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Ecologies of Spectacle: Reflecting on the New Presidio Parklands Design Competition

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# Ecologies of Spectacle

## Reflecting on the New Presidio Parklands Design Competition

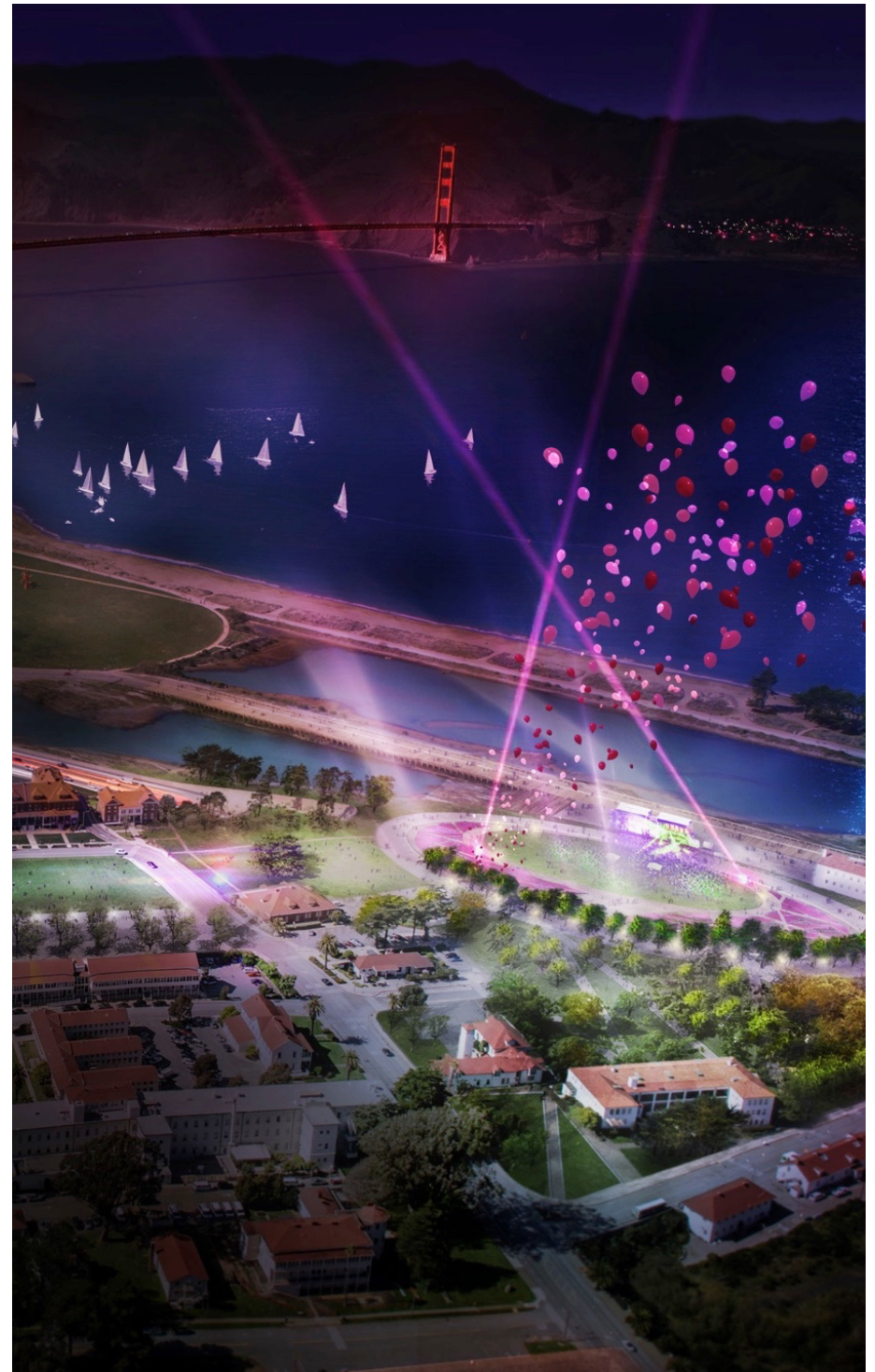
Karl Kullmann

2015, *Ground Up (Out West)* 4: 100–105

At one end is a historic barracks, partially ensconced by the Eucalyptus forests of the Presidio and restored to picture-perfection. At the other is a sandy beach and reconstructed tidal marsh that restores an ecological system vital to the performance of picture-perfect San Francisco Bay. In between slices the Presidio Parkway that dispenses Golden Gate Bridge traffic into the San Francisco grid. With the Parkway in the process of being buried under a land bridge, five design teams were challenged to craft a landscape link between the barracks and the shore.<sup>1</sup> This reflective article considers the premise of the project, the strategies of the shortlisted design teams, and their prospective place in landscape discourse and the design competition canon.

### **Premise: connectivity**

Forging connections is a proven mechanism for revitalizing urban environments, to the point where ubiquitous ‘connectivity’ has become virtually synonymous with good design. To be certain, reconnection does play an important role in urban design; the reunification, for example, of a community torn apart by a freeway for a couple of generations. However, adjacent locales often evolve according to divergent logics, such as a neighborhood ‘on the other side of the tracks’ that will be altered when the tracks are buried or removed. The New Presidio Parklands Project follows this template, premised, as it is on the connection of two landscapes that evolved in

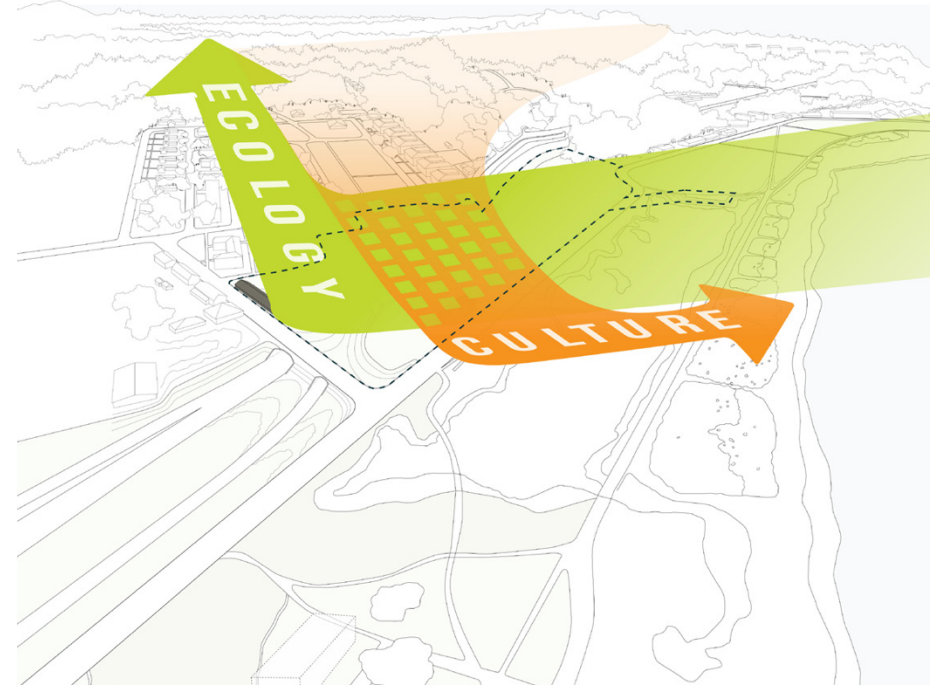


View of a concert on West 8's Eclipse Lawn.

semi-isolation; separated first by a fortified operational barracks, and later by a Parkway.

When new connections are created under these circumstances, breaking through to the other side for the first time often generates a euphoric experience. For an interval, visitors scramble to reconcile their warped psycho-geography with the mundane Cartesian one that states unequivocally that the two locales were adjacent all along. Nevertheless, once the floodgates are opened this euphoria delivers diminishing returns, just as the astonishment of the first Berliners to penetrate the Berlin Wall faded as the deluge of humans and capital equalized across a unified city. Psycho-geography also tends to be nourished by nostalgia, as evidenced by the residual mental wall that still weaves through some Berliners' city today, despite 25 years of meticulous reconnecting across no man's land since the fall of the concrete wall.

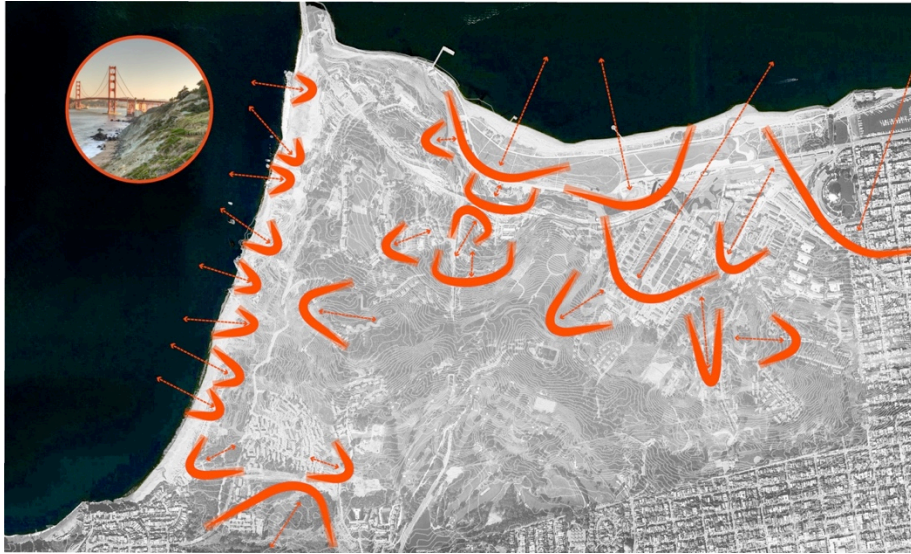
The diminishing potency of some connections raises a valid question. Is a \$1.45 billion project to cover a freeway and connect a preservation site with a salt marsh and shoreline necessary? Does it forge a link critical to the functioning of San Francisco that reunifies two halves of a broken whole, rectifies a social injustice, removes a turbid circulation bottleneck, or repairs an ecological system? Probably not. The New Presidio Parklands is primarily an aesthetic enterprise, a picturesque mega-project in enhancing the postcard view to the Golden Gate. Initially conceived and stewarded by a landscape architect, the whole venture is a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Humphry Repton's *Red Books*, with their before-and-after foldouts illustrating improved 18<sup>th</sup> century pastoral scenes.<sup>2</sup> The vanity exposed in this exercise is shared by the world's prettiest and most gentrified cities; a beauty pageant of over-hydrated cosmetic procedures while the city's displaced soul withers to dust on the suburban periphery.



CMG concept diagram

### Proposals: new ground

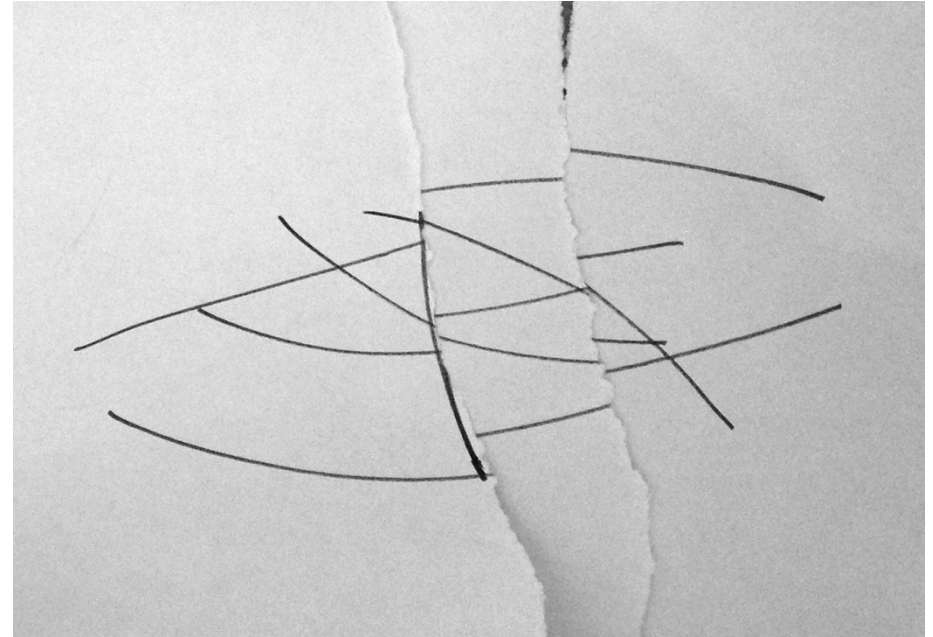
The scenographic premise and absence of necessity of the New Presidio Parklands Project is compounded by the absence of geomorphological foundations on the site. Much of what transpires in landscape is a consequence of—or is registered in—the ground, from which emerges a profound understanding of a place, its challenges, and its opportunities. However, *new ground*—such as that created by landfills, development earthworks and buried transport infrastructure—does not offer this archival trove. In the absence of a geological foundation from which to cultivate a concept from the ground up, landscape strategies tend to fall between two poles, either (1) *pulling* the adjacent context in over the new ground, or (2) *filling* the new ground with externally sourced ideas. At the new ground of the Presidio Parklands, four out of the five design proposals fall within this spectrum.<sup>3</sup>



Olin concept diagram

As the most vivid rendition of strategy (1), the winning design by James Corner Field Operations takes the grassy skin of the parade ground at the southern end of the site and stretches it over most of the new ground. Where it is pinned to the northern edge, the new skin appears to stretch to the point of distortion, under which a small dune-scape slides into the site from the neighboring salt marsh. The proposal by CMG applies a reverse value system to a similar context-derived approach. This scheme pulls the saltmarsh and dune-scape from the northern edge in over the new ground, so that a messy ecology abruptly abuts the precision of the parade ground.

The proposals by Olin and West 8 fall closer to (2) on the strategic spectrum. The conceptual approach of Olin conceives the site as a microcosm of the whole Presidio macrocosm. In a process that essentially follows a timeless garden motif, the folds and gulches of the Presidio topography are condensed on the site into activity-accommodating niches. West 8 also implants a new element into the breach but operates at a much larger scale. The scheme shoehorns in a single stadium-like bowl that would fit within the circles and axes of Daniel Burnham's unrealized 1905 San Francisco master plan, but is



Snøhetta concept diagram

conceived here as a self-contained entity that leapfrogs the site and communes directly with the Golden Gate Bridge.

The remaining proposal by Snøhetta does not fit as neatly into the *pulled* ← → *filled* conceptual spectrum of the other finalists. Rather than smoothing the new ground over with borrowed adjacent landscape or implanting externally sourced design ideas, Snøhetta's concept stitches together both sides of the divide with a web of pathways. In one sense, the 'crossing space' that results is the most honest acknowledgment of the in-betweenness of the site and the hollowness of the ground underfoot. In all other senses, Snøhetta's landscape design submission is underwhelming when compared against the firm's acclaimed corpus of site-expressive architecture. While limited investment in the competition is a likely factor, it also indicates the gulf between architecture's primarily figure/ground approach to landscape, and the unbounded ambiguity of the figureless ground that landscape architecture predominantly engages.

James Corner Field Operations  
“claude glass”



Notwithstanding this outlying strategy, Snøhetta was as seduced by the Golden Gate Bridge as the other teams, with all five schemes featuring staged viewing experiences. James Corner Field Operations and Olin created viewing promontories, CMG and Snøhetta proposed architectural viewing plinths, and West 8 conceived of the entire project as a viewing stadium. In addition to facilitating stand-and-awe vistas, most teams also invested heavily in perceptual augmentation apparatus designed to assist visitors to ‘see’ the site in new ways. James Corner Field Operations proposed a “claude glass” mirror, Olin proposed a “sky pod” observatory and a new app that functions as a fog, tree and ground penetrating digital telescope and microscope, CMG proposed a thermal camera and a “cyanoscope” to comprehend the sky, and West 8 proposed an optically distortive telescope trained on the Golden Gate Bridge.

On reflection, it is questionable whether these contrived viewing stages and contraptions will enhance the New Presidio Parklands experience. Awe-inspiring views are abundant throughout San Francisco, and while designated vista points atop prominent topographic features are significant, views are often most potent when captured as unexpected glimpses and angles while on the

move. Given that the competition site is more topographically transitional than it is protuberant, a more relaxed approach towards the jewels of San Francisco Bay may have been more suitable to the setting.

With such strong bias towards exploiting the visual aspects of the setting, the natural environment was generally treated superficially. Of the five teams, only CMG genuinely sought to leverage ecological performance or factor sea level rise into the project. As the only San Francisco led team, CMG drew on their local knowledge and ethos to eschew monocultures of lush turf for messier but more sustainable ecosystems. Although principled, this approach proved difficult to package into the competition format and was ultimately overpowered by the opulent ecologies of spectacle pitched by the fly-in fly-out teams. Nevertheless, following years of record-breaking drought, the acres of verdant lawn that feature in the proposals by James Corner Field Operations and West 8 appear indecently decadent.



CMG sea level rise diagram

Irrespective of varying degrees of ecological authenticity, all proposals invest heavily in events, activities and spectacles. This saturation is undoubtedly influenced by the competition format, whereby the design teams felt obliged to match the spectacle and public profile surrounding the whole procurement event. Conceptual intensification is the consequence, even though a simple pathway may be all that is really necessary to transition through a non-site squeezed between two existing, memorable and significant landscapes. The nature of this intensification is also remarkably consistent across the proposals, despite significant variation in overall landscape strategies.

This uniformity replicates a larger pattern of homogeneity across landscape types within cities. Whereas botanic gardens, piazzas and urban parks once exhibited distinct identities and rituals, the events and supporting apparatus that now populate them are increasingly uniform. In effect, the urban environment becomes an undifferentiated 24/7 *Hortus Ludus* of earthly delights that is co-opted into neoliberal demands for quantifiable returns on investment in public space. Under this paradigm, landscapes that appear passive,

idle, or underperforming risk being deemed untenable and being perceived as candidates for divestment, renewal or redevelopment.<sup>4</sup>

The drawback of designing landscapes that appear to be spectacular, full, and active is the risk of lack of robustness and redundancy once the illusion is exhausted. This weakness is applicable to the five proposals, whereby the fog-belt atmosphere of the Presidio is more often individual and contemplative than teeming and festive. In these conditions—when the throngs and activities have dissipated in search of sunnier microclimates elsewhere in the city—each landscape scheme is reduced to the essence and form of its surfaces, plantings, and permanent elements. Just what the qualities of the five proposals would be when vacant is difficult to verify.

### Position: competition canon

Design competitions are integral to the canon of internationally significant public spaces. Soliciting competing designs is a potent mechanism for procuring ideas for difficult sites, broadly applicable themes, or culturally laden projects. Conversely, competitions have been criticized for reducing the serious and sometimes uncomely job of environmental design to a beauty pageant where each drawing strives to be more hyper-real than the next, often at the cost of substance.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, given that the New Presidio Parklands Project is in itself a beauty contest, procuring a design through a competition—with all the seductive graphic costumery that entails—appears to be entirely appropriate.

The New Presidio Parklands competition shortlisted teams by qualifications using the increasingly common closed format, which is quite different from the one- or two-phase open competition format most venerated by designers. Although this may appear to subvert the spirit of competitions as open forums for the entire design community, it is likely that an international open competition would have attracted up to a thousand entries from designers based all over the globe, who, like venture capitalists, are eager to digitally invest their excess design liquidity wherever it may stick. It is therefore doubtful whether innumerable proposals dropped in from cyberspace



James Corner Field Operations view through the fog from the West Overlook

under the misapprehension that San Francisco summers are warm (because the city is in mythologized California) would have enriched the dossier of design alternatives.

Open competitions have also not been particularly fruitful enterprises for landscape architects. Unlike open architecture competitions, which are normally implicitly or explicitly only for architects, competitions with landscape-based themes tend to attract highly varied pools of entrants, from both allied spatial design disciplines and from elsewhere. To be sure, this diversity is part of the identity and richness of the field of landscape architecture, which as the most 'grounded' of the design disciplines, has operated as a melting pot for

other disciplines. However, in open forums landscape architects have tended to be outgunned by architectural offices, which appear less inhibited at promulgating spectacular (if sometimes imprudent) concepts and possess greater capacity to incentivize these proposals with high-end graphic productions.

The real value of the closed competition is duly expressed in composition of the New Presidio Parklands finalists, with four out of the five selected teams led by landscape architects. As the competition organizers, the Presidio Trust deserves commendation for exhibiting the temerity to resist seduction by starchitects by investing primarily in landscape architectural solutions. It also demonstrates the

advances that many landscape architecture firms have made in the past decade at playing the game of presenting and sustaining a compelling design brand that is able to float in contemporary image dominated culture. This strong showing supports a recent sense that the tide is turning; that landscape architecture is recapturing stewardship of its own canon, which since the Parc de la Villette design competition in the early 1980s has been significantly outsourced to architecture.

### Practice/praxis: design form

Does a designed landscape always need to appear to be spectacular, full, and active? It does in the context of neoliberal expectations for justifying public space, and especially so in the case of the Presidio where the Parkway land bridge costs more than replacing and expanding San Francisco's entire light rail fleet.<sup>6</sup> But herein lies a catch; unlike buildings, predetermining the effectiveness of a designed landscape in advance of its actualization is a vague science.<sup>7</sup> No matter how many activities and apparatus are rendered in or planned for the five finalists' ecologies of spectacle, a frigid San Francisco fog will probably clear them out. What remains will be the *form-al* essence of each project, which is the defining characteristic of the New Presidio Parklands Project.

If fifteen years ago at the Toronto Downsview Park design competition, *indeterminacy* emerged as a proxy for design without designing, at the New Presidio Parklands, *form* returns as a proxy for design without necessity.<sup>8</sup> Landscape architecture has been repudiating form and scene making for a couple of decades as it rightly pursued empowerment as an authentic cultural agent by focusing on more performative aspects of landscape. While much has been achieved since, the New Presidio Parklands competition reveals that forming scenes and experiences remains an enduring feature of landscape architectural practice. Given that design form language has barely advanced over the same timeframe, the challenge for landscape architectural *praxis* is to reconcile this reality with the form-denial bias that remains prevalent in contemporary discourse.

University of California, Berkeley

All illustrations courtesy of the Presidio Trust

### Notes

1. Full details of the project background, the site, the competition, the brief, the finalist team members and the winning proposal are available at [newpresidioparklands.org](http://newpresidioparklands.org)
2. Esteemed San Francisco landscape architect Michael Painter is credited with first formulating and championing the concept of cloaking the Presidio Parkway with parkland.
3. The following discussion draws on linear landscapes analysis by the author, as reported in: Kullmann, Karl (2011) Thin Parks / Thick Edges: Towards a Linear Park Typology for (Post)infrastructural Sites. *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 6 (2): 70–81.
4. See: Kullmann, Karl (2015) The Usefulness of Uselessness: Towards a Landscape Framework for Un-activated Urban Public Space. *Architectural Theory Review* 19 (2): 154–173.
5. See: Kullmann, Karl (2014) Hyper-realism and Loose-reality: the Limitations of Digital Realism and Alternative Principles in Landscape Design Visualization. *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 9 (3): 20–31.
6. As reported at: <http://sf.streetsblog.org/2014/09/11/not-a-freeway-re-branding-the-excesses-of-the-presidio-parkway/>. Calculation not independently verified.
7. See: Kullmann, Karl (2015) The Usefulness of Uselessness: Towards a Landscape Framework for Un-activated Urban Public Space. *Architectural Theory Review* 19 (2): 154–173.
8. Kullmann, Karl and Weller, Richard (2000) Strange Parks: 1000 Words on the Downsview Five, *Juncus 1: Downsview Park*. Digital publication, no longer available online. Cited in: Czerniak, Julia (2001) Introduction: Appearance, Performance: Landscape at Downsview. In Czerniak, Julia (ed) *CASE: Downsview Park Toronto* (New York: Prestel Verlag): 12–23.