



A Landscape in Transition: The Reinvention of the Presidio in San Francisco

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The iconic Presidio in San Francisco presents a complex web of land uses, cultural infusions, and environmental conditions. Because of its strategic location, the 1491 acre parcel has provided shelter, ocean access, and defense to a sequence of inhabitants.

Archeological evidence indicates that indigenous groups occupied the peninsula 10,000 years ago. European military and geo-political occupation began in the 1770's, with Spain establishing a small military outpost at this location. This was followed by the Mexican army in the 1820's. Subsequently, the Mexicans were replaced by the U.S. Army, which claimed the area as a spoil of the Mexican-American War. Each group put their unique stamp on the peninsula; militarily, architecturally, environmentally.

As its defensive significance waned in the late 1970's, the U.S. Army planned for a public takeover, starting with roadway improvements and increased public access. Today, the Presidio is a component of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. It is managed through stewardship agreements between the National Park Service (NPS), the Presidio Trust, and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. The landscape can be considered cultural not natural, as military occupations systematically replaced a grassland-dune environment with thousands of evenly spaced non-native trees. This provided windbreaks for hundreds of military buildings, and ceremonial parade grounds. Existing riparian corridors were also altered, and in some cases eliminated. The result, a highly synthetic landscape, presents challenges for existing stewards. While programs of native ecosystem reintroduction and riparian restoration have been initiated, the managed forest condition remains popular to the public.

This paper will discuss the challenges with managing a major public facility that is artificial in quality, yet culturally significant to the community. And, because the Presidio is a unique NPS unit in that it is financially self-supporting, the paper will discuss the delicate balance between economic concerns and ecologic desires. Examples of student work, the designing of a cultural institute on a small site within the Presidio, will also be presented.

--Professor Gary Clay