



A standing-room-only crowd turned out last December for a discussion about 3A Gallery's exhibit, "CAMP Reconsidered." Learn more about the exhibit in the Portfolio section of this edition.

Photo: CAMP

## CAMP Reconsidered — an interview with Mark Horton, AIA

By Kenneth Caldwell

*The Contemporary Art Museum in the Presidio, known as CAMP, ran into several roadblocks in 2008. Local architect (and LINE editorial board member) Mark Horton decided to generate some dialogue about the design to get the project moving. The result was an exhibit and panel discussion at his exhibition space, 3A Gallery, titled "CAMP Reconsidered." Part of the program included a standing-room-only public forum.*

**Q:** Where did you get the idea for this project?

**A:** The idea came from doing something in our office that we have done intermittently for the last 20 years. This is an exercise that is somewhere between a competition and theoretical project. It has a way of energizing and generating dialogue in the office. We had been casting about for something to do, and we talked about rethinking this whole CAMP project. We thought it was a bigger issue than what we would typically think about in the office and that it would be great to have other people involved. Serendipitously I was in Modesto with John King, urban design writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, talking about a project. I mentioned it to him and he expressed a strong interest. He thought it was a great idea and that he would help out with it. As you know, he moderated the public forum we had a few weeks ago. That gave me the impetus to involve the other offices. In the end, that resulted in the exhibit on the walls here.

**Q:** How did you determine the other architects?

**A:** I sat down for 10 minutes and thought about architects who would be able to give the exhibit a considered amount of energy based on the size of the office and their resources.

**Q:** What was the time frame?

**A:** I gave them two and a half weeks. That time frame would have been taxing for an individual or a very small office so I came up with a list of nine other architects. Six out of nine got back to me immediately and said yes. I needed three more and got those three an hour later. It took surprisingly little effort.

**Q:** What do you think that shows?

**A:** A couple of things. To a certain degree we were lucky in terms of timing and economic climate. Architectural firms had started to slow down and had some extra energy and time and wanted to direct it toward something positive. Secondly, I think the architects thought that this was an important issue to address somehow. I got the general impression that the CAMP project was something they wanted to support, but could not get behind as it was presented. They were conflicted. The exhibition was a way to resolve that conflict within themselves.

**Q:** It isn't fair to ask you to speak for all of the architects, but what is your sense about why the project wasn't getting support?

**A:** In really broad strokes there seemed to be three general camps:

Historicists who feel that the Parade Ground is a historic precinct and should not have a modern building;

National Park advocates who feel that in the best of all worlds there shouldn't be more uses in the park; and

Cow Hollow neighbors who don't want more cars.

None of those groups bought into the design. But if you had imagined a group that might have advocated for the project, it would be the architectural community. Some architects didn't like the siting and some didn't like the visual manifestation. I think the latter group was more prevalent. This was a way for them to speak out.

**Q:** The design solutions were quite different. What did they share?

**A:** There were some common themes. The Presidio is about 1,400 acres. Somewhere in that large precinct you should be able to put a 100,000-square-foot building and develop it so that it would be visually acceptable. By the way, we didn't say that the museum had to be in the Parade Ground. As it turned out, most people focused on siting the project in or near the Parade Ground.

The second shared theme was that most of the schemes were, at least partially, underground. At one extreme, our office took the entire Parade Ground and put the project beneath it. Some folks put the project at one end of the Parade Ground and used it as a sectional moderator between the elevation difference of the Parade Ground and Crissy Field. The idea is that you might enter at one level, say at the Parade Ground, and exit on the other level, at Crissy Field. Another theme was using the fact that Doyle Drive is scheduled to be put underground, allowing the project to span over it. That moderated this grade change and allowed the Parade Ground to flow into Crissy Field.

Two projects, one of our schemes and Anne Fougeron's scheme, spread the whole thing out over the Presidio. People would ambulate around the Presidio and experience art in the entire park rather than as a single project. The Presidio itself becomes the container for this museum.

**Q:** Was there any negative reaction?

**A:** I did get a couple of phone calls from various individuals who saw what we were doing as meddling. I tried to explain that wasn't our intent. As an architect, I was trying to present this project in a positive light that might be used to forward the project. My perception was that the project was at a standstill. Nothing was happening. That would be the most unfortunate result. Here is somebody trying to give San Francisco an incredible gift and was being told that it wasn't wanted.

**Q:** Do you think that you influenced the dialogue?

**A:** I think the exhibit did a few things. As you know, the Presidio Trust came to our public presentation, and now the architectural community is interested in the project and engaged. Had architects been brought into the fold, they could have helped the project move forward. This might happen in the future with other projects. I also think that the architects who were involved and the architects who came to the public forum saw this as an opportunity to structure some kind of process for the future. Rather than being reactive, they need to think of themselves as proactive. In other words, the architecture community can be useful to an organization like the Presidio Trust before selection. Architects are always complaining about the weather, like we don't have any say in it, and I think they saw this as a model where they could be doing something about the weather as opposed to just talking about it.

**Q:** What about the project itself?

**A:** Apparently it is going ahead. The scuttlebutt is that WRNS is now the architect, and their design follows the parameters laid out by the Presidio Trust, which suggests three separate pavilions. I think that will be presented in a public forum again. The Presidio Trust has contacted us about presenting the new design to architects so that this time around the trust can elicit and engage the support of the architecture community. This should be our role.

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