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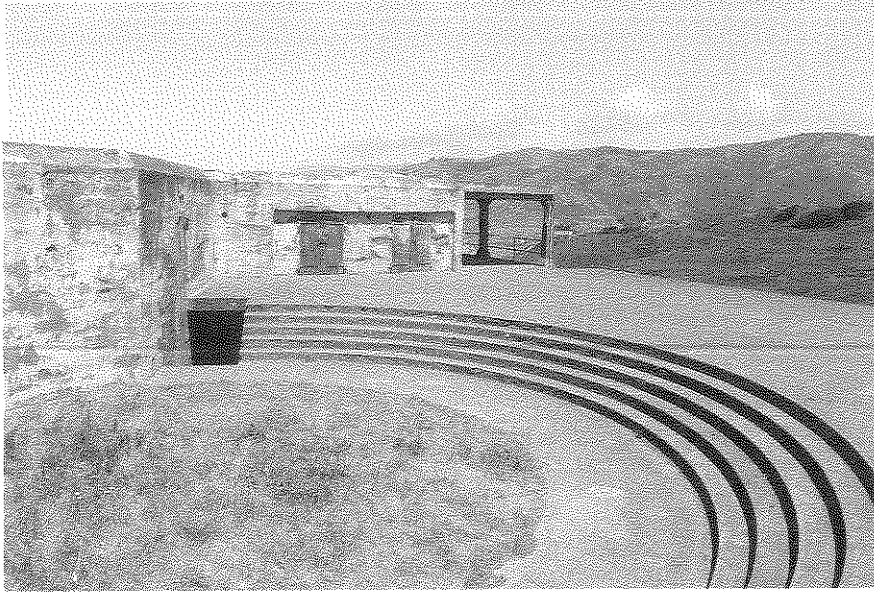
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Dwelling as Reciprocity: The Marin Headlands

Kyle Thayer



And I still find myself wondering if there is not always some deep similarity between the way war organizes space and movement and the way contemporary society organizes them: that is, if the military landscape and military society are not both in essence intensified versions of the peacetime landscape, intensified and vitalized by one overriding purpose which, of necessity, brings about a closer relationship between man and environment and between men.¹

—J.B. Jackson

The Marin Headlands is a place of quiet contradiction. It is an area that, because of and in spite of long-term military occupation from 1865 to 1972, was preserved from normal patterns of urban and suburban development. Situated just north of San Francisco on the Pacific Coast, it is an area of stunning natural beauty within a stone's throw of the city. More recently, it is an area resettled by socially aware not-for-profit groups. An energy resource center, an environmental resource center, and a multidisciplinary, arts center, among others, inhabit the simple white buildings left by the military. What were once barracks, officers' quarters and mess halls are now artist's studios, public assembly halls and overnight lodging for visiting schoolchildren. The stripped-down austerity of the military structures somehow suits the art, science and educational facilities that have moved in.

The Headlands is a good example of re-use of a military installation

I An amphitheater-like space was created at Battery Mendel when the great pivoting guns it housed were removed, still unfired, after World War II. Photograph by Kyle Thayer

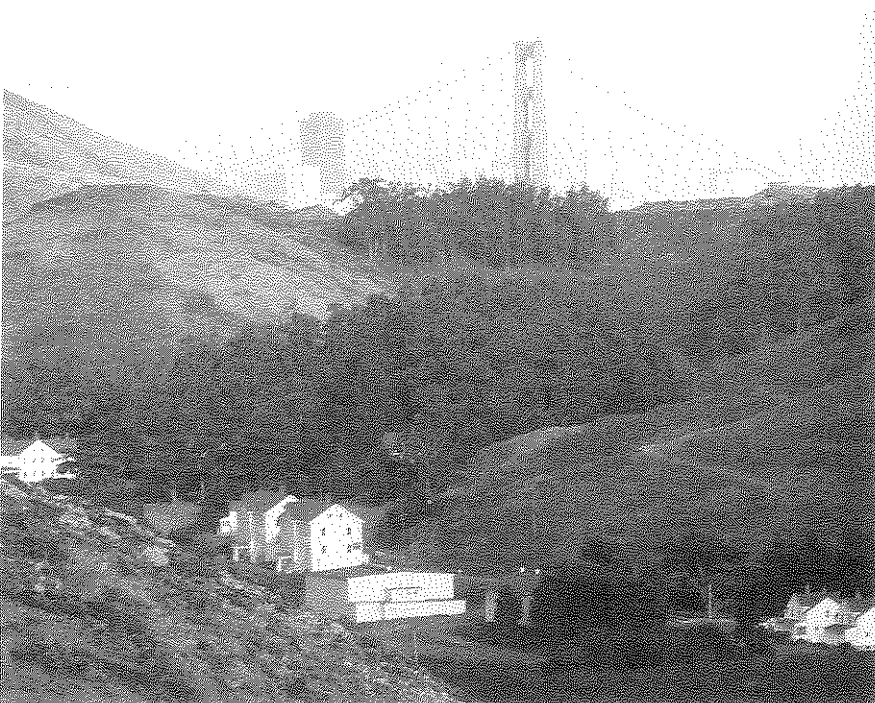


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2 The military intrusion in the landscape is subtle but pervasive; Battery Mendel, Marin Headlands.
Photograph by Kyle Thayer



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for a socially responsible purpose. The groups serve to orient visitors to the great resources of the place by offering exhibitions, workshops and symposia open to the public. It is in fact the military order overlaid on the natural order that makes the Headlands the unique place it is. New users must acknowledge both realities. Thus re-use has the implicit proviso that the public again have access to the original natural order, without the damaging motivations of development or exploitation.

The military moved out in 1972 when changing technology minimized the strategic importance of the proximity to the Golden Gate Bridge. Over 200 buildings in various states of repair were left in its wake, plus the remains of gun emplacements, bunkers, Civil War gun batteries and even a Nike missile installation. The 15,000-acre site was turned over to the National Park Service and became part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA).

Six different nonprofit groups currently lease buildings from the Park Service. The Park Partners, as they call themselves, consists of the Pacific Energy and Resource Center, the Marine Mammal Center, the Headlands Institute, the Golden Gate Youth Hostel, the Point Bonita YMCA and the Headlands Art Center (HAC). The Energy Center and Marine Mammal Center are responding directly to environmental factors of sun, wind and marine wildlife. The Youth Hostel, housed in one of the circa-

1905 officers' residences, offers casual visitors a place to spend the night. The Headlands Institute conducts residential field studies for public and private school students. Last year over 12,000 students visited the institute, lodging (for three to five nights) in converted army barracks at Fort Cronkhite. Director Steve Christiano and a staff of twelve teach the young visitors about local and regional ecology. The Art Center is a multi-disciplinary group that offers residency programs for local and national artists and hosts a series of exhibitions, lectures and symposia on art topics open to the public.

Each group has settled in the Headlands to pursue its particular purpose. Yet they share some fundamental common goals: to preserve the windswept beauty of the place and enhance the public's understanding, perception and enjoyment of it. The commonality of purpose the site induces is perhaps expressed most explicitly in a joint grant proposal submitted to the Buck Foundation in 1986. The proposal would have created a facility for the comprehensive study of resource management, centering on the social aspects of natural resources as well as practical problem solving. The educational potential of the place itself would have been highlighted, as designers and planners from here and abroad would have been invited to stay in residence at the Headlands. Of course, public outreach would have remained a key component. Although funding for the proposal was turned down,

the collective process of grant writing laid a foundation for the Park Partners to work together and share resources in the future.

The dialogue is in fact already open. Army historians brief artists and scientists on the military history of the area. Park Service naturalists give guided hikes, helping to orient the artists-in-residence to their new setting. Artists speak about their work to students staying at the Headlands Institute and are designing and building exhibits for the Energy and Resource Center. A guidebook to the Headlands, designed by the artists, will be published by the Art Center in 1988. The much-needed resource will highlight points of interest to visitors, bringing together information from a variety of sources, including historical photographs and writings.

The Headlands Art Center, under director Jennifer Dowley, has a strong commitment to orienting artists to the special qualities of the landscape and other features of the place. The specific intent is to allow and encourage artists to listen to, interact with and respond to the surroundings. In the words of the first HAC newsletter, the Art Center seeks "to explore and interpret the relationship between place and the creative process through the resource of the Marin Headlands." "Place: Exploring the Patterns That Connect," an HAC symposium held in November 1986, is one tangible example of this exploration. Sculptor George Trakas, architect and *Boston Globe*

3 Buildings 944 and 945, built by the Army in 1905, currently house the Headlands Art Center.
Photograph by Kyle Thayer

4 View from the Headlands Art Center oriented to the primeval beauty of the Marin Headlands, but close to the city as well.
Photograph by Ed Beyler



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5 Building 944 commands the Fort Barry parade grounds, now used as a playing field. Photograph by Ed Beyler

6 Officer's Mess Hall, East Wing, Building 944, renovated under direction of David Ireland for use as a lecture hall. Photograph by Henry Bowles

critic Robert Campbell, artist Leonard Hunter and former astronaut Rusty Schweickart were among the featured speakers. Hunter sums up the major theme: “Making connections . . . constitutes the primary relationship between place and the creative process. Artists and arts organizations are the facilitators, interpreters and connective links” in this process.¹

To inhabit means not only to dwell in or occupy a landscape, but implies that the landscape itself can dwell within the inhabitant, informing his or her sensitivity and sensibility. A series of remarkable transformations within Building 944 at the Headlands Art Center evokes the history of the site and

amplifies the connection with the land outside.

The results of David Ireland’s “recovery procedure” on the second floor of the building are perhaps the most permanent and subtle of the manipulations. Ireland’s careful uncovering of the original materials of the building—oak, maple, tin, plaster—long obscured under layers of paint—has given the center a focal point and a sense of home. The 650-square-foot Rodeo Room and the 200-square-foot East Wing are the stages on which the public life of the place unfolds. The Rodeo Room will function as a library/reading room and the East Wing serves as a public lecture hall. These rooms also embody a guiding



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philosophy of the Art Center: Listen to the site, take your clues from the qualities of the place. “Investigating and exploring are what is fascinating to me,” Ireland explains. “. . . looking and digging into something to see what might be there that is obscured by someone else’s hand, perhaps—I think that was largely the inspiration.”¹

The passage of time and the effects of place on the building are revealed and allowed expression. Stress cracks in the plaster caused by uneven foundation settlement were mythologized as maps of military strategy. Later the cracks were seen as “volunteers,” tangible evidence of the site’s dialogue with the building. The changing sense

of light and how it plays on the liberated interior surfaces were also conscious considerations in the recovery strategy.

Artist-in-residence Mark Thompson’s work with bees is another example of this site-building interdependence. A living hive placed in a second floor office has direct access to the outside. The bees come and go, absorbed in the business of collecting pollen and making honey. “It really is a parallel to what’s going on here,” says Ireland, who has come to admire Thompson’s work, “this collective gathering of energies for a common end.”⁴ The constant activity also reflects a disciplined “can-do” attitude reminiscent of

military hierarchy. The growing hive is the microcosmic crystallization of place. It becomes a central collection depot for the pollen gathered in forays into the Headlands. A special dance informs comrades where in the land the pollen is to be found.

The work of artist-in-residence Ned Kahn also relates to local natural phenomena. Since coming to the Headlands he has been inspired by the cycles of wind and fog that mark the area. His fog observatory contains a fog machine that produces a visual expression of the wind in a controlled environment. In addition, chairs are set up near the window of his West Wing studio so people can watch the afternoon



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7 The Rodeo Room, Building 944
Photograph by Henry Bowles

fog roll up the valley. The smaller-scaled model inside is designed to increase visitors' awareness of the natural process going on outside. Kahn's work at the Headlands can be seen as an outgrowth of his sense of the site, but it also is related to his exhibition designs for the Exploratorium in San Francisco.

Amy Thayer's clay balls are another instance. As the school-age daughter of one of the artist/interns, she has had plenty of opportunities for creative exploration of the area. Not far from the Art Center she and her friend Liz Selvin came upon a clay bank freshly exposed by recent rains. Gathering a hunk in her hands, she worked it into a ball the size of a grapefruit. Liz's mother Nancy Selvin, potter and artist-intern, began using the local clay in her work. Amy's original ball of local clay, accompanied by written documentation of its creation, were shown at the center's exhibition and open house in March 1987.

The sonic qualities of the region are explored in two temporary installations by sound sculptor Bill Fontana. Microphones placed on the Farallone Islands, twenty miles from the Golden Gate, send audio signals to speakers in the Rodeo Room, creating a real-time audio portrait of the remote islands. The disembodied sounds of wind, waves, seals and a wide variety of coastal birds echo throughout the building. Another piece, set in the center's East Wing, is a sound portrait of the Golden Gate Bridge. Sounds of wind, the slowly shifting bridge deck and nearby foghorns are

transmitted simultaneously to the Headlands Art Center and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The piece plays with notions of “bridging” between an urban museum and a rural art center, even as its focus is the structure that geographically joins the two.

HAC’s current insistence on bringing pieces of the landscape into the building can be read as a sensitive response to the site, but not without ironic overtones. Visitors to the Headlands came in order to commune with the natural forces at work there. Yet much of the artwork produced so far at HAC appears as an abbreviated version of nature, a companion piece to the real thing happening outside. The irony is that sound, land, wind, fog and fauna are isolated from the whole and represented within the building so that we may learn to perceive them again. The artists would be quick to point out that venturing out into the land is the crucial step in reintegrating this renewed vision with the whole. To realize the full power of Amy’s clay piece, for instance, one must scrape the clay from one’s boots after a day’s hike in the hills. For Thompson’s apiary to really resonate, one must linger among the wildflowers bees love. The art ultimately points back to landscape, implicating and engaging its quiet power. In time, one hopes that the art will begin to move out into the landscape itself. Right now the landscape is seen as the touchstone of artistic endeavor and thus nearly perfect—not something anyone could improve upon.

Historically, artists’ attempts at site-specific sculpture in the Headlands have met with Park Service and public skepticism or outright rejection. A 1981 proposal for twelve projects at Battery Hill 129 was lost in a mass of bureaucratic red tape. The two site-specific artworks that were realized (by artists William Wiley and Gyorgy Laky) were soon defaced by self-righteous members of the public. Since then, the National Park Service has balked at allowing any artistic interventions in the land. This official skepticism may break down as the artists come to know the site more intimately. Changing the minds of vandals may prove to be more difficult.

But there seems to be a faith that when the time is right an appropriate artistic response will appear in the land, not as an intrusion but as a complement. The examples of artists bringing the landscape into the building is evidence that the landscape has begun to dwell within. This process would seem to be part of the essential groundwork for installing meaningful artwork outside of the buildings.

The sculptor Robert Irwin in his 1985 book *Being and Circumstance* proffers a useful definition of the site-conditioned or -determined aesthetic that the HAC seems to be working towards.

Here the sculptural response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings. This requires the process to begin with an intimate, hands-on



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reading of the site. This means sitting, watching and walking through the site, the surrounding areas . . . the city at large or the countryside.⁵

Depending on what one learns from this interaction with the site, Irwin continues, the “sculptural response” may be “monumental or ephemeral, aggressive or gentle, useful or useless, sculptural, architectural, or simply the planting of a tree, or maybe even doing nothing at all.”⁶ Thus far, in the Headlands doing nothing at all in the land has been seen as the appropriate response.

The flip side of the Marin Headlands is Candlestick Point Recreation Area, a windswept, rubble-strewn site on the southeast edge of San Francisco. This forlorn piece of landfill, currently used as overflow parking for the nearby Candlestick Park baseball stadium, borders Hunter’s Point, one of San Francisco’s poorest neighborhoods. (In contrast, the Headlands’ nearest neighbors are Sausalito and Mill Valley, two of Northern California’s most affluent communities.) While preservation—doing nothing at all—is appropriate for the Headlands, Candlestick Point is crying out for change. A park and picknicking area has already been created on the southern portion of the site, close to the bay. An ambitious state-sponsored cultural center, a collaboration among architect Mark Mack, landscape architect George Hargreaves and sculptor Doug Hollis, is slated for the site just north of the existing park.

An impromptu art park has sprung up north of the cultural center site, due largely to the efforts of Leonard Hunter, a teacher at San Francisco State University and HAC board member. David Ireland has erected a powerful gateway from the great chunks of concrete rubble that litter the site. John Roloff has created a boat of local wildflowers and volcanic stone that echoes the shipwrecks that were supposed to have occurred in the area at the end of the last century. Lisa Hein has fashioned provocative wedge-shaped ramps of sandbags that allow one to mount and meander through the tough rubble piles. The ensemble is exuberant, spirited and an appropriate response to the site. The sculpture takes its cues from the place, often using local materials. Where a gentle touch is the right move in the Headlands, the tougher, worked-over environment of Candlestick demands more physical, outdoor pieces.

Artists-in-residence at the Art Center should be encouraged to visit the Candlestick art park, both to enhance their understanding of the great contrasts of the San Francisco Bay Area, and, more specifically, to understand the unique qualities of the Headlands in terms of what it is not. This is apparently already happening, as evidenced by the facts that David Ireland has a foot in both places, and Doug Hollis and Leonard Hunter are Art Center board members.

Taken together, the various multi-faceted readings of the Marin

Headlands comprise a surprisingly balanced and complete view. The Art Center has one particular take, the Energy Center another, the Mammal Center another. While the power of the land is likely to stimulate even more cooperation among the organizations in the future, site visitors also have a crucial role to play in the equation. They must continue to come to the place, engage the artistic, scientific and educational facilities that have settled there and test this understanding in the land. Ideally, a renewed vision is then carried back into the life of the city itself.

Notes

- 1 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 135.
- 2 Leonard Hunter, Unpublished transcript from the symposium "Place: Exploring the Patterns That Connect," Headlands Art Center (November 1986). Used with permission.
- 3 David Ireland, *Headlands Art Center* (Sausalito, 1986), vol. 2, no. 4, p. 2.
- 4 David Ireland, *Headlands Art Center* (Sausalito, 1987), vol. 2, no. 2, p. 6.
- 5 Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance* (Larkspur Landing, CA: The Lapin Press, 1985), p. 27.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

8 Boat sculpture by John Roloff, Candlestick Point A World War II naval shipyard is visible in background. Photograph by Kyle Thayer

9 Sculpture by Lisa Hein, Candlestick Point Photograph by Kyle Thayer