

## **Downtown Laguna Beach: Architectural Treasures Adorn This Artistic City**

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**Laguna Beach County Water District Building**

**Attracted by Laguna's deep canyons**, pristine ocean, numerous coves and plentiful available land, this town's first settlers began arriving here nearly 150 years ago, in the 1870s. Back then, the 'downtown' area was available for homesteading, and entrepreneurs, developers and artists soon settled here, building homes, schools and businesses.

One early homesteader was John Damron, who sold 528 acres to George Rogers for \$1000 in 1878. Rogers built a home for his family here, and, with his daughter Lizzie, planted a pepper tree in front of the house. That mature tree now frames the front of City Hall as a living testament to Rogers's enterprising spirit.

Laguna Beach had only 300 residents in 1910. The few buildings here, the majority in downtown, included a general store and post office, a hotel and a smattering of cottages. But downtown Laguna began to grow in 1912 after Elmer Jahraus opened the lumberyard whose site we'll be visiting in a moment.

As more settlers arrived and built homes and businesses, downtown Laguna Beach became known for its old-fashioned ambiance and diversity of

architectural styles. By the mid-twentieth century, as planned communities were spreading over much of south Orange County, this artistic city by the sea was refurbishing its historic buildings. Many of these charming structures still grace downtown, from Coast Highway to Third Street and City Hall, from Legion Street to Broadway at the north.



**Main Beach 90-Year-Old Lifeguard Tower** (All images, 2014 ©Tom Lamb)

**Our tour of historic downtown** begins at Laguna's hexagonal lifeguard tower on Main Beach. Erected in the 1920s at the Union Oil gas station on Coast Highway, it was moved to this location in 1937. First aid and rescue equipment are kept on the ground floor, but the tower's top floor has become an observation deck.

A jaunt to Legion Street affords a visit to the turn-of-the-century classic Legion Hall building with its hipped, gabled roof, front porch and stoop. As a former school built on Park Avenue in 1908, it was purchased, renamed and moved to its current location by the American Legion in 1929. Nearby is Hotel Laguna, built in 1930 in Mission Revival style. As the third hotel building at this address, this beachfront venue features parapets, a mock bell tower, an inner courtyard, a dining veranda with ocean view and an alcove with numerous historic photos. As a popular Hollywood retreat, it attracted a number of famous figures, including Humphrey Bogart, Errol Flynn and John Barrymore.

**Across the street from Hotel Laguna** is the refurbished Provincial Revival style Tommy Bahama Building. Built in 1931 as the Heisler Building, the combination restaurant and clothing store was upgraded recently with stucco façade and double hung windows. Up Laguna Avenue to Park Avenue, you'll

find St. Francis By-The-Sea American Catholic Church with its Mediterranean revival architecture. It was founded and built by Reverend Percy Wise Clarkson in 1933, using materials salvaged from the Long Beach earthquake of that year. The church features an adobe-tiled gable roof, plaster facing and a wooden bell tower. The front bay, forming the altar inside, has a half-moon stained glass transom. The building is listed in Guinness World Records as the 'Smallest Catholic Church.' On the corner of Park Avenue and Glenneyre Street, you'll find the Cope House, built by S.H. Cope in 1897. The oldest home in downtown Laguna, it boasts Victorian architecture reminiscent of homes in the East and Midwest, a multi-gabled roof and board-and-batten walls. The current owner has restored and maintains this building in pristine condition.



**Historic Legion Hall, a Downtown Laguna Landmark**

**Back up South Coast Highway** a stop at the White House Restaurant reveals more history. Built in 1918, it features large front-facing gables, a steep pitched roof and the casement windows characteristic of early Laguna buildings. Along with excellent food and a broad menu, this comfortable eatery displays a gallery of historic photos. Just beyond Ocean Avenue is South Coast Cinemas with its old-fashioned balcony seating. Opened in 1935 as the New Lynn Theater, it is Mediterranean in style, with French doors and wrought iron balcony balustrades.

Three buildings on Forest Avenue illustrate this city's allegiance to architectural preservation. The Laguna Presbyterian Church on the corner of Second Avenue was constructed in 1928 by Roy Ropp, who is also noted for founding the [Pageant of the Masters](#). This Gothic-inspired Mediterranean revival building features stucco walls, tiled roofs and a large bucolic garden

open to all passers-by. Bells in the church's tower remind pedestrians that another hour has passed. Nearby at 384 Forest Avenue is the former office of Laguna Beach Lumber, which was in business from 1912 to 1975 and which provided wood for ninety percent of Laguna's older homes. This majestic Norman-style structure features an elevated front-facing gable at one end, a long side-facing gable, smaller sub-gables, recessed entry and double wood doors. After closing, the lumberyard office became the Ivy House and Cedar Creek restaurants, and is today the Lumberyard Restaurant.



**Mediterranean Revival 1901 Downtown Laguna Firehouse**

**At the corner of Forest Avenue and Third Street**, you'll see the classic 1901 Fire Station designed by Aubrey St. Clair. (The architect was the son of Norman St. Clair, whose watercolors helped establish Laguna Beach as an art colony.) This Mediterranean revival firehouse has a red-tiled roof, stucco finishing, fire truck doors and a Spanish ornamented tower in the rear. To the right of the firehouse is the complementary architecture of Laguna Beach County Water District. Designed primarily with one story with a second story over the northerly section, it also features a tiled and gabled roof, an entry arcade on the lower story, and inviting trees, lawns and flowers in front.

The final stop on our architectural tour is at the Murphy Smith Bungalow on Ocean Avenue, near Beach Street. This small board-and-batten home has cozy front and back porches with French doors in the front bedroom. Built in 1920, it is the showcase of the Laguna Beach Historical Society, which provided invaluable research for this article. The beach-style cottage has been lovingly maintained and decorated with period furnishings, kitchen appliances, clothing, medicine bottles, paintings and photos of early settlers. Open Friday

through Sunday from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m., it is like a large piece of folk art and well worth a visit.



**Murphy Smith Bungalow, Home of Laguna Beach Historical Society**

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