

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

DEC - 5 2001

1458

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box and by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, NATIONAL PARKS categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name El Cortez Apartment Hotel
other names/site number El Cortez Hotel

2. Location

street & number 702 Ash Street not for publication
city or town San Diego vicinity
state California code CA county San Diego code 073
zip code 92101

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Kevin Egan 11/28/01
Signature of certifying official Date
California Office of Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is: for Signature of Keeper Date of Action
 entered in the National Register Edson H. Beall 1-17-02
 See continuation sheet.
 determined eligible for the National Register _____
 See continuation sheet.
 determined not eligible for the National Register _____
 removed from the National Register _____
 other (explain): _____

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form

(Property Name): El Cortez Apartment Hotel

(County and State): San Diego, California

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)	Category of Property (Check only one box)	Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in this count)	
		Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)		
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	_____ buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	_____ objects
			_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>Domestic</u>	Sub: <u>Hotel</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>Domestic</u>	Sub: <u>Multiple Dwelling</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th & 20th Century Revivals
Other: Spanish Colonial Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Reinforced Concrete
roof Concrete
walls Stucco
other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

See Attached Continuation Sheets

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- N Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Period of Significance

1927

Significant Dates

1927

Significant Person

(complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Walker & Eisen
William Simpson Construction Company

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary Location of Additional Data

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository:
Office Of Marie Burke Lia

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form

(Property Name): El Cortez Apartment Hotel

(County and State): San Diego, California

(Page 4)

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	11	485280	3620125	3		
2				4		

— See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Scott A. Moomjian, M.A., J.D.

organization Office Of Marie Burke Lia date August 7, 2001

street & number 427 C Street, Suite 416 telephone (619) 235-9766

city or town San Diego state CA zip code 92101

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

EL CORTEZ APARTMENT HOTEL
702 ASH STREET
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101

7. Narrative Description

INTRODUCTION

The El Cortez Apartment Hotel ("El Cortez") is located at 702 Ash Street in the El Cortez area of San Diego. Set at the northeast corner of Seventh and Ash Streets on Cortez Hill in downtown San Diego, the building occupies an entire city block. It is identified as Lots 1 through 12 in Block 11 of the Bay View Homestead or Caruther's Addition, Assessors Parcel Number 534-032-01.

EXTERIOR

The El Cortez is a fifteen-story tower constructed of reinforced concrete set upon a reinforced concrete foundation. Designed in a Spanish Colonial Revival or Spanish Renaissance architectural style, the building is situated diagonally on the site to take advantage of the sweeping views of San Diego's downtown and harbor. The building features a "C-shaped" floor plan which is divided into three sections—the main tower or central section of the building which consists of the first through fifteenth floors, and two projecting ells along the northwest and southeast sides of the building which serve the first through sixth floors. The latter ells are "cut back," tangent six-story wings set at a 45 degree angle from the central tower. This configuration reflects a stepped back appearance at the seventh, twelfth, and fifteenth floors.

The Spanish Colonial Revival architectural style is derived from earlier building forms influenced by the design elements brought to the New World from Spain and merged with the indigenous styles of the Americas. Various stylistic influences can be seen in Spanish Eclectic designs which capture the rich architectural heritage of old Spain. The style uses decorative details borrowed from the entire history of Spanish architecture. These may be of Moorish, Byzantine, Gothic, or Renaissance inspiration, an unusually rich and varied series of decorative precedents. Decorative details include a range of arch types, an asymmetrical pattern to the overall design, large massed blocks, spiral columns, pilasters, carved stonework, patterned tiles, red Mission tile roofs in a mix of styles, brick or tile vents, heavy wooden doors, a variety of window sizes and shapes, window grilles, cantilevered balconies (usually paired and glazed with multiple panes of rectangular glass), fountains, courtyards, walled gardens, towers, tile terraces and wrought iron accents.¹

The Spanish Colonial Revival style is most common in the southwestern states, particularly California, Arizona, and Texas. These were the areas heavily settled by the Spanish during their colonial period. With the development of the missions, ranchos, and public buildings, the Spanish influence on architecture was felt well into the 20th century. During the 1920s, many new communities in southern California were planned in the Spanish Eclectic style, as it symbolized the beauty and heritage of California. In addition, the designs blended well with the landscape of the region and allowed many of the newcomers from the cold climes of the East Coast to enjoy the outdoor lifestyle

¹ Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide To American Houses*, pp.417-421.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 2 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

of California. The Spanish Eclectic style reached its peak during the 1920s and 1930s and passed out of favor during the 1940s.²

The El Cortez consists of 8" reinforced concrete walls and concrete floors. The roof is flat with built-up roofing materials. The exterior consists of stucco on lath. Fenestration is varied. Windows are located along each floor across the main central section of the building and the two supporting ells. Varieties range from vertical double-hung with upper pane sashes, vertical double-hung pairs with upper pane sashes, as well as smaller vertical double-hung. Most of these windows are believed to be original.

Main Tower Section

The main section of the El Cortez is topped by the "tower," which is composed of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth floors. The fifteenth floor consists of a penthouse. The tower contains original crests, torches, pilasters, friezes, and scroll work. Of note is the fact that along the roofline above the fourteenth floor and below the fifteenth floors, richly ornate parapets and scroll work rise upward adding an elegant Spanish flair. The top of the tower is adorned with a red neon "El Cortez" sign which was added to the building in 2000. The original 1940 sign at this location had read "El Cortez Hotel." In the 1970s, that sign was replaced by one which read "El Cortez Center."

A broad band exists above the tenth floor with two projecting decorative balconies. Decorative arched molding exists above the windows behind the balconies. Above these windows, at the eleventh floor, are two non-operational leaf-shaped, quatrefoil windows. Two more broad bands, located above the twelfth and fourteenth floors are highlighted by short, decorative scrolled columns.

Ornate parapets and scroll work, which once topped the twelfth floor roof, no longer exist along the fourteenth and fifteenth floors, having been removed at an unknown time. Two metal enclosures with glass windows are located along the twelfth floor in the area formerly known as the "Starlight Room" (1956). The enclosures were added in 2000. In addition, an emergency staircase has been added to the northwest side of the main section during this year.

Ells

The El Cortez features two projecting ells along the northwest and southeast elevations. At these elevations, the ells include the first through sixth floors of the building. Originally, the building featured parapets and scroll work (identical to the main section above), as well as two decorative arched parapets (one on each ell). However, the parapets, scroll work, and arched parapets were removed at an unknown date. Original decorative molding located along the center of each ell at the fifth and sixth floors still remains.

Between the two ells, there originally existed a one-story, inverted "C-shaped" elevated driveway and entrance. This area featured the main entrance to the El Cortez and terrace above. The entrance to the building is highlighted by a magnificent ornament combination of carved pilasters, scrolls, and parapet with decorative crest. The entrance is

² McAlester, p.418.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 3 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

composed of cast stone, flanked by columns roped in cable molding and a cartouche overhead etched with "Sea Bienvenida," or "Be Welcomed." The entrance features a variety of motifs including shells, foliage, figures, urns, crests, ribbons. A large set of wooden doors and multi-paned inset windows is located within the recessed entrance. A palm garden, which originally existed at the corner of Seventh and Ash Streets, was replaced by one-story retail space in 1957. This retail space itself was replaced with newly constructed retail space in 2000. Overall, the exterior is in excellent condition.

Historic Alterations/Modifications

Over the years, the El Cortez had been the subject of numerous "Modern" modifications and/or alterations. Most improvements which affected the original design/construction of the building were performed during the early to mid-1950s. Overall, improvements which impacted the building included the installation of a neon "El Cortez" sign (1937) at the top of the building; the addition of the "Sky Room" on the fifteenth floor (1940); the addition of a swimming pool (1952); the addition of the "Caribbean Wing" along the northwest elevation (1954); the addition of the "Starlight Room" on the twelfth floor (1956); the construction of the "Starlight Express," an exterior glass elevator located off center to the southeast which served the Starlight and Sky Rooms (1956); the construction of one-story retail additions at the corner of Seventh and Ash Streets, which replaced the original Palm Garden, (1957); and the creation of a "moving sidewalk" which connected the El Cortez to the Travolator Motor Hotel which was built across Seventh Avenue (1959). Other subsequent changes to the exterior of the building during the late 1970s and early 1980s included the installation of air-conditioning units along the building's exterior.

Recent Alterations/Modifications

Beginning in June 2000, the El Cortez underwent substantial Certified Rehabilitation (Project Number 0914-98-CA-98-0755). During this period, major elements of the rehabilitation work included the removal of the Caribbean Wing (1954) and replacement with an auto court, garden court, and dining terrace; the removal of retail structures along Seventh and Ash Streets (mid-1950s) and replacement with new retail structures; the removal of decorative columns and trellis along the hotel driveway (mid-1950s) and the addition of a new "pull off/parking area" to complement the existing original driveway; the removal of an aluminum storefront and entry doors (mid-1950s) and replacement with replicated wooden doors and decorative ornamentation restored; repair of the Don Room facade (1927); restoration of balconies and doors (1927); the removal of the Starlight Room along the twelfth floor (1956) and restoration of original configuration; the removal of the Starlight Express glass elevator (1956) and restoration of original apartment configuration; the removal of the Sky Room along the fifteenth floor (1940) and resumption of apartment unit use; and the removal of mechanical equipment along the fifteenth floor (1927 with modifications over the years).³

INTERIOR

The basement of the El Cortez includes a garage, boiler, mechanical, electrical, fitness facility and storage rooms. The first floor is composed of the lobby and administrative offices within the former Aztec Dining Room. A portion of this space is dedicated to an historic photographic gallery with memorabilia on the building. First floor space formerly included restaurant, bathroom and kitchen space. The Don Room, which had been painted and slightly

³ "El Cortez Hotel," Historic Preservation Certification Application, Part 2, Item 5, Pages 1-13.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 4 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

modified over the years has been restored. It is basically octagonal in shape with restored wood flooring and carpeting, with light fixtures and intricately-carved sandalwood ceiling. Ceiling panels were carved in a style depicting the era of the Spanish Conquistadors.

Former guest floors, second through twelfth, were formerly double loaded corridors which had, over time, been substantially remodeled. Single-family living areas were converted into dormitory-style quarters during the late 1970s and early 1980s. While the original building had 117 units, comprised of 85 apartment suites and 32 hotel rooms, all rooms (except one suite on the thirteenth floor) were converted into hotel guest rooms over the years. While some original bathrooms, wood trim, moldings and paneled doors exist, the second floor interior including the Cotillion Room, have been extensively renovated and partitioned into meeting rooms. Ceilings throughout the building are plaster; except for some applied acoustic tile ceilings and sprayed acoustical ceilings in the lobby and guest rooms.

Prior to 1999, upper floors included the former Starlight Room on the twelfth floor; a penthouse suite on the fifteenth floor with two bedrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen and bathrooms; and the Sky Room on the fifteenth floor, which had been converted into a religious telephone center and chapel. Overall, the interior is in excellent condition.

Recent Alterations/Modifications

Certified rehabilitation work performed during 2000 to the interior, included the removal of employee locker rooms (1927) and Starlight Express equipment (1956) and its replacement with a new gymnasium facility; restoration of the main entry lobby floor and vaulted ceiling (1927); removal of elevator lobby wood paneling (1950s) in main entry lobby; and the addition of new lighting in main entry lobby.⁴

⁴ "El Cortez Hotel," pp.13-15.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 1 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

EL CORTEZ APARTMENT HOTEL
702 ASH STREET
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101

8. Statement of Significance

The El Cortez Apartment Hotel qualifies for the National Register of Historic Places under "Criterion C: Design/Construction," as a property which embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, and method of Spanish Colonial Revival or Spanish Renaissance construction, the only one of its kind designed in San Diego by the noted Southern California architectural firm of Walker & Eisen.

The El Cortez Apartment Hotel ("El Cortez") qualifies for the National Register of Historic Places under "Criterion C: Design/Construction," as a property which embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, and method of Spanish Colonial Revival or Spanish Eclectic construction, the only one of its kind designed in San Diego by the noted Southern California architectural firm of Walker & Eisen. Designed by the firm between October and December 1926, the El Cortez Apartment Hotel was constructed by the William Simpson Construction Company in 1927.

Brief History Of The El Cortez Area

The history of the El Cortez Area is well-documented. Named after the "imposing" El Cortez Apartment Hotel, the El Cortez Area encompasses a geographic section of San Diego which rises from around a 25 feet elevation along Front Street to approximately 65 feet at 10th Avenue. The area has been defined as bounded by Interstate 5 to the north, the community of Little Italy to the west, Interstate 163 to the east, and A Street to the south.¹ The highest point in the El Cortez Area is "Prospect Hill," located within the Bay View Homestead subdivision between Ash and Date Streets and Sixth and Tenth Avenues. This hill contained some of the most spectacular Victorian residences in the city.²

During the 1880s, prominent businessmen erected their homes on Prospect Hill because it provided them with magnificent views of the city and harbor as well as the city park. Unfortunately, the majority of ornate structures and their gardens from that period are no longer in existence. After San Diego recovered from the Panic of 1893, affluent citizens constructed more modern and less massive residences on the hill. With plans beginning in 1909 for a Panama-California Exposition in the newly named "Balboa Park," the Cortez area experienced a surge in hotel and apartment building. Between 1910-1913, the majority of the apartment complexes in the Cortez area were erected.³

After city planner John Nolen returned to San Diego in 1926 and revised his 1908 plan for the city, it became apparent that local visionaries, along with several businessmen, desired to see the city develop in an orderly fashion

¹ Kyle E. Ciani and Cynthia Malinick, "From Spanish Romance To Neon Confidence And Demolition Fear: The Twentieth-Century Life Of The El Cortez Hotel," p.3.

² "Lia/Brandes Team," *Historic Site Inventory Of El Cortez*, p.1.

³ "Lia/Brandes Team," pp.1-2.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 2 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

with a focus on the waterfront and Balboa Park. Nolen's plan included several buildings and a civic center on the waterfront to be surrounded by other public buildings and a tree-line paseo leading up Cedar Street, connecting the waterfront to the park area. Acting in anticipation of the implementation of this plan, several stately structures were then erected in the Cortez area.⁴

The El Cortez Apartment Hotel

The El Cortez is located on Lots 1-12, Block 11 of the Bay View Homestead, also called "Caruther's Addition," according to Maps 150 and 254, filed on January 29, 1873 and August 18, 1871, respectively. The site was once owned by Oren S. Hubbell, a well-known capitalist and banker, who had constructed a magnificent Victorian residence on the property around 1887. In 1893, Ralph Granger, the founder of National City, acquired the property. Less than two months later, the property was sold to Fannie C. Grant, the daughter-in-law of former President Ulysses S. Grant and wife to Ulysses S. Grant, Jr. From this prominent residence atop Prospect Hill, U.S. Grant, Jr. had a commanding view of downtown San Diego and could watch the construction of his large hotel, the U.S. Grant (which began construction in 1905 and was completed in 1910).⁵ In 1926, the U.S. Grant Company sold the property to the Southern Trust and Commerce Bank, which shortly thereafter sold the property to Richard T. Robinson, Jr, a local capitalist and landowner, who would finance the construction of the El Cortez.⁶

Prior to the construction of the El Cortez, San Diego had, between during the mid-1910s and mid-1920s, experienced intense urban development, much of which centered around the growing presence of the United States Navy. The installation of major naval bases in San Diego County helped create "a new federal city" in the West as construction, technological, and industrial concerns scurried to serve the military. During the 1920s, the city continued to profit from its amiable relationship with the military as well as a measurable increase in tourist dollars, whereby San Diego's population, like other warm-climate cities, doubled during this period. Cortez Hill at this time represented one of the first neighborhoods in San Diego to have combined commercial and residential living as the center of fashionable entertainment. Major building projects in and around Cortez Hill during the mid-1920s, took form to "announce the confidence of the age. Much of the new architecture symbolized the strength of banking and manufacturing [as well as recreation and entertainment] in the city."⁷

The El Cortez was financed by Richard T. Robinson, Jr., who secured the two million dollar venture with a national bonding company. Robinson selected the Los Angeles architectural firm of Walker & Eisen (composed of Albert R. Walker and Percy Eisen) to design the building.⁸ The design was prepared for Robinson's "Grant Terrace

⁴ "Lia/Brandes Team," p.3.

⁵ "El Cortez Hotel," p.1; Evelyn I. Banning, "U.S. Grant, Jr., A Builder of San Diego," pp.9, 11.

⁶ "El Cortez Hotel," p.1.

⁷ Ciani and Malinick, pp.3-5.

⁸ Ciani and Malinick, p.5.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 3

El Cortez Apartment Hotel

Name of Property

San Diego County, California

County and State

Building Company," in October 1926 and revised in December 1926.⁹ The William Simpson Construction Company of Los Angeles oversaw construction.¹⁰

Walker & Eisen

The architectural firm of Walker & Eisen was comprised of principals Albert R. Walker and Percy A. Eisen, who formed their association in Los Angeles during the year 1919. Both Walker and Eisen were native Californians. Eisen, a second generation Californian, was born in December 1885 in San Francisco. With a father (Theodore Eisen) and grandfather (Augustus Eisen) as architects, it is little wonder that Eisen followed in their footsteps. He was educated in the public school system and received his license to practice architecture in 1906. After which, he worked with his father under the firm name "Eisen and Son."¹¹

Albert Walker was born in Sonoma, California in 1881. In 1902, he moved to the East coast where he attended Brown University in Rhode Island. Upon his return to California, he joined the architectural firm of Hebbard and Gill in San Diego, composed of William Sterling Hebbard and Irving John Gill. After a year in San Diego, Walker moved to Los Angeles where he continued his apprenticeship, first with Parkinson and Bergstrum, later with the firm of A.F. Rosenheim, Hunt and Grey. In 1909, he established his own practice where he primarily produced designs for domestic and church architecture. In 1910, Walker formed a partnership with John Terrell Vawter, called "Walker and Vawter." This association lasted until October 1917 when Vawter joined the United States Army. Over this period, the firm produced varied styles for residences and churches.¹²

In 1919, Walker entered into a partnership with Eisen which was to last until 1941. Over the course of their partnership, Eisen occupied himself predominately with the procurement of contracts for the firm. His social acceptance and friendly disposition aided him in gaining access to investors, and it is estimated that he arranged for more than sixty per cent of the firm's commissions. Walker, on the other hand, was primarily concerned with the design work, although both men shared this responsibility. His mastery of detail and special ability in anticipating construction costs and other related problems appear to have been a particular asset in attracting prospective clients. By bringing together this combination of ability, personality, business acumen, and respect for traditional designs, these men quickly established their reputation as substantial architects.¹³

During the 1920s, Southern California became the focal point for one of the largest internal migrations in the history of the United States. Almost one and one-half million people had settled in or near Los Angeles during this period. Construction of new buildings at this time overwhelmingly favored structures of a commercial nature, most of which were designed for the tourist trade. Office buildings, apartment houses, hotels, and motion picture theaters

⁹ Walker & Eisen, Architectural Drawings, "Apartment Hotel Building For The Grant Terrace Building Co."

¹⁰ Ciani and Malinick, p.8.

¹¹ Donald J. Schippers, "Walker & Eisen: Twenty Years of Los Angeles Architecture, 1920-1940," p.372; University of San Diego, *San Diego Architects, 1868-1939*, p.58.

¹² Schippers, pp.373-374; University of San Diego, p.186.

¹³ Schippers, p.374.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 4

El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

predominated. In particular, a large number of new apartment houses and hotels went into construction over a widespread area. Through the construction of large commercial buildings, the firm of Walker & Eisen gained the status of a top-ranking organization. Not only did the firm obtain the bulk of contracts in the city, but also employed the most draftsman and architects. In short, it was largely through hotel and apartment house building that they made their debut as business partners.¹⁴

Percy Eisen died in November 1946, and Albert Walker expired in September 1958.¹⁵ Over the course of its twenty-two year existence, Walker & Eisen produced designs for various hotels and apartment houses, office and bank buildings, and theaters and stores. The firm's designs are located in almost every major city in California, including San Francisco and Berkeley. In other states, the firm designed buildings in Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona; Salt Lake City, Utah; Denver, Colorado; Portland, Oregon, and Las Vegas, Nevada. In Mexico, the firm designed a building in Mexico City, and another in Baja, California. Examples of the firm's apartment and hotel work during the 1920s include the Ardmore Apartments in Los Angeles (1924); the William Penn Hotel in Whittier (1924); the Hollywood Plaza Hotel in Hollywood (1924); the Havenhurst Apartments in Hollywood (1924); the Breakers Hotel in Long Beach (1925); the Beverly Wilshire Hotel (1926); the Arcady and Gaylor Apartments in Los Angeles (1926); the Mar Monte Hotel in Santa Barbara (1927); and the El Mirador Hotel in Palm Springs (1927). Of these, the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, designed during the same year as the El Cortez, has been noted as "an excellent example of the product of Walker and Eisen, and at the same time is representative of one of the stylistic trends of the 1920s."¹⁶ Many of these designs emphasized the Beaux-Arts tradition including adaptations of the Renaissance and Mediterranean expressions based upon classic models. Variations of the Romanesque and Gothic were wedded in a startling array. To this combination, "Spanish," "Mission," and "Moresque" were often added.¹⁷ Other buildings of note designed by the firm include the Fine Arts/Signal Oil Building in Los Angeles (1925); the United Artist Theater and Texaco Building in Los Angeles (1927); and the Sunkist Building in Los Angeles (1936). The firm engaged in many public works projects during the early to mid-1930s.¹⁸

The William Simpson Construction Company

In 1879, the founder of the William Simpson Construction Company, William Simpson, began a career as a builder in Denver Colorado. In 1903, the William Simpson Construction Company was incorporated in Denver, and in later years, was changed to a California Corporation. Until 1912, the company maintained headquarters in Denver, during which time projects were constructed throughout the Western United States for the United States War Department, the Denver Rio Grande Railroad, and other large corporations.¹⁹

¹⁴ Schippers, pp.374-379.

¹⁵ Schippers, p.391.

¹⁶ Schippers, p.379.

¹⁷ Schippers, p.381.

¹⁸ Schippers, p.390.

¹⁹ William Simpson Construction Company, *Building With Confidence*, n.p.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 5

El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

In 1912, the company moved to San Diego, and three years later, relocated to Los Angeles. In 1917, William Simpson died, leaving the company to administered by his two sons—William A. Simpson (President) and C.C. Simpson (Vice-President). Between 1912-1920, the company was involved in many projects, including work for the United Verde Copper Company at Clarkdale, Arizona, and the United Verde Extension Copper Company at Jerome, Arizona. The company, however, concentrated upon the construction of the Santa Fe Railroad between San Diego and Albuquerque. Two government projects were also built during this period, one a cantonment for the United States Army in 1918 at San Pedro, California, and a Veterans Hospital at Prescott, Arizona in 1920.²⁰

Between 1921-1931, the company directed its attention to construction projects within the San Diego and Los Angeles areas. Projects completed during this period included work on office buildings, theaters, hotels, warehouses, stores, and churches, many of which, cost in excess of \$1 million. In 1921, the company constructed the first of seven buildings of the San Diego Naval Hospital. From 1931-1939, the company continued to work on large projects including the Planetarium in Griffith Park, the I. Magnin Store Building, and the Pellisier Building, all of which were in Los Angeles. With the coming of the Second World War, the company built the private Vega Plant for the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation for \$5.5 million. During the war, the company was awarded nine contracts by the Navy Department totaling approximately \$35 million dollars. After the war, the company resumed private construction.²¹ Of note is the fact that the William Simpson Construction Company collaborated with Walker & Eisen in the construction of the El Cortez, and other buildings in Los Angeles including the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, the California Fruit Growers Exchange Building, the Farmers Insurance Building, the Commercial Exchange Building, and the Medical Dental Building.²²

In November 1926, the former Grant residence was demolished during groundbreaking for the new construction of the El Cortez, a fourteen-story Spanish Colonial Revival or Spanish Renaissance apartment hotel. The cost for the hotel, its landscaping, and furnishings was two million dollars. Of this amount, \$1,200,000 was spent on actual construction while the remainder was used for landscaping and furnishings.²³

The El Cortez opened for business on November 23, 1927. Over 50,000 San Diegans out of an approximate population of 159,000 toured the hotel on its opening day. Like the El Cortez, “typical American hotel apartment house[s]” as symbols of capitalistic success during the 1920s,

“became much more than a place of temporary or even permanent residence, developing instead along more public lines and becoming almost a civic monument, a center of communal life. At these hotels, society staged great dinners and balls, political organizations rallied, and leaders called mass meetings. In a very real sense, the hotel became a town hall, a place in which the guests felt an instinctive, if somewhat irrational ownership. It is this public character that made necessary great monumental lobbies, magnificent ballrooms, and capacious restaurants.”²⁴

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “El Cortez Hotel,” p.1.

²⁴ Ciani and Malinick, p.13.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 6

El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

Nowhere was the communal emphasis on recreation and entertainment more profound than in the El Cortez. The octagonal-shaped "Don Room" on the ground floor, fashioned in an older Spanish style, was considered the "gem" of the hotel.²⁵ Designed to evoke images of Spanish galleons, the room's ornately carved sandalwood ceiling supported by eight massive pillars and a \$3,000 inlaid maple floor provided San Diegans with a grand ballroom unlike any other ever seen in the area. Extraordinary special effects of electric lights which shown through tiny openings in transparent blue glass overhead center panels produced the feeling of "dancing under the stars." The Don Room soon became the site of wedding receptions for San Diego's most prominent families as well as dinners for visiting dignitaries. In addition, the El Cortez also featured other public pleasures such as the 200 seat "Aztec Dining Room" which has been described as a "scheme of Moorish Spanish elaboration on a fundamental Aztec design," an "outstanding eating rendezvous of the community...because of its vast windows, brilliant ceiling and handsome equipment."²⁶

Very little is known about the early history of the El Cortez. From all accounts, however, the hotel gained popularity with San Diegans and quickly established itself as the social center for San Diego.²⁷ Despite the fact that the Depression gripped San Diego during the early 1930s, the El Cortez continued to host special engagements. Unfortunately, the hotel's owner, Richard Robinson, did not weather the financial storm as well as his hotel. In 1936, his Grant Terrace Building Company sold the building to the San Diego-based El Cortez Company.²⁸

With the acquisition of the El Cortez, the El Cortez Company began a large expansion program. In 1937, the Company installed a large "El Cortez" sign which could be seen for miles around night and day. In June 1940, the Company added the "Sky Room" on the fourteenth floor. Known for its 360 degree view, patrons could enjoy ocean sunsets through 70 percent glass exterior walls. Other features associated with the new construction included stylish decor with an art deco Lucite "extravaganza" above its elliptical-shaped bar, and a modern air conditioning system which changed the air every four minutes. The Sky Room soon became the social gathering place for fashionable San Diegans.²⁹

During the Second World War, the El Cortez served another purpose divorced from luxury and entertainment. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, United States Marines secured the El Cortez as a point of military operation. The very next day, an anti-aircraft battery and radar station was installed on the roof of the building. Between 1942-1945, the Army's anti-aircraft 244th Regiment in San Diego occupied the roof.³⁰

The Second World War brought unprecedented prosperity to San Diego. Connections to defense production and general support of major military installations led to a healthy economy which lasted until the 1980s. The expansion of business beyond downtown San Diego spurred the need for suburban planning and improvements. The development of Mission Valley for shopping and Mission Bay for recreation created new attractions for San Diegans.

²⁵ "El Cortez Hotel," p.2.

²⁶ Ciani and Malinick, p.13.

²⁷ "El Cortez Hotel," p.2.

²⁸ "El Cortez Hotel," p.2; Ciani and Malinick, p.14.

²⁹ Ciani and Malinick, pp.14-15.

³⁰ Ciani and Malinick, pp.16-17.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 7 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

The allure of these new leisure opportunities created competition for the El Cortez. According to some, in the midst of the “Modern” era, the El Cortez was in need of a change in its Spanish design.³¹

In October 1951, the El Cortez was purchased by San Francisco businessman Harry Handlery, the President of Handlery Hotels, Inc. The thirteenth hotel acquired by Handlery, who was reputed to have fallen in love with it, he soon made it his personal residence. Determined to make the El Cortez into a “dream hotel” and “the finest hotel on the Pacific Coast,” Handlery almost immediately pursued a multi-million dollar program of expansion, addition and alteration. Preserving the original beauty of the structure, however, did not figure into his plans. The strength of Handlery’s determination was exemplified by his statement, “the hammers will never be still as long as I own the Cortez.”³²

Handlery well understood the American consumer of the 1950s. American lust for consumer goods after the Second World War did not include a luxury hotel room in slowly declining downtown. In the 1950s, traveling vacationers turned to motels for lodging. The presence of motels (from 26,000 establishments in 1948 to 60,000 motels in 1950 and 120,000 by 1972) signaled the demise of the hotel. The popularity of motel use shifted travel stay, and consequently dollars, from urban centers to the suburbs. To fight the lure of new suburban shopping centers, Handlery installed technological novelties such as marketing ploys to attract tourists and residents alike to the El Cortez, especially the white, middle-class visitor. The El Cortez soon “catered to suburban families looking for a more affordable ballroom to hold their wedding, prom or bar mitzvah banquet.”³³

In order to attract resort visitors back to San Diego’s downtown and especially to the El Cortez, Handlery added a swimming pool in 1952, the Caribbean Wing in 1954, the Sky Room on the fifteenth-floor, the Starlight Room on the twelfth-floor in 1956, and the Travolator Motor Hotel across Seventh Avenue in 1959, all of which catered to a new kind of client—the business traveler in for conventions or sales meetings. The Caribbean Wing served as Handlery’s answer to the absence of a San Diego convention center. The eight-story, two million dollar addition, included 100 rooms and suites, a grand ballroom, swimming pool, patio, and patio-side dining room called the “Café Cortez.” To entice visitors to spend more than just hotel dollars in San Diego, Handlery replaced the palm court and garden of the original hotel design with retail space at the street floor.³⁴ In order to make room for the bar within the Sky Room, which provided spectacular views of San Diego, the Pacific Ocean, and Mexico, three penthouse suites on the fifteenth floor had to be removed. The Sky and Starlight Rooms “created widespread excitement for the fabulous view and chic experiences they offered to patrons, especially to young adults enjoying their first tastes of nightlife.”³⁵

With all of Handlery’s changes, arguably the most prominent and impressive was the addition of the “Starlight Express” or “Haroun al Handlery’s Flying Carpet,” an exterior glass elevator installed in 1956 which delivered passengers from the hotel lobby all the way up to the fifteenth-floor Sky Room. The elevator also made stops at a new dining room built over the lobby deck and the Starlight Room. Designed by architect C.J. “Pat” Paderewski, the

³¹ Ciani and Malinick, p.17.

³² “El Cortez Hotel,” p. 2; Ciani and Malinick, p.17.

³³ Ciani and Malinick, p.18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 8 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

elevator was built by Elevator Electric, Inc., a local firm, and became only the second operational glass exterior elevator in the world. The elevator's unique design used a hydraulic ram principle which created quite a stir among architects and builders. While an exterior elevator in Europe operated on the traditional cable principle, Paderewski's design called for a 12-inch thick steel ram to push the cab up the front of the hotel. The solid steel ram, powered by five motors aggregating 150 horse-power, dropped 175 feet into the ground when the elevator was at rest on the lobby level. Two rails held the cab in place, and neon stars decorated the enameled metal in between the elevator rails.³⁶ After its construction, the elevator soon became the site of many promotional stunts, an object of interest to many, attracting visitors to the hotel--one of the most memorable forms of entertainment for San Diegans.³⁷ In addition to the Starlight Express, in 1959, Paderewski also designed an elevated moving sidewalk which linked the El Cortez with the Travolator Motor Hotel, a \$2.3 million motel-garage across Seventh Avenue.³⁸

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Handlery and his staff catered to the downtown business community. Over this period, the El Cortez became the center of meetings, programs, and fundraisers. Without a convention center in the city, many organizations turned to the hotel which served as the site for "a variety of business activities."³⁹

In 1965, Harry Handlery died. This circumstance signaled the decline of the El Cortez as a "center of the downtown social world." While Handlery's son, Paul, took over the hotel's management after his father's death, he did not share in his father's love of the hotel. In October 1978, the El Cortez Hotel was sold to the World Evangelism, Inc., headed by Reverend Morris Cerullo for almost eight million dollars. After this conveyance, the hotel entered into a short period of service as a home to evangelical ministry and training. World Evangelism, Inc. left an indelible mark upon the building. Not only did the organization poorly install individual air conditioning units which eventually disfigured the hotel's exterior and add a neon "El Cortez Center" sign atop the building, but interior spaces were modified to accommodate cafeteria-style eating rather than fine dining. In addition, single-family living areas were converted into dormitory-style quarters and the deluxe furnishings of the hotel's early years were auctioned off. The hotel quickly fell into disrepair when the organization failed to expand as intended.⁴⁰ In an effort to bring in income, the organization attempted to rent some hotel and convention center facilities to the public.⁴¹

In December 1981, World Evangelism, Inc. sold the El Cortez to El Cortez Associates, a partnership comprised of the Considine California Company, Inc. and Bass Brothers Realty Company of Philadelphia.⁴² In December 1986, the property was acquired by J. Mark Grosvenor. In July 1990, the El Cortez was designated as City of San Diego Historical Landmark #269 on the basis of the building's long-time status as San Diego's "landmark hotel"; its association with many and nationally significant personages, including Richard T. Robinson, Jr. and Harry Handlery;

³⁶ Ciani and Malinick, pp.20-21.

³⁷ Ciani and Malinick, pp.18-19.

³⁸ Ciani and Malinick, p.21.

³⁹ Ciani and Malinick, pp.21-22.

⁴⁰ Ciani and Malinick, p.23.

⁴¹ "El Cortez Hotel," p.5.

⁴² *Ibid.*

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 9 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

its having been the focus of many significant local events; and its significance as a local work of prominent Los Angeles architects, Walker and Eisen.⁴³ The property is today owned by Janopaul Block SD Number 1 LLC which acquired the property in 1997.

Significance

The El Cortez Apartment Hotel ("El Cortez") qualifies for the National Register of Historic Places under "Criterion C: Design/Construction," as a property which embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, and method of Spanish Colonial Revival or Spanish Renaissance construction, the only one of its kind designed in San Diego by the noted Southern California architectural firm of Walker & Eisen. Designed by the firm between October and December 1926, the El Cortez Apartment Hotel was constructed by the William Simpson Construction Company in 1927. In its current appearance, the building is in excellent condition. It features such characteristics indicative of the Spanish Colonial Revival style as an asymmetrical facade in massed block form with a dominant, central tower element; a rich, recessed and arched doorway of cast stone flanked by ornate columns; smooth plaster exterior walls with decorative molding; double-hung and quatrefoil windows; false balconies; flat roof with pilasters topped with Corinthian columns, finials and roofline cresting, a dentil course, intricate cross work; courtyard; and tiled terrace area.

⁴³ City of San Diego, Historical Site Board, Resolution Number R-90072513, Adopted July 25, 1990.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 9 Page 1 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

EL CORTEZ APARTMENT HOTEL
702 ASH STREET
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 9 Page 2

El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 10 Page 1 El Cortez Apartment Hotel
Name of Property
San Diego County, California
County and State

EL CORTEZ APARTMENT HOTEL
702 ASH STREET
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101

10. Verbal Boundary Description & Justification

Verbal Boundary Description

The El Cortez Apartment Hotel ("El Cortez") is identified as Lots 1 through 12 in Block 11 of the Bay View or Caruther's Addition, Assessors Parcel Number 534-032-01. It is located at the northeast corner of Seventh and Ash Streets on Cortez Hill in downtown San Diego. The El Cortez is bounded by Beech Street to the north, Ash Street to the south, Seventh Avenue to the west, and Eighth Avenue to the east.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries selected for the El Cortez are justified to encompass the building and the site on which it is located.