

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

LIFE

17 renovated Crystal Cove cottages could be coming soon

March 6, 2017 - Updated March 9, 2017 9:35 a.m.
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Crystal Cove Alliance founder and vice president Laura Davick, left, and President/CEO Alix Hobbs walk along a row of historic cottages that are yet to be refurbished. The project is finally going up before the Coastal Commission. (Photo by Ana Venegas, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Laura Davick walks through a tiny, rundown cottage in Crystal Cove and brushes a spiderweb off her face. The interior in this and other aging beach cottages is as decayed and dilapidated as the ocean view outside is spectacular. Tiny mounds of wood show where termites dine. Rust from the salty air clings to every inch of exposed metal. Random wires poke out from the walls like crazed eyebrows. And a simple walk on the stairway is a risk. Some steps dodge the missing planks — the empty spots that make the staircase look like a toothless grin — and others land on wood that could give way any second. It all makes for a somber sight for one of the most in-demand areas along the California coast.

Though Crystal Cove buzzes with life — the nearby Beachcomber Cafe is busy and other, renovated cottages in the area are in constant demand — the last of the area's 17 historic beach cottages are in dire need of a makeover.

On Wednesday, the California Coastal Commission is expected to vote on starting the final stage of a restoration project decades in the making. "I can't quite quit until these (cottages) are all done," said Davick, founder and vice president of the nonprofit Crystal Cove Alliance, who grew up in one of these cottages. "Every one of these has to be restored."

FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC

Crystal Cove has long been linked to Hollywood. A century ago, movie producers used the stretch of sand between Laguna Beach and Newport Beach as a film location. Sometimes, they left behind things like fake palm fronds and, occasionally, huts.

Some people used the huts as a place to sleep by the ocean. Soon, the huts were joined by tents filled with more people who were starting to value staying at the beach. During a quick tour of the area, Davick points out the cottages that were built with wood that became available on Valentine's Day, 1927, when a lumber schooner washed ashore at Crystal Cove. It was bad luck for the sailors, but it was a gift for people wanting tiny homes on the sand. Soon, a tight-knit community formed on a slice of cottages that stood near the center of the 3,000-acre stretch of coves and bluffs and beaches.

In 1979, after generations of people had lived in those cottages, the entire stretch was sold to California by the Irvine Co. In 2001, the state evicted the families still living in the cottages — people sometimes referred to as “cove-ites.” It was an emotional end for people who had grown up in a world of beach bonfires and sunset martinis and lobster roasts on the sand.

The idea then, and now, was to boost public use of the area. Davick was a cove-ite. She grew up in Cottage No. 2, and lived there into her 40s. She was one of the people who resisted an early plan, from a developer, to turn the area into a luxury resort. In 1999, she founded the Alliance to Rescue Crystal Cove, now known as the Crystal Cove Alliance, a non-profit organization partner with California State Parks. Her mission? To preserve the cottages as a piece of California history. “This is a huge public-access story,” Davick said. “It was a dangerous precedent, to put a luxury resort on state parks land. State parks are to be affordable and open to everyone.”

The first phase of restoration opened in 2006, when 22 cottages were restored, with 13 of them rented out to the public at relatively low rates. Seven more cottages have been restored since, some as overnight accommodations, others for educational endeavors.

So the next step — complete restoration of the last 17 cottages — is a familiar idea for Davick and the Alliance. “This is it. This is our coastline. This is all you have,” she said. “This place gives people that sense of nostalgia. You walk back in time to simpler times. It’s an experience people crave to come down here and have.”

RESTORING HISTORY

It’s not going to be as easy as slapping on a fresh coat of paint and replacing a few broken windows. Every piece of every house, down to every nail, has to be evaluated to see if it should be saved for historical purposes. The sandy bluff has to be secured. And, in some cases, the entire home will need to be lifted onto concrete blocks so it isn’t washed away by waves as sea levels rise.



A window in one of the historic cabins on the sand is from a home belonging to Carmen Miranda. (Photo by Ana Venegas, Orange County Register/SCNG)

“It’s more expensive than starting with a piece of land,” said Alix Hobbs, the chief executive of Crystal Cove Alliance, who was hired about six months ago to help spearhead the final phase of cottage restoration.

Cottage No. 12, for example, is in such bad shape that it likely will have to be completely rebuilt. Likewise, much of what sits inside all of the eclectic cottages, like the bathtubs and sinks, will have to be replaced. (Though Davick has found uses for many, turning some into planters.)

Light fixtures and appliances will be evaluated to see if they add to the time period character; a broken wooden boardwalk will be rebuilt.

DID YOU KNOW?

During Prohibition, rum smugglers used the cove to smuggle their booty ashore. For years, bottles could still be found buried in the sand. Historic artifacts -- including bottles -- will be on display.

The Crystal Cove Historic District is a 12.3-acre coastal portion of the 2,791-acre Crystal Cove State Park.

The cottages are considered historic because of the vernacular architecture, which means they were built without design or plan, in an eclectic style.

Cottage No. 34 -- now the cultural center -- was used as a language school, mostly for the Japanese farming community in the 1930s and 1940s. In World War II, the military used it as a coastal lookout for enemy ships.

Crystal Cove through the years

1918: "Treasure Island" is shot at Crystal Cove; the film crew leaves behind a palm-frond set.

1920s: Pacific Coast Highway opens; tourists make the beach a destination for day trips and camping; first cottages built.

1927: A lumber ship capsizes off the coast, providing building materials for cottages. The clarity of the water prompts Beth Wood to name the area "Crystal Cove."

1946: Families use the beach for camping and swimming and evening bonfires.

1962: Orange County Board of Supervisors outlaws tent camping on local beaches.

1979: The National Register of Historic Places considers Crystal Cove a remnant of 1920s-era California beach life and declares it a historic designation.

Early 2001: More than 600 people pack a public meeting, opposing state plans for a \$35 million resort. The state drops a resort contract with the developer. The public California Coastal Conservancy gives the state \$2 million to buy out the contract.

July 2001: Cottage residents start moving out after dodging three eviction notices in 22 years.

February 2004: California awards an \$8 million contract for the Crystal Cove project to Newport Beach-based Metro Builders and Engineers Group.

March 2004: Work begins on the first phase of the project.

May 2006: The first 22 units are renovated, which included the first 13 overnight cottages open to the public, Beachcomber Cafe and educational center.

March 2010: The second wave of restoration for seven more cottages. Two were made into overnight rentals and the remainder were set aside for educational programs and park operations. The project also helped renovate the cottage made famous by the 1988 movie "Beaches," which is now available for special events and weddings.

March 2017: Plans to restore the final 17 cottages to be discussed by the California Coastal Commission.