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Crissy Field: A New Model for Managing Urban Parklands

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San Francisco's new Crissy Field is a transformed landscape that has as much to do with the future of urban parks as it does with its natural beauty or long history of human use.

Several years in the making, the 100-acre site on San Francisco Bay that was once part of the Presidio army base now boasts a restored salt marsh and sand dunes, a heavily used pedestrian shoreline promenade, cleaned beaches, and a 28-acre greensward on the site of an historic military airfield. But perhaps more importantly, Crissy Field exemplifies several maturing trends in urban park design and how these can be woven together to produce a comprehensive new model for creating and sustaining urban parklands.

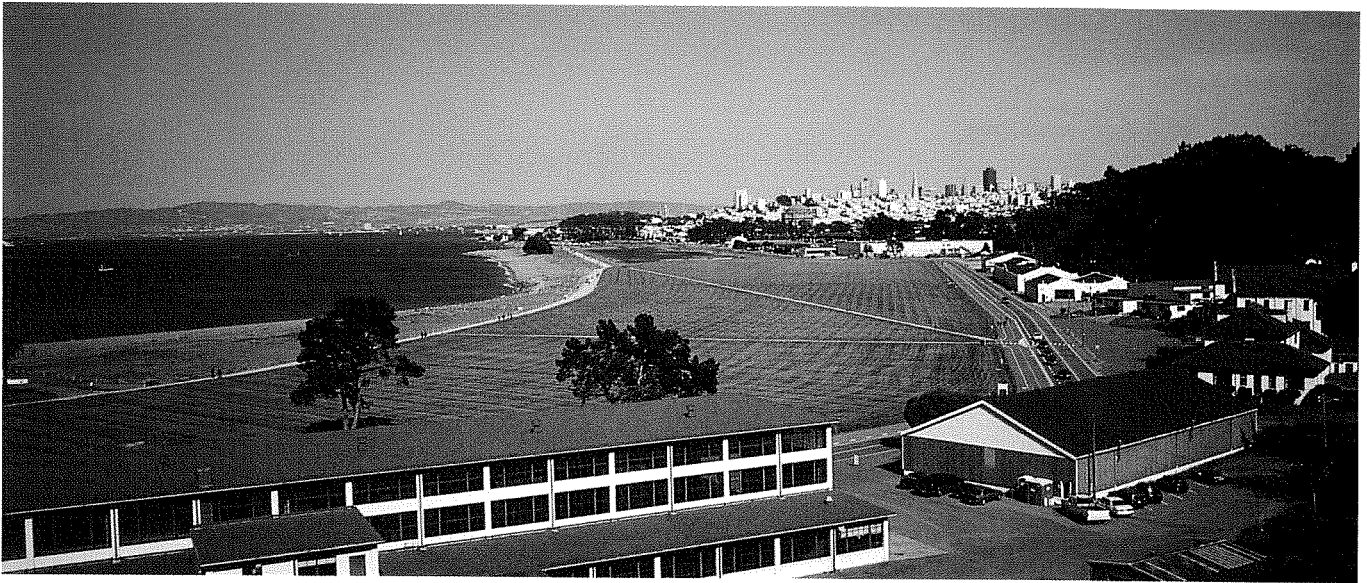
As befits its natural qualities and complex history, the central theme today at the Crissy Field is one of layering. In particular, it is an interplay between things "wild" and "urban" that gives it a special character. This is a truly dramatic landscape that brings together many conflicting forces. And everywhere there are views — wild, long, intimate, active, solitary — often heightened or framed

by contrasts with the surrounding urban fabric.

Until the mid-nineteenth century Crissy Field was occupied by sand dunes and salt marshes. Filling began in the 1870s and was completed in time for the area to become part of the grounds on which the Panama Pacific Exhibition was staged in 1915. Then, when the exhibition came down, the site was transformed into the first military airfield on the West Coast. Thus it was that when the National Parks Service inherited the site in 1974, 70 of its acres were covered with asphalt and hard-packed dirt, while rubble lined much of its 6,000-foot shoreline.

Today, in many ways, the Crissy Field site has come full circle, as the Park Service and its nonprofit partner, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, have restored many of its former natural qualities. Yet the National Park Service has also struck a delicate balance between its mandate to preserve natural and cultural resources and its desire to encourage public use and enjoyment.

Signs of the multivalent character of this new park are everywhere. For example, new landforms have been sculpted out of excavated earth and recycled rubble for



use as viewing platforms, amphitheaters, and wind-protected picnic spots. Most prominently, the new West Bluff picnic area is now formed so that it slopes dramatically toward views of San Francisco Bay and the city skyline.

Meanwhile, at East Beach, rubble has been removed to expand the beach and restore the natural process of dune formation. A new marsh channel has also been dredged, and a new seawall has been constructed to protect a shoreline promenade. The result is an area that can comfortably accommodate a diverse mix of activities. Small children play in the marsh channel's relatively calm water. Board sailors flock to the beach to access the nearby waters of the Golden Gate, a world-class venue for their sport. Pets and their owners frolic on the beach. And the simple concrete seawall plays host to all manner of play, rest, and picnicking.

Perhaps most tellingly, the restored tidal marsh serves all at once as a wildlife habitat, an educational facility, a scenic attraction, a recreational resource, a "sacred place," and an ongoing scientific experiment.

Sustainable design practices were a major feature of

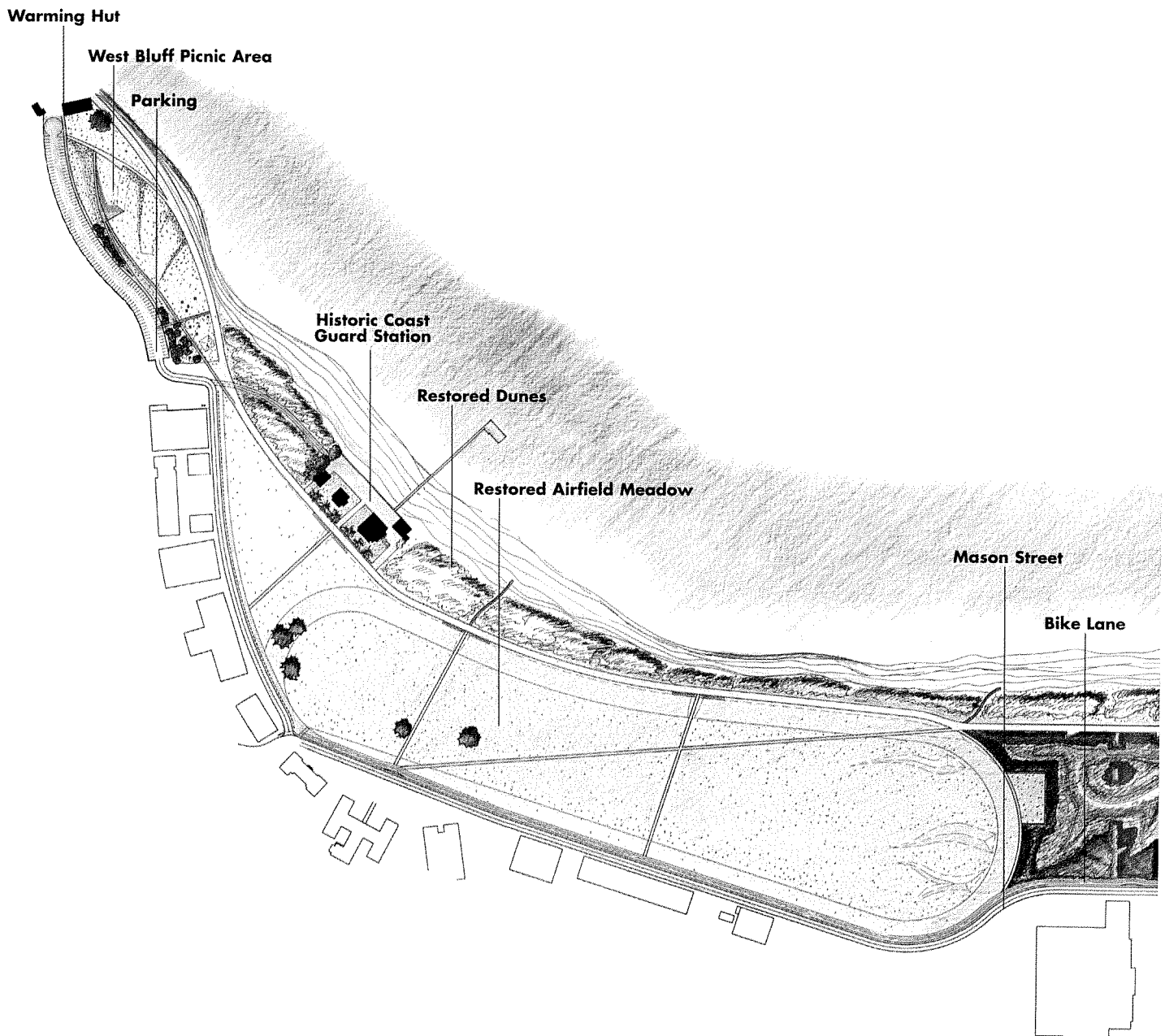
the Crissy project. Instead of being trucked away and dumped offsite, soil excavated during construction of the tidal marsh was used to elevate the historic airfield. Tons of rubble removed from the beach were also ground up and used as underlayment for landscape features. And existing asphalt was crushed and reused as structural fill and the base beneath new pathways and parking lots.

In terms of planting, the preeminent goal was to establish a more sustainable and self-perpetuating landscape. Thus, most plant types selected were native to the area,

Opposite: Crissy Field was dedicated on May 6, 2001. The opening day festivities drew more than 75,000 people. Photo courtesy of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

Top: Native grasses and fill excavated during creation of the tidal marsh were used to restore the historic 28-acre Crissy airfield. View east toward downtown San Francisco. Photo by Michael Boland.

Bottom: Plantings at Crissy Field focus on the sculptural and spatial qualities of plant communities rather than the aesthetic characteristics of individual plants. Variation, contrast and pattern will emerge as a byproduct of natural processes and human use. Photo by Michael Boland.

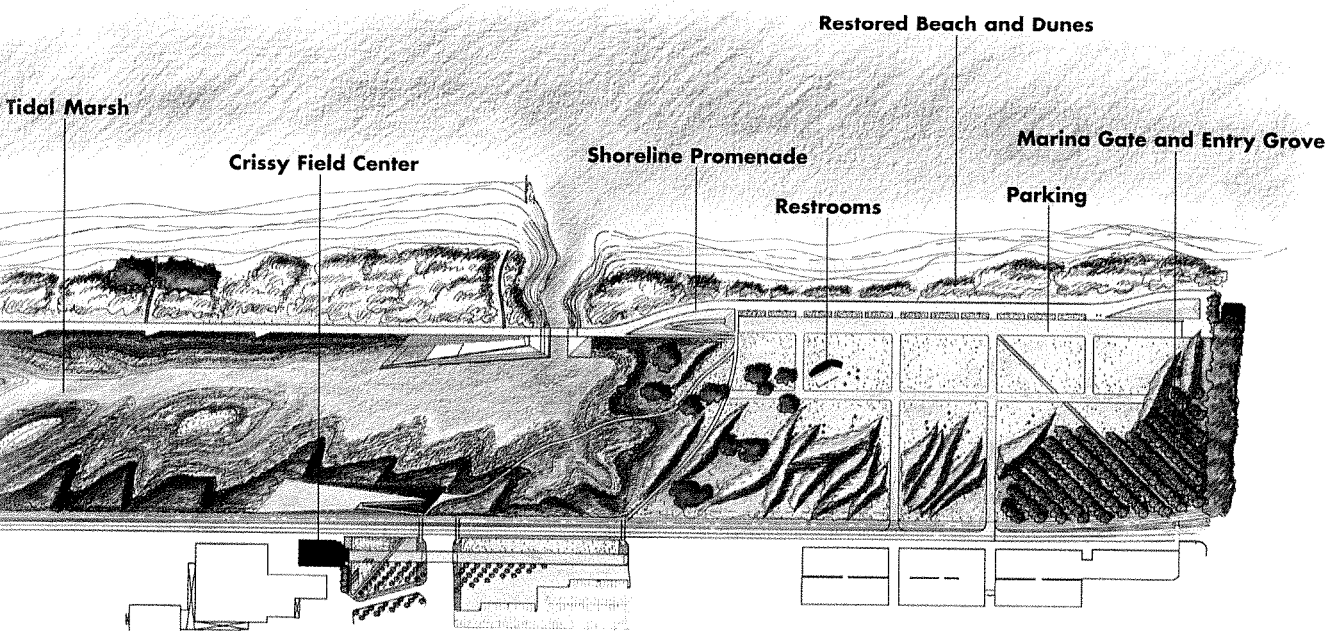


often propagated from locally collected seeds and cuttings. Native turf grasses were also chosen to tolerate harsher conditions and minimize pesticide applications.

The new Crissy Field also provides clues about a new role for landscape design and designers. In some locations, such as the entry grove and West Bluff area, the Hargreaves Associates site plan was precise and fixed. But in other areas, like the marsh, dunes, and East Beach seawall, the design was deliberately open and evolutionary. In part, this lack of specificity was determined by the inherent difficulties of the project. Designers had to work with a harsh, windswept site. They were charged with “restoring” a natural marsh and dune system that had been all but obliterated. And their ideas were often carried out employing the labor of thousands of community volunteers.

Given such realities, conventional grading and planting plans were often not an option. Instead, they decided on a “template” approach. Thus, the marsh was over-excavated and allowed to backfill naturally with sediment, creating its own channels. Cordgrass and other native species were planted in various locations and allowed to establish themselves where ecological conditions were right. And instead of building sand dunes, rubble was removed from the shore to free up blowing sand, which was then allowed to accrete naturally around newly planted beach sandwort and sand verbena.

Throughout design and construction, the Crissy Field effort also sought to establish a new standard for community engagement. More than one hundred public and community meetings were held, and leaders of underserved



communities were encouraged to propose strategies for diversifying public use. One particularly successful outcome of this effort has been the new Crissy Field Center, which today hosts community events and programs for thousands of Bay Area students.

Individual citizens have also played an important role, helping to restore Crissy's tidal marsh and dunes, collect seeds, and assist in the propagation, planting, and weeding of native plants. Today, such individuals continue in a stewardship role, helping to monitor and protect the native plantings. An AmeriCorps program has also been developed to help young adults develop leadership skills through management of the volunteer effort.

Finally, the nonprofit Parks Conservancy funded this entire effort with contributions from private donors. And

it has managed the planning, design, and construction of the project in partnership with the Parks Service. Without this partnership between the Parks Service, the nonprofit Conservancy, and thousands of volunteers, it would never have been possible to complete the successful transformation of this dramatic urban shoreline.

Above: The Crissy Field site plan.

Courtesy of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.