Community Partnerships Activate Santa Barbara’s Presidio Neighborhood

ANNE PETERSEN

At the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation (SBTHP), we prize our partnerships. In fact our operating model is dependent on them, and they provide a multidimensional standard for enlivening historic places while also allowing them to evolve. Ours is a large site with a rich, complex history comprising many stories. We, along with our partners, continue to honor, preserve, and tell those stories because our method of activating spaces is built on working with our community to weave history into contemporary use.

SBTHP was founded in 1963 by a group of committed community members who shared a dream of rebuilding the Royal Presidio of Santa Barbara, a Spanish fort established in 1782 and the origin of the modern-day city of Santa Barbara. The new organization began acquiring land within the Presidio footprint. El Cuartel was the first acquisition—made in 1964—and encompasses a 1788 adobe that is the oldest standing residence in California and the only completely original portion of the Presidio. These efforts coincided with California State Parks’ growing interest in adding the Presidio to its holdings, and in 1968 the site became a State Historic Monument.

It was named El Presidio de Santa Bárbara State Historic Park (El Presidio SHP) in 1970. The founders had dreamed of rebuilding the entire adobe fort, but a public planning process in 1988 resulted in the park’s current, less-ambitious general plan. Today the park comprises 5.5 acres of downtown Santa Barbara, with about one-third containing reconstructed and historic portions of the Presidio and with limited portions yet to be reconstructed. The rest of the park incorporates much of the original Presidio footprint and includes more than 20 additional structures dating from the 1840s through to the mid-20th century, each with its own rich history.
The Presidio is a centerpiece of El Pueblo Viejo Landmark District, the city of Santa Barbara’s major preservation and design control district.

In 1972 SBTHP signed a concession agreement with the State of California that later evolved into an operating agreement. This agreement is key to SBTHP’s business model and our commitment to successful partnerships. Under its terms, any funds raised within the park stay in the park to support its operation.

In 2011 SBTHP was proud to receive the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Trustees Emeritus Award for excellence in the stewardship of historic sites, and we consider our strong, mutually beneficial relationships with our tenants integral to that excellence. We work carefully to secure tenants that are well suited to the site, and those tenants assume a significant and layered role in promoting our shared value of preservation supporting a sustainable community.

Among the organization’s many resources for ensuring the stability of our tenant and partner relationships, as well as the integrity of our built resources, are a property management company contracted by SBTHP as well as the Restoration and Property Management committees. They are chaired by board members and include board members, staff, and community volunteers with professional skills in architecture, preservation, property development and management, engineering, finance, real estate law, nonprofit management, and historical archaeology, among others.

Many of the tenants continue historic uses of park properties, providing important connections between past and present. The rent they pay supports SBTHP’s mission of preserving, restoring, reconstructing, and interpreting historic sites in Santa Barbara County, but they also contribute to the vibrant neighborhood that surrounds the museum portion of the park.
CONTINUING EDUCATIONAL USE AT ANACAPA SCHOOL

More than just a tenant, Anacapa School, a private middle and high school, is an active participant in the life of El Presidio SHP. The school is housed in several historic buildings of the Presidio: the Rochin Adobe and the structures of the former Hoff Hospital.

The Rochin Adobe at 820 Santa Barbara Street was constructed in 1856, the first structure built within the Presidio quadrangle as the Presidio began to decline. It was made with adobe bricks cannibalized from the fort, and its transitional architecture—an adobe covered in wood siding with a shingle instead of a tile roof—marks its significance as an American-period building in the center of the older pueblo. The Rochin was acquired by the state in 1996 for inclusion in the park. Adjacent to the Rochin, at 816 Santa Barbara Street, sit two rectangular wood buildings conjoined to form an L-shape. Relocated to this site in 1947, the buildings originally formed part of the 1941 Hoff General Hospital, a World War II-era military hospital constructed a few miles northwest of their current siting.

Educational use of this site has a surprisingly long history. The Sloyd School, a Queen Anne Revival structure, was built here in 1893. The school included manual arts training and was a precursor to the University of California, Santa Barbara, but its building was lost in the 1925 earthquake. When the Hoff Hospital structures were moved to the site, they were used for an early incarnation of Santa Barbara City College. California State Parks acquired the property in 1982, and Anacapa School has occupied it since 1984, later adding the Rochin Adobe.
When the school moved in, SBTHP fenced the property and allowed the school to do some interior remodeling to accommodate its needs. Recent restoration work funded by SBTHP includes a new shingle roof for the Rochin—no small feat to undertake in Santa Barbara’s “high fire zone,” especially given that the building’s use as a school results in a higher-risk designation for the property. SBTHP successfully navigated the Santa Barbara Historic Landmarks Commission’s approval process to ensure that the new roof would include historically accurate cedar shingles. We are currently replacing and upgrading the more-than-100-year-old sewer main. Anacapa School itself funded exterior painting of the Hoff buildings and the Rochin as well as porch repairs to the Rochin.

Anacapa School has been a consistent and valued tenant for SBTHP. The school’s rigorous curriculum integrates opportunities for students to participate in programming at El Presidio SHP. Each semester three to five students serve as interns for the park’s heritage garden project. Students also participate as interpreters during living history programs, and the school devotes one day every year to volunteering at the park, with students often doing the whitewashing that is continually required for the adobe buildings of the Presidio. Headmaster Gordon Sichi and his students prize their school’s location. “This is the most historic part of Santa Barbara, and we’re actually a part of it,” Sichi says. “Both properties have ... helped establish the character of the school.” Student Ray Johnson says that the adobe “has more of a welcoming feel than just a school ... Looking at it, you don’t really see it as a school, you see it more as a house.” Student Lauren Sloan adds, “It’s been used by so many people that it really has that feel that people like to be here.”

KEEPING MAI TAIS FLOWING AT JIMMY’S ORIENTAL GARDENS

Santa Barbara’s Chinatown was originally centered one block to the west of the Presidio site, on East Canon Perdido Street, but after the 1925 earthquake provided an opportunity to redevelop the downtown in a uniform style, the buildings of Chinatown quickly came down. In the late 1920s, local real estate owner and contractor Elmer Whittaker built a series of structures on the south side of the 200 block of East Canon Perdido Street intended to
encourage a dwindling Chinese population to stay in downtown Santa Barbara. By 1930 the remaining residents of Santa Barbara’s Chinatown had moved to this “New Chinatown,” firmly situated within the Presidio quadrangle and adjacent to a small and active community of Japanese residents. Jimmy’s Oriental Gardens, built in 1947 by Whittaker for restaurant owner James Yee Chung, was the last piece of New Chinatown to be constructed.

The Chung family operated the bar and restaurant for two generations, until Jimmy’s son Tommy, who had taken over in 1970, sold the property, including the Chung family home, to SBTHP in 2006. The building that housed the last Chinese-operated business in Santa Barbara’s Chinatown is not only a major asset for the park but also a visual reminder within El Presidio SHP of the Chinese community.

In 2011 SBTHP signed a lease with Robert Lovejoy to operate a deli called Three Pickles in the restaurant portion of the Jimmy’s building, and in 2013 Lovejoy added a bar called the Pickle Room in the remaining portion. A labor of love, creating the Pickle Room involved a complete restoration of the Chung family’s bar. Lovejoy worked closely with SBTHP to re-cover the original bench seats in the booths, restore the length of the bar (which had been truncated under Tommy’s ownership), clean and repair the iconic pagoda roof over the bar, and update the restrooms. SBTHP’s curatorial department lent the business the original Chinese lanterns from

Robert Lovejoy (right) with his son Clay at the Pickle Room.
PHOTO BY MICHAEL H. IMWALLE
the bar, cleaned and rewired, as well as the historic business sign, which now hangs proudly under the pagoda.

With the Pickle Room, Lovejoy has not only restored a building, but also returned a beloved institution to the community, and he is very cognizant of his role as steward of this historic place. Lovejoy notes that he has a master’s degree in furniture design, his father ran an antiques shop, and his grandfather ran a bar and steakhouse in Los Angeles. “Red booths,” he says, “are my history.” Lovejoy was also a friend of Tommy Chung and a longtime patron of the Chung’s business, and he feels a responsibility to carry on the character of the bar. “[Tommy Chung] was just a really sweet guy. He was a true gentleman, and welcomed everybody,” says Lovejoy. “On Thanksgiving, he would cook all this food for people who were alone and didn’t have a family. You always felt like you were welcome here. It was my charge to do this. I knew I would be the best man for this job.” Of El Presidio SHP, Lovejoy notes, “People ... come and visit you [the park], and one out of four of them drops into my door, so it’s a symbiotic relationship.” The Presidio is an anchor in the downtown that supports the surrounding businesses as much as they support us.

FROM WINE CELLAR TO TASTING ROOM AT CASA DE LA GUERRA

By repurposing a historic wine cellar for use as a wine tasting room, a local entrepreneur has found a uniquely suitable location for his business, and SBTHP has found an ideal partner to help share this historic resource with a wider audience.

Casa de la Guerra is the 1828 adobe home of the Presidio’s fifth commandant, José de la Guerra, and his family. The Casa and El Paseo, the shopping and office complex built onto the adobe beginning in the early 1920s, were donated to SBTHP in 1971, and both are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1989 SBTHP created a lot split and sold El Paseo while maintaining a conservation easement on the building’s facade. In 1990 we began restoring the Casa to its earliest configuration—the one dating to the lifetime of José de la Guerra. Today SBTHP operates the Casa
as a historic house museum that includes furnished period rooms as well as rotating art and historical exhibits.

In the last few years, a series of wine-tasting rooms have opened in El Paseo, capitalizing on Santa Barbara’s growing reputation as a wine region. José de la Guerra himself grew grapes on one of his five ranches, Rancho Simi, which were used in a chardonnay that won first prize at Philadelphia’s Centennial Exposition of 1876. The family’s bodega (wine cellar) stands in the northwest corner of the U-shaped adobe, along a zaguán (passage) that connects the building with El Paseo. In 2015 SBTHP leased the bodega to Standing Sun Wines, which now uses the space as a tasting room for its Santa Barbara County wines.

The bodega is rich with historic character. After SBTHP conducted above-ground archaeology in the room, the exposed adobe walls were left unplastered. Patches of original whitewash adorn the walls, and half of the room’s perimeter features an adobe platform originally used to store wine barrels. The building lease was developed to protect these features and to prevent the insertion of new elements, such as running water or glass window panes.

Fortunately, SBTHP found an ideal tenant in Standing Sun co-owner John Wright. Wright, a preservation architect by training,
started a second career in the wine business a few years ago. He takes pride in the location of his business, noting that “The joint effort of bringing this space back to life works well, because I do have an understanding of this building and the history of this courtyard and of this house. And I’m able to pour wine in this space that was the original wine cellar.”

Wright points out that his customers find their way into his tasting room for a variety of reasons, and many do not have a direct interest in history or museums. Wright is able to connect them to the history of the building through an experience in his tasting room that often inspires them to learn more. “A lot of people come in here for wine tasting,” he says, “and they almost feel like … they’ve taken a step back in time, and they are in a historic space. Instead of viewing it as a museum, which is one way to experience this history, they’re viewing it as a space that they’re occupying and just being a part of.” Wright plans to deepen the mutually beneficial ties with the historic house museum: “We can build the energy. We are going to put outdoor seating in the courtyard, and we can get people to start using this courtyard, and this room, and filtering out into the museum.”

Wright’s protective stewardship of the bodega is apparent in the way he shares the room with all of his customers. “I came at this project from an architectural standpoint,” he explains. “I walked into this space and I saw opportunity, not obstacles. I don’t mind being inconvenienced by character … To come into this space and to have to use it exactly the way it is, it gave limitations but it also drove the design and it drove the use of the space. Somebody else used it before, just the way it was, so you just have to figure out how you are going to use it in a modern-day application.” Wright added wine barrels to one section of the original platform, providing an interpretive opportunity to discuss how the room was originally used. He also displays and sells art in the tasting room but only uses existing nails to hang canvases. Where there is no nail, paintings lean against the wall—another opportunity to enliven the space.
WORKING WITH PARTNERS TO BRAND THE “PRESIDIO NEIGHBORHOOD”

SBTHP also works to cultivate the role preservation plays in the commercial area surrounding El Presidio SHP. We had long been developing an interpretive and programming approach using “Presidio Neighborhood” branding when, in 2015, local business owner Hugh Margerum began meeting with local businesses and organizations with a similar idea. While not a tenant of SBTHP, the Margerum family has a long-term stake in the success of the area, having operated an award-winning restaurant and tasting room there for decades. Margerum produced a Presidio Neighborhood map, website, and mobile app, which he developed with input from most of the organizations and businesses in the four-block area, including SBTHP. Funds contributed by each partner supported production of the map and the rack fees to ensure its placement in all major hotels and visitor centers in Santa Barbara.

Margerum feels that the area has “always had that historic aspect … [The Presidio] was the first thing here … The neighborhood … is lively enough to have a coffee shop, a cool deli, a bar, world-class cheese shop, cafe, in addition to the wine tasting and restaurants like the Wine Cask … So I was thinking, we need to get [the word out] to visitors and to locals [that this is] a destination to come to and have all these different types of experiences.”

The process has brought the neighbors closer together to focus on our shared interest in the success and sustainability of Santa Barbara’s historic core. Last year Margerum hosted a mixer for the neighborhood in his tasting room, fostering new connections. SBTHP was able to use the mixer as a forum to share the new direction of our traditional Founding Day event in April, which was expanded last year to serve as a celebration of the city’s birthday. All of the partners have begun to use the Presidio Neighborhood logo on their marketing materials to help promote the branding. The Presidio Neighborhood is now a destination on the rise, referred to by name in the media and sharing an increasing sense of camaraderie among partners.
THE KEY TO GOOD PARTNERSHIPS

SBTHP does not undertake partnerships and tenant relationships lightly. We spend time up front considering whether the potential relationship is good for the organization, good for the state park, and, most importantly, the right fit for the historic resource. Our collaborations not only bring much-needed income to support the preservation and educational work that we do, but our tenants and partners also act as stewards, sharing our work with the public in ways that reconnect the past to the daily lives of everyone who visits the park. FJ

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