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Old Sacramento: Place as Presence, Palimpsest, and Performance

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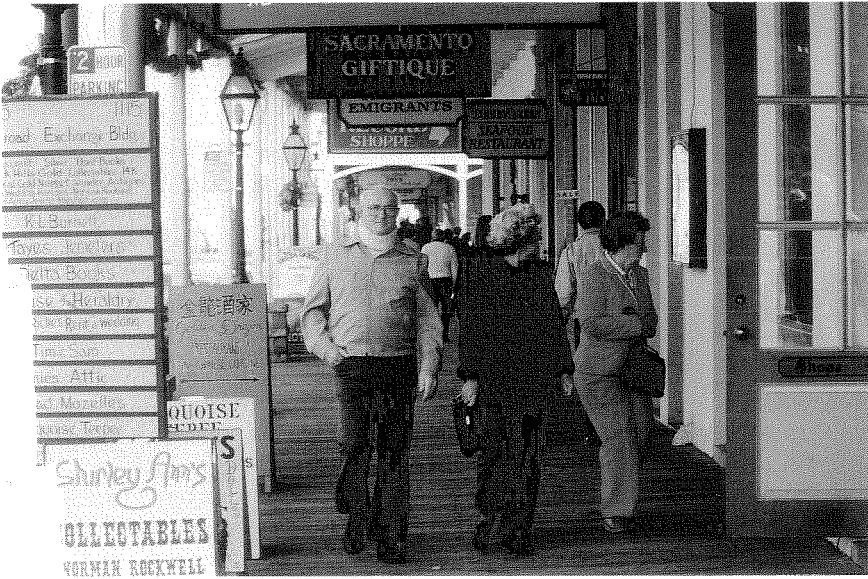
On the surface, Old Sacramento is a familiar sort of American place, an “Old Town”—a once-depressed and now-restored urban area made to look old-fashioned but designed to serve moderns and to work well. Its parking ramp, for example, is made to look *like* a converted warehouse with its arched windows and brick facade, but in fact it is modern. As is the whole development, which pulls together the modern California Railroad Museum and Sacramento History Center complex on the north, restored and renovated old buildings now turned to use as shops and restaurants and saloons at the core, and, more recently, the excursion concession down on the river. Old Sacramento neither “just grew” as vernacular developments commonly do nor was it authored in any way that rewards “reading” the way more formal landscapes do.

Rather, Old Sacramento exemplifies that contemporary kind of place denominated Landscape Three by J. B. Jackson in his recent *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*.¹ Whereas the authored landscape, Landscape Two, clues in a visitor about how to read the meaning of the place and how to respond aesthetically, Old Sacramento more commonly miscues the visitor. And while the vernacular Landscape One realizes the everyday needs and purposes of its users, the meaning of Landscape Three abides neither in its use, alone, nor in its design, but in the performance of the place by visitors and staff moving about in the landscape. It does not make sense

apart from its people and their mix of purposes and expectations. We must enter these places cautiously, as reflexive ethnographers and geographers, alert both to the instances of meaningful interaction we see in others and to our own imported aversions to what seems muddled.

One way to enter the Landscape Three of Old Sacramento is through its self-interpretation in the cartoony map-mural that hung in the Visitors’ Center when I first began to study the place. In it, Old Sacramento appears as no workaday place but as an escape from ordinary duties. The map portrays an urban fabric of places alternative to the everyday infrastructure of commerce and government: a zoo, a shopping mall, two museums, a convention center, Sutter’s Fort, and even, Lake Tahoe and Reno over 100 miles to the east and San Francisco just as far to the west. Interstates 880, 80, and 5 assure simple access and easy exit. Old Sacramento draws tourists during the day and diners or theatergoers at night. Annual jazz and blues festivals draw visitors from greater distances. And local boosters continue to aim for spin-off business from tourists coming to San Francisco and willing to take secondary excursions to the wine country, the Mother Lode, or the Capital and Old Sacramento.

Old Sacramento is really an island now, skirted by everyday automobile traffic and skipped even by boats, though this once was a busy port and plans are afoot to



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1 **Old Sacramento.** Photograph by David Scofield Wilson.

2 **Map of Old Sacramento, Visitor's Center.** Photograph by David Scofield Wilson.

reestablish a pleasure wharf at the levee. It has become a kind of refuge, a siding for retired steam engines and a wax museum-of-work instead of a working embarcadero. In short, it is a Point of Interest on AAA maps—a riverside Historical Park just off the freeway and cut off from the city by sunken I-5.

What is now a cultural cul-de-sac once was among the liveliest crossroads in the West, a thriving biocultural nexus of waterways and landlife. The river was the lifeline of the Sacramento Valley and an avenue to the sea downstream and to the ranches and mines upstream. Later, roads and railroads converged on Sacramento, the capital, and wove it into a network that went east through the mountain passes to the rest of the United States and west to San Francisco, the ocean, and the Orient.

Reminders of this earlier, bustling time remain in the concrete levees, which once had warehouses on top of them and railroad loading docks beside them. Now native sycamore trees in redwood planter boxes testify to the taming of the port of Sacramento. But over the levee walls wild riparian willows still bloom in the spring; box elder trees and Fremont cottonwoods harbor birds out of sight of the tourists, and abandoned wharves shelter swallows and rats and human transients in rainy, winter weather. This is all outside the Historical Park. Within the Park itself, the immigrant ailanthus, a native of China and the tree that “grew in Brooklyn,” shoots up out of

neglected alleyways and vacant lots and cellar holes. When I first began studying Old Sacramento in 1979, I sketched an ailanthus growing beyond a fence that the State Department of Parks and Recreation had erected around a hole in the ground it planned to develop soon. So far, it was only a dump, strewn with bricks, bottles, and nameless junk and inhabited by cats and rats. I was struck by the way the fence stood between two worlds of meaning and two systems of worth. What is fenced in and fenced out told a great deal about the nature of this and other Old-Town restorations, about the values and beliefs, and the fears and fantasies which lurked just beneath the surface of such restorations as Old Sacramento and helped explain the tenor of the tourist attraction built over the old town.

A text from 1925 helps us see just what has been fenced out. Tourists to Front Street are warned by Fremont Rider that:

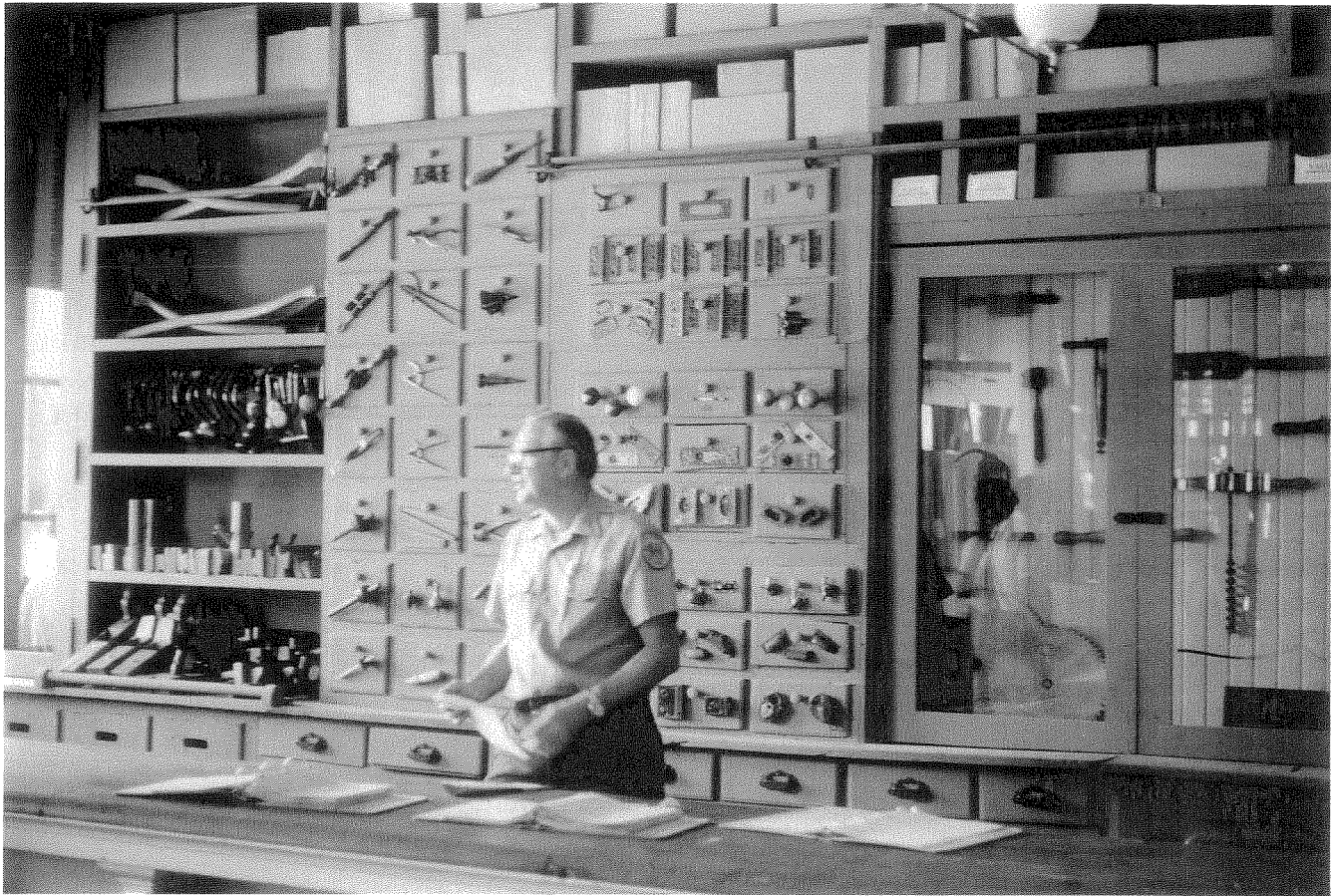
This . . . riverfront is a sordid, depressing neighborhood, thronged with a motley cosmopolitan crew, and largely given over to employment bureaus, pawn shops, cheap lunch rooms and cheaper lodging houses. In the wide variety of racial types there is a conspicuous percentage of overflow (a telling choice of words in this flood-prone place) from the adjacent Mexican, Chinese and Japanese quarters.²

In other words, it was not the sort of place a family of tourists would

go as a rule. Cheapness in lunch rooms and lodgings is suspect—probably a sign of dirt, and maybe disease. The motley crew of mixed racial types and riverfront proletarians suggests danger. Tales of Shanghai-ing, brawls, and bawdy houses fill the imagination, making the physical dirt and danger and decay an omen of moral dirt and danger.

So why go at all? Rider tells us: “Historically the district deserves a visit, since it is here that the first nucleus of the present state Capital started.” Apparently dirt and decay that is historic uplifts instead of endangering, so we suffer the one to get at the other. But why suffer if you can help it, the single-minded tourist might well ask. The tension between history and hysteria so evident in Rider’s riverfront has been dissolved in Old Sacramento by banishing the slums and presenting the past as colorful and meaningful regional history. In the Railroad Museum a restored locomotive rests on mirrors that reflect its glory, and the display leads our eye down the hall to Thomas Hill’s painting, *The Last Spike*, which celebrates the opening of the West to the railroad. The past is dusted off and painted up here. Outside, the trash cans are framed by tasteful wooden boxes. And even the middens of old double today as archeological digs, a poster advises us.

The transients who used to live here have been driven out and now squat across the river under cottonwoods and take their lunch, while inside the Railroad Museum waxwork



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hobos “speak” (on tape) of hobo life but never confront us quite face-to-face. The manikins are very life-like, having been cast from docents who work in the museum. They are accurate down to the fingerprints. One wonders what sort of Dorian Gray experience awaits the models as they grow older and the statues cast from them remain frozen in period settings and costumes. The main point, however, is that here in the museum replicas stand in for the dirty, and maybe even dangerous, real bums of our nightmares. Old Sacramento has been made safe by putting some distance between us and the object.

The hardware store once owned by Huntington of the Big Four of the Southern Pacific has been cleaned up, cataloged, restocked with correct goods, and transported from its historic location on J Street to a site nearer the museum. It is

as neat as the tourist map that presents Old Sacramento as a kind of menu of gift shops, restaurants, and antique stores, expensive replacements of the cheap lunch-rooms and pawn shops of Rider’s riverfront. Old Sacramento is now a clean, costly, and safe place instead of a falling down, dirty, cheap, and motley slum. The place has been edited—is being edited even now. Facades have been restored to pre-slum conditions and plenty of parking supplied. History without the dirt and death is the logic here. The aim is to re-present and represent the past, to *do* local history.

But once that logic is clear, what are we to make of the pretend cable cars on rubber wheels that plied the K Street Mall until recently and ran shoppers into and out of Old Sac? They do not fit with the place at all. It is a runaway symbol. If, as Clifford Geertz argues in his

3 **Huntington Hardware.** Photograph by David Scofield Wilson.

Interpretation of Cultures, we human beings hang suspended in webs of words and feeling which we ourselves have spun out and woven into patterns of meaning, and if our task here is to read and to interpret the meaning of such items in context, then what stories must we learn or remember in order to be able to “get *this* right” and see it for what it is and see how it fits?³ Is this an anomaly, a kind of freak? Is it a revelation? It is clearly out of place historically, but it is out of place in Sacramento in much the same way as the Showboat Bus which sports a smokestack and riverboat trimmings but carries riders on rubber wheels along paved streets to nine special tourist “landing stations” in Memphis, Tennessee. And it is out of place the way the stuffed and mounted rhino head is over the doorway at Fanny Ann’s, a popular bar jammed with curios and customers and one of Old Sacramento’s most popular spots. Outlandishness sells, it seems, and fakery is fun. But it goes even deeper than that, I believe; right to the heart of American culture.

Consider the fine wooden doors of the Wells-Fargo building and the bench, railing, and woodwork upstairs in the chambers of the first Supreme Court of California. They are not oak at all as they seem, but north-coast redwood painted and then “combed” to look like oak. This is no modern-day shortcut, no inexpensive substitute for quality, but an expensive illusion. And it was meant, a century ago when it was first done, to enhance the

quality of the abundant but pedestrian redwood by lending it the prestige of sturdy eastern oak. We usually suppose that truth in history must be dug out, uncovered, but here it is, the cover-up that tells the truth.

Suppose the people who disguised these doors and the people who ordered them disguised were no more muddled than those who brought the “cable car” tram to Sacramento or put the Showboat Bus up on wheels in Memphis, or than those who ride them. Is there some proposition we can fabricate which would explain their preference for oak, even faked oak, over redwood? Is there some way in which it is not mad but only modern to stick rhino heads on doorways and feathers on a white cowboy hat worn by a woman who is no cowgirl but a jazz fan eating an ice-cream cone in broad daylight and sitting on a folding chair listening to Dixieland in California one Memorial Day seven years ago? Is there an “aesthetic” behind that or underlying the fancy of one E. A. Armstrong, who used to join patriotic and pop symbols on a white dress jacket and then go to Old Sacramento because, as he said when interviewed, his hobby was “just to goof off and make people happy.” And he did. Symbols have been loosed from any necessary regional or conventional context and made into commodities here, affordable, portable adornments, whose meaning resides not in one button or slogan but in the underlying proposition: discontinuity delights. The very

out-of-place-ness, the evident made-up-ness, the denial of natural and historical predestination amuses us and reassures us somehow.

We are close now to our answer to Geertz. Behind Armstrong and the cable car and oaken doors lies an American myth which holds that nature and heritage and social station are not predestined but are conditions to be overcome, to be conquered, improved upon, redeemed. Whatever is given may be and should be put to better use, cleaned up, ordered, cataloged, and, most important, treated somehow, handled and transformed, but never left simply as received. The merely old is no fun—it must have died and been moved, and set up again for it to belong in Old Sacramento.

Old Sacramento is not unique in this sense. Memphis has been “restoring” its famous Beale Street for years now, tearing out old buildings and ripping up the road, while erecting attractions for tourists. But here there is one business that has held on through the transition. Abraham Schwab’s dry-goods store has stood 112 years in the same spot and fought off a series of attempts by those who would improve the area by removing the last living enterprise with genuine roots in the vernacular neighborhood. It sells dry goods and notions and potions to locals, including size 70 overalls and size 60 dresses. To tourists the proprietors offer friendly talk, and at any sign of interest in the place they will break routine to show the visitor through the store, through





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the A. Schwab Beale Street Museum on the mezzanine, and through the basement framed in timbers salvaged from old river rafts. Down there Abraham Schwab gives a visitor a salvaged, glazed paving brick unearthed from the original Beale Street when the more modern surface was torn up. Shoppers carry their purchases away in bags decorated with the store's logo and now familiar motto: "If you can't find it at Schwab's, you are better off without it." But for all the promotional savvy, Schwab's remains a remnant of an earlier ambience and of an ongoing community, however depressed. This is no Huntington's Hardware, restored and restocked, but an original peopled-place still in situ and run by a family rather than State Park Rangers. Schwab's is both its own text and context. Its museum on the second floor puts it in historical perspective and makes a kind of commentary on

Beale Street, which is itself a commentary on the Mid-South, which in turn may be taken as a commentary on America, and so on: the kind of "thick description" Clifford Geertz would relish unpacking, and so would I, but that is another project.⁴

A thinner layering of personality and artifact and commerce and community characterizes Old Sacramento for the most part. What commerce there is serves visitors from outside the area, tourists or shoppers and lunchers from the city. An exception is the mural painted half-a-dozen years ago on the cement levee wall facing the river and away from the development. Tom Raley, who owns the marina across the river, got "damn tired of looking at the blank wall" and commissioned local artist, Horst Leissel, to decorate it. Most of this has since been half-erased by floods and

5 Mural, Horst Leissel. Photograph by David Scofield Wilson.

obscured by recent work on the wall, but when fresh it contributed an “affecting presence” embodying an aesthetic that values a discontinuousness appropriate to the place, on the one hand, and a kind of sardonic commentary on the goings-on above and behind the mural, on the other; I draw here upon the work of anthropologist and aesthetic theorist Robert Plant Armstrong (no relation to the man in the dinner jacket).⁵ What Leissel created was an array of stylized, outsized birds in the Egyptian manner, as if incised in concrete. They ignore Old Sacramento above and the riparian, natural flora and fauna at their feet. But best of all, the mural comically undercuts itself and comments upon its own text even while making fun of Old Sacramento and commenting upon its pretensions. Two black blotches on the belly of the crane turn out, on close inspection through binoculars from across the river, to be realistic renderings of crows, as if perched on the trompe l’oeil “carving” and casting shadows on the wall behind. The piece presents an awareness and commentary of understated but ironic wit that in large part denies the more earnest enterprise being worked out above.

On the other hand, this levee presents an intriguing palimpsest, an entirely un-ironic text. According to my *American Heritage Dictionary* a palimpsest is a “document . . . that has been written upon several times, often with remnants of earlier, imperfectly erased writing still visible,” as in the nooks in the concrete levee where timbers

used to fit to hold up warehouses, or in the vertical layering of Old Sacramento itself. The whole city raised its buildings 10 feet up on jacks and built buttressed foundations under them a century ago to escape the repeated floodings. Some left their first floors as basements, making one-story structures where there once had been two-story ones. The present waterfront rests on top of a half-erased, half-entombed old waterfront.

Palimpsests are useful to scholars who look *through* and *past* the latest inscription in order to read old autographs beneath and recover lost texts. But I am encouraged by Leissel’s mural also to look *at* the present palimpsests of Old Sacramento and to find that they please with their patterns as well as inform. The flanks of buildings exposed when adjacent buildings fell to the wreckers display patterns of plaster, paper, and paint never arranged for effect but pleasing nevertheless. And unlike the faked-oak door, this dialectic between underlying materials and overlays of paint suggests a continuity with the past and a natural sedimentation akin to geological deposition or cultural accretion.

Palimpsests break the aesthetic distance and both declare their composite nature and invite us to savor them as compositions as well as accidents. In one particular find amidst the reconstruction, fragments of stairway on a wall whisper of patterns lost or forgotten; bricked up, ground-level doors and windows tell of the city’s razing a century ago. And

dumpsters and a cyclone fence in the foreground do not so much exclude us from the scene as second the bricked up doors and the stairway to nowhere.

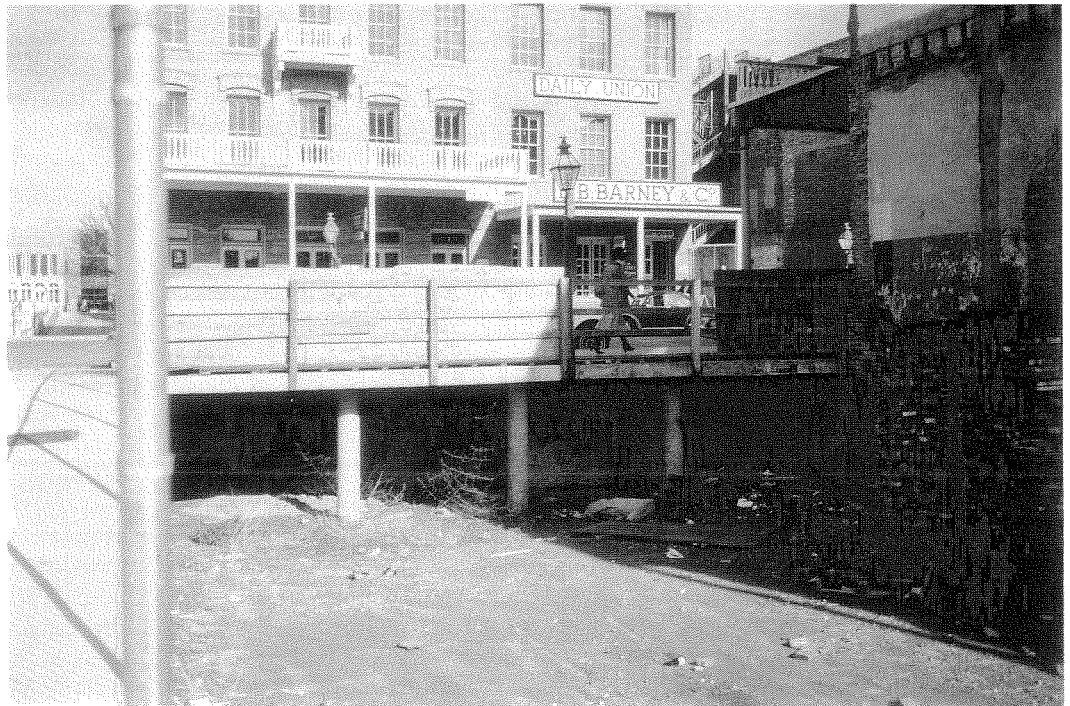
Down the block a minimalist’s sort of palimpsest (or perhaps pentimento) makes of a fairly ordinary, poured concrete wall a kind of lyric to overlays. Its silver-painted wall suits, somehow, the shiny cars parked beside it by diners at a nearby restaurant. Palimpsests tell a different sort of tale about Old Sacramento than the cutesy map-mural at the Visitors’ Center that makes everything over.

Truer visions offer themselves where we are least led by the design of the place to find them, beneath sidewalks, between buildings, in alleys and other framed-out phenomena. What the merchants and redevelopers guide us to see within the framework of their Old Sacramento Historical Park inclines toward the freshly turned out souvenirs or collected antiques, not the overlooked or not yet redone.

One such find are the ruins beneath a raised sidewalk near the silver parking-lot wall. The present clearly rests upon the past, this find declares; it does not repeal it. Accidental trash and unpredictable disintegrations add strands to the fabric. And yet the feeling and mentality incarnate in this place qua palimpsest are sedimentary only, the underground remains of earlier actions and artistry. But meaning is an ongoing, living project enacted daily by ordinary as



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well as artistic types of people. Again, I think of Schwab's.

Coming upon two women downing fast food in the alley behind The Cracker Company restaurant's dumpsters while other shoppers walk by with cold drinks reminds us that some palimpsests may link artifacts, architecture, official signs, "naturalized" trees such as the ailanthus, and casual human use all at once. This particular moment-in-place may be taken as a kind of upbeat anecdote, a sort of living palimpsest which is a thicker and richer commentary on place than any designed by the planners of Old Sacramento. The people make their own sense of place, sometimes to the despair of planners, by strolling or lurching where they please. And their liking and using enliven the text as no amount of detached analysis, or even engaged savoring, of abstract patterns of meaning can by itself. Old-Town restorations are done by people bent on making money or making parks to attract people, and so the text must finally be taken as performed. It must be understood within its envelope of everyday, actual use.

My favorite palimpsest, then, is an ephemeral anecdote; a moment-in-place my camera caught of shoppers walking by on a sidewalk above the dump left in a vacant lot not yet ready for reconstruction. Here apparent discontinuity and the virtual composition are joined. The view speaks eloquently of the above- and below-groundness of this place, of the dead and discarded overlooked by the matter-

of-fact fun-seekers, of the taking-surface-for-granted and the inattentiveness to infrastructure that characterizes so much of American life. This is the Old Sacramento that draws me back, and back again. And it is in unplanned palimpsests such as these that Old Sacramento tells the fullest truth about itself. The last time I stopped by to say hello, as it were, to this old acquaintance, the lower level was filled with pallets of used brick destined for some reconstruction project, and so the text I loved had been erased. The palimpsest continues to be performed.

Notes

- 1 John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 154–155.
- 2 Fremont Rider, *Rider's California* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925), pp. 201–202.
- 3 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.
- 4 Geertz, pp. 6–7, 9–10.
- 5 Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); in developing a structuralist model of the feeling incarnate in works of what he preferred to call "affecting presences" instead of "art," Armstrong helps us see that feeling and power may inhere in works out of a kind of harmonious unity but also out of featured discontinuities and rather in-turning surfaces. In the case of Leissel's wall, the discontinuities which witness his membership among modern artists complement those commercial and popular discontinuities found in the shop above.

6 Palimpsest, Firehouse Alley. Photograph by David Scofield Wilson.

7 Vacant Lot, Old Sacramento. Photograph by David Scofield Wilson.