

A Lasting Addition

Cliff Hanssen and His Work at the Marin Art and Garden Center

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Many architects and landscapers were involved in designing the grounds and buildings at the Marin Art and Garden Center. One such contributor is Cliff Hanssen. He grew up in Marin and his father, Cliff Hanssen Sr., was a Northwestern Pacific Railroad Master Mechanic in Tiburon.

His work at the Center started when he was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. For his 1960 thesis, he reimagined the Center grounds in preparation for the eventual move of the Art and Garden Fair to the new Marin County Civic Center. From adding new buildings and expanding existing facilities, to new parking and circulation patterns, he provided an interesting set of changes for consideration.¹ While his ambitious plan was not adopted, some of his suggestions were realized over time.

In 1962, working as draftsman and designer for architects Gromme and Priestley, he designed the addition to the Frances Young Gallery, then home of the Marin Society of Artists and today's Studio. While the addition is a relatively simple expansion to the rear of the building, he added a creative method for displaying the many paintings available for rent by the Society. It was a series of 18 rolling panels, each 10 by 12 feet in size that could hold several paintings on each side. It was easily pulled out for viewing and returned to storage with a gentle push or pull. As the Independent-Journal reported, this was the equivalent of a wall 30 by 144 feet.²

Outside the building, Cliff designed a curved wooden bench in the rear garden area. He described the process of soaking the wood in water from the adjacent creek to make the boards pliable for bending into the desired shape. The bench remains in place today.



MAGC Landscape Inventory, 2017

During his visit, Cliff also observed the 8 foot obelisk attached to the rear addition to the building, marveling that it was still there after so many years. It was a mystery when it was rediscovered behind a growth of bamboo in 2004. Several theories were considered at the time, but no concrete answer was

¹ "An Expanded Art and Garden Center", Cliff Hanssen, Independent Journal, November 26, 1960, M11.

² "A Wall Full of Surprises", Karl Barron, Independent Journal, October 27, 1962, M10.

found. He described it as his creation when the original addition was added to the building. For more about the mystery, see “The Mysterious Obelisk in Ross” at <https://www.moya-rhs.org/magc.html>.

Hanssen would go on to work on many mid-century modern projects, working closely with Joseph Eichler. He worked on multi-unit buildings in San Francisco and on several local schools, including Terra Linda High School. He is further credited on the award winning design of the Corte Madera Library with the firm of Smith, Barker and Hanssen.³

Cliff recalled a long and productive career that took him around the world, from Iran to Sri Lanka. He also worked in Cambridge, Massachusetts and for 20 years in Honolulu. It was inspiring to know that the Center was the start of this long and productive career.

Cliff retired some years ago to Las Vegas, Nevada, but still has family in Marin County. It was a pleasure to meet him and talk about his many memories here.

³ “Firm Wins Library Design Award”, Independent Journal, May 18, 1972, S4.