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Counterfactual Constructions

What is is. What is not is possible.

Imagining the future is a revealing, satisfying, and time-honored tradition. But in 2013 it met some competition: imagining a different present. Two exhibitions—one in San Francisco and one in Los Angeles—gathered and presented a wealth of plans for buildings, parks, civic buildings, highways, and entire neighborhoods in each city that never came to fruition. Some died on the vine, never making it past the architect's drafting table. Others were fully realized concepts that were killed by a tanked economy in some cases or angry citizens in others. Each would have altered its city.

What if Chavez Ravine north of downtown Los Angeles hadn't been sold to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1958 because a few years earlier it had been filled with modern, affordable apartments for 3,300 families designed by famed midcentury architect Richard Neutra? Not only would the surrounding neighborhood be different today, but the city's present, ceaseless quest to build a stadium downtown might have ended decades ago—if it had ever begun.

What if each foot of the Golden Gate Bridge housed a massive desalination plant, creating an abundant new water source for the city? Tourist shops would need a new supply of postcards and our concept of preservation—of both structures and natural resources—might have been forever altered.

Is it an exaggeration to say that our cities are shaped as much by what we what leave on the table as by what gets done? Maybe not. When Los Angeles ripped out its world-class public transportation system in the 1950s, the city's character was permanently altered. But around the same time (and obviously not unconnected) there was a plan to cover the city so extensively with highways that no resident would be more than four miles from an on-ramp. Had that plan been implemented, what little of the city you could make out through the smoggy fug would be unrecognizable.

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Taller David Dana Arquitectura's 2009 Bay Bridge Project would have turned an unused portion of the Bay Bridge into park and farmland.

RENDERING BY DAVID DANA.

It would be nice to think that each project the exhibits highlight failed on its merits, and that what was developed instead (whether something or nothing) was wisely selected. I'll wait for the planners, architects, developers, and neighborhood activists to stop laughing. Although some remain unbuilt because they were too outlandish, or impossible to build, or were never entirely serious to begin with, others were born and stumbled for reasons particular to each city.

In San Francisco, John King, co-curator of *Unbuilt San Francisco* with Waverly Lowell, thinks the most interesting unbuilt projects were those proposed by the government. Whereas private developers have often been more interested in flash, government-proposed projects tended (note the past tense) to be more earnest attempts to solve genuine problems in the life of the city. He cites the Ferry Building as a prime example. When the hulking structure was made obsolete by new bridges across the bay, every few years brought a new scheme to replace or reuse it. The most ambitious was a 1951 state-backed plan to demolish it and build a World Trade Center spanning nine city blocks. The plan stalled, and subsequent proposals were increasingly modest, until public opinion turned more preservation-minded and the Ferry Building was preserved.

Public opinion has done in its fair share of projects in both cities, but particularly in San Francisco. According to

King, the successful freeway revolt inspired a generation (or more) of resident activists who continue to flex their project-blocking muscles today.

In Los Angeles, the dynamic has often been reversed. In his forward to the *Never Built Los Angeles* catalogue, architect Thom Mayne lays the blame for LA's failure to live up to its architectural potential at the feet of the city. "People love to portray the freedom of L.A.'s pluralism as a strength; in reality, it goes hand in hand with the city's distinct failure to collectively embrace communal projects," he writes. Mayne and *Never Built's* co-curators Sam Lubell and Greg Goldin agree that, for better or worse, large-scale projects in Los Angeles tend to rise and fall on the often bizarre whims of developers and moneymen.

While there will be plenty of fodder for the 2050 editions of *Never Built* and *Unbuilt*, the types of projects they feature may be different. John King notes that government-instigated schemes don't have the big problem-solving character they once did. But he also notes that younger San Francisco residents aren't as inclined to stand in the way of new buildings the way older generations did. Pro-density, pro-transit activists can find plenty to object to, but they're less interested in maintaining the status quo above all else. In Los Angeles, it remains to be seen whether the city can exert some ordering influence on individual developers. With

its second consecutive mayor dedicated to smart growth, the will is certainly there if the way isn't entirely clear. And at the state level, changes to the environmental protection regulations that are often used and abused by those trying to ensure projects stay unbuilt are due for a major overhaul.

But let's get back to reimagining a new present for ourselves. Over the following pages are selections from *Never Built Los Angeles* and *Unbuilt San Francisco*, any one of which, if it had been built, would have opened new possibilities for each city.

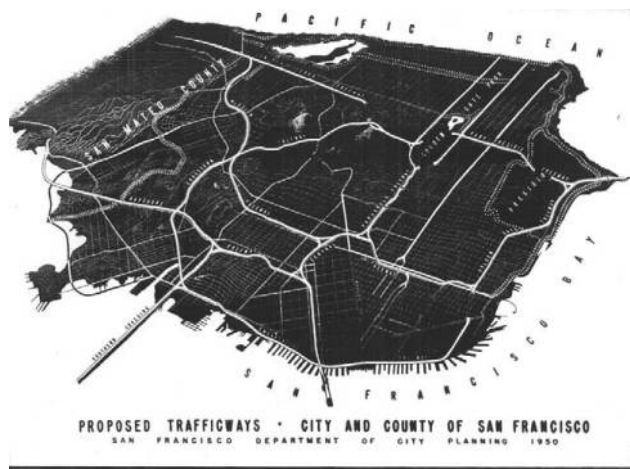


IMAGE COURTESY OF SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING.

San Francisco Expressway map, 1950 (above)

The municipal tendency to dream up big solutions doesn't always lead to good solutions. Postwar San Francisco planners responded to the explosion of car traffic with this 1950 plan, which was only partially built. By 1959 neighborhood groups flexed their collective muscle and staged a "freeway revolt," persuading the city to cancel seven of the ten planned routes.

Expressway system master plan, 1959 (facing page, bottom)

Around the time San Franciscans were revolting over the city's freeway plans, the state approved a monumental scheme for metropolitan LA that would have built 1,557 miles of road by 1980. While there was local opposition to select routes, the project was done in by economics: the gas tax that would have paid the bills did not raise enough to

keep up with spiraling construction costs, environmental remediation, and so on. By the late 1960s, routes began to be removed from the "to build" list.

Elysian Park Heights, 1950 (below)

Faced with a postwar housing shortage, city planners chose Chavez Ravine near downtown for an ambitious project that would build 3,600 new homes for low-income families. The area's poor Mexican American residents were evicted to make way for Elysian Park Heights, which architects Robert Alexander and Richard Neutra designed to be a dense neighborhood to foster a tight-knit community. It wasn't the protests of evicted residents that killed the project; rather, a coalition led by the *Los Angeles Times*, the police, and Citizens Against Socialist Housing, who disapproved of the government-funded development, turned opinion against it.



IMAGE COURTESY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA LIBRARY FOR SOCIAL STUDIES AND RESEARCH.

Lands End housing development, 1969 (facing page, top)

In 1969 a private developer saw opportunity in the bluffs of Lands End, in what is now the Golden Gate National Recreational Area, and planned a resort community there. But where one saw dollar signs, others saw open space in need of protection. The ensuing battle led directly to the creation of the Golden Gate National Recreational Area, quashing not just the 1969 plans but any future designs on the site, too.



WILLIAM W. WURSTER/WURSTER, BERNARDI & EMMONS COLLECTION.

IMAGE COURTESY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY.

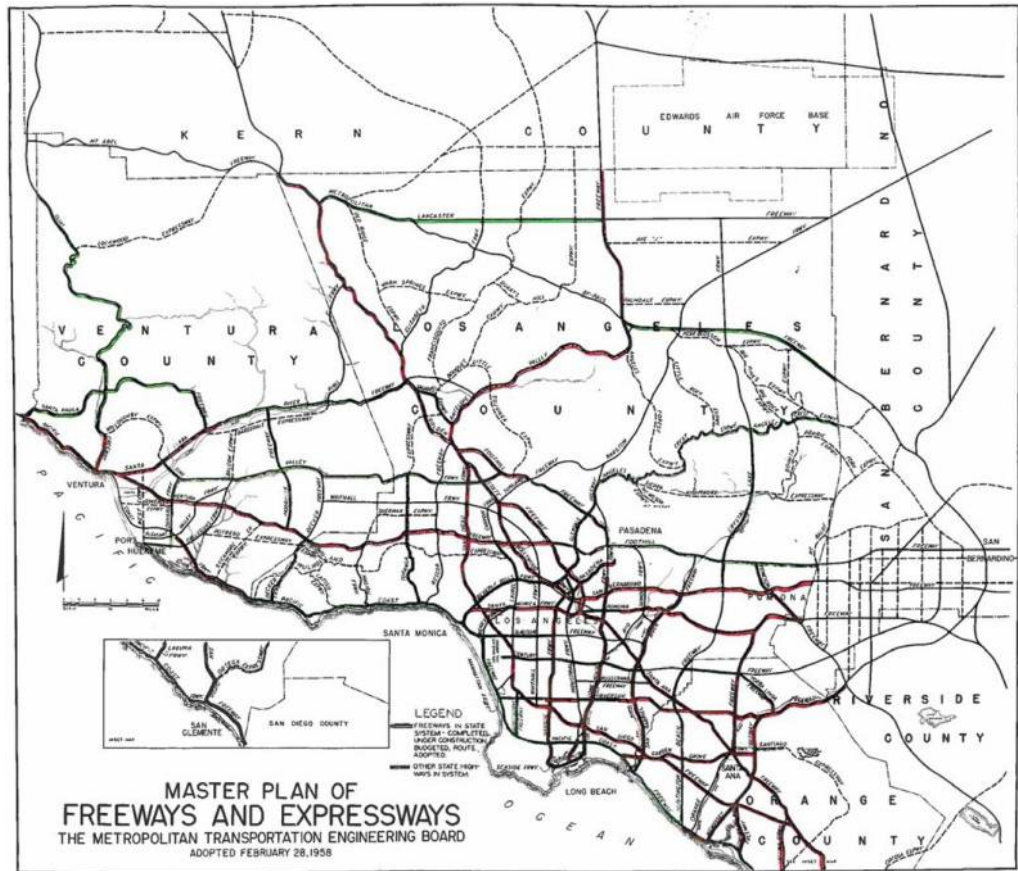
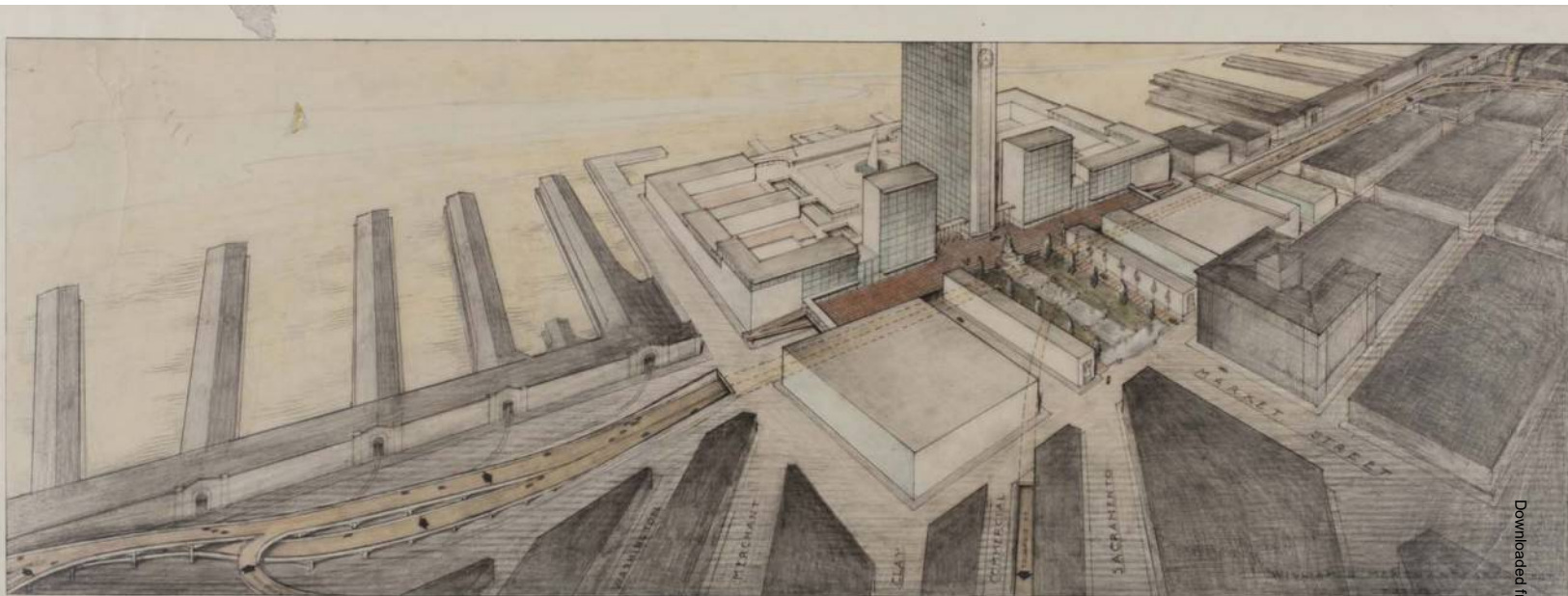


IMAGE COURTESY OF METRO TRANSPORTATION LIBRARY.



WILLIAM MERCHANT/HANS GERSON COLLECTION. IMAGE COURTESY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY.

World Trade Center, 1951 (above)

When the Ferry Building was made obsolete by bridges across the San Francisco Bay, the imposing site inspired a series of plans from developers and planners over several decades. Perhaps the most radical was this from 1951, supported by state officials and the Rockefellers, to replace the building with a World Trade Center spanning seven city blocks.

Los Angeles Civic Center, 1925 (below)

In Los Angeles, developments on an epic scale are perhaps more likely to come from the private sector—to wit, Lloyd Wright's 1925 plans to reconceive the heart of Downtown LA around Bunker Hill, creating an “acropolis for the city.” Civic buildings, shops, and offices above, and rapid transit lines below—plus helipads, parking lots, and walkways—would have been connected by high-speed elevators. Anais Nin thought the plans would have made Los Angeles “the most beautiful city in the world,” but city officials chose a far more limited plan instead of Wright's.

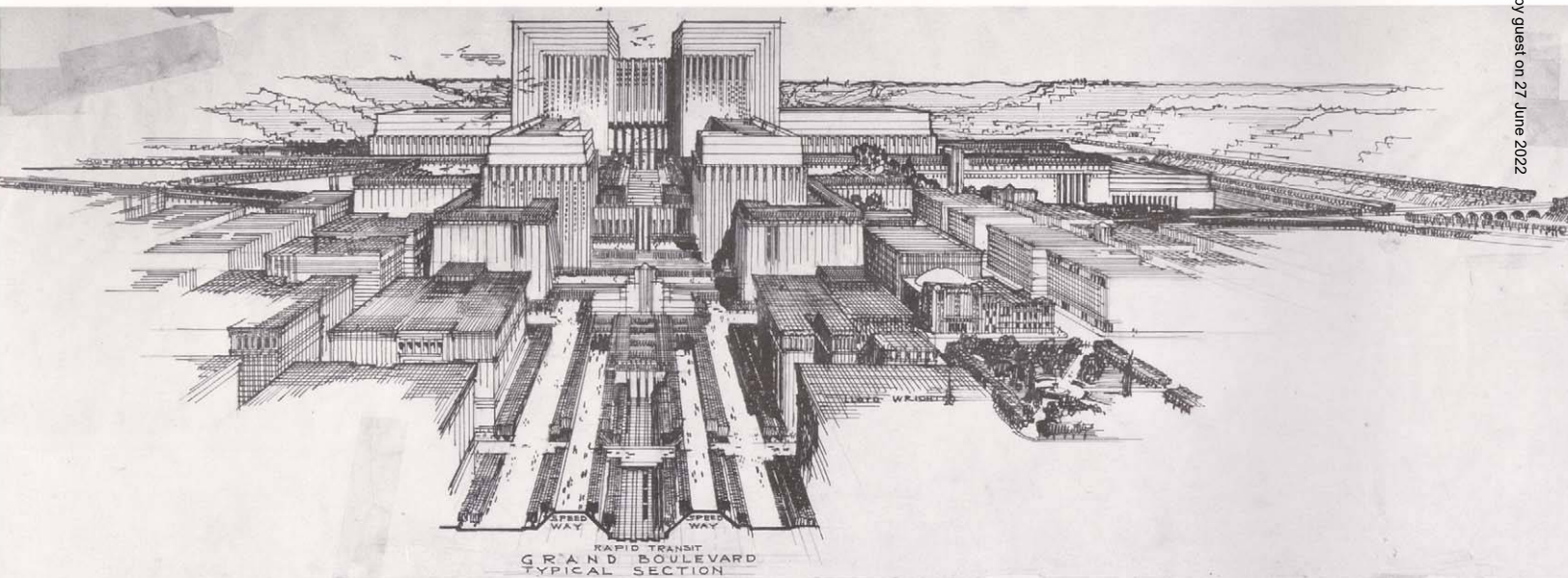


IMAGE COURTESY OF UCLA CHARLES E. YOUNG RESEARCH LIBRARY DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

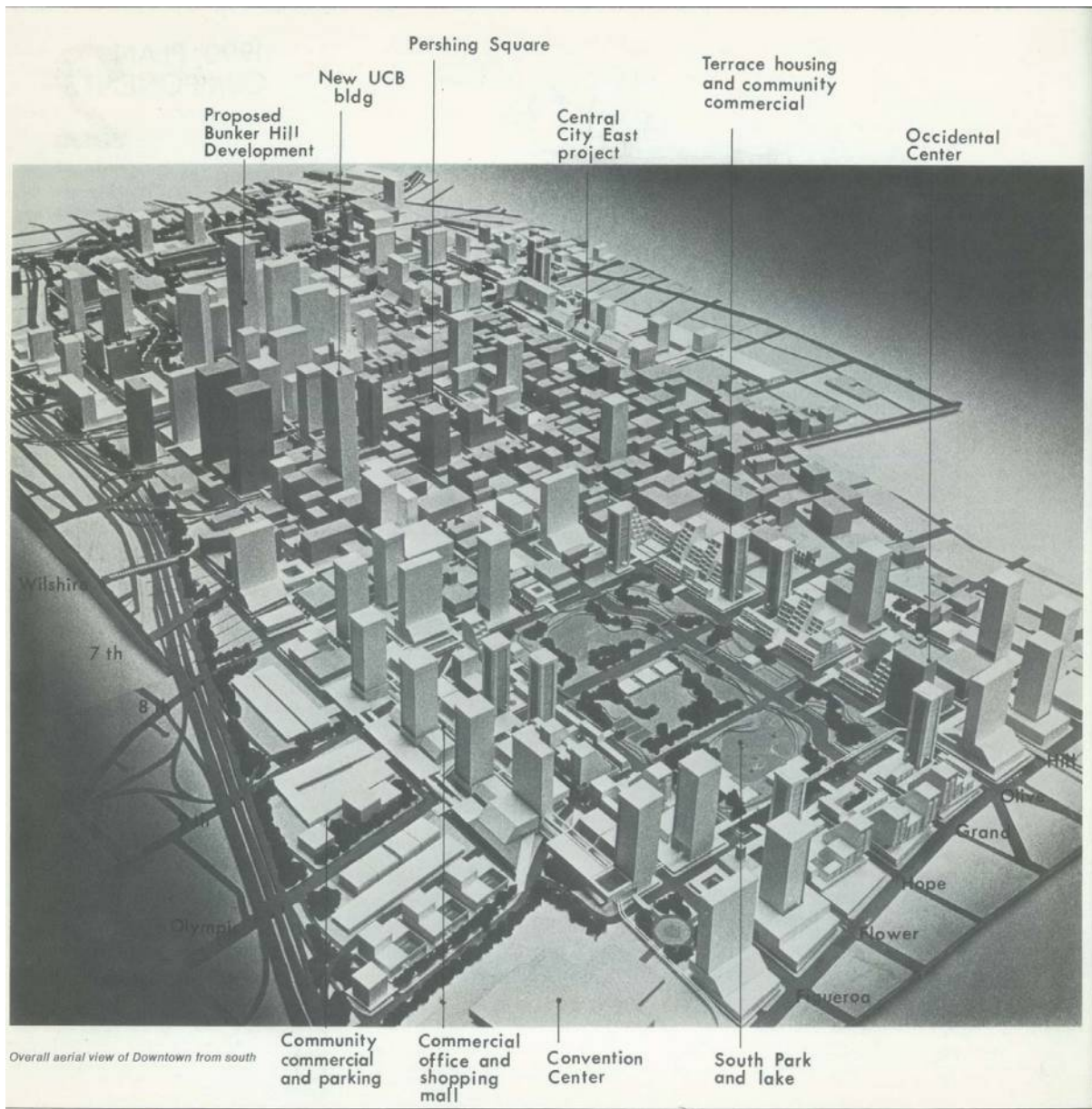


IMAGE COURTESY OF LOS ANGELES PLANNING DEPARTMENT.

Silver book, 1972 (above)

This 1972 study imagined a downtown LA circa 1990 with six times the number of high-rise residential units, double the commercial space, traffic alleviated by mass transit projects, no more Skid Row, and a residential neighborhood they called South Park Urban Village complete with parks, a lake, bicycle paths, and other idyllic features. Proposed by a downtown business lobby, the city never adopted the plans—though the name South Park stuck. Three decades later, however, the neighborhood saw a major building boom, with the LA Live complex, several luxury buildings, and, once again, plans for a residential village, parks, and all.

Yerba Buena Center, 1967–68 (following page, top)

This late 1960s plan would have taken the site now home to a convention center and gardens for a fortified, metabolic superstructure, a “safe” extension of the Financial District with little interaction with the streets around it. It was one of many mid-century, block-clearing plans to completely remake how people inhabit cities. Fought by local residents and business owners, the plan revealed planners’ “underlying assumption that South of Market and its residents were irredeemably ‘other,’” according to *The Urbanist*, and it was eventually abandoned—but not before the decision was made to clear the site, paving the way for the convention center.



IMAGE COURTESY OF SAN FRANCISCO REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY.



IMAGE COURTESY OF MOORE RUBLE YUDELL ARCHITECTS.

Nueva Azalea Power Plant, 1997 (above)

The Nueva Azalea power plant was going to be Sunlaw Energy Corporation's gift to Los Angeles, a "truly beautiful" landmark that would create clean energy and cleaner air for the surrounding community, according to the company's CEO. Inspired by both Soviet architecture and the Watts Towers, the \$450 million plant would have been visible to passengers flying into LAX and drivers whizzing down nearby freeways. Neighbors, city officials, and environmental activists saw past the ambition, however, and their outcry doomed the project.



IMAGE COURTESY OF EHDD AND OFFICE OF CHARLES F. BLOSZIES, AIA.

Golden Gate Bridge desalination plant and Presidio wind turbines (above and facing page)

Preservation cuts both ways. The impulse to protect our natural environment saved Lands End from a badly conceived private development. But the same preservationist spirit makes projects like these—which both have environmental protection at heart, if not preservation of iconic city views—impossible. A desalination plant for the base of the Golden Gate Bridge, as well as wind turbines along the Presidio bunkers, remains unbuilt and crystalize the tug of the past and future around us. **B**

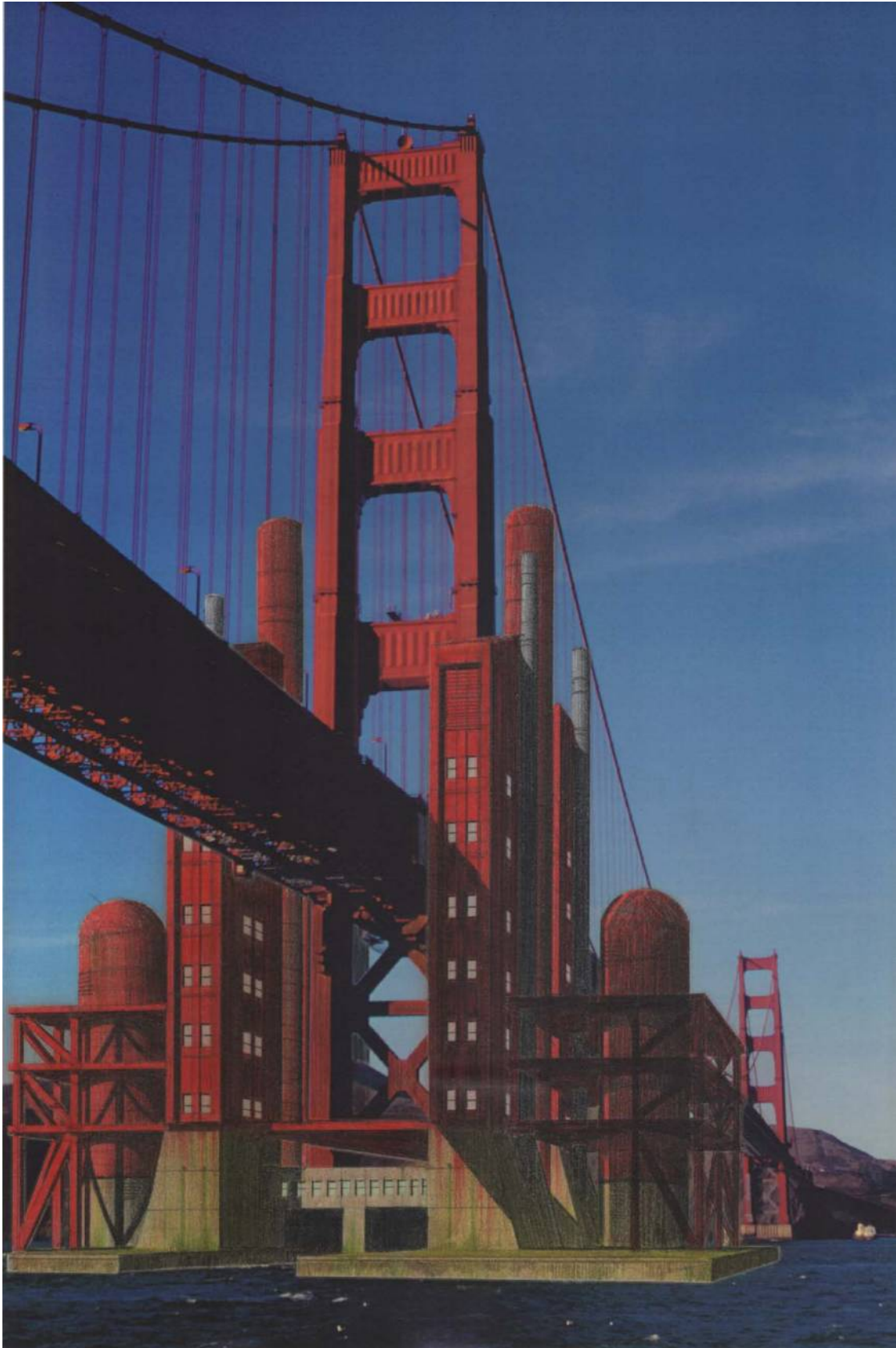


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