



September 13, 2010

Mr. Rene Rubio
Director General
Camino Real Hotel
101 S. El Paso Street
El Paso, TX 79901-1107

RE: Preliminary Report; Art Glass Dome, Skylight & Lighting

Dear Mr. Rubio:

It was a pleasure to meet you in August and see the stunning art glass dome in the Camino Real Hotel. I also want to extend my thanks to your impressive hotel staff who were all highly competent and courteous from the shuttle drivers to the desk clerks and fabulous maintenance staff. I especially want to thank Fernanda Carrasco, Jose Ugalde, Manny Berrera and Jose Lopez for their time and patience in answering questions, and providing documentation and access to the dome.

This preliminary report summarizes my field survey of the art glass on August 10th, 11th and 12th from the roof top, interstitial space (between the skylight diffuser and art glass dome), and from the lift below. In addition to the information I gathered from inspecting and measuring the dome, I also researched original blueprints and historical articles at the El Paso Public Library. The library staff was very helpful, particularly Danny Gonzalez in the historical research department. The primary resources reviewed during my visit included:

- ◆ Hotel Paso del Norte: Historical Research file (articles from the 1940s through 1990s)
- ◆ Ponsford Collection: Archival Photographs
- ◆ Microfilm: *El Paso Times* and *El Paso Herald*, November 15th - 30th, 1912
- ◆ The Handbook of Texas Online, "Trost, Henry Charles"
- ◆ Englebrecht, Lloyd C. and June-Marie F., *Henry C. Trost: Architect of the Southwest* (El Paso Public Library Association, 1981).
- ◆ Walking Tour of El Paso (brochure)
- ◆ Original blueprints: Trost & Trost, Hotel Paso del Norte
- ◆ Under the Dome: Footsteps through History, Sandra Lyon Collins, editor, 1989.

PHASE 1: ART GLASS STABILAZATION WORK: (see attached reference diagram).

The art glass has not been worked on since 1984 when it was removed for cleaning and repairs. According to information found on page 56 of Under the Dome, the entire art glass dome was removed and re-installed the following year. There are several errors in the text including the description that the art glass is "built in 17 pieces"; the entire art glass dome actually breaks down into 49 panels (see attached diagram); 16 panels in each of the "A," "B" & "C" rings plus the oculus. The art glass was presumably cleaned and repaired (re-soldered) at minimum. Most of the art glass appears to be original but further review of the lead matrix that holds the glass is required to determine the full extent of re-leading that occurred in 1984. The art glass was probably reinstalled into the steel frame the same way it came out. Unfortunately, the art glass essentially relies on gravity and loose cotter-pins to hold it in place. Many cotter-pins are missing and some panels—particularly the "B" and "C" panels that make up the middle and bottom rings—have shifted in the frame [see Fig 1.] The "C" panels are particularly susceptible to hinging along the bottom zinc borders causing them to "creep" (slip) away from the steel frame revealing daylight or "light leaks" along the edges from certain viewing angles in the lobby.

PHASE 4: DIFFUSING SKYLIGHT WORK

The diffusing skylight is generally in good condition for nearly a century of service. It was originally glazed with hammered wire-glass throughout but the original glass only survives on the sidewalls today. The roof diffusing glass was presumably replaced with laminated glass during the work in the 1980s. If laminated glass is verified throughout the skylight, the heavy-gauge wire screens should be removed to allow more daylight to reach the art glass and facilitate maintenance on top of the skylight and diffusing glass. The sealants on the skylight glass are presumably 25 years old and near the end of their service life. The ventilator on top of the diffusing skylight and cladding could be cleaned and painted at the same time. Any and all clutter that is not required in the interstitial space should be removed—such as the old steam pipes that were abandoned many years ago. This will allow more room to safely move around the art glass dome, reduce shadows, allow more daylight to reach the art glass, and eliminate some of the obstacles to installing better backlighting [see Fig 6.]. This is a low priority but should be considered when scheduling future building maintenance.

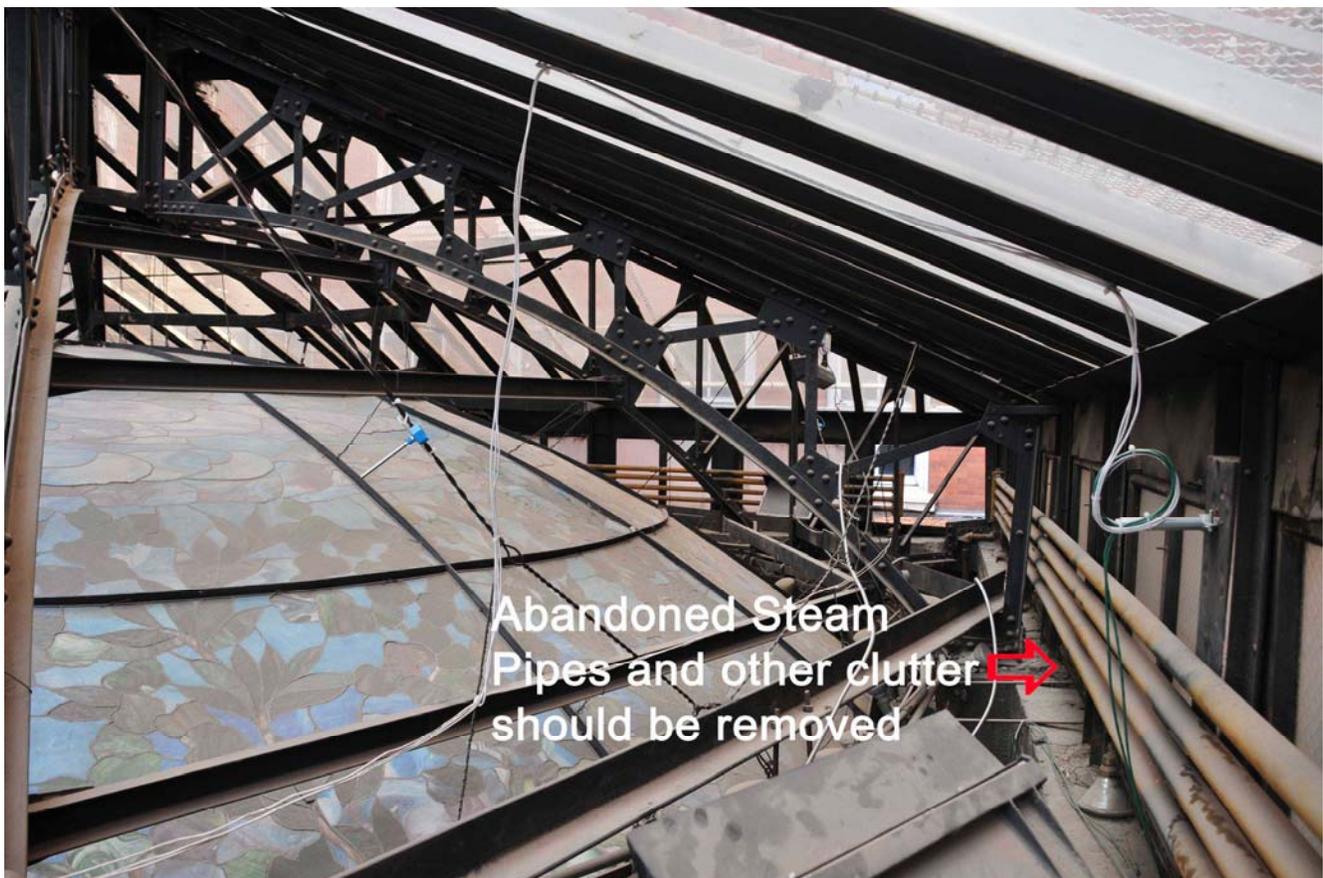


FIG 6. Interstitial space between the domes; abandoned steam radiation pipes on the right.

HISTORICAL “TIFFANY” ATTRIBUTION

Numerous resources attribute the art glass dome to Tiffany Studios of New York but this attribution may be erroneous. The art glass was likely produced by a lesser known studio emulating Tiffany Studios. I spent time perusing the historical resources available in the El Paso Library mentioned at the beginning of this preliminary report during my visit. I found no Tiffany references in the original articles and descriptions of the hotel when it opened. In fact, the first Tiffany reference I could find appears in an undated article that was definitely written after 1936 and possibly as late as the 1950s—a time when Tiffany was rediscovered and a renewed appreciation for everything Tiffany was growing among collectors.

The art glass dome was made with opalescent glass first developed by Tiffany, but I did not see any “favriile” glass from Tiffany’s famed “Corona Furnaces.” Moreover, while art glass landscapes were popularized by Tiffany, this one is comparatively rudimentary in design [see Fig 7.].



Fig 7. Though beautiful in its own right, the rudimentary art glass design does not appear to be Tiffany.

Two technical aspects of the art glass construction that point to Tiffany include the pebble-glass backplates of the clouds (although again, rudimentary); and solder-floated leading on the topside of the dome. However, the zinc border leads around all of the panels strongly points to a Chicago or Midwest studio. Zinc-came was chiefly produced by Chicago Metallic when the dome was fabricated. I am not aware of any other instance in which Tiffany Studios employed zinc despite viewing hundreds of Tiffany windows and domes around the country.

There are several other historical aspects that increase the circumstantial odds for a Chicago studio. Perhaps first and foremost is that most decorative artists for any early 20th century building were secured through the architect. Prior to settling in El Paso, the hotel’s architect, Henry Charles Trost, worked for Adler & Sullivan in Chicago between 1888-1896. Furthermore, the first hotel manager spent time in Chicago and was in charge of the Grand Pacific at the 1892 World’s Fair held there.

The first instance I could find where the Tiffany attribution was formally challenged was in Lloyd & June-Marie Engelbrecht’s summary research of Trost & Trost prepared for the El Paso Public Library in 1992 under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. On page three, they indicate:

“...It is not known which firm made the stained-glass dome in the lobby, still in place. A local oral tradition ties it to the Tiffany Studios; more likely, it would have been designed by Mitchel & Halbach of Chicago, a firm which worked with Trost & Trost on a number of El Paso buildings.”

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It's possible that Mitchell and Halbach provided the art glass if they were in fact hired to decorate the hotel. In the Biographical Index of Stained Glass Makers (Robert O. Jones) their bio reads:

Mitchell and Halbach. 1885- Chicago, IL Decorating firm. Window craftsmen included on staff in response to public demand in the mid 1880s. Lampshade department in 1890s. Owners were Otto William Mitchel, and J. Frederick Halbach.

Jones cites Sharon S. Darling's Chicago Ceramics and Glass as his source. Ms. Darling was employed by the Chicago Historical Society when her research for this book was completed in 1979. Further information on Mitchell and Halbach's work for Trost & Trost might be found within their archives. A more extensive search of the El Paso Times and El Paso Herald in the months leading up to—and after—construction of the hotel in 1912 might also yield more information on the contractors, decorators and artisans involved. Due to time constraints, my search was limited to the week before and after the grand opening.

The art glass dome is certainly "Tiffanyesque." That is, Tiffany-inspired, Tiffany-influenced and Tiffany in style. However, a false attribution is misleading to the public and may result in an over-inflated valuation and related insurance costs. This aspect should be researched further in an effort to identify or affirm the true maker.

If the work described herein is deferred for any length of time, we could develop specifications and bid documents for the eventual art glass restoration, when and if the hotel is prepared to move forward with the work in the future. These materials could be developed as a separate cost and pricing could be developed once the full scope of work is identified (e.g. backlighting, diffusing skylight, etc).

If you want to proceed with any of the work identified herein, please let me know and I will develop a formal proposal and Agreement for your approval. We are prepared to return as early as October 5th to begin Phase 1.

Sincerely,

Neal A. Vogel
Principal