



Dave Randolph

The funny box-like building, above, out at the Cliff House contains a camera obscura as designed by Leonardo da Vinci. It takes pictures of Seal Rocks and reflects those images inside the building, as at left. Now this rare attraction is in danger of being closed down and carted away.

Giant camera at Cliff House in danger of total obscurity

By Carol Pogash
Examiner Staff Writer
No doubt Leonardo da Vinci would not approve.

The scientist-artist, who is believed to have invented the camera obscura, forerunner to the camera, would want one of the few remaining examples of his invention, which sits at the base of the Cliff House in San Francisco, to survive.

But then Leonardo da Vinci didn't know about the master plan for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which calls for eliminating the current Camera Obscura because the primary value of the site on which it sits is as "an overlook with seating for those who come only to enjoy the view. In conjunction with this, structures in the vicinity that do not fit into the historical setting will be removed."

The funny yellow building — shaped like a box camera, with fat black knobs on its walls — does not fit

in with the U.S. government's sense of history, beauty or importance.

The Camera Obscura — which bears a come-on that reads: "Now Open. What is it?" — has been by the ocean for a mere 30 years. That is not long enough, by most accounts, to be considered historical, and certainly not by the standards of Leonardo da Vinci, who died in 1519.

"This is one of the more spectacular views," said a GGNRA official, and "it does not need to be cluttered up by an ugly yellow box."

"It is one of the most visited areas of The City," said acting GGNRA Superintendent Jack Davis. But the camera, he says, is not a popular attraction.

Indeed, the boxy building is not beautiful. But for the visitor who plunks down 50 cents, the view from the large sloping dish on the inside is as magnificent, maybe more so, than the spectacular one it mirrors on the outside.

The Camera Obscura captures light through a 45-degree angle mirror and two lenses, to reflect the 360-degree view of ocean, rocks and land onto a large parabolic disc in a darkened room.

While some historians contend that Leonardo da Vinci invented the camera obscura, others believe it was created in the 11th century and only described in his manuscripts.

The camera became popular with astronomers and 17th-century artists anxious to capture realistic pictures of skies and landscape. Italian painters often carried sedan chairs, tent and camera into the countryside to trace copies of scenes.

Its devoted San Francisco caretaker, David Warren, gives the scientific explanation for the camera and then one that describes what the viewer sees: "It's magic. It makes things clear to you."

If it hadn't been for the Rube Gold-

berg box camera building, which seems better suited to selling foot-long hot dogs, the Camera Obscura might have been left alone.

But then the U.S. government bought the Cliff House and the area became part of the national park system.

The funny yellow box was deemed officially inappropriate by the National Park Service at the beginning of the year, and a permit was denied. If there is no reprieve, it will be closed and carted away after Oct. 13.

Frank Boerger, chairman of the citizens advisory commission to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, has not seen the camera from the inside and says he has "no preconceived ideas" about what should be done.

But he adds, "I think it is fair to say the building does intrude itself into the landscape there."

Outside the Camera Obscura, Zolo-

plus Californianus, better known as the California sea lions, and the Steller Sea Lions, with whom they share lounging rights, bark and honk from Seal Rocks. Blue-black cormorants pamper themselves in the sun. Blossoming purple succulents hug the cliffs. And tourists pop quarters into quick-eyed telescopes to glimpse life on the rocks.

For Warren, who at 14 ran away from his Hayward home to join a carnival, Camera Obscura is worth fighting for.

After climbing down from the turret, still grasping the essential Windex, one day last week, Warren talked about his dedication to Leonardo da Vinci's camera by the sea. He explains that because the camera does not make enough money — it grossed \$4,000 last year — he works as a volunteer.

Before he came to Camera Obscura, Warren sold vacuum cleaners and en-

cyclopedias door to door. Brian Fewer Jr., who also volunteers, used to operate the merry-go-round at Playland at the Beach. And Donald Goodwin, another camera volunteer, used to be an apple picker.

Warren and friends may be dreamers, trying to save a building that can't pay for itself. But they have persevered, pushing hard enough to win a second chance of sorts.

Recently, says Warren, "Mayor Alioto and his new wife" came through. And, like many others, he said, they signed Warren's petition to save the camera from obscurity.

But the Camera Obscura has been so obscure for so long that many San Franciscans still don't know what or where it is.

One morning this week, the only visitor who knew what a camera obscura was was a tourist from Italy, who explained that he had been taught about it in school.

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