

A Guide to “Old Scripps Building” at Scripps Institution of Oceanography

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George H. Scripps Memorial Marine Biological Laboratory, as it appeared when completed in 1910.

History of Old Scripps Building

The George H. Scripps Memorial Marine Biological Laboratory is the original building on the present site of Scripps Institution of Oceanography (of the University of California, San Diego). Now designated "Old Scripps Building," the two-story reinforced-concrete structure was erected in 1909-1910.

The building was designed by Irving J. Gill, a locally prominent architect. He designed an unadorned utilitarian building, using the method by Julius and Albert Kahn (of Detroit, Michigan) of concrete reinforced with trussed bars, which have a rectangular cross-section of the main bar, with flanges on two diagonally opposed corners. (An example is in the display case on the first floor.) Ritter was keen on good natural lighting for the laboratories, so two skylights were included and "sidewalk lights" were installed on the second floor to provide light to the first floor. Each office had frosted-glass windows along the inner wall. The building had

the basic utilities of water, gas, and electricity. The two-story structure was completed in July 1910 at a cost of \$15,818.09, which was less than its estimate. It is 26 feet high, 75 feet long, and 50 feet wide. Ellen B. Scripps, who had provided the funds, specified that the building was to be called George H. Scripps Laboratory, in memory of her deceased older brother.

On the ground floor on the west side was an Aquarium room, which served as the first public aquarium of the institution until a nearby facility was erected in 1915. On that wall were also a darkroom, a shop for creating equipment, a storage room, a janitor's room, and a toilet. On the east side were five office/laboratories, each with running seawater as well as fresh water. (All sinks have been removed, but original built-in units — drawers, specimen cabinet, and a cloak locker — are located in the northeast office.) On the second floor on the eastern side was a large classroom, an "apparatus room," and a library. On the western side were six offices.

Dr. and Mrs. Ritter lived in several rooms on the second floor until a Director's House was built in 1913. Dr. Ritter used the library room for his office, and it continued in that role until 1950. A new structure, named Ritter Hall, was built in 1931, which took some pressure for space off Old Scripps as the institution grew.

In this building was the only classroom. After World War II, when interest in oceanography grew greatly, the number of students soared. Scripps Institution offered the only advanced-degree program in oceanography at that time. Classes and seminars were held in the classroom, and hundreds of Ph.D. dissertation defenses were given there, into the 1970s.

Through the years some internal walls were added. The large classroom was divided into a smaller classroom and offices. The inside windows were covered with plywood, the darkroom and shop were turned into offices, and the sidewalk lights were covered with floor tile, so the first floor became dark and dreary. Upstairs, the roof leaked after rainstorms, but wasn't repaired because the building was designated to be demolished. It was emptied in 1977 after Hubbs Hall was completed. Physicist Fred Noel Spiess and his wife Sarah W. Spiess began a campaign to save Old Scripps Building, because of its distinguished past. The building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1977 and declared a National Historic Landmark in 1982. Funds were obtained from the California Office of Historic Preservation, from federal sources, and from private donations, including many alumni and some members of the Scripps family. A total of \$450,000 was raised, with which the building was restored (including earthquake safety) and put back into use in 1983. Changes from the original building are that the classroom is now located on the first floor (to benefit handicapped persons), an exit stairway was added on the west side, and a balcony has been placed on the east side of the building instead of the west side (where it overlooked the ocean).

Guide

Old Scripps Building, built in 1909-1910 for the Marine Biological Association, later known as the Scripps Institution of Oceanography (SIO) and since 1912, a part of the University of California. The architect was Irving J. Gill; construction was by Perl Acton Company of La Jolla. Original cost: \$15,816.09.

The building is 26 feet high, 75 feet long, 50 feet wide. It is built of reinforced concrete, using the “Trussed Bar system,” developed by Julius Kahn about 1903.

In 1910, the public aquarium was located in the first-floor southwest corner. The lecture hall and museum were designed for the second floor. But for three years the first Director of Scripps, William E. Ritter, and his wife moved into the second floor, until the Director’s House was completed in 1913. (That historic wood-frame structure still stands; it is about 400 feet inland from the Scripps Pier.)

“Old Scripps” was slated for demolition in 1976, but concerted action by SIO volunteers pointed out that this was “the oldest oceanographic laboratory building in the western hemisphere.” They arranged for its listing as San Diego Historic Site #119, obtained funding from the State Office of Historic Preservation, and assured its listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a National Landmark. Restoration was estimated to cost \$400,000, and those same volunteers raised that amount; they also saved \$20,000 of site preparation costs by their own physical labor. John Henderson, AIA, did the architectural work to return the building as closely as possible to its original design. John Kariotis, structural engineer, worked out the engineering to bring this old building into conformance with present-day requirements for earthquake resistance. The building has been restored and returned to use.

Enter the building through the east doors. On your left is the new classroom, which you may walk through; it was originally the apparatus room, dark room, storeroom, workshop, and men’s toilet room. The lecture room of the original building was moved downstairs in the restoration for greater accessibility. Its size is about equal to that of the older second-floor classroom. The room has natural ventilation as well as its own heating/cooling system.

Leave the classroom through the door near the platform, passing a bust of George Henry Scripps. The room to your left, through the windows, is the Development

Department. Note that the offices have windows to the corridor for good use of natural light. These offices in the building's early days were for biologists, and each room had a seawater tank on its south side. The tanks have been removed, and there is no longer a seawater supply to this building.

Note the "sidewalk lights" overhead. These were re-discovered during restoration. Volunteers spent many hours scraping off mastic, asphalt tile, and paint, in order to bring them back to their original function of letting in good lighting.

The exhibit case contains various historical items, including a well-worn copy of *The Oceans*, the famous textbook written in this building by three Scripps authors and published in 1942. The office to the east of the front door has been furnished to look closely like an office in 1910. The 5-drawer cabinets and the coat closets are the original ones, as are some of the counters; the rest are replicas. The overhead lights were chosen as similar to the original; the heat registers now are hot-water, not steam; no longer are the original wood-burning stoves in any of the rooms.

Climb the stairs. The first room on the left was once the office of the only secretary, and had the only telephone on campus. The large room to the west is now used by the office of the SIO Graduate Department. Within its space was the old "Classroom," the site of numerous lectures, examinations, and parties. Many SIO graduate students defended their Ph.D. dissertations there. At one time, a partition had been added between the large columns, but this was torn out by the volunteers (who called their work "Demolition Therapy?"), to restore the original concept. During restoration an exit staircase was added at the southwest corner. Also, with the approval of the State Office of Historic Preservation, a deck was built on the west side, and a replica of the original west balcony was built on the east side where it is more visible. Room 20, which served as the Director's Office from 1910 to 1950, is furnished much like the upstairs rooms in 1910. The fireplace is functional. The restored room is used for many meetings and seminars.

Major donors to restoration of the building were: Robert P. Scripps, in memory of his mother; the J.W. Kieckhefer Foundation; Ametek; Scripps Industrial Associates; friends of Carl L. Hubbs; SIO alumni; more than 125 friends of "Old Scripps"; and a grant through the California Office of Historic Preservation.