
PARKS: Choice of museums could influence Presidio's future (12/06/2007)

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SAN FRANCISCO – The Presidio, a former U.S. Army base that is undergoing a long-term transformation into a self-supporting public park and cultural institution, will soon decide whether to build a huge contemporary art museum or a more modest historical museum in the base's Main Post area. The choice, detailed in two new architectural designs released this week, could significantly influence other planned developments and alter the character of the park far into the future.

But in typical San Francisco fashion, the selection of one museum idea over another might lead to an even bigger controversy about public parking in the Presidio and adjacent neighborhoods.

During a special meeting this week of the Presidio Trust – the nonprofit governance body for the park – advocates of two previously announced museum proposals presented more details of their projects to a standing-room only audience that included strong representation from the local arts and philanthropic communities, as well as a number of voices who argued that historic values should take precedence at the site.



An artist's rendition of the ultra-modern Contemporary Art Museum Presidio, as proposed by Don and Doris Fisher. Image courtesy of Gluckman Mayner architects.

Underlying that argument is both a reverence for the past and a deepening concern that in its drive to become self-supporting by 2013 – as required by Congress when it turned over the property to the city in 1998 – the Presidio is allowing commercial development to overwhelm the park's public purposes. In recent years, the Presidio Trust has endured criticism of its decisions that allowed filmmaker George Lucas to construct a large, private office and studio complex at the site of the former Letterman Army Hospital and, more recently, to turn over one of the historic barracks buildings to house a museum devoted to the art and legacy of Walt Disney.

Also in the works for the Presidio's main parade are a lodge/resort and a private institute for the prevention of violence.

According to critics, how the trust decides the museum issue could either accelerate the trend of commercialization in the

park or restore what some consider the primary mission of the park in commemorating its 230-year history and significance as the birthplace of San Francisco.

The nearly 1,500-acre Presidio is now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, managed by the Presidio Trust in cooperation with the National Park Service. In recent years, the trust also has made a special effort to rent space to nonprofit organizations, particularly such social and environment-oriented groups as the Energy Foundation, the Center for Resource Solutions and the Goldman Foundation.

Competing visions

One proposal is for a 100,000-square-foot Contemporary Art Museum Presidio (CAMP) that would house the prized and priceless collection of Don and Doris Fisher, who founded the Gap retail sportswear chain and are longtime contributors to the city's arts and social services networks.

Don Fisher, who until last year served on the Presidio Trust under appointments by presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, revealed this week that the CAMP project would also include rehabilitating one of the nearby Montgomery Street barracks buildings to house art education and programs and studios. In addition, Fisher announced he is willing to make a \$10 million gift to the trust to help pay for a planned \$45 million greening of the Presidio's main parade grounds, now covered by an asphalt parking lot, and a partial restoration of the now-buried founding site that the Spanish called El Presidio.

After considering donating the family's art collection to other prominent museums, Don Fisher said, "We decided to put it here because we want it to be seen."

The sleek, spacious design by famed New York museum architectural firm Gluckman Mayner is for a decidedly modern building of glass walls and white granite that would offer those inside a sweeping view of the parade ground and San

Francisco Bay, while affording those outside an open portal to the galleries that will house what many consider the world's greatest contemporary art collections plus traveling exhibits. Outdoor sculptures and other features attempt to further blur the distinction between inside and outside the building.

He emphasized that CAMP would be available to all in the community, with special educational programs and some level of free access aside from the usual membership and entry fee programs used by many art museums.

Fisher cited several examples of prominent museums existing compatibly on park lands, including the National Gallery of Art on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and praised the design as appropriate for both the collection and the site. "Today most architects are building museums as monuments to themselves," Fisher said. "That really wouldn't fit into the Presidio."

The Gluckman Mayner firm recently completed a new expansion of the Philadelphia Art Museum and has been involved in many other highly praised museum projects.

Architect Richard Gluckman said that the proposed CAMP facility would "fulfill the aspirations of the City Beautiful Movement" by having a prominent public institution at the head of the parade grounds. "Adding a new building and new uses [for the older building] is a great opportunity to celebrate the changing nature of the base," Gluckman said. "The building should be a physical record of its time that considers the past, accommodates the present and anticipates the future," he said.

The second proposal is for a History Center at the Golden Gate, offered by the Presidio Historical Association (PHA). This plan involves a 50,000-square-foot facility comprised of several galleries and other public spaces that would serve as a focal point for school groups and other visitors to the post, with standing exhibits about the history of the post, the nation's westward migration and the still-growing connections in the Pacific Rim. As many as 200,000 people each year could visit the museum, the group said in its proposal.

PHA President Gary Widman explained that there are few national historical parks to be found in the West, and the Presidio's mission statement specifically contemplates maintaining the park as an historic landmark. "The Main Post is the most historically sensitive area. It's where San Francisco really started in 1776 and it has buildings from almost every historical period since that time," he added.

"We want to present the story of American history at the Golden Gate," Widman said, covering the Spanish settlement, and role of the base in military conflicts spanning from the Spanish-American War to World War II and beyond. "This is done nowhere else. All of these stories need to be told in that part of the Presidio where they lived and worked."

He argued that the history museum is preferable to CAMP because it would "transform the Presidio into the park it was meant to be" while serving as an anchor and portal to history.

Neither proposal seeks to emulate the surrounding buildings, as Interior Department and National Park Service guidelines say that new buildings should be compatible with but not try to mimic the designs of historic buildings. In addition, both designs make some attempts to blend in with the surroundings and preserve bay views from the nearby Officer's Club.

In the case of CAMP, the museum would partly cut into the slope of the main parade and its height would be limited to that of the surrounding buildings.

The PHA museum would be more low-key in size and appearance, noted Lucia Bogatay, an architect working with the group. The design is set back from nearby buildings and will have sod-covered roofing to blend in better with the natural surroundings in the heavily wooded Presidio. "We wanted it to partially disappear and be more discrete, while keeping a respectful distance" from some of the oldest buildings in the park, she said.

Both projects would result in the demolition of a bowling alley and tennis courts as well as reduction in surface parking, but the PHA plan would allow retention of the base's former clinic, called the "red cross" building that is now occupied by the Center for Resource Solutions. That building is slated to be torn down under the CAMP plan.

Jan Hamrin, executive director of CRS, told *Land Letter* that the organization is already looking for other space at the Presidio or some other favorable location because it has outgrown the clinic building.



This building, a former Army base clinic now occupied by the nonprofit Center for Resource Solutions, would be demolished for construction of the CAMP proposal, but could be preserved under the Presidio Historical Association's proposed museum plan. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

