Treasure Island and the new bridges, looking west. COURTESY OAKLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY, OAKLAND HISTORY ROOM.

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Let There Be a Firmament in the Midst of the Waters

Treasure Island, then, now, and again

At its lowest points, the levee ringing the former naval station of Treasure Island clears the lapping brackish waters of San Francisco Bay by about four feet during the highest tides.[1] According to current sea-level-rise projections, the bay could overtop the levee sometime this century. The return of Treasure Island to the bay whence it came would start with a few exuberant splashes during storms and extreme high tides, then more routine flooding at very high tides, and then flooding every day, twice a day, beginning a slow conversion of the island to tidal wetlands, and finally history.

Of course, that will happen only if the levee isn't built higher or if Treasure Island doesn't rise up to match the encroaching waters. That's exactly what's planned as part of a long-awaited redevelopment on the island, set to get underway later this year. Solving the problem by raising the levee alone would wall off the island from its spectacular views of downtown San Francisco, the East Bay, and the Golden Gate, which planners deemed unacceptable (and future residents would likely agree). Instead, they've assembled a mix of mitigation measures. They'll increase levee heights a few feet in some places and truck in fill to raise the elevation of the developed parts of the island. They'll build a robust new storm-drain system and require that the base floors of all new buildings and transportation infrastructure sit three-and-a-half feet above the projected 100-year water level. They acknowledge that even in the near

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term, during certain high-water events like storms, some of the open spaces may develop temporary ponds—a preview of coming attractions, perhaps.

Sea level rise is something developers are now required to consider when planning new projects along the shore of San Francisco Bay. But it wasn't on the minds of the people who began filling in a stretch of shoals in the center of the bay to create Treasure Island in 1936. They had no idea that a warming planet and rising waters would one day threaten the mile-long chamfered rectangle they were "reclaiming." They were focused instead on a much more foreseeable challenge: building Treasure Island so that it could host a World's Fair, the Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939.

Into the Void Pacific, by University of California, Berkeley associate professor of architecture Andrew M. Shanken, undertakes a detailed examination of the politics and processes of design that produced the layout, monuments, and buildings of the 1939 fair, and how those buildings were executed and received. Within his design history, Shanken considers the fair as an expression of identity and ambition, a projection of power—America's, California's, and San Francisco's power—into a new Pacific world order.

Shanken's book is also about how we try to build for a future that we think is coming, and how we frequently get it wrong.

The 1939 fair was, as Shanken points out, a "pretext" to accelerate the creation of Treasure Island itself, where San Francisco planned to build a new major airport after the exposition's end. By the early 1930s, civic leaders looking for the next engine of development turned their gazes skyward. They saw a future in which airborne transportation would determine a city's fortunes, and they set about building the infrastructure necessary to seize it for San Francisco's benefit. Adjacent to the natural Yerba Buena Island, where the two spans of a newly proposed Bay Bridge would meet, Treasure Island was thought to be an ideal place for a new airport, providing easy access to San Francisco and Oakland. Build the bridge, and a new island airport begins to seem practical. Propose a fair to celebrate the new bridge. Use the fair to speed up the creation of the island for the airport. It helped that federal funding through the Works Progress Administration was available for this audacious building spree.

Shanken argues that the bridge-fair-airport scheme was San Francisco's gambit in a competition for West Coast economic dominance. San Francisco saw itself in a race with other cities, in particular Los Angeles, but its growth was constrained by its peninsular geography. The Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge, both built in the 1930s, were attempts to escape those confines, and they helped the city expand its influence over the wider region. Its state-spanning and region-serving water system, its railroad connections, and its then-robust seaport had also been critical to San Francisco's growth.

Like the bridge and the island airport, the 1939 fair was a tool for expressing and, city leaders hoped, realizing San Francisco's goals for the future its elected and business elite saw coming. Shanken explains that, with the fair, San Francisco was willing itself to become "the hub of what civic leaders imagined as an emerging Pacific civilization that would supplant the Atlantic world." That no such "Pacific civilization" existed seemed not to bother the fair's designers; they would create one. They would "transplant and synthesize" elements of the distinct cultures ringing the great ocean and make California "the melting pot of the Pacific."

Shanken attempts to make sense of the Golden Gate International Exposition's muddled program and ideology. The design of the fair's buildings and their contents, he writes, aimed to position the city

> as the center of a vast western region that extended across the Pacific. The City's regional consciousness had imperial ambitions. The rhetoric of the GGIE tapped into this idea, extending the reach of imperial San Francisco to the Pacific in a moment when air transportation promised to shrink the oceans and make such a plan possible. The immense symbolic power expressed by the China Clipper landing at Treasure Island brought these associations into plain view. The name of the island itself echoed the sentiment. And so would the architecture become an accomplice of this fantasy.

Into the Void Pacific is rich with drawings, photographs, and passages from documents and correspondence by the fair's designers, visitors, and critics that document this fantasy-abetting architectural enterprise. Shanken recreates the look and experience of the fair as it was at the time—which is helpful, since almost none of its buildings are standing today. Visiting Treasure Island now, it is almost impossible to picture the Golden Gate International Exposition as it stood in 1939 and 1940, because it left so few traces on the ground.

Even before the fair opened in February 1939, its fever dream of a unified "Pacific civilization" was being

Detail of construction of the "nave" of the Federal Building. From the Visual Resources Center, University of California, Berkeley.

undermined by reality. Japan, which had occupied Manchuria since 1932, launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937. (Reflecting its own grand Pacific ambitions, Japan set up an ornate, 50,000-square-foot pavilion at the fair—the largest of any foreign country. China had no official participation.) By the fair's end on 29 September 1940, Japan had taken control of French Indochina and signed the Tripartite Pact with Italy and Germany, creating what would be called the "Axis" powers. There was no Pacific world in contrast with an Atlantic world, as the fair had offered. There was simply one world, and it was at war.

When the fair ended, the United States was still more than a year from formally joining that war, but the momentum of global events was clear. In early 1941, the Navy leased Treasure Island from San Francisco and opened a receiving center there, and in the spring of 1942 it acquired the island from the city outright (though not without protest from San Francisco over the low price paid).[2] As it transformed the island from playground to training ground, the Navy demolished or paved over most of the exposition's buildings, monuments, and formal courtyards.

Today, only four original buildings remain. They include two large hangars and a semicircular administration building, aligned on the island's southern edge, which had been designed to serve the airport that never was. (The administration building is even topped with a small control tower in anticipation of its intended use.) The fourth, a model home from the fair called the "California Home of the West," has been altered significantly and now houses a restaurant and banquet space called the Oasis Café.[3]

The rest of Treasure Island is covered with a hodge-podge of open spaces and structures built during its use as a naval station from 1942 to 1997: warehouses, classroom buildings, offices, apartments, and other buildings in various states of occupancy, disrepair, or outright abandonment. About 2,000 people live in the apartments today. There's plenty of parking, though some lots are chained off with regularly spaced red, white, and blue shields bearing the words "US GOVT PROPERTY NO TRESPASSING." The word "NO" is the largest element. Other parts of the island are closed to entry with a different kind of sign: yellow rectangles warning of radioactive contamination—another legacy of the Navy years, though not as tangible as the buildings.

This utilitarian, decrepit, partly toxic landscape is a far cry from the spectacle that the fair must have presented, and that is captured in the photographs and diagrams of *Into the Void Pacific*. Shanken's book can help us with the difficult trick of seeing Treasure Island's past. But it's harder to see its future.

The plans for Treasure Island's redevelopment call for razing most of the structures on the island and replacing them with, among other elements, up to 8,000 housing units, 140,000 square feet of commercial space, 100,000 square feet of offices, three hotels, 300 acres of open space, and a new ferry terminal.[4] Demolition of some existing structures has begun, but the full project is expected to take about twenty years to complete. (Given the nature of California planning and environmental laws, this may well prove optimistic.) The plans approved to date give a rough idea of what will be built where, but later phases will add details to this new small city in the middle of the bay. Right now, it's a gauzy rendering.

Part of the difficulty of imagining the past and the future of Treasure Island may have to do with the island's fundamental impermanence. Buildings burn, fall apart, are demolished and replaced. Land, though—we're not used to land going away. Perhaps we should work to accustom ourselves to this idea, but for now, our senses struggle to accommodate it.

The Bay Area may have stopped creating land where once was water in the late 1960s,[5] but several legacies of the era of fill are now threatened by rising water: the San Francisco and Oakland airports, large sections of San Francisco's northern and eastern waterfronts, portions of other cities and developments around the bay, and, of course, Treasure Island. We don't yet have anything resembling a long-term or comprehensive strategy to protect all of these low-lying lands, but we also seem reluctant to let them slip silently below the surface.

Standing on Treasure Island now, you might feel like you're standing on solid ground. You might know the story of the island's engineered origin. You might know how parts of the island and its perimeter walls have settled at different rates, leaving ground elevations ranging from 6 to 14 feet on what was once an open and level canvas for the designers of a World's Fair. You might have climate-change-induced sea level rise in mind as you watch the bay pulse around you, with whitecaps driven by a hard westerly wind. You might even have read the studies about how portions of the island's sandy soil liquefied during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and are likely to do so again if the next big one hits before the planned work to strengthen the ground is finished.[6] None of that makes the ground feel any less substantial beneath your feet. But it is.

Treasure Island was built on soft, wet mud, and on a set of assumptions about the future of transportation, commerce, metropolitan organization, and international relations. Both soil and assumptions have proved unsettled and liable to shift. The creators of the island and the fair did not foresee world war, nor the changes in airplanes that rendered the site unsuitable for an airport shortly after the war, nor the false fixity of the sea level around the island.

Early in *Into the Void Pacific*, Andrew Shanken notes that world's fairs in the United States frequently functioned as "great utopian experiments in planning and social order" that "reflected the state of the art in building cities." The 1939 exposition on Treasure Island, like the fairs the preceded it, was a place "where an idealized order could be modeled in full scale or nearly so."

The present redevelopment plans for Treasure Island follow in this tradition—a rare luxury for Bay Area planners, who could treat much of the island as a blank slate, as the fair's designers did seventy years before. In addition to calling for so many units of housing and so much commercial space, the new development is imagined grouped into walkable blocks, oriented around public transit. The new buildings are to be constructed of recycled and locally sourced materials to high "green" standards, with on-site composting and stormwater treatment, all powered by fully renewable energy, some of it generated right on the island. There's even something called an "urban agricultural park," which sounds like what you get when you torture the words "community garden."

The redevelopment plan, in other words, is an encapsulation of contemporary urban planning and design thought. It includes many of the elements, gestures, and buzzwords that capture the current *bien pensant* consensus about what

Architecture Exhibit: All the materials needed for a building. From the Ernest and Esther Born Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

global cities should be. The new Treasure Island is no World's Fair, but it is nonetheless "an idealized order modeled in full scale."

Treasure Island was created as an expression of San Francisco's visions for its future, as seen by the imperially minded civic leaders in the mid-1930s: "San Francisco as a regional giant, dominating trade with the Pacific," in the words of Shanken. The plans for the island's redevelopment carry on that legacy, but with a new idea of what tomorrow will bring: a transit-oriented eco-city, home for people instead of planes, resilient to sea level rise and with an eye toward other possible long-term changes in energy, water use, and food production. This new vision is different, but just as grand in its sweep as the one that built Treasure Island, and hopefully less likely to be derailed by war, and planned with the rising waters that no one considered to account for 1930s. **B**

Notes

1 Moffatt & Nichol Engineers, "Treasure Island Development Project Coastal Flooding Study," April 2009, http://sftreasureisland.org/sites/sftreasureisland.org/files/migrated/ftp/devdocs/Tsunami,%20Seismic,%20SLR%20Detail-%20File%20110291%202%20of%202.pdf.

2 "Treasure Isle Goes to Navy," *San Francisco News*, 17 April 1942,

3 "A House That Many Architects Have Dreamed of Building," *Architect and Engineer* (June 1939): 57.

4 The Treasure Island redevelopment plans approved thus far are available at http://sftreasureisland.org/development-project.

5 For more on this, read "The Man Who Helped Save the Bay by Trying to Destroy It" by Charles Wollenberg for *Boom*: http://www.boomcalifornia.com/2015/04/the-man-who-helped-save-san-francisco-bay-by-trying-to-destroy-it/.

6 J.M Ferrito, "Ground Motion Amplification and Seismic Liquefaction: A Study of Treasure Island and the Loma Prieta Earthquake," Naval Civil Engineering Laboratory (June 1992), http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a253945.pdf.

Painting of the Tower of the Sun, Golden Gate International Exposition, by Chesley Bonestell.
Collection of the Oakland Museum of California. Gift of Heather Fowler.