Magic City 2.0

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Chapter 10

Magic City 2.0: Articulations of Soil, Law, and Capital on Treasure Island

John Stehlin

*If you could start from scratch, absolute scratch, what would you build?*

- Jared Blumenfeld

Few landscapes are as obviously constructed as Treasure Island, a stretched octagon of landfill jutting awkwardly out from Yerba Buena Island in the middle of the San Francisco Bay. The island is constructed in a dual sense, however, as a technical object in continual flux and as a political mirror for San Francisco’s developmental ambitions. The most recent plan echoes an increasingly dominant commonsense regarding sustainable urbanism, calling for a futuristic, carbon-neutral eco-city of nineteen thousand new residents (see Sankalia, this volume). Its signature feature is the construction of a dense, walkable urban form connected by frequent ferry to San Francisco, surrounded by verdant open space, an organic farming education center and nutrient-cycling artificial wetlands. Treasure Island can host this fusion of intensive urbanization and high-tech eco-futurism, according to prevailing discourse *because* it can act as a blank slate on which to push design boundaries and generate an experimental urban form for a postcarbon future. Getting ecological urbanism “right,” in this framing, depends on the availability of a tabula rasa, a radical break from the material histories that have produced it. This essay pushes against this framing, reading the island’s materiality back into the structure of the plan, in spite of the departure it purports to make. It also moves beyond a “greenwashing” narrative that reduces Treasure Island to a screen for San Francisco’s development machine. Treasure Island is
a site on which a fantasy of a green urban future plays out through techno-fetishist design and the ideology of a start “from scratch,” but is in fact subject to very material “enabling constraints” (Butler 1997) on the possible futures Treasure Island holds.

Since 1997, the “empty” island, with its cheap housing built for military families and almost devoid of services, has acquired many temporary uses, such as the Treasure Island Music Festival, various sporting events, a flea market, and several wineries. But as housing costs in San Francisco continue to rise, the island has seen an influx of low-income residents (US Census Bureau 2015). Many new residents since base closure are formerly homeless, rehoused through the Treasure Island Homeless Development Initiative (TIHDI), a program federally mandated for shuttered military bases. The specter of radioactive pollution from the Navy’s tenure (see Dillon, this volume) haunts current residents, who are formally temporary and frequently relocated when areas that had been deemed safe by the Navy are reopened for further remediation. Much of the public discussion of the island focuses on this toxic legacy, a growing social justice issue as the temporary tenure of some residents has stretched to nearly two decades. At the same time, in built-out San Francisco, the irresistibility of unbuilt land acquired through “accumulation by demilitarization” (following Harvey 2003) makes its redevelopment a foregone conclusion.

Less well documented, however, is how the materiality of the island’s construction from dredged soil itself shapes the current plan. In what follows, I argue that it does so in three ways. First, the poorly consolidated soils making up Treasure Island are vulnerable to seismic destabilization, making any foreseeable development plan contingent on offsetting the high costs of seismic retrofitting by attracting capital investment. Second, as coastal landfill, Treasure Island is legally required to be used in the “public trust,” and is administered by the California State Lands Commission (CSLC). This designation strictly precludes residential uses. Thus, the
balance of open space and intensive urbanization for which the redevelopment plan has been hailed is in fact the result of legal maneuvers to circumnavigate this legal framework and free up as much land as possible for residential development. Finally, the initial “conjuring” of the island as a projection of San Francisco’s regional ambitions continues to resonate in this current “utopic cycle” (following Sheridan 1999, 3). In the days of the Expo, the raising of the island from the bay floor played as key a role to its image of futurity as the pavilions and demonstrations it assembled. Plans for the eco-city of the future reference the technical prowess that initially formed the island, celebrating the engineering challenges it presents as part of assembling a spectacular site where the fantasy of a sustainable future generates value in the present. Through attention to “past processes whose traces are not always evident in the landscape” (Lefebvre 1977, 341), I hope to show that Treasure Island is anything but a blank slate.

Accumulation by Demilitarization

The closure of Naval Station Treasure Island (NSTI), initiated in 1993 at a time of the end of the Cold War, the devolution of federal power, and the neoliberalization of the state’s economic role, constituted “accumulation by demilitarization,” to borrow from Harvey (2003): a privatization of state space, in this case military land. The transfer of the island to civilian ownership—and essentially to the private sector, though formally owned by the city of San Francisco—opened a large swath of land to profitable redevelopment. Unlike the closure of military bases in economically depressed regions such as the Southeast, NSTI’s realignment has freed land adjacent to one of the West’s most dynamic property markets. As the Los Angeles Times put it, redeveloping former military land on the booming California coast is a “cottage
industry” for the project’s builder, Lennar Urban, a wing of Lennar Homes, which at the time of the 2008 financial crisis was the second largest homebuilder in the United States.

Although “accumulation by demilitarization” opens up “empty land” in advantageous locations, the land it opens is laden with challenges and obstacles. These do not block efforts to renew accumulation, however: Treasure Island’s toxic, seismically vulnerable soils generate opportunities for innovation. As Karl Marx well understood, the limits placed upon processes of capital accumulation do not halt them, but in fact force technical and political changes to spur new rounds of accumulation (Marx 1992 [1867]; Harvey 2007 [1982]). The not-at-all empty materiality of the island itself thus decisively shapes the possibilities for how to profitably develop it, not because of its essential properties, but because of the way that state-facilitated capitalist development works through material constraints rather than erasing them, recombining the material into new profitable configurations.

**Emptying Treasure Island: From Grandeur to Dereliction**

In many ways, Treasure Island was built to commemorate the start of the gasoline age. It was built within the context of a broad, state-led move toward regional integration and modernization, particularly with respect to the infrastructure of the automobile and airplane. The US Navy arrested this arc, taking control of the island in February of 1941 and transforming it into a base of operations in anticipation of war in the Pacific. NSTI served as a routing center, a node in the network of military bases stretching throughout the Bay Area region from Santa Cruz to Point Reyes. But its absorption into the region’s military geography (see Arbona, this volume) and subsequent slow deterioration after World War II essentially foreclosed the possibility of it keeping pace with the world it had commemorated. Not itself a primary site of shipbuilding,
munitions production and storage, or troop quartering, NSTI’s role as an administrative and circulatory command center, processing thousands of troops daily, meant that it saw little of the residential clustering common to bases with large permanent populations, and far less of the heavy pollution that saturated other sites such as Hunter’s Point.

Nevertheless, an early 1990s study in anticipation of base closure identified twenty-nine sites on the island contaminated with PCBs, diesel fuel, pesticides, petroleum, lead, and various other compounds, and eleven thousand feet of buried, aging fuel lines lie leaking (ROMA Design Group 1995a, vol. 1; 1996, 21). Most alarmingly, postwar radioactive materials training has left accumulated deposits of radium and cesium-137 (Hice and Schierling 1995, 68; Benkowski 2006, 7; see also Dillon, this volume). Locations that the Navy had declared safe, particularly in the island’s low-lying northwest corner, have been reopened for remediation, and the families living atop the questionable soils relocated (Russell 2007). In addition to documenting pollution on the land, a suit brought by ArcEcology and others named more than four hundred thousand separate violations of clean water laws, events that stand to increase as climate change-related sea-level rise could bring deeper toxins closer to the surface (Holding 1996; Schlesinger 2010). Since 1997, the Navy has spent over $100 million on cleanup, and in 2009, after seemingly endless negotiations with the city of San Francisco over the terms of transfer, the parties settled a $105 million deal, which includes a possible $50 million to be paid to the Navy if the redevelopment is successful (Coté 2009).

Treasure Island is currently home to an estimated 2,300 temporary residents living in remaining naval housing, mainly on the island’s northwest corner, as well as some privately built market-rate houses. Accessed at the midpoint of the notoriously traffic-plagued Bay Bridge by car or a single hourly bus line, the island remains cut off from the rest of San Francisco, forcing
residents to leave the island for even the most basic needs. Services such as schools and a
grocery store, present during the period of Navy use, have since been removed, leaving only a
pair of convenience stores in their stead (though in June 2013, perhaps recognizing market
potential, a small, full-service grocery store did open). Current uses of the space include film
production, an annual music festival, and various sporting events. Perhaps most poignantly, it is
noteworthy as a destination from which to gaze back upon San Francisco itself. The only
permanent uses are a federal job training center and TIHDI, both mandated by the Base
Realignment and Closure Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-510). Its residents considered temporary and
movable, Treasure Island has been construed as a space arrested in a holding pattern, both
materially and discursively emptied of durable content and awaiting development. Meanwhile,
booming, space-hungry San Francisco is undergoing an affordability crisis with little parallel in
recent history.

A Blank Slate for an Ecotopia by the Bay: The Treasure Island-Yerba Buena Island
Development Plan

Framing the island as a tabula rasa is the basis on which planners, investors, and
progressive organizations all interpret its possibility. After fitful planning efforts throughout the
1990s, the Treasure Island Development Authority (TIDA), a state agency formed to oversee the
transfer, finally introduced the current master plan in 2005. The plan’s moving parts represent
the contingent articulation of San Francisco’s growth machine with a rising discourse of
sustainable urbanism that has gained traction over the past two decades, and is hegemonic within
California (Hawkes and Yeung 2010; Russell 2005). The planning of “San Francisco’s newest
neighborhood” is handled as one large site overseen by a mayoral appointee (for a more detailed
analysis, see also Sankalia, this volume), in a process that typifies the neoliberal public-private partnership model and its evasion of democratic planning processes (Harvey 2000, 1989).

In a virtually uncompetitive selection process, Treasure Island Community Development (TICD), a joint venture of Lennar Urban, boutique developer Wilson Meany, and two private equity firms, submitted the winning proposal.\(^1\) Expected to eclipse $6 billion in cost, the project features a hundred-acre pocket of dense, mixed-use urbanization at the southwest corner of the island with eight thousand housing units, two thousand of which are below market rate,\(^2\) complete with a tourist-oriented commercial and hotel district (Ward 2009). This new urbanization will connect by ferry service to San Francisco with strict parking maximums designed to create disincentives to car ownership in favor of pedestrian-, bicycle-, and transit-based mobility (TICD/TIDA 2007; TICD 2011, 56; Hawkes and Yeung 2010). Three hundred or more acres of open space surround this “town center,” including a twenty-acre organic agricultural education center, a wastewater cycling artificial wetlands, parklands and walkways. LEED-certified buildings, including a glass condo tower of between forty and sixty stories, boast “world-class” views of San Francisco to attract affluent buyers. Even the street grid will be realigned to block the bay’s notorious winds to reduce energy used on heating (Ward 2009).

In 2008, the project received the Governor’s Environmental and Economic Leadership Award; at the ceremony, Mayor Gavin Newsom called the project “a model of how communities can grow sustainably and prosper economically” (San Francisco Office of the Mayor 2008). Meanwhile, bringing in the expertise of various stakeholders, from bicycle advocates to environmental activists, built the credibility of the design as a wholesale departure from previous efforts and a mirror of the green future. The result, advocates hope, will be a self-sustaining, carbon-neutral ecological utopia in the bay, one that will serve as a model for other localities
who intend to adopt aspects of its organizational logic in order to forward a more sustainable urban agenda.

The notion of the island as a tabula rasa shapes the discourse surrounding its redevelopment. Thus, even as he acknowledges the obstacles, TIDA board member John Eberling argues,

<ext>There are no NIMBYs. It’s nobody’s backyard. Instead, people have addressed a series of policy issues they care about. The military’s withdrawal from the Bay Area has left all these huge opportunities around. Hunters Point, Concord. These are all huge opportunities. And they come with a tremendous collection of problems. (Simerman 2010)</ext>

TIHDI head Sherry Williams sounded a similar note when we spoke in an interview:

“Since there is no existing neighborhood, there is no need to deal with NIMBY-ism about the formerly homeless. It is a unique opportunity to build in the homeless from the ground up.”

These statements imply that an existing community would act as an obstacle to both comprehensive ecological design and poverty alleviation, raising the obvious question of how the project could become a model for comprehensive sustainable and socially just development elsewhere. Meanwhile, the “tremendous collection of problems” that issue from the island’s material legacies can be overcome with the application of technical expertise. Aspects of the island laid down in its very construction, however, have shaped the plan in ways as decisive as the perceived opportunity to design in sustainability from the beginning. I now turn to the technical, legal, and political-economic framework through which the island’s materiality acts on the project.
Risk and Capital on Shifting Ground

The lasting effects of Treasure Island’s construction hinge on the particularities of how its soils were made into a landmass to begin with. Establishing the island as solid ground is a process that has never been complete. Treasure Island as a whole is sinking. Its north end, where most of the remaining Navy housing is currently located, was never expected by the original builders to remain solid. It sits on the deepest part of the shoal and currently lies below sea level, where it is prone to flooding and upwelling that draws pollution to the surface. More importantly, the entire island is at high risk for liquefaction, the destabilization of saturated soil caused by major seismic activity, as demonstrated by the extensive boiling, lateral spreading, and flooding caused by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake (see Figure 10.1) (ROMA Design Group 1995b).

<Insert Fig 10.1 about here>

By 1995, it was clear to planners that without geotechnical improvements only 120 acres in the center of the island would be developable space (ROMA Design Group 1995b, 19). An early stabilization approach study indicated that though $18 million in improvements would yield the capacity to use this 120-acre core covering the original shallow shoals, $234 million would be needed to render the bulk of the island safe for intensive construction (see Figure 10.2). Ironically, the most radically minimalist option—simply removing the seawalls and letting the island return to the bay floor—would violate federal clean water laws due to the extent of pollution in the soil. Base conversion law also mandates the redevelopment of former military
lands, although there are provisions for low- or no-cost transfer if the land will be used for parks and open space (Urban Land Institute 1996; US Congress 1990).

Even though an independent evaluation by the Urban Land Institute specifically recommended against housing (1996, 14), the need for remediation efforts was never substantively called into question in official plans. Fixing liquefaction simply requires the application of capital and technology to shift risky soils into a more solid combination. As Jack Sylvan from the mayor’s office tellingly puts it, “It’s about as risky a project as there is. It’s massively front-loaded” (Simerman 2010). Here, positing seismic activity as a risk already advances the possibility of a technical rather than an ethico-political solution, and attests to the inevitability of the undertaking (Winner 1989; Beck 1992). Thus, instead of posing an insurmountable barrier, these challenges spurred the planning of a larger and more intensive project to offset the costs. As early planning documents make clear, the return on the capital required to cover geotechnical engineering could not be raised by low-rise residential uses alone, but only by combining dense housing with more outwardly-directed accumulation strategies (ROMA Design Group 1995b, 39–40). In 2010, two thousand more units were added to the plan in accordance with this logic.

In other words, Treasure Island could never be just another average neighborhood of San Francisco. Long before its “green” turn, planners were convinced of the need to produce it as a spectacular space that could stimulate the requisite investment, mobilizing a nominally public interest in sustainability to generate private accumulation. In this way, planners were constrained
both by the general requirement to return a profit in order to attract investment capital and the specific requirements made by the very mode of construction of the soils, in the context of this instrumental understanding of what is possible in urban redevelopment. This is the first paradox of the supposedly blank space of Treasure Island.

Trading Places: Abstract Space and the Treasure Island Trust Exchange

A second constraint concerns the fill landscape as a jurisdictional category. Although Treasure Island falls within the city of San Francisco, because it is constructed from landfill, on transfer from the Navy it becomes subject to regulation by the California State Lands Commission under the Tidelands Trust. The CSLC was founded to protect coastal areas from development and hold them in the public trust for the use of the citizens of California. Tidelands Trust lands were originally limited to maritime commerce, navigation, and fishing, but since the 1970s, the list of possible uses has expanded through case law to include recreational open space, swimming, hunting, scientific study, and ecological value (Ziemann 1973).

The Tidelands Trust specifically excludes residential real estate, a constraint that would jeopardize the main basis of the profitability of the island’s redevelopment as determined by the ROMA studies. Planners had anticipated the need to negotiate with the commission to relax these strictures long before the current character of the plan took shape. Although when base realignment was first explored it was not yet clear whether Tidelands Trust constraints would apply, the commission had already indicated willingness to “negotiate flexibility” (ROMA Design Group 1995b, 40–41), perhaps recognizing the political and economic pressure for the development of newly acquired land.
To circumvent these strictures, representatives from the City of San Francisco successfully lobbied the state legislature for the passage of the Treasure Island Public Trust Exchange Act in 1994, which lifted trust status from roughly one hundred acres of Treasure Island and in exchange assigned it to portions of Yerba Buena Island deemed of equal value. In the bill’s language, “the existing configuration of trust and non-trust lands within the property is such that the purpose of the public trust cannot be fully realized. This measure is intended to allow for the exchange of lands to maximize public trust values for the benefit of the statewide public” (Senate Committee on Governmental Organization 2004). Left unexamined is that the existing configuration considered unable to realize the public trust is, paradoxically, the designation intended to preserve coastal areas for public uses. The majority of the hundred acres freed for private real estate development, roughly a quarter of the area of the island, will be devoted to real estate sales and a small portion of rental properties (for a discussion of the legal history of the Tidelands Trust in California and the dubious constitutionality of trust exchanges, see Martyn and Bohner 1978).

Trust exchanges have become the norm in the redevelopment of riparian lands, occurring throughout the bay on decommissioned military lands such as Hunter’s Point Naval Shipyard, Naval Air Station Alameda, and the Oakland Army Base. Between 1968 and 1978 alone, the state legislature authorized 150 trust exchanges involving an unknown amount of acreage. “Most of the coastal wetlands boundaries,” Martyn and Bohner note, “have never been completely and accurately surveyed in metes and bounds. . . . [I]f the state does not know what it originally owned, and thus what it is giving away, one can question whether what it is giving away is equal to what it is receiving” (1978, 42–43). In this case, the flat, sea-level landfill of Treasure Island
bears no resemblance, save the abstraction of surveyed area, to the rocky slopes of Yerba Buena Island. Treasure Island, however, is far better suited to intensive development.

Here, instead of an imaginary all-powerful force of capital, flowing without restraint across abstract space, we find a legal maneuver within the constraints of environmental regulation and material conditions to generate new sources of value. Ironically, given the artifactual quality of Treasure Island, environmental law spurred this jurisdictional transfer. Without the trust exchange, no land could have supported the residential development needed to make seismic retrofitting feasible. Furthermore, the balance of urban density and open space outlined by the plan—indeed, one of its main selling points as a space of eco-urbanist harmony—is not simply the result of enlightened land-use planning and cultural progress, but a response to the durability of these constraints and the opportunities they nevertheless present. Whether the public benefits from the maneuver depends on how one construes the public interest, but planning documents appear to interpret it as synonymous with whatever chain of events facilitates the island’s development.

Even within the dichotomy of trust- and nontrust land that the Trust Exchange Act created, prospective uses are unevenly prioritized. Trust lands only permit commercial uses that are directed toward “publicly oriented uses”—meaning for the benefit of the citizens of California as a whole (ROMA Design Group 1996). Housing and retail intended to serve residents are legally confined to the acres transferred from Yerba Buena Island. The 2010 increase in the planned number of units, from six thousand to eight thousand, expands the consumer pool to attract retailers, particularly a large grocery store (Dineen 2010) but could bring housing into competition with neighborhood-serving retail. Ironically, such constraints do not apply to some of the most potentially lucrative land uses like the proposed hotel, “wellness
center,” sailing center, and various “visitor-serving” retail and entertainment uses, which occupy nearly twice the land area of retail serving residents. These outwardly oriented uses occupy areas where public trust status has not been lifted (Figure 10.3).

<Insert Figs 10.3 and 10.4 about here, preferably side-by-side>

Indeed, high-value land uses intended to serve visitors form a large portion of the expected revenue from the project (TICD 2011). Because the trust exchange imposed the requirement to both generate profit and “serve” the citizens of California, the development’s claimed energy-neutrality depends on tourism from the wider carbon-intensive world. Furthermore, this speaks powerfully to the neoliberal underpinnings of this framing of sustainability, implying that the kind of public interests to be enhanced are those that support the engine of accumulation. This contortion of the Tidelands Trust, the expansion of which specifically named the value of keeping coastal areas in their “natural state,” materially underpins the “green” design for which the plan is celebrated (Ziemann 1973). Paradoxically, instead of limiting development, its manipulation encouraged it. As one critic said of a similar trust exchange in San Diego: “The public lost a jewel that defines what the California Coastal Act was created to protect” (CSLC 2003, 30).

**Magic City 2.0: An Expo for the Postcarbon Future**

The ways these material and legal strictures have shaped the island’s development fall away in the triumphalistic account of the opportunity to build an ecological future “from scratch” in the present. Moreover, this technological celebration harkens back to the narrative of the
island’s construction itself. The island’s construction is not in itself unusual in San Francisco Bay history, where constantly shifting boundaries between land and ocean correspond to periods of intensive urbanization, industrial growth, and transport revolutions (Chin et al. 2004). But a qualitatively different imaginary accompanied the writing on Treasure Island at the time of its manufacture. In contemporary and more recent accounts alike, the island “literally ris[es] from the bay,” “takes shape,” and “blossoms” from the bay itself. In photographs, dredges and other heavy machinery operated by engineers “work,” “build,” and “fill” (Pipes 2007, 12–21). This erasure of labor by a highly technical account of engineering and sheer mechanical power frames the island’s construction as the inevitable result of merging natural materials with high technology and expertise. Triumphant accounts proclaimed, “To the average person it appeared that Aladdin rubbed his ‘Magic Lamp’ and ‘lo there arose before him, out of the waters’ depths and through the mists, a City, glowing in magnificent splendor and beauty,” mobilizing awe over technological progress that was capable of conjuring an island from nothing (Bottorff 1942). The grandeur of the Expo was not simply an escapist paradise but a representational space showcasing the technological future built into its very construction (Lefebvre 2004, 44).

The utopian celebration of the development plan as a fresh start seems directly tied to the island’s role as a space within which to realize grand, carefully choreographed visions of a bright future. These visions largely reflect the ideological preoccupations of San Francisco’s evolving growth machine. Plans floated before the current one included a golf course, sports complex, theme park, casino, and even an Expo ‘99 to commemorate sixty years since the Golden Gate International Exposition; all of which predated the noted seismic assessments (Expo ‘99 1995, 44; Urban Land Institute 1996). Such plans had a global patrimony; the 1990s air was thick with excitement over themed urban space, and planning documents from this period cite themed
island parks in Stockholm and Singapore as viable precedents (ROMA Design Group 1996, 44). A 1993 Sustainable Communities workshop at the University of California at Berkeley articulated aspirations for developing Treasure Island most clearly: “Globalization is here. The Bay Area is the gateway to the expanding Pacific Rim trading network and to the global economy. Just as soldiers left the Bay Area for the Pacific theatre of war, so trade will dock here to make the peace” (Blakely 1993, 4).

Nearly two decades later, the TICD plan in a sense still proposes a theme park. The holism articulated by the plan responds as much to the need to assemble a complete experience of a commodified version of sustainability as to a newfound attention to ecological urbanism. Put another way, the project captures place-based monopoly rents through a commodified appeal to ecological urbanism while enrolling environmental advocates into a capitalist redevelopment project. Moreover, it depends on a fetishized conceptualization of sustainability in which the decisive relationships are between technical objects, not social groups or classes (see Marx 1992 [1852], 163). This vision of urban sustainability fundamentally requires a blank slate on which to operate. Moreover, it requires a vast landscape of global capital to secure investment, the underpinnings of which are hardly ecologically positive.

These aspects of ecological future-world and themed commodity blur together in the utopian narrative that carries the day in media. Various reports on the current plan excitedly proclaim the project to be “a model for cities everywhere,” an eco-“Xanadu” in the bay and the “super-green city of the future,” “the world’s hottest property, a showcase of sustainable design,” while emphasizing the technological sophistication enabliing this sustainable development (King 2005a, 2005b; Ward 2009). Pipes links the new plan directly to the Expo, seeing the island as poised to be “transform[ed] entirely into a place as magical and important as it had been in the
past,” and Popular Mechanics reminds the reader that, like the development plan, the island is itself “an engineering feat” (Pipes 2007, 7; Ward 2009). As the Expo did with the postwar consumer utopia, the project’s rhetoric makes an imagined future of ecological and social harmony spatially tangible through the workings of capital. Hence, the reworking of soil and space provide the backstory and the material grounds for the Treasure Island’s sustainable spectacle in the ecotopia to come.

Jason Hannigan argues that fantasy spaces constitute a powerful arena of municipal expenditure in urban development, as cities are disciplined by the need to attract real estate investment and tourist revenue (1998). He focuses on the entertainment spaces built by downtown redevelopment, but we can see in the Treasure Island plan a similar dynamic. Following Hannigan’s concept of “empire’s theater,” Treasure Island’s second act will be as “ecology’s theater,” where designers have created spaces to produce not subjects of empire but ecological subjects (18–21). The fantasy at work in this environmental dreamworld is that of direct engagement with ecological problems through correct design. This fantasy mobilizes progressive notions of environmentalism and a just way of life as the basis for a spatial commodity produced by the same real estate interests that in other times and places have harnessed notions of the “good life” to sell extensive and ecologically destructive suburban tract developments.5

Moreover, the Treasure Island planners and boosters are explicit in their claim that the arrangement of urban space in the plan not only is a prototype that can travel, but also represents the future of urban form itself. In the “green” present, consumer environmentalism is not escapism or postmodern hyperreality, but an interaction with the all-too-real threats of climate change, sea-level rise, and so on, mediated by a fantastic amount of knowledge about what
patterns of consumption represent the responsible life. This is the serious turn of consumption, in which it has taken on all of the weight of politics itself (Barnett et al. 2005). The fantasy being assembled in space is the perfect spatial commodity that can serve as the example for all others, pointing the way for other cities by showing that ecological citizens vote with their feet and dollars.

The development of an ecotopia on Treasure Island is in some ways a response to an ecological crisis that requires a reimagination of urban space. But it may also postpone any direct engagement with the capitalist social relations that generate many of the conditions that mark the galloping crisis. It would be far too functionalist to assert that global capitalism facing catastrophe requires such escape valves. However, Treasure Island’s selection for intensified investment in sustainable design has a flavor of Aiwha Ong’s notion of spaces of “positive exception,” where change is modeled at small scales, rather than carried out broadly, through arrangements amenable to existing power structures (2006). If Treasure Island is the model of ecological urbanism, its spread would focus on spatial design as against social and political processes (see Harvey 2000), rescaling the zone of ecological responsibility to the level of the enclave (Hodson and Marvin 2010). Just as the rehabilitation of Treasure Island acts as a proxy for the ecological leadership of the city and region as a whole, the site-specific public-private economic partnership embodied in TIDA fragments the political administration of ecological governance in ways that are productive of capitalist value (see N. Smith 2002, 438–439). Ecological urbanism is in this sense a way to generate differential rents, and they become proof of its viability (Walker 1974; Harvey 2007 [1982]).

Thus, while planners tortuously orchestrated a hyper-ecological utopia over the past two decades, poor San Franciscans priced out of longstanding working class neighborhoods in San
Francisco and Oakland decamped to the sprawling exurbs of Antioch, Brentwood, and Oakley (Schafran 2013). Experiments in prefigurative ecotopias such as Treasure Island bring the “nonplace” of utopia into being precisely as an exception to normal life—one that allows its normalcy to persist. The packaged fantasy of the sustainable future, in this respect, permits us to tolerate the contradictions of the present.

Conclusion

The Treasure Island plan, which stalled between 2006 and 2010 in negotiations with the Navy over the terms of transfer and remediation, was cleared to advance by the Board of Supervisors in 2011, only to stall again during the investment freeze of the 2008 financial crisis and then again in 2012 with the withdrawal of Chinese investment capital (M. Smith and Mieszkowski 2012; Gammon 2013). With the demise of California’s Redevelopment Agencies in 2012, Treasure Island was discharged by the city’s successor agency and converted to an Infrastructure Financing District, which retains tax increment financing powers but does not carry the same affordable housing requirements. Accordingly, TIDA reduced the proposed percentage of affordable housing (Treasure Island Development Authority 2016). Outcry over the contaminated legacy of military use, especially given that current housing is to remain in use long after construction begins, continues (M. Smith and Meiszkowski 2013; M. Smith 2012). Moreover, complaints have already begun about the expected increase in already choked bridge traffic.

Although these concerns have important political implications, the dominance of the pollution narrative and the uncertain financing landscape obscures how the plan itself has been fundamentally constrained by the material politics of the island’s soils. Just as the site plan erases
the labor of environmental activists in shaping a regional politics of sustainability (see Sankalia, this volume), the framing of the island as empty, and the plan as a reflection of astute ecological design alone, obscures the materiality of the undertaking and the island’s history. The need to maneuver around the strictures of the Tidelands Trust, combined with the projected cost of seismic stabilization, go further towards accounting for the land-use plan and the profit structure, respectively, than explanations focusing on the emergent “green economy” or the ability to start again “from scratch” on Treasure Island.

But neither can these be considered outside the neoliberal logic of urban development, in which no project escapes the disciplining of “fiscal responsibility” exerted by the need to raise private capital or to finance redevelopment using future property tax increases (Hackworth 2007; Weber 2002). In this case, part of such fiscal responsibility has been the ability of the plan to mobilize markers of a global ecological citizenship in space itself, sustained by liberal environmentalism and capitalist development, as a secure revenue stream. Perhaps the most powerful legacy of the island’s construction—a vision of a future consumer utopia unified under a wise, carbon-intensive capitalist American hegemony—has found new life in the holistic package of the “super-green city of the future” leading the way for the urban anthropocene. In this narrative, Treasure Island is the model for a green consumer public to come. But it has come to be so by virtue of the less spectacular and marketable constraints imposed by the unsteady soils of which it is made.
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Evaluation of Reuse Opportunities and a Strategy for Development and Implementation."


Notes

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Epigraph

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1 Portions of the site development have since been subcontracted to a variety of architecture and planning firms in the Bay Area. I am grateful to Alison Ecker for pointing this out.

2 In a strong market like San Francisco’s, “below market rate” is still open to people making up to 120% of area median income.

3 Sherry Williams, interview with the author, Treasure Island Homeless Development Initiative, October 23, 2009.

5 Indeed, Lennar Homes was a major player in the low-density suburban building boom that led up to the subprime housing crash of 2008.

6 In March 2016, TIDA recommended forming an Infrastructure and Revitalization Financing District, a new tool signed into law in 2014 specifically targeted to military base redevelopment, but less specific than previous tools in its requirements for affordable housing (Treasure Island Development Authority 2016b).