

REAL ESTATE

By Jennifer K. Stuller

The Presidio: A New Hope

Lucasfilm's move to the Presidio preserves a historic piece of land

THE FORCE must be strong in the Presidio district of San Francisco. How else could *Star Wars* filmmaker George Lucas win the final bid to redevelop the Letterman Hospital property? Getting Lucas involved might have been one of the few solutions for preserving the area's rich history.

Long before California had become a state – a Franciscan priest named Father Pedro Font looked out over San Francisco Bay from the site of Spain's new military garrison and proclaimed, "The port of San Francisco ... is a marvel of nature, and might well be called a harbor of harbors. ... I think if it could be well settled like Europe, there would not be anything more beautiful in all the world."

Today, few urban landscapes can rival either the natural or architectural magnificence of San Francisco. And there are few cities as young that have so much history. The Presidio is a prime example of this, and even Lucas and his modern, state-of-the-art campus for the digital-arts empire Lucasfilm Ltd. has sought to uphold its historical significance.

Established by the Spanish in 1776, the Presidio was under Mexican rule from

1822 until the U.S. Army took control of the grounds in 1846. The Army transformed the Presidio into a prominent military post. It was named a National Historic Landmark in the 1960s, and in 1972, when the Golden Gate National Recreation Area was created, it was decided that the Presidio would be designated part of that area if the base was ever closed – which it was by Congress in 1989. On Oct. 1, 1994, the Presidio was transferred to the National Park Service.

THE LANDMARK

The Presidio has roughly 500 buildings of historic value, making the grounds costly to maintain. Therefore, Congress estab-



The Letterman Digital Arts Center (below) was built to blend with the Presidio's existing architecture.

AMY WOLFF/PRESIDIO TRUST



Presidio buildings throughout the district blend various architectural styles and afford views of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Palace of Fine Arts rotunda (center).

lished the Presidio Trust in 1997 to come up with a plan for park management. The trust's mission was to transform the park into a financially self-sustaining entity by the year 2013, while also preserving natural resources, scenic magnificence and historic landmarks. The Presidio would be the only national park in the United States required to achieve such seemingly impossible autonomy, and it faces liquidation if the goal is not achieved.

As part of the project, the trust selected the site of the Letterman Army Medical Center to be redeveloped and leased. The hospital, which during World War II was the largest debarkation hospital in the country, went up for bidding.

HARMONY AND BALANCE

Buildings on the Presidio grounds rest on land that features exquisite views of both sea and city. These structures feature varying architectural styles that reflect more than 200 years of development under three nations. Though the Letterman Hospital would have to be demolished, it was still considered a hot property. Design bids for the site came down to three finalists: the Shorenstein Co., Lennar Partners, and George Lucas, chairman of Lucasfilm. While Lucas was the low bid, the Presidio Trust's board of directors made the agreement with him because it felt he was the ideal type of tenant — one who would bring imagina-

tion to the project.

"When we were awarded the privilege of building in the Presidio and restoring the [Letterman] site, we knew we had to create something to honor this special place," Lucas has said of the project. "We wanted to create a campus that would speak to the history of the Presidio, fit into the environment, and make it look and feel like a natural part of the larger park."

The Presidio Trust felt George Lucas would bring imagination to the redevelopment of the Letterman site.

Lucas and company succeeded with their campus mission, and then some. The project was guided by certain fundamental intentions regarding preservation and sustainability. This included restoring the 23-acre site to host a landscaped public park and appropriately integrated and ecologically efficient buildings.

After standing vacant for more than 10 years, the Letterman Hospital was demolished. The majority of the building's materials were recycled for use in the construction of the new Letterman Digital Arts Center (LDAC). More than 10,000 tons of concrete, the same amount of met-

als, and all of the asphalt from the parking lot were reused. This eco-friendly approach not only made construction more efficient but kept faith with West Coast ideals regarding sustainable development.

Although Gensler Architecture & Design and HKS Inc. acted as the buildings' architects, Lucas was the primary conceptual designer because he understood the importance of preserving this San Francisco landmark on both visceral and pragmatic levels.

"I'm very much an advocate of historic architecture," Lucas said in a short video shown on opening day. "I like to work in a facility that ... looks like it's been there for a period of time."

The LDAC gathers together Industrial Light & Magic, LucasArts and Lucasfilm's cor-

porate side under one roof for the first time since 1971. The new \$350 million campus comprises four buildings with a total of 865,000 square feet of office space on six acres. At four stories each, these low-rise additions to the Presidio look as if they've been there for decades. The red brick and white stucco exteriors seamlessly blend with neighboring buildings.

To blasphemously invoke another sci-fi franchise, the LDAC is like Starfleet Headquarters, with campus perks such as a 5,000-square-foot fitness center, a 10,000-square-foot day-care center for children of employees, and a 298-seat, state-of-the-art, THX-certified screening room equipped for digital projection, in addition to two smaller theaters. Employees enjoy operable windows for breathing in the fresh air and have access to a cafeteria with 25-foot-high floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Palace of Fine Arts, Alcatraz and Russian Hill.

"We have the opportunity to do the best work in digital arts — cinema, visual effects, games, and animation," said the notoriously private Lucas through a spokesman, who relayed the quote to Dan Frost of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "We'll share a beautiful workplace, too — and that place will encourage creativity in a new way."

The remaining 17 acres of the Letterman

site are devoted to public park space. Peppered with about 85 different kinds of trees and shrubs, the park also includes a lagoon circled by cherry trees. Much of the existing greenery was saved and relocated or otherwise incorporated into the design drawn up by Lawrence Halprin, one of the world's leading landscape architects and environmental planners, whose projects include Ghirardelli Square and Seattle's Freeway Park. Underground parking for 1,500 cars allows even more space for greenery and landscaping. The park grounds also contain a coffee shop. It's got the only door on the campus a visitor can enter without a pass – and guards are abundant.

A PUBLIC PARK

The LDAC project succeeded in its mission to reflect and complement the historic architectural styles of the Presidio while preserving breathtaking views of San Francisco landmarks for visitors of the public park. But back in the mid- to late 1990s, when the National Park Service began to draw up a plan for the Presidio, the intention was not only to preserve landmarks and protect park resources, but also to use the site to bring together organizations that worked for environmental causes and social justice issues. Critics of the trust feel that bringing in commercial tenants such as Lucas, no matter how creative they may be, demonstrates that those in charge of the Presidio's future have neglected these aspects of the original general management plan. As Gough Street resident Daniela Kirshenbaum told *The Chronicle*, "The Presidio is being treated as a piece of real estate. I don't think it's proper to have a big office complex in a national park."

Yet it is because of Lucasfilm's new campus that the Presidio Trust made money for the first time last year, earning \$43.2 million, most of it from property rentals all over the grounds, while spending \$40.5 million to operate the park. Annual rent from Lucas will bring in \$5.6 million.

Father Font was right about the grandeur of the City by the Bay, and it looks like the Presidio Trust has found at least one solution to keep it magnificent.

Jennifer K. Stuller, a Seattle-based freelance writer, is married to Official Star Wars Fan Club member No. 285.

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