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The Battle of the Bulb

Nature, culture and art at a San Francisco Bay landfill

On a misty afternoon in early 2014, you sail into San Francisco Bay under the Golden Gate Bridge, threading the passage between San Francisco's steep urban slopes on your right and the green hills of Marin County on your left. Gliding between two of the wealthiest peninsulas in the world, you continue past Alcatraz Island on the diminishing swell until the Bay opens up to the north and south. Silicon Valley is a hazy presence on the horizon off to the south, and the peak of Angel Island pokes up to the north.

You spot the industrial shores of the East Bay. The four-legged, skyscraper-sized gantries of the Port of Oakland loom to the right, and the remains of the Richmond shipyards are off to the left.

You continue due east, your boat surfing downwind as the gentle swells of the Bay lift your stern, until the Berkeley Hills get so close the windows of the brown shingled houses glint like flames and you can see the UC Berkeley Campanile.

Dead ahead is what looks like a steep, rocky, thickly wooded island. On the far side of a lagoon, hanging off the bluff like a nightmarish version of a Malibu mansion, is an impressively balanced three-story shack. It's made of plywood, corrugated tin, and old window frames and encrusted with hubcaps, stained glass, and street signs. It's topped off with a windsurfing sail and an American flag.

You veer left to the north side of the island and guarding the hillside crouches a giant dragon with reindeer antlers, ridden by a warrior—all made of driftwood. Along the shoreline an iron samurai wields a sword and a fifteen-foot-tall woman reaches to the sky with a beseeching gesture. Her windswept hair is made of branches, her skirts of twisted tin. Painted gargoyle faces stick their tongues out at you from truck-sized pieces of concrete. Tibetan prayer flags flutter in the distance. You can hear the tinkling and squeaking of kinetic scrap metal sculptures spinning in the breeze.

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The Albany Bulb, looking northwest. Photograph by Robin Lasser.

Straight ahead, past cormorants perched on mouldering piers, wetlands glisten with the movements of snowy egrets, curlews, and airborne flocks of sandpipers catching the sun like tossed confetti.

The mudflats are too shallow to navigate by boat, so you turn back and sail around to the south side of the island. Dogs bark, running in and out of the water at a small beach. You smell horses and saltwater and coastal sage. You see that the island is actually a peninsula connected to the mainland by a causeway of debris that rises some thirty feet above the water. An enormous red and yellow and green concrete Rubik's cube clings to the rocky shore just above the water line, and clouds of pink, magenta, and white valerian, golden California poppies, and crimson roses spill down the causeway's precipitous hillsides. A castle perches on a pile of rubble with a gothic arch for a window and a small turret. The castle is covered with paintings of human-sized rabbits.

You have discovered the Albany Bulb.¹

But you are not the first. Urban explorers have been coming to the Bulb—by land—since the mid-1980s, ducking under what are now fourteen lanes of elevated freeways to this landfill made of construction debris. This peninsula was once open water, but like much of the Bay's current shoreline, was created by the dumping of waste. Large-scale filling of the Bay was outlawed thanks to the Save the Bay movement of the early 1960s, but the Bulb was grandfathered in. People in the small town of Albany still remember coming here in the sixties and seventies to dump their old furniture and yard waste on top of broken buildings. When nearby cities needed new highways, commuter lines, stores, schools, and houses, what was torn down got deposited at the Bulb. Because the landfill was never completely capped, it is an open-air museum of creative destruction exhibiting huge chunks of brick walls, bathroom tile, highway supports, rebar, and asphalt with yellow highway lines intact.

It is also a thirty-one-acre battleground for the Bay Area's competing progressive movements for social justice, environmental conservation, and politically engaged art. Street protest, lawsuits, regulatory jockeying, anarchist camp-ins, and art have all been deployed in the name of saving this oddball spit of land from and for its users of many species.

If you had gone ashore a couple of years ago, you would have found a community of more than sixty people living on the Bulb in tents, shacks, and the aforementioned cliffside

mansion. The man who called himself Boxing Bob would proudly show off his handiwork on that house, with its million-dollar view of San Francisco and the Golden Gate, as well as the outdoor ring where he practiced his jabs and parries. You might have met KC, a white woman with pink hair who lived with her tiny black-and-white dog between a giant eucalyptus and a grove of olive trees and Canary Island palms in a hut where she made jewelry. She might have invited you to her famous kitchen in the adjacent garage-sized tent where she made flaky lemon curd pastry for the whole community. You might not have met Doris, who was shy and had a little fence in front of her secluded home with a sign that read, "Cats—Keep Gate Close Please."

You'd have seen Saint, a black man who always wore a World War II German-style military helmet, and Little Joe, a welder who came to the Bulb after his young daughter died in a hiking accident and his life went to pieces. Little Joe was not to be confused with Big Joe, who had hip problems and used a walker to get around the rough paths of the Bulb but could travel long distances for supplies on his bike.

Tamara from Southern California was pregnant and said she had lost her first child in a gun accident. She lived not far from a guy called Tom with graying blond dreadlocks in a section of the Bulb people called the Ghetto because it was so densely populated. Tom surrounded himself with shopping carts full of plastic bottles and rebar and bicycle parts.

Nearby, Frank built a teepee suspended from a sprawling acacia that had branches like muscular human arms. At a firepit next to his tent, he and his friends would burn wire and cable they found at the landfill to extract the copper. Frank said he had been a teenage jockey at Golden Gate Fields, the racetrack next to the Bulb, until he went to prison for robbing a bank.

For a while, Jimbow the Hobow—his spelling—lived in the section of the Bulb called the Ghetto. The Bulb's poet laureate for decades, he lived all over the peninsula at different times. He grew up on a tobacco farm in southern Ohio and had been on the road most of his life. Like a number of landfillians, as they called themselves, Jimbow used to live at People's Park, the university-owned piece of land in downtown Berkeley, about four miles from the Bulb as the crow flies, that has been disputed territory for even longer than the Bulb. Jimbow said he left People's Park during the crack epidemic in the 1980s and went to the railroad tracks, eventually settling at the Bulb in the 1990s.



Amber in her tent. Photograph by Robin Lasser.

The Bulb was last resort for some victims of the economic crisis of 2008. It provided refuge for people struggling with trauma and mental illness who preferred living outdoors to the claustrophobia and social threats of shelters. Amber and her partner, Phyll, built a compound of tents hidden by a scrap metal fence with a Palestinian flag for a front door. “When you live indoors, nothing moves,” said Amber, who had a quick smile with no front teeth, a wardrobe of camouflage and black lace, an archaeologist’s eye for half-buried treasure, and an impressive knack for reviving laptops and mobile phones pulled out of dumpsters. The Bulb’s wind, the tides, and the movement of the grass and trees kept her sane: “The Bulb is the healthiest place I’ve ever lived.”

Some people led conventional lives before ending up here. Stephanie was married with three kids and made flyers for a real estate office in a nearby town. After her divorce and the foreclosure of her house, she found the peace and quiet of the Bulb more soothing than the noisy spot under the BART train tracks that she first tried.

Stephanie’s camp was as tidy as a suburban ranch house, with two stone-ringed gardens with geraniums, iceplant and pink flamingos, and an outdoor kitchen with a spice rack and flowers in a vase. Near her tent she made a bench with a patio firepit where you could look out to Angel Island and Mt. Tamalpais over the low wall she built of flat concrete chunks. She used solar panels to charge her cell phone and saw her grown children at the holidays. With a Monterey pine and a cypress framing her Bay view, her home was picture-postcard perfect.

People lived off the fat of the East Bay land. At the nearby Costco dumpster, pillowtop queen-sized mattresses were there for the taking, still in dented boxes, along with dinged lawn furniture and bags of imperfect bagels. Nearby University of California housing saw families come and go with each semester, leaving behind their books and shoes and kitchenware for reuse. Like a glacial moraine, the consumer goods that came in from China via those Oakland gantries flowed into the Berkeley Hills, down to





Boxing Bob after demolition of his house. Photograph by Robin Lasser.



Dragon sculpture, San Francisco skyline behind. Photograph by Doug Donaldson.

the flats via estate and garage sales, and finally down to the Bulb.

Everything was transported onto and moved around the Bulb by bicycles equipped with handmade trailers, some of which could carry up to 750 pounds. These trailers carried metal that residents mined from the landfill and sold at Berkeley scrap dealers, as well as five-gallon jugs of water for drinking and bathing. The Bay Trail, designed as a recreational amenity, was a highway for the homeless supply chain.

Mom-A-Bear's home was a social center. People would hang out in the dark interior of her Bear's Den, the low-ceilinged wooden hut built under a ngaio tree. Calm and heavysset, Mom-A-Bear used to be a physical therapist and people often went to her for advice. She came to the Bulb after her husband and son were killed when their sailboat was caught in a storm off the California coast. She situated her home on a low bluff with a view of the Bay overlooking the Amphitheater.

The Amphitheater was just one of the many public spaces the residents of the Bulb built or adapted as the kind of agora or marketplace found in any small town. The Amphitheater occupied a bowl-shaped depression in the landfill and was where people gathered for meetings, had parties, and burned trash. The Castle was a kind of church

or spiritual vortex built by longtime Bulb resident Mad Marc, designed with fairies in mind, and situated at a numerologically propitious west-facing spot excellent for observing the solstices. There was an outdoor gym and, at one time, a heated bath. There was a horseshoe pit and communally maintained trails like the one called the Yellow Brick Road, as well as a Free Box for exchanging goods. There were two stone labyrinths for meditation. And there was a book-filled Library that, like the ancient Alexandrian one, was destroyed and rebuilt several times.

The people who lived at the Bulb felt it was theirs. But so did a lot of other people. Dogwalkers were some of the earliest pioneers of the landfill. People from Albany and Berkeley and Oakland brought their dogs to the Bulb on a daily basis, and—led by their dogs' noses—became nearly as expert on its nooks and crannies as the residents. Professional dogwalkers would come mid-day with as many as ten dogs in tow. Birdwatchers loved the Bulb for its 158 species of birds, which thrived among the fennel, coyote brush, broom, and feral wisteria.

Environmental educators brought schoolchildren to study the nudibranchs, tunicates, and bryozoans of the rocky shore. Geocachers, paintballers, cyclocross bicycle racers, parents seeking the ultimate birthday party, musicians,

rave-organizers and professional wedding photographers all used the Bulb.

The Bulb was a charnel house of cities, where the skeletons of urban destruction and regeneration were laid bare. It was also a memorial garden for human lives. Painted messages on concrete remembered Suzy, who lived and apparently committed suicide at the Bulb. The place attracted people seeking a place to remember deaths that happened elsewhere. A hand-carved tombstone was marked, “In the Memory of Emily Wagner . . . 33rd homicide in Oakland, 2004.” An abstract metal sculpture at the lagoon memorialized a baby’s death. At the center of the two labyrinths, you would always find a changing array of beer bottles, cigarettes, candy, and other favorites of deceased or departed friends and family, sometimes marked with notes and driver’s licenses.

Of all the park users, artists made the most lasting mark. They came to paint the door-sized slabs of concrete, to assemble sculptures of found materials, to make visual jokes. Someone arranged a pair of stuffed, striped, ruby-slipped legs so they emerged from under a large chunk of a house like those of the Wicked Witch of the East. Somebody else “solved” the Rubik’s cube by painting a single color on each side. An empty gold picture frame hung from a tree to frame a spectacular Bay landscape. A lump on a chunk of concrete became a painted monster’s nose. An elfin door was painted on a huge rock for imaginary sprites to enter and exit.

The art was as changeable as the weather and the tides. Medusa heads were painted over with dinosaurs, and dinosaurs with poetry. Images of Emma Goldman, Che Guevara, and Malcolm X weathered into obscurity. Art depicting manga-style rabbits proliferated all over the Bulb, with the artist riffing off different textures and locations and other people’s art.

The surface of the dump is uneven, with verdant beeh-filled gullies slumping between rough peaks of concrete and lichen-encrusted heaths giving way to wildflower-filled meadows sparkling with eruptions of steel slag. Like a botanical garden with sections for Australasian or South American flora, different parts of the landfill provided creative microclimates. Motifs seeded and spread in response to differently fertile substrates: if one person painted eyes in the rubble, soon eyes in many styles would proliferate like dandelions after a rain. If someone hung one mask from a tree, soon more faces would be peering out from the branches.

Stencils spawned linear hieroglyphic narratives leading from place to place.

Artists and passersby added to and altered sculptures. The beseeching woman, which some called the Water Goddess, was originally made of orange dock foam and was gradually refined and beautified with metal and wood. Visitors bestowed angel wings, shoes, jewelry, and whiskey flasks on the driftwood sculptures of human figures, and added beads and ribbon to the kinetic sculptures. Change was expected. The art was more performance than object, more personal than material.

Theatrical and musical performance also happened at the Bulb. The topography includes many natural stages that actors found inspiring. In 2006, the theater group We Players animated the entire peninsula with a mobile performance of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* that began with the shipwreck scene on the beach and ended with a wedding feast at the Amphitheater. Prospero’s *mutinous winds*, *green sea*, *azured vault*, and *Jove’s stout oak* were played by the site itself, and even surly Caliban helped put the audience at ease in the dreamlike, unfamiliar terrain, saying:

“Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.”

Most art was anonymous, but not all of it. In the early 2000s, Bruce Rayburn, Scott Hewitt, Scott Meadows, and David Ryan—members of a collective called Sniff—gathered every Saturday morning to paint barn-door-sized pieces of plywood and flotsam that they erected in an art gallery along a hundred yards of the Bulb’s north shore. The work was collaborative and darkly whimsical, evoking both Bosch and Chagall, thickly populated with revelers, a devil or two, and flying nudes. Sniff gave up their painting after it was falsely associated with a gruesome murder. In a case that was tabloid fodder for three years, a man named Scott Peterson was accused of killing his pregnant wife, Laci, who had gone missing in Modesto in 2002. Her headless body had washed ashore not far from the Bulb. In statements to the media, Peterson’s lawyer pointed to the paintings at the Bulb as evidence that a Satanic cult had murdered the woman. Peterson was later convicted of the crime. But meantime, Sniff’s members were forced to explain to parents of their children’s classmates that they were in fact not Lucifer-worshipping decapitators, and the group was never quite the same.

Not far from the Sniff gallery, Osha Neumann created the Water Goddess sculpture with his son-in-law Jason DeAntonis. The scion of a prominent German Jewish intellectual family (his father was Frankfurt School critical theorist, Franz Neumann; his stepfather, Herbert Marcuse, philosopher of the 1960s New Left), Neumann dropped out of graduate school at Yale and spent his young adult years with an anarchist street gang in New York. He became a painter, sculptor, and lawyer, creating a famous mural near People's Park about Berkeley's history of protest.

Despite its physical isolation, the Bulb is very much part of the East Bay's greater artistic, political and social history. The style of informal sculpture that studded the Bulb occupied much of the East Bay shoreline in the 1970s and 1980s, thriving on the outlaw culture of the garbage-filled mudflats west of the freeway. But the growing conservation movement saw the mudflats as valuable habitat for birds, not art. With more than 90 percent of the region's wetlands destroyed by human activity, environmentalists were intent on saving and enhancing what was left. Homemade sculptures squatting in the mud were not part of this vision of a restored Bay and were removed. As protections for endangered animal habitats were beefed up, however, human protections were weakening, driving people from cities into open spaces at the urban margin. Starting in the 1980s, cuts in federal spending on affordable housing and the deinstitutionalization of mentally ill individuals sent thousands into underpasses, creekbeds, and parks. Later, the bust and boom of the late 2000s and teens created more human jetsam whiplashed between foreclosures and gentrification. Displaced people washed ashore at the Bulb (at least one literally arriving by boat) and shared the space with bricoleurs squeezed out of their old artistic stomping grounds.

Along this evolving waterfront, the Eastshore State Park was established in 2002 after decades of advocacy by the Sierra Club, Save the Bay, and the Audubon Society, which came together in an organization called Citizens for Eastshore Parks. After fighting off commercial development, the groups envisioned a series of land acquisitions that would connect existing city-owned and regional parkland into a continuous nine-mile swath of habitat restoration and trails stretching from the Bay Bridge to Richmond. The park general plan called for the removal of the remaining art.

The Bulb today is in the process of being incorporated into that state park, now named after the late Save the Bay

hero, Sylvia McLaughlin. This troublesome peninsula is land nobody wanted—neither the City of Albany, nor the State Parks, nor the East Bay Regional Park District relished the headaches caused by the homeless people, the hazardous waste, the art, the dogs. In preparation for transfer of the land from the City to the State (with management provided by the Regional Park District in place of the cash-strapped State Parks), the encampments at the Bulb were swept out in 1999 and again in 2014. Frustrated that this jewel in the necklace of parks remained a shantytown years after it was designated a state park, the environmental groups were key lobbyists for evicting Bulb residents. Osha Neumann, the artist and lawyer, was a leading advocate for Bulb residents, and along with some Albany residents, brought an unsuccessful anti-eviction lawsuit on their behalf. It was one of a number of lawsuits at the Albany waterfront, where advocates for the environment faced off with advocates for social justice and for the human—and canine—right to public space. The conservationists argued that the garbage, drugs, and residents' dogs made visitors feel unsafe and damaged the habitat.

Short-term housing assistance was offered by the city, and some people were able to move into subsidized apartments. But some Bulb residents didn't want to move and others said the amount of assistance was inadequate to find permanent homes. Several Bulb residents found housing but lost it for the same reasons they became homeless in the first place: mental illness, substance abuse, orneriness, family tragedy, medical disasters, poverty. In April 2014, Albany agreed to pay \$3,000 each to twenty-eight residents to leave and never set up camp again. Many of those people moved directly to a freeway underpass nearby. Others occupied a restored habitat area in another part of the state park, hiding among the bushes planted as homes for birds. Today, the community is scattered around the East Bay, living out of cars, under highways, and in ephemeral constellations of Bulb alumni roommate groups that migrate from cheap apartments to the street and back again.

At this green lump on San Francisco Bay, the central narratives the Bay Area likes to tell about itself collide, and the histories of its environmental, social, and creative cultures converge. The Bay Area thinks of itself as an environmental leader, protecting endangered habitat and saving the Bay. It insists that it is committed to equity and support for



We Players' production of the *Tempest*. Photograph courtesy We Players.

the downtrodden. It sells itself as a bohemian home for artists and touts its anything-goes creativity as an economic as well as a cultural resource.

Yet the Bulb lays bare the contradictions and inconsistencies in these stories and provides an ongoing laboratory for exploring the complexities of these nature-culture conflicts. It is a novel ecosystem in social as well as environmental terms. As a modern-day midden, it is a fertile site for contemporary archaeologists to unearth ways that discarded people make use of society's material discards and to ponder our culture of disposability. As rising tides inch ever closer to the skirts of the Water Goddess, the Bulb has a front row seat to the climate consequences of that consumption.

The Bulb was, in human terms, an island of misfits, but it was a community that was a relatively safe, surprisingly sociable haven. In terms of natural systems, it represents the opposite of the Galapagos Islands—it's a place completely invaded by exotic species that have blossomed into a botanical gallery of some of the toughest plants on the

planet. For art, the Bulb is the last remnant of creative spaces along the East Bay shoreline that have now been almost completely wiped out, an endangered habitat as rare as homes for the salt marsh harvest mouse. As public space, it has been a park designed by its users, who built trails and vista points and benches where the authorities provided none.

The Bulb is a misfit in terms of park categories—neither a pristine wilderness nor an urban park, nor a typical regional or county park defined by picnic tables, trails, and bathrooms. Amid the tempests of the politics of park planning, it's a place that asks whether we should listen to the unruly, ground-level Caliban wisdom of its everyday, often unsanctioned, users as well as the top-down visions of the Prosperos who wield their power as organized advocates, professional planners, and elected officials.

What does it mean to preserve "nature" at a man-made pile of rubble overrun with invasive species? Does art belong in a state park conceived of primarily as a conservation site rather than a recreation area? Do state park rules and policies

developed for old-growth redwood forests work at an urban landfill? How can a habitat-oriented park be managed in a densely populated, highly urban area? What is “public” in public land? What rights do nonendangered wildlife have relative to threatened species—is displacement of undervalued species a kind of gentrification? What rules should apply in a park that has been so neglected by the agencies in charge of it that the users have taken over maintenance and established their own norms?

The Bulb is a place in transition—to what, it is not clear. If you were to sail around it today, you’d see that it is gradually being smoothed over and erased, with clean fill and lawns calming the rubble. Jungly vegetation is being cut down to improve sight lines, Mad Marc’s castle is crumbling and the Library is gone. There are still sculptures and dogs and birds, but new rules are domesticating this last bit of wild on the East Bay shoreline. This process of change is worth studying, because the lessons learned here apply anywhere that water, land, people, art, wildlife, and politics come together.

For a time, the Bulb presented a utopian vision of a user-designed, user-made public space—full of dysfunction, to be sure, but also possessing a vitality rare in public parks. That vision has not yet been snuffed. Some people see an opportunity for the narratives of ecosystem protection, social justice, and human creativity to be woven together instead of

being pitted against each other. The Bulb could be a park that is both laboratory and performance, as dynamic as the human and natural forces that buffet its shores. **B**

Note

¹ In researching this article, I have been involved at times as a participant and an engaged resident of the City of Albany, rather than a neutral observer. I am currently working with a group of artists and local citizens to make the Bulb a site for ongoing art, environmental and social research, and performance. Information in this article was collected over sixteen years of visits to the Bulb, including scores of hours of interviews beginning in 2013. Starting in that year, I worked with an interdisciplinary team of UC Berkeley students and Bulb residents to apply techniques of ethnography, contemporary archaeology, oral history, participatory mapping, mobile apps, botany, architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning to the study of the Bulb. We presented this work as *The Atlas of the Albany Bulb* (albanymbulbatlas.org), part of the *Refuge in Refuse* exhibition (<http://www.somarts.org/refugeinrefuse/>) at the SOMArts Cultural Center in February 2015 which was curated by Robin Lasser, Danielle Siembieda, and Barbara Boissevain. The Bulb has been an important testing ground for the interdisciplinary methods of the Global Urban Humanities Initiative. The methods and the issues they raise are described in “Albany Bulb,” *GroundUp* Issue 4 (<http://groundupjournal.org/albany-bulb>).



Sculpture by Osha Neumann and Jason De Antonis. Photograph by Susan Moffat.