21st Century standards. First, the shaft had to be repaired and extended, as the original elevator was far too small to meet current codes. Next, a new elevator system had to be designed to modern access and emergency standards. Finally, the new elevator car would not be suspended by cables as its predecessor was. It would be supported by a giant piston installed at the bottom of the shaft, 50 feet below the basement.

As the massive steel piston was lowered through the roof of the building and into the elevator shaft, it was the job of the men at the bottom of the shaft to guide it into place. The new elevator

features access from the lower rotunda, a feature not present in the original elevator. The elevator is just one upgrade. Repairs to the building replaced heating and air conditioning equipment, as well as plumbing and wiring. Where there had once been outdated wiring and crumbling building infrastructure, there are state of the art systems to fill the requirements of a modern office building. With the project completed, the building appears just as it has for nearly a century, but within its walls there is 21st century technology.

From ground level to the very top, the Atascadero Administration Building stands 94-feet, one-inch. It is on this curved surface and at a dizzying height that workers must labor to seal, repair and resurface the building. Earthquake damage left the interior of the building, particularly the upper floors, open to the weather and to animals and birds. In anticipation of winter rains, crews used the same strategy people use to preserve leftovers... they shrink-wrapped it in plastic. But this plastic was much heavier and more durable. The building's new "white bonnet" would remain in place for months while workers completed the repairs necessary to keep the weather out.

Removing the thousands of tiles that have covered the dome for decades was a gargantuan task. Workers formed a firemen's chain from the top of the dome to the construction scaffolding. Painstakingly, each tile was removed and lowered, hand to hand to the fourth floor roof. There they were inspected. Tiles that can be cleaned and used were secured and lowered to the ground. badly broken tiles would have to be replaced with modern materials designed to match the original. Most of the tiles were cleaned and re-used. More than 90% of the original tiles were salvaged.



Once the tiles were removed, crews could inspect the sub-roofing and make repairs where necessary. Then the entire dome was sealed with waterproof materials in preparation for re-installation of the tiles. The dome, finally re-assembled, is the result of thousands of hours of meticulous restoration, and stands again as the crown of the Atascadero Administration Building and the icon of the city.

Today, after 10 years of planning and restoration, the unique, double-domed Atascadero Administration Building has been re-opened to the public. City offices once again fill its circular halls and historic photos and placards explain the history, significance and use of this amazing edifice.

For more information concerning the Atascadero Administration Building or the City of Atascadero please visit [www.Atascadero.org](http://www.Atascadero.org) or call 805-461-5000.