

## 6 Communicating values

The South Bay Salt Pond Project presents the Bay area with an excellent opportunity to learn about its landscape and industrial history. The area being restored makes the project one of the largest restorations in the country, on par with the Everglades. Because of its urban context, its accessibility to people of all walks of life, and its high visibility, the role of human visitors cannot be ignored. While the restoration project goals are explicit about recreational access to the area, I feel that this does not fully serve the community. Recreation is, by its very definition, a leisure activity – in our busy society it is a luxury, an extra. This project, however, should play a larger role in the lives of Bay Area citizens. We live by it, we fly over it, we drive through it – and yet we often don't think too much about it.

The authors of *Back to the Bay* point out that the Bay is the backyard to the cities that circle it.<sup>1</sup> Our community hides military and industrial processes along with our waste along its edge. This restoration presents a drastic change in this perception: the Bay will be our front stoop. Honoring, rather than burying, the natural processes of the tidal ecosystem requires more than enhancing wildlife habitat. In order to bring the ecosystem into urban residents' lives, we must give them high quality access.

The salt ponds and the restored tidal lands that they will become should

<sup>1</sup>

Matthew Coolidge, *Back to the Bay: Exploring the Margins of the San Francisco Bay Region* (Culver City, Calif.: Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2001).

figure more highly in our consciousness; they should be part of our identity as citizens of the San Francisco Bay. Landscape design can serve this role through highlighting and revealing previously ignored or misunderstood elements of the bay.

The strategies I have outlined can help designers transform visitors' views of this landscape from one that is utilitarian – for both industry and refuge managers physically structure it this way – to curious and beautiful. At the heart of revelatory design is the idea that design can alter perceptions. It says, “What has been here all along is beautiful” whether that be an object or a process.

We must create landscapes and structures in the restoration area that communicate the high value our community places on the site. Ecologists, government officials, ordinary citizens, birdwatchers, hydrologists, hunters, boaters, bureaucrats, students, engineers, historians, and planners have been pouring themselves into this restoration project. Their efforts must be honored by good design. Revelatory strategies can tell their stories and the story embedded in this dynamic landscape.

Design in the United States is just now catching up to the trends started in Europe almost two decades ago in transforming post-industrial landscapes. I have referred to Duisburg-Nord Landschaftspark many times in this thesis. Like the ponds, it was a vast industrial space in the middle of an urban area that has been transformed into a public



*Corten structure at Bahia de Cadiz.*

amenity. The interventions there are simple but striking: blue walkways and dramatic lighting transform perceptions of the old structures while barely touching them. They make what was once off-limits dramatically accessible. In Spain, at Bahia de Cadiz, Valimana and Rivera used simple materials – wood and corten – to create striking structures in the middle of a restored salt marsh.

By creating small, beautiful interventions these designers have communicated, as Joan Nassauer has put it, their own “cues to care.”<sup>2</sup> In this way, they invite urbanites into rough, wild areas without losing their wildness.

Some public access elements in the existing refuge area are beautiful – the bridges and boardwalks are simple structures that communicate the care that the agencies wish the public to have for the site. In other case, where trails are merely remnants of Cargill’s levees, small interventions can communicate stewardship without destroying their ruggedness.

The designs I developed for the ponds are infrastructurally intensive but the design strategies do not necessarily require a lot of infrastructure. Measuring and marking are easily done with small elements at regular intervals that can run alongside an existing trail or float out in the landscape to be seen from afar. Unexpected moments can have a large impact on visitors’ perceptions of a site.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation provides us with examples of such surprising landscape elements. Their program to place photo opportunity signs in front of hidden industrial structures, such as the Kodak waste facility in Upstate New York, can change quickly change one’s idea of a place as natural to being highly toxic.

While the restoration project is aimed at enhancing habitat over all other goals, its location in the middle of a densely populated urban area with little relation to its

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Joan Iverson Nassauer, “Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames,” *Landscape Journal* 14.2 (1995).



*Existing boardwalks at the DENWR Environmental Education Center near Alviso.*

waterfront cannot be forgotten. Project leaders must use design to communicate the high value of this landscape to its neighbors.

### C i t a t i o n s

Coolidge, Matthew. Back to the Bay: Exploring the Margins of the San Francisco Bay Region. Culver City, Calif.: Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2001.

Nassauer, Joan Iverson. "Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames." Landscape Journal 14.2 (1995): 161-70.