

Grids on the Port of St. Francis

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You could not build San Francisco today. You are supposed to design streets that curve with the contours of the hills, yet the best streets in San Francisco are straight. They are too steep for codes and cars; they are a grid of rational roller coasters. Everyone gets to see where they are going, where they have been, and the view at the end of the line.

In the Spanish Colonial pattern of the ideal city, the streets were to extend uninflected from the harbor, over the

hills, and on to the sand dunes of the Pacific. These "too wide" streets made sky everywhere; sky was inside the windows, out of the windows, and on the white wood and plaster walls blanced by the fog. Every street ended in the Bay or the Pacific, or both. Everyone got a view from these streets and some of the best views were of these streets. Hilltops became parks; they were too difficult to build on. Eucalyptus and cypress, planted around the rectangular parks and in the midblock gardens, became the

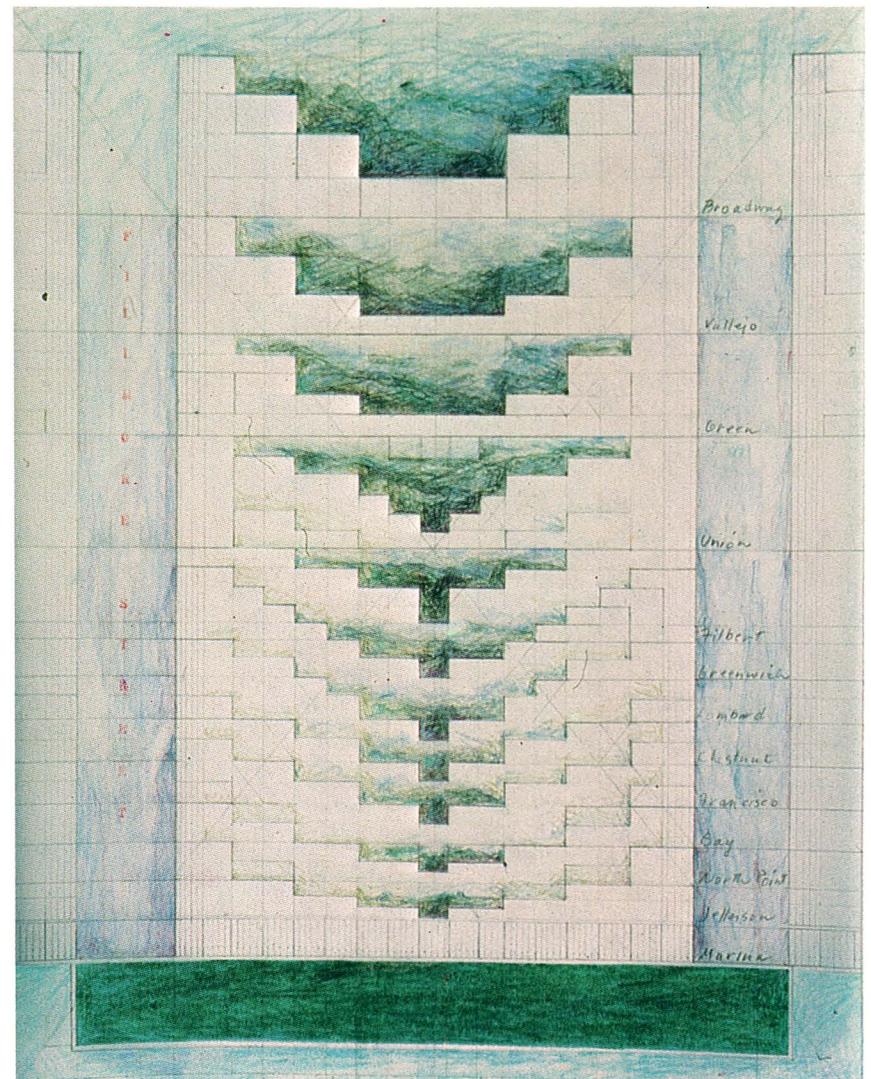
only dark colors. The city terraced white and green to the Bay (except at dawn when the city is deep violet and orange). San Francisco is where the streets become waterfalls to the Marina Green and Aquatic Park; they are always down to the Bay and up to the sky.

We urban Californians are obsessed with the sea and the sky, with nature and paradise. For us nature as paradise is in the city parks. A line of trees on a street is a park. Surely the

line of palms ascending straight up Dolores Street leads to paradise. A rectangle of grass is a park. In San Francisco we can also decide that a selected rectangle in the grid will be green. This piece of hallowed ground becomes particular, possessed, a garden. We use it to improve our bodies, incidentally our minds, and certainly our chances for immortality. Our parks are green theaters for playing and play-acting. Parks on the edge of the water—the long rectangle of green grass that is the Marina Green



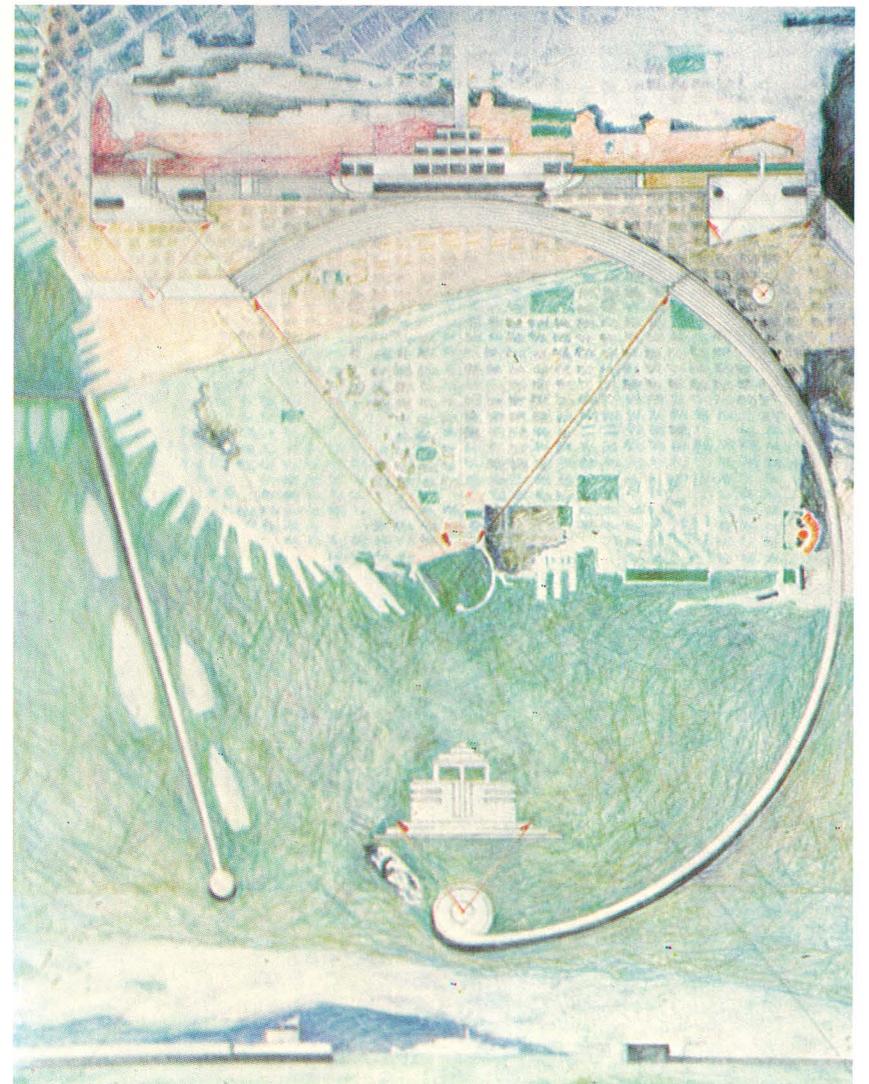
3. Hilltop Park.



4A. Midblock gardens terrace to the Marina Green.



4B. Where the streets are waterfalls.



5. The Aquatic Park buildings and piers enclose The Cove.

and the circular complex of building and piers enclosing the Cove at Aquatic Park—are the center of the universe for those who daily go down straight streets in order to plunge themselves in revels on the grass or in and on the salty waters.

As Bernard Maybeck said in 1923, "Let us stand on tiptoe, forgetting the nearer things and grasp what we may."

If the streets are real, the monuments need not be. Those buildings which

house the out-of-doors, which enclose but not close out the sky (buildings which are not really there), are among San Francisco's most beloved monuments. These buildings are for being around, outside, and not inside.

This series of drawings includes two such buildings:

The Conservatory in Golden Gate Park, originally shipped from England around the Cape in crates, came as an architectural plan and a collection of



6. The Conservatory at Golden Gate Park.

rectangles of glass. (The metal parts were purchased here when the building was assembled in 1878.) It is a most remarkable house for hot air.

The W.P.A. Maritime Museum/Aquatic Park amphitheater of buildings and

piers house ghost ships and imaginary crowds of Sunday swimmers who probably never really expected to swim in the cold Bay waters. As early as 1912 brave members of the rowing and swimming clubs decided that their Cove would be



7. Dolores Street.

kept in splendid isolation from real estate speculation. Sea gulls, fishermen, bums, and tourists never bother the swimmers. The grid of the city is there; the buildings are not. They blend together, white and closed. The streets of the city are

strong and straight and provide order for those monuments that allow madness and magic. Paradise is not excluded by virtue of the grid on the land; straight streets only make it quicker to get there.