

Calendar

Cement Memory

Forgotten Craft Medium

Theater work exposes you to every kind of building material," says Erik Hanson, a restoration consultant who spent 20 years as a theater-prop maker for the La Jolla Playhouse and the Globe. "Working in the theater shows you what's real and what's fake; how to make the fake out of the real, and vice versa. For the same show you might have to make wood look like metal and metal look like wood" — because, of course, the ersatz is often cheaper, lighter weight, or stronger than the actual.

"What I didn't like about theater work is that you were always building something temporary," says Hanson.

"Restoration work is the opposite; it's permanent, or supposed to be. And hopefully you're also using only authentic materials."

Cement is one material that Hanson has thought a lot about lately. "Cement is the forgotten craft material of the Arts and Crafts period," he says as if coining a phrase. "Why are people in the Arts and Crafts revival movement obsessed with furniture-making and metalwork, when cement crafts were every bit as popular?" He answers his own question. "They aren't collected because people follow the brand names, and there are no national brands of cement products. These were made locally, with local skill."

Hanson names folk sculpture — gnomes and squirrels — as common cement crafts of the era (officially 1890 to 1915). But what he likes particularly are the porch urns. "Every bungalow house has a place on the porch that's meant to have two or three of these urns.



Combination planter/bench by Irving Gill

They're for dracaena, Southern California's favorite. Or maybe an agave or a ball-headed rose bush." These urns are colorful. They were made of tinted cement — green, brown, yellow, and other earth tones — to go with the tinted cement floors and walls of the bungalows themselves.

Many urns got broken by expanding plant roots, or simply dropped, like comparable numbers of gnomes and squirrels. The remainder are consequently valuable. You can buy reproduction Arts and Crafts lamps from L.L. Bean, but Hanson knows of no one making reproductions of cement crafts on a national scale. It's still an industry with local potential, he says. "With a thousand dollars, you could set up a cement shop. The same thousand wouldn't buy you a tenth of a woodshop."

Hanson is immediate past president of the Save Our Heritage Organisation. This weekend, he will talk about cement as part of SOHO's Sixth Annual San Diego Arts & Crafts Weekend. He is also a book and ephemera dealer these days and has a website, www.irvinggill.com — or Irving Gill Central. It's devoted to its namesake,

San Diego's preeminent architect of the period. And there's a lot of cement talk to be found there, including excerpts from a vintage magazine called *Cement-Concrete Age*. Hanson is on the prowl for issues from 1915 and 1918, because they have references to Gill.

To read what Hanson has already posted about Gill and cement is to know that the architect truly loved the medium. In 1915, Gill wrote in *Sunset Magazine*: "Before it has set, cement is a wonderfully plastic material, more wonderful than clay. It can be colored, modeled, shaded, surfaced, and then of itself hardens into an everlasting expression of the workman."

Like many places in Southern California, San Diego has dozens and dozens of cement bungalow courts — a series of small homes built around a central courtyard. "They were built back when people wanted a little house and big garden," says Hanson. "Now they want a big house and little garden. Which is a shame, because you can have the latter anyplace. The whole point of Southern California is that you can live outside so much of the year."

"Erik's Bungalow Manifesto" is on the website, too. "Remove your window bars and security doors: nothing you own is worth having a pitiful home" is one of his edicts. "Keep interior walls dark: white walls are for bathrooms. Do you want your dining room to look like a bathroom?" he chides would-be

bungalow bunglers. A third imperative — "Plant climbing roses" — has relevance to cement. Roses climb cement walls willingly, and, according to Hanson, "Climbing roses enhance 'the bungalow look.' They integrate the house and landscape. Planting climbing roses is what everybody assumed would happen when these houses were built, and they aren't complete without them, because they compensate for the lack of ornament."

But, says Hanson, you don't often see houses festooned with roses the way they used to be. (Check out chases in old Laurel and Hardy movies, he suggests. You'll see authentic bungalows in those scenes, filmed along the streets of L.A.) "On every block, every third house used to be swamped. Nowadays people don't like to grow them because they do trap moisture. But they don't have to be on the house itself. They could be on fences or trellises."

— Jeanne Schinto



Cement porch pot, c. 1910

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Slide Lecture:
"Cement: The Forgotten Craft Medium"
by Erik Hanson
Saturday, March 8,
11:00 a.m.-noon
B Street Cruise Ship Terminal
Cost: SOHO members, \$10;
nonmembers, \$15.
Info: 619-297-7511 or
www.sohosandiego.org