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Author

Anderson, Tamsen

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**Out of Sight, Out of Mind:
The Evolution of One Bay Area Industrial
Suburb**

by Tamsen Anderson

Department of Architectural History
University of California, Berkeley
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Tamsen Anderson
Department of Architectural History
University of California, Berkeley

tamsen@berkeley.edu

Financed by San Francisco capitalists, industry began to move beyond the boundaries of San Francisco in the 1850s. Industrial growth in the East Bay led to the development of a number of working-class communities along the San Joaquin River, including Martinez, Bay Point and Pittsburg. A case study of the development of Pittsburg, California demonstrates the critical role heavy industry has played in the suburbanization of the San Francisco Bay Area. The mixed land use, racial heterogeneity and working-class character of industrial suburbs such as Pittsburg challenge the widely held belief that American suburbs in general and Bay Area suburbs in particular are solely residential enclaves of white, middle-class families. Disproportionately polluted and poor, industrial suburbs serve as economic engines used to fuel the outward growth of American cities.

Introduction: Rethinking the American Suburb

Located along the San Joaquin River on the east side of the Berkeley Hills – about an hour from San Francisco – the city of Pittsburg is one of the fastest growing suburbs in the Bay Area (Hornor 2002). Driving east along Highway 4 on the approach into Pittsburg, one sees hundreds of newly constructed single-family homes perched in the southwest hills. In 2002 alone, nearly 5,000 houses were planned or under construction (May 2002). With prices for new homes ranging from \$400,000 to \$560,000,¹ Pittsburg's subdivisions are far more affordable than those in nearby suburban communities such as Walnut Creek, Danville and Orinda, where average home prices in 2002 were \$588,546, \$710,781 and \$871,555, respectively.² The relative affordability of housing in Pittsburg is, in part, explained by the presence of the towering exhaust stacks of the Los Medanos, Delta Energy Center and Pittsburg power plants (Bulwa 2004).³ Dominating the city's skyline, the 600-, 800- and 2,022-megawatt plants generate enough power to fuel more than 3.5 million Bay Area homes (May 2000).⁴ They also help run Pittsburg's industries, including a Dow Chemical plant, which is the "largest integrated chemical manufacturing complex of its kind on the west coast,"⁵ Praxair's industrial gas plant (Massey

¹ See www.seenohomes.com. The 54th largest home builder in the nation in 2003, A.D. Seeno Construction Co. is one of the largest residential developers in Contra Costa County. To illustrate the difference in price of newly constructed homes in Pittsburg and Walnut Creek, compare the cost of two five bedroom homes. The "Swallow" model home in Seeno's Capistrano subdivision in Pittsburg costs \$499,400; a similar home in a Walnut Creek subdivision (the "SBII" model) runs \$2,560,870, over \$2 million more than the house in Pittsburg.

² *The Contra Costa Real Estate Report* (July 2002).

³ In 2004, the median home price in Pittsburg was \$285,000. By comparison, the median home price in the Bay Area was \$459,500.

⁴ At any instant, one megawatt fuels 1,000 California homes.

⁵ See www.dow.com. The plant is located at 901 Loveridge Road.

2001), and USS-POSCO's steel plant.⁶ Situated along the San Joaquin River, these industries occupy much of the city's waterfront.

The heavily industrialized landscape of Pittsburg does not correspond to popular perceptions of the American suburb. Most Americans envision suburbia as a string of subdivisions where white, middle-class families live in comfortable single-family homes strictly segregated from other kinds of land use.⁷ Accordingly, Bay Area industrial suburbs such as Antioch, Bay Point and Pittsburg – where apartments, single-family homes and retail stores border heavy industry such as a bulk petroleum coke facility and a former asbestos manufacturing plant – are seen as something other than suburbs.⁸

The lack of attention to the lives of the suburban working class has been reinforced by urban historians, many of whom have based their views of suburbia on the form and function of elite nineteenth-century railroad suburbs and middle-class post-World War II suburbs.⁹ Alluding to the “classic suburbs” of Philadelphia's main line, the historian Robert Fishman (1987) claims that a “true suburb” is a middle-class residential community “physically separated from the urban core,” but “nevertheless depend[ent] on it economically for the jobs that support its residents” (5). Despite Fishman's insistence that the separation between work and home is “a vital prerequisite for suburbanization in the United States” (116), and even though residents have tended to work near home, industrial suburbs have been as economically tied to urban centers as bedroom communities. Historically, investment in wage labor by urban capitalists helped finance the housing market in industrial suburbs, while investments in land, production

⁶ See www.uss-posco.com. The steel plant is located at 694 West 10th Street.

⁷ There is no consensus among academics on what characterizes a suburb. Not only does the meaning of suburb differ from country to country, it also changes over time. Nonetheless, most scholars agree that suburbs typically share the following features: “1. Peripheral location in relation to a dominant urban centre. 2. A partly (or wholly) residential character. 3. Low densities, often associated with decentralized patterns of settlement and high levels of owner-occupation. 4. A distinctive culture, or way of life. 5. Separate community identities, often embodied in local governments” (Harris and Larkham 1999, 8).

⁸ Calpine's Los Medanos Power Plant, Koch Carbon, Inc.'s bulk petroleum coke facility, and Johns-Manville's asbestos manufacturing plant (later converted for the manufacture of roofing and siding) are located on Pittsburg's Fourth Street, just down the street from the Bay Harbor subdivision and a subdivision developed by Albert Seeno, Jr.

⁹ See, for example, Fishman 1987, Hayden 2003, and Jackson 1985.

facilities and equipment drove the economic development of industrial suburbs. Moreover, homeownership, which historians such as Fishman consider a key feature of suburbia, has historically been higher in working-class communities than middle-class ones (Bigott 2001, Zunz 1982).

The conventional wisdom of popular and scholarly narratives neglects or marginalizes mixed-use suburban development, which includes heavy and light industry along with the building of satellite residential housing and suburban retail shopping centers. Careful observers of the metropolis, however, have long recognized the heterogeneous character of suburbia. As early as 1915 the Progressive social reformer Graham Romeyn Taylor (1915) published a study on American industrial suburbs that captured the industrial suburbanization process: “Huge industrial plants are uprooting themselves bodily from the cities. With households, small stores, saloons, lodges, churches, schools clinging to them like living tendrils, they set themselves down ten miles in the open” (1). As Taylor’s study shows, most American cities were ringed by industrial suburbs by the second half of the nineteenth century. Chicago was surrounded by Argo, Pullman and Gary; Cincinnati by Covington, Dayton and Newport; Pittsburgh by Aliquippa, Carnegie and Homestead; and St. Louis by East St. Louis, Granite City and Wellston.

In the Bay Area the decentralization of industry from San Francisco in the 1850s spurred the development of the East Bay industrial suburbs of Crockett, Martinez and Pittsburg long before the expansion of the Caldecott Tunnel in 1964 facilitated the creation of the neighboring bedroom communities of Orinda, Moraga, Lafayette, Walnut Creek and Concord. Although not widely recognized, industry – as much as middle-class residential development – has been instrumental in the creation of “the sprawling form of the American metropolis” (Walker 2001, 36). A case study of Pittsburg illuminates the historic and contemporary roles industrial suburbs have played in the economic and urban development of the Bay Area metropolis. An analysis of

Pittsburg's social and economic structures is also instructive for understanding the spatial organization of the Bay Area and other metropolitan areas in the country.

Forging a Geography of Capitalism: Urban Growth and Industrial Decentralization in the San Francisco Bay Area

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space is useful for understanding the early geographical dispersal of industry in the San Francisco Bay Area and the subsequent restructuring of such industrial spaces. Lefebvre (1991) contends that space – which he conceives as three interrelated moments: “the perceived-conceived-lived triad” of spatial practice, representation of space, and representational space – is socially produced, meaning space “cannot be separated either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society” (40). Because of its social nature, the production of space is an important source of power. By structuring space in particular ways, powerful segments of society have historically been able to extend their economic and political control by reinforcing existing social relations and reproducing their privileged position with the social system.

Under capitalism, capitalists as individuals and as a class have struggled to shape space to ensure economic growth. Capitalists have invested in manufacturing facilities, housing, infrastructure and the built environment more generally, to create the necessary conditions for profit making. However, given the dynamic nature of capitalism, fixed capital investments have often become barriers to further accumulation. For example, the heavy investment in dock and harbor facilities, warehouses and light industry (as well as some heavy industry such as refineries) in San Francisco's South of Market district during the nineteenth century led to the area's economic decline in the twentieth century, as the city's manufacturing sector was

supplanted by the growth of banking, financial services and real estate (Scott 1959). The capitalist imperative for accumulation – which Marx describes as the “accumulation for accumulation’s sake” – thus creates a spatial paradox. As David Harvey (1989) explains:

Capitalist development has therefore to negotiate a knife-edge path between preserving the exchange values of past capital investments in the built environment and destroying these investments in order to open up fresh room for accumulation. Under capitalism there is, then, a perpetual struggle in which capital builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time. The temporal and geographical ebb and flow of investment in the built environment can be understood only in terms of such a process. The effects of the internal contradictions of capitalism, when projected into the specific context of fixed and immobile investment in the built environment, are thus writ large in the historical geography of the landscape that results (83).

From the beginning, then, the dispersal of industry in the Bay Area was a spatial strategy for profit making. San Francisco capitalists – and subsequently national and international interests – invested in industrial opportunities in outlying areas near raw materials, cheap land, and easily accessible water and rail transportation networks. Subsequent rounds of investment have reshaped the landscape of East Bay industrial suburbs such as Pittsburg. Until recently, most large-scale investment in Pittsburg has directly benefited industry, including publicly funded infrastructure improvements such as the expansion of Highway 4 and municipal sponsorship of industrial projects, including the San Jose-based Calpine’s Delta Energy Center and Los Medanos power plants. Although capital is in no way omniscient, a brief overview of Pittsburg’s industrial development indicates the extent to which capital has been able to successfully structure and restructure the community.

Industrialization on the Periphery: The Development of Pittsburg, California

The flood of money and people that poured into San Francisco during the Gold Rush of 1848-1855 transformed the city and the region.¹⁰ Before the Gold Rush, San Francisco was a small settlement with no more than 500 residents (Hittell 1878, 117). Economic activity centered on trade. Few workers were employed in manufacturing. Instead, finished goods were supplied by New England traders, who returned home with raw materials for manufacture. Most of the wealth from trade flowed to merchants in eastern cities, limiting the growth of San Francisco and the Bay Area. However, the discovery of gold in the Sierra Nevadas redirected the flow of capital westward. San Francisco's financiers, merchants and land speculators amassed enormous fortunes that bankrolled much of the region's impressive growth.

Eager for new investment opportunities, San Francisco capitalists readily invested in the region's industrial development. Richard Walker (2001) notes that "every big investor had fingers in a dozen pies" (38). From the beginning, much of the region's industrial activity was concentrated in outlying parts of the Bay Area. As early as the 1850s, the availability of cheap land and water transportation in the East Bay drew industry away from San Francisco, where land was scarce and transportation ties to the Central Valley less direct. Early industries in the East Bay included agricultural processing in Crockett; dynamite manufacturing in Hercules; and coal mining in Pittsburg.

Of the East Bay's early industries, coal mining was particularly important. By the 1850s, coal had revolutionized American manufacturing. Far more efficient than traditional sources of power, coal dramatically increased the rate and scale of commodity production. Shipped in large

¹⁰ Although regional boundaries do not always accurately reflect the changing economic and political relations of municipalities, for purposes of this paper, I have adopted the boundaries for the San Francisco used by the geographer James E. Vance, Jr. (1964): These boundaries reach "from the southern Santa Clara Valley at Gilroy to the narrowing of the Russian River valley north of Cloverdale in Sonoma County, a distance of exactly 150 miles in a NNW-SSE line, and from the Pacific shore inland for some fifty miles. This area includes all of the valley around San Francisco Bay and the shores of the Suisun Bay in the east" (16).

quantities to San Francisco, local coal fueled much of the Bay Area's early economic development (Schmidt 1979, 152).¹¹ Discovered in the East Bay in 1859, the Mount Diablo coal fields – located in what is today Pittsburg – were the largest in California (Mosier 1979, Munro-Fraser 1926, 99-100). Nearly four million tons of coal, worth an estimated \$20,000,000, was extracted from the Mount Diablo mines between 1860 and 1902 (Purcell 1940, 335). Only small mines were owned by East Bay locals, however. Large mines were sold to San Francisco businessmen, who had the capital to make mining in the East Bay profitable. The San Francisco financier P.B. Cornwall, for example, held the title to the Black Diamond Mine, the largest mine in Pittsburg (Purcell 1940, 366).

The miners, rail hands and teamsters who migrated to the Mount Diablo coal fields established five settlements near the mines: Nortonville, Somersville, Stewartville, West Hartley and Judsonville. Like other landscapes of production, these mining communities were also landscapes of social reproduction and contained a mix of churches, hotels, houses, saloons, schools and stores that were hurriedly constructed on the uneven terrain of the foothills. The discovery of a superior grade of coal in the Pacific Northwest in the 1880s led to the eventual demise of Contra Costa's coal industry and the collapse of the mining towns surrounding Mount Diablo. Workers were pushed off company land, leaving those with houses the uninviting prospect of either losing their investment or lifting their house off its foundation and relocating nearby (Purcell 1940, 366). However, a new round of investment by San Francisco capitalists sustained industrial development in the county's waterfront communities.

The abundant supply of salmon, shad and sturgeon in the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers made upriver ports such as Pittsburg ideal sites for the burgeoning California canning industry. Fisherman began migrating to the area as early as 1853. By the 1860s, small canneries

¹¹ The Pittsburg Mine, the last operating mine in the area, closed in 1907.

appeared along the Sacramento River (Purcell 1940, 3). Large-scale commercial fish canning began in the 1870s when “merchants in Great Britain began to sell canned salmon to industrial workers as a cheap source of protein” (Friday 1994, 11). The first large-scale cannery was established across the river from Pittsburg on Chipps Island in the early 1880s by San Francisco businessman Sol Wangerheim (Light 1971, 25). Subsequently, the major San Francisco firms of King Morse & Company and A. Paladine Company opened branches along Pittsburg’s waterfront.¹²

Operating branch plants helped San Francisco firms maintain economic control over the region’s canning industry. By locating operations near new sources of fish, firms had an opportunity to capture new markets and to eliminate less successful competitors. Typically, San Francisco firms reduced competition by buying out or forming lucrative partnerships with undercapitalized local canning companies. For example, Walter Paladine of the A. Paladine Company entered into a partnership with the nearly bankrupt owner of Pittsburg’s San Joaquin Fish Company, which gave the A. Paladine Company controlling interest in the company and 60 percent of its profits (Light 1971, 21).

San Francisco capitalists continued to invest in the East Bay’s canning industry well into the twentieth century. However, at the turn of the twentieth century they focused more on emerging industries such as chemical, petroleum and steel. As the geographer Richard Walker (2001) observes, these industries developed “almost entirely” outside of San Francisco (44). Industrialization could have “continued down the Peninsula” from South San Francisco, but as Walker explains, resistance from powerful South Bay land owners “forced industry to take the path of least resistance over to the East Bay,” where business leaders competed to attract industry (42). By the early 1900s, Contra Costa County was one of the most heavily industrialized parts

¹² See Sanborn Map of Black Diamond Landing (April 1884), University of California, Berkeley Earth Sciences Map Library.

of the East Bay. Large manufacturing facilities appeared along the county's south shore as early as 1906 (Walker 2001, 50). Some of the earliest plants were located in Pittsburg. Private investment in infrastructure gave the community a competitive advantage. Recognizing modern industry's need for a reliable source of cheap, plentiful energy, C.A. Hooper, Pittsburg's largest land owner, established the county's first electric power company in 1901. Other local businessmen, eager to encourage more industrial development, underwrote the town's telephone, water and waste systems" (Boysen 1964, 11, 36).

Around 1908 Pittsburg attracted the attention of Charles M. Gunn, formerly of the Union Iron Works of San Francisco. Gunn approached Hooper with a proposal to build a steel mill in Pittsburg, believing, according to historian Mel Scott (1959), that "labor conditions there would be less distributed than San Francisco" (74). By locating far from San Francisco, Gunn no doubt also hoped to escape complaints about noise, noxious odors and pollution that plagued heavy industries in the city, such as the Selby Smelting and Lead Company at Black Point (Fort Mason) (Scott 1959). Seizing the opportunity, Hooper invested in the fledgling enterprise, providing twenty acres along the Sacramento River for the foundry. Other industries soon followed. By the 1920s, with the city's population at 4,715, Pittsburg had become a regional leader in the production of building materials, chemicals and steel (U.S. Department of Commerce 1921, 184). Among its largest industries were Redwood Manufacturers Company, Johns-Manville, Columbia Steel Corporation, Great Western Electro Chemical Company, the National Chemical Company and Shell Chemical Company. In 1926 Columbia Steel alone employed 1,500 workers (Munro-Fraser 1926, 142).

In the 1930s, many of Pittsburg's industries underwent organizational changes that dramatically increased their scale of production. Columbia Steel and the Great Western Electro Chemical Company were acquired by national corporations seeking to expand into western

markets – Columbia Steel by the United States Steel Corporation in 1930 and Great Western Electro Chemical Company by Dow Chemical in 1939. Under the ownership of the United States Steel Corporation, the number of workers at the Pittsburg plant jumped from 1,500 in 1926 to 2,500 in 1940 (Munro-Fraser 1926, 101; Purcell 1940, 374). Dow Chemical also increased its work force, hiring more than one hundred men to work in its newly enlarged facility. Buoyed by industrial activity, Pittsburg's population rose from 9,601 in 1930 to 11,769 in 1940 (Purcell 1940, 689).

Most of those who worked in Pittsburg's factories lived nearby. Workers initially settled near the waterfront and the burgeoning business district made up of hotels, offices, restaurants and stores. However, beginning in the 1920s, many workers moved away from the factories in the old part of town and into the wood and stucco bungalows of the new residential tracts. The increased demand for housing by the industrial workers who moved to Pittsburg in the 1930s and 1940s pushed housing further east and west (Pittsburg Historical Society [n.d.], 6).¹³

Although architectural historians have largely ignored the development of working-class housing in industrial suburbs, the production of family housing has been critical for the reproduction of labor in industrial suburbs such as Pittsburg, where the lack of public transportation and low wages has historically made it difficult for workers to afford to live far from the factory. Local builders have exerted a significant amount of control over the production of space. Much of Pittsburg's extant housing stock – modest single- and multi-family homes – was built by Albert Seeno, Sr., who established a construction company in Pittsburg in 1938 (Hallisay 2002, Conrad 2003).¹⁴ Both Al Seeno, Sr. and his son, Al Seeno, Jr., who is the head of A.D. Seeno Construction Company (the East Bay's largest residential development company)

¹³ Although it is unlikely much of the new housing was intended for military personnel, the establishment of Camp Stoneman in Pittsburg in 1942 helped boost the local economy until its closing in 1954.

¹⁴ Like many of the other Italian-American families in Pittsburg, Albert Seeno, Sr. comes from a family of fishermen.

and Sierra Pacific Properties, Inc. (a professional assets management services company for the various commercial, residential and industrial rental properties in the East Bay owned by the Seeno family), have used their influence with the Pittsburg city council to push their development projects through Pittsburg's Planning Department. For example, Al Seeno, Jr. received authorization to proceed with the construction of 3,200 homes in San Marco Meadows, despite vocal opposition of local environmental groups such as Save Mt. Diablo (King 1999).

The current shortage of housing in the Bay Area has given developers such as the Seenos even greater control over the production of space in Pittsburg. Even after being fined \$1 million for wiping out the habitat of the red-legged frog during the construction of San Marco Meadows and the ouster of two of his cronies in the city council election of 2002, Seeno Jr. remains a politically powerful figure in Pittsburg (Conrad 2002). As Pittsburg's former planning commissioner Allen Valentine points out: "He's almost like the pope with these people in town. Everybody's going to come over and kiss his ring" (Hallissy 2002). The Pittsburg Planning Commission's recent approval of Albert Seeno, III's request to build 292 single-family homes in Valencia at San Marco suggests that the Seeno family will continue to direct much of the city's growth.¹⁵

Recent efforts to increase Pittsburg's tax base have resulted in the authorization of a number of industrial projects, which have effectively turned over much of the control of the city to powerful outside interests, leaving many of Pittsburg's residents with little input in the shaping of their community (Garofoli 2000). In 1996, under the direction of City Manager Jeff Kolin and City Attorney Michael Woods, Pittsburg obtained approval from the city council to create the Pittsburg Power Company, a municipal utility organized as a joint power authority

¹⁵ Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the Pittsburg Planning Commission (April 8, 2003). See www.ci.pittsburg.ca/us/Pittsburg/Government/Commission/Planning/plng-agendasmin-main.htm.

between the city and its Redevelopment Agency.¹⁶ The following year, without any public hearings, the city solicited proposals to build a power plant on a twelve-acre site only one-and-a-half blocks away from a residential neighborhood. The city failed to meet with residents until after the contract was awarded to the infamous Houston-based energy firm Enron. In the wake of the deregulation of California's electrical energy industry in 1998, private electric utilities seeking a competitive advantage clamored to partner with municipal utilities such as Pittsburg Power Company, which benefited from government subsidies in the form of loan guarantees, low-interest government loans, tax exemptions, tax-exempt bond financing and preferential power purchasing (Davis and Davis 1997).

Like A.D. Seeno Construction Company, investor-owned electric utilities such as Bechtel Enterprises, Calpine Corporation and Enron have found it relatively easy to impose their will on Pittsburg's landscape. Some Pittsburg residents supported the power plant projects, especially those employed in the construction trade. Led by the California Unions for Reliable Energy, a consortium of building trade crafts and utility unions, including Pittsburg-based Boilermakers 569, union construction workers were successful in obtaining construction and maintenance work for union workers.¹⁷ Other residents were appeased by Bechtel and Calpine's mitigation packages, which funded community organizations, parks and street repairs.

Many Pittsburg residents, however, opposed the city's construction of power plants such as Joe Hawkins, who filed lawsuits against two proposed projects (Kraul and Brooks 2000). Even pro-power plant Assemblyman Joe Canciamilla (D-Pittsburg) admitted, when introducing a bill (AB 157) that would exempt residents within a 20 mile radius of a new power plant from rolling blackouts, that "[o]ne of the major obstacles to the construction of new power plants is

¹⁶ See www.ci.pittsburg.ca.us/Pittsburg/Government/power-comp.htm.

¹⁷ See www.ibew569.org/newsletter.html. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers 569 Newsletter 2 (May 1999).

opposition from local communities.”¹⁸ Recognizing “local residents do not want all the burdens of a large generating facility in their backyard if the plant is not going to benefit them directly,” Canciamilla proposed “giving local business and residents the security of knowing that they are not at risk of rolling blackouts.”

Political payoffs such as Calpine’s \$3,000 campaign donation to Canciamilla, which enable public appeasements such as AB 157, are yet another important way in which the private power industry has been able to leverage control over the production of Pittsburg’s landscape. Calpine alone contributed \$270,000 to candidates, incumbents and political committees in 2001 (Wintokur and Berthelsen 2001). Ordinary Pittsburg residents who oppose the power plants have been unable to compete with the power industry.

Conclusion: Recognizing the Importance of the Industrial Suburb

Despite its partially residential character and its strong economic ties to San Francisco, Pittsburg has not historically been considered a suburb (Bulwa 2004).¹⁹ In large part, industrial suburbs such as Pittsburg have been denied suburban status because they do not easily fit into traditional models that divide the metropolis into a poor inner city surrounded by white, middle-class suburbs. By reserving the status of suburb only for middle class communities, historians have been able to study urban growth without having to discuss the working class.

The adherence to such a narrow definition of the American suburb has distorted our understanding of the metropolis. Much of the wealth of America’s cities has, in fact, been produced in outlying industrial areas such as Pittsburg. Disproportionately polluted and poor, these communities continue to be economic engines for metropolitan regions. Without the

¹⁸ See <http://democrats.assembly.ca.gov/members/a11/Press/p112001002.htm>.

¹⁹ With the recent development of large subdivisions of middle-class housing in the southwest hills, Bay Area residents are becoming more inclined to think of Pittsburg as a suburb.

energy generated in Pittsburg or the gas refined in Richmond, many of the Bay Area's more glamorous "post-industrial" businesses would grind to a halt. By ignoring industrial suburbs, academic and popular discourse effectively renders the social and spatial realities of industrial production "invisible." Expanding our notion of the suburb to include landscapes of production is an important first step in understanding the serious social and spatial implications of an industrial capitalist economy.

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INSTITUTE FOR
THE STUDY OF
SOCIAL CHANGE

2420 Bowditch Street #5670
Berkeley, CA 94720-5670

tel: 510-642-0813

fax: 510-642-8674

email: ISSC@berkeley.edu

web: <http://issc.berkeley.edu>