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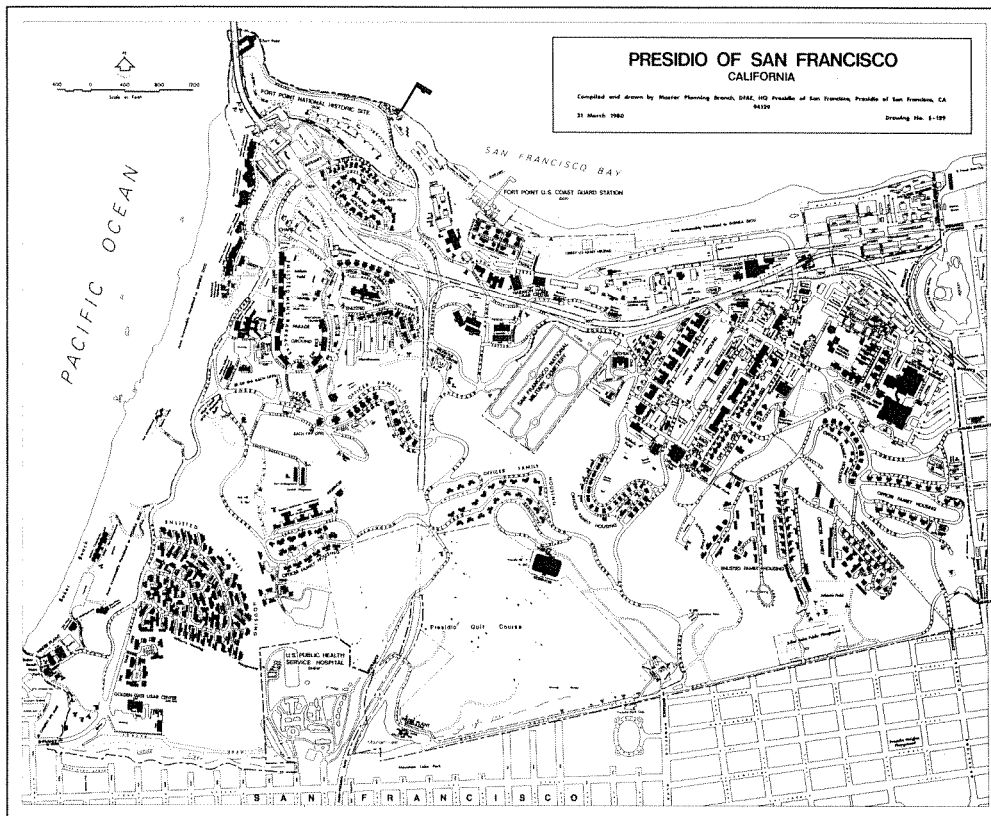
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Military Architecture: The Presidio of San Francisco

Britton Schlinke



In a city ruled by the neutral grid of its streets, which tames its hills and orders its life from the Embarcadero to the Pacific Ocean, the Presidio of San Francisco stands as an important difference. For the people of San Francisco the Presidio, with its dramatic landscape overlooking both the ocean and the bay, has become a kind of picturesque public estate. Though still operating as a military reservation, its value today as a U.S. Army base is more symbolic than real. But the Presidio is also valuable as an architectural museum. The buildings of the reservation offer themselves as traces of specific historical events and as embodiments of the values that have structured military life.

If San Francisco is primarily the result of thousands of individual actions, played out within the geometric framework of small-scale property holdings, the Presidio reveals a different mode of development. Less a single architectural composition than a collection of different, typologically ideal formations scattered across the parklike reservation, the Presidio is the result of various programs of building, created by specific military missions and indicative of a scale and mode of development that characterize the military as an institution. By implication, the Presidio offers broader lessons in the

I President-day Presidio of San Francisco. (Courtesy of the Presidio of San Francisco.)

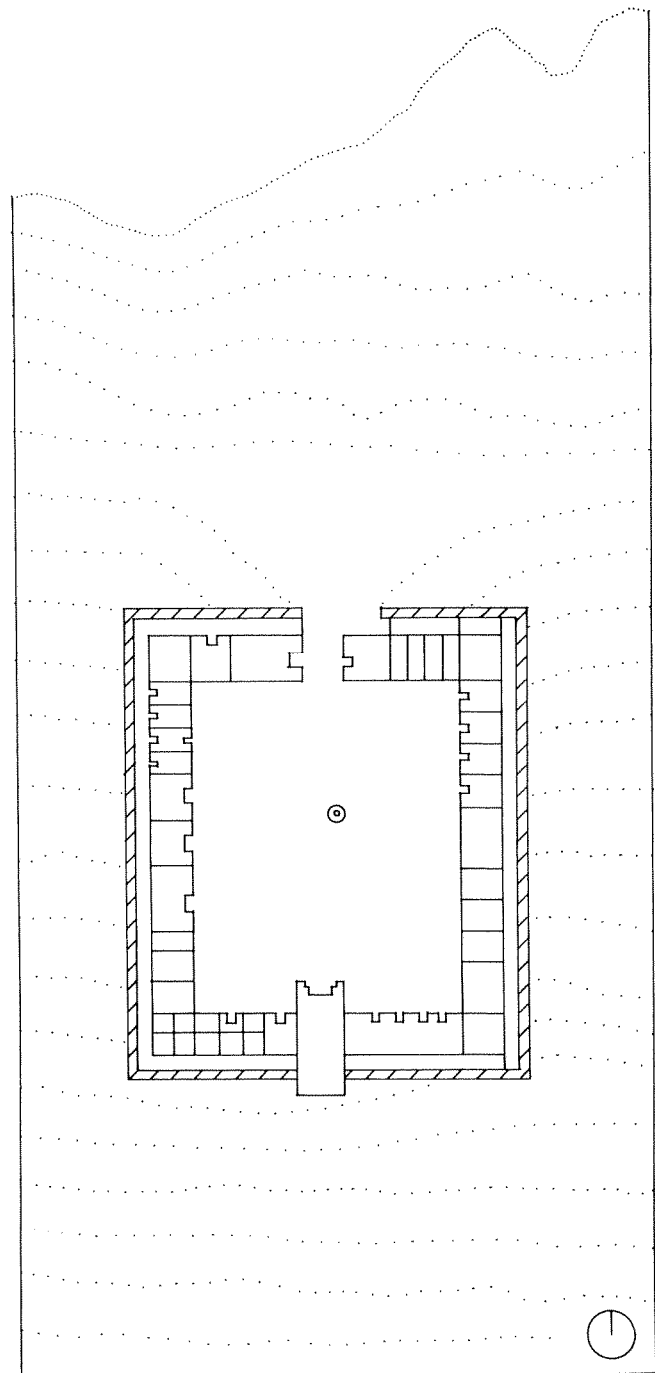
difficult relationship between architecture and the institution.

Architecture's role in the institution has at least two aspects. Its primary function is to physically constitute and to order a space according to the needs of the institution. This link between operational structure and built configuration is so tight that the word "institution" includes both. And because that word covers everything from schools and hospitals to factories, military bases, and prisons, it is clear that Louis Kahn's fond use of the term comprehends less than its total meaning. Michel Foucault has analyzed the darker side of the institution, most notably in *Discipline and Punish*, which traces the history of the prison through the 19th and 20th centuries. According to Foucault, institutions—regardless of their specific goals—share certain common strategies that are centered around the use of discipline as a mechanism to achieve desired ends. The first move in this disciplinary mechanism is to enclose and to separate clearly a definite space from the ambivalence of the larger world. That territory is, then, precisely partitioned according to a system of hierarchy and repetition that is determined by the needs of the institution.

If institutional architecture is, thus, primarily the physical correlative of a

purposeful order, it can also attempt to affect the mind as well as the body. With strategies ranging from inspiration to intimidation to camouflage (to list a few), architecture assumes its second major role as the symbolic representation of the institution.

With those roles in mind, the history of the Presidio reveals a series of mutations within the institution itself. These mutations are immediately apparent when searching for evidence of the oldest fort on the reservation. All that remains of the original Presidio, which was founded in 1776 as the northernmost Spanish garrison on the Pacific Coast, are a few adobe walls imbedded within the much larger and more recent mission revival style Officers' Club. As a functional entity, that fort has ceased to exist, but its architecture has become a stylistic touchstone for the reservation. From rough plans and sketches drawn by early travellers we know that the original Presidio was true to the Spanish courtyard type. A walled rectangle, it was set in a desolate landscape of grassy dunes and barren hills, lined inside by barracks, prison cells, the commandant's and sergeants' quarters, various storerooms, and in the place of honor, the church. One is tempted to read in the plan of this "primal fort" an innocence born of absolute necessity, and to attribute the plan type to a basic need for



2

2 Plan of the Spanish Presidio, circa 1820, showing the church opposite the main entrance. The Bay is at the top of the plan. (Author's drawing from original plan. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service.)

PRESIDIO,
SAN FRANCISCO,
CALIFORNIA.



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3 Plan of the first U.S. fort at the Presidio, circa 1865.
(Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service.)

protection and a platonic will to geometry. Yet, obviously, the fort was a culturally determined product of a long societal evolution. What seems primal about this original Presidio is the fact that the needs of the military and the technology of building were both so relatively simple that the congruence was nearly perfect.

By 1847 when the first U.S. forces arrived, all they found of the original Presidio, which had been abandoned for over 20 years, were a few half-eroded adobe buildings. Though work commenced on rebuilding the Presidio, it was seriously hampered by the discovery of gold in the state, which lured deserters away in such epidemic numbers that by 1849 only a few stalwarts remained on the base. Nevertheless, it had been recognized that the Presidio occupied a strategic position on the Golden Gate, and in 1851 a presidential order set the present boundaries of the reservation. At that point the boundaries were mostly academic. San Francisco clustered along the Embarcadero and the nearby hills; it would be decades before its development closed in upon the base.

The Civil War and the Union's desire to ensure California's loyalty precipitated the first large wave of U.S. construction at the Presidio. The Spanish had brought their architectural culture with

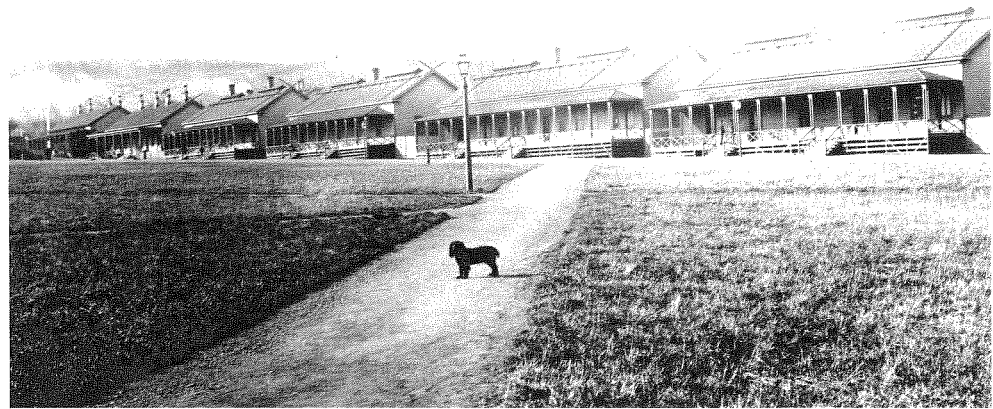
them; the Americans now brought theirs. Starting from the few remaining adobe buildings, the new fort was organized around a sloping parade ground, lined on one side by barracks and administrative buildings and on the other by officers' quarters and the hospital. All the buildings were made from wood frame and clapboard and built from standard quartermaster plans. A simple perimeter fence with a gate and a guard sufficed to provide security. Though it may have resembled a New England village, the fort was highly ordered to serve the needs of institutional discipline. To this end several elements were crucial. Each barrack was a simple rectangular room with a porch in front, home to a company of 100 men who ate and slept as a unit. One company equaled one barrack, an architectural equivalence of exact and economical precision. On the other side of the rectangle stood the officers' houses, lined up in perfect repetition. Here the individual family was the unit of organization, recognition of the "gentlemanly" status of the officer. Though the officers were more individuated than the enlisted men, the pure repetition of their housing and the unequivocal hierarchy of rank locked them into the disciplined life of the base. At the center of the fort between the officers and the soldiers lay the parade ground. On that clear

space of discipline itself, in the guise of marching drills and parades, individuals were trained, made docile, and shaped into military instruments. For all the clarity of that space and the order of its surrounding buildings, the operational reality of the military was already becoming too complicated to be structured within a single controlling architectural form. Thus, support services such as the laundry and the stables were housed in buildings that served, but stood away from, the official life of the rectangle.

After the Civil War the Presidio found a new role to play as a support base for the Army campaigns against the Indians in the West. The final subjugation of the Indians around 1890 signalled the end of the small frontier posts and the consolidation of military forces into larger, more urban forts located near transportation routes for easy mobilization. This consolidation precipitated several major changes in the military as an institution. Mobilization meant both large-scale, long-range planning and the permanent and complicated organization to support it. The institution moved from a dependence upon the immediate mission to a prepared and permanent anticipation of future conflicts, which were not long in coming. Having settled its own internal



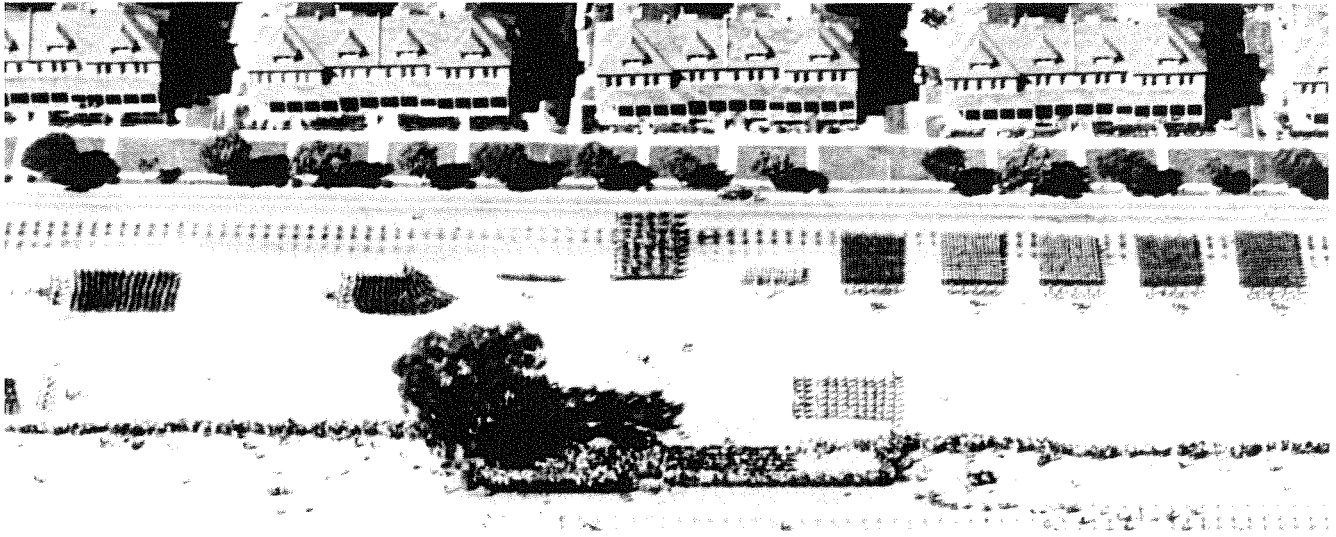
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4 Gateway into the original U.S. fort at the Presidio. Officers' quarters flank the gate in the foreground. Behind them on the other side of the parade ground stand the barracks and administrative buildings. (Courtesy of the Presidio Army Museum Library.)

5 Parade ground and barracks from the original U.S. fort at the Presidio. (Courtesy of the Presidio Army Museum Library.)



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disputes, the United States soon engaged in imperialist adventures abroad. The military action in the Philippines associated with the Spanish-American War caused a new round of building activity on the base, including a new guardhouse, several ordnance and commissary buildings, and a string of new barracks enfronting a new, larger parade ground to the northwest of the original.

These new barracks, imposing brick edifices in a severe version of the federal style, reveal the expanding role of symbolism in military architecture. This is not to say that the earlier fort, in its chaste wooden severity, lacked symbolic power, but rather that the architecture of the new barracks was consciously symbolic. The root of that symbolism lay in a growing self-consciousness within the military, encouraged on a national level by patriotic imperialism and on the local level by the development of San Francisco as a prominent city. As an Army engineer

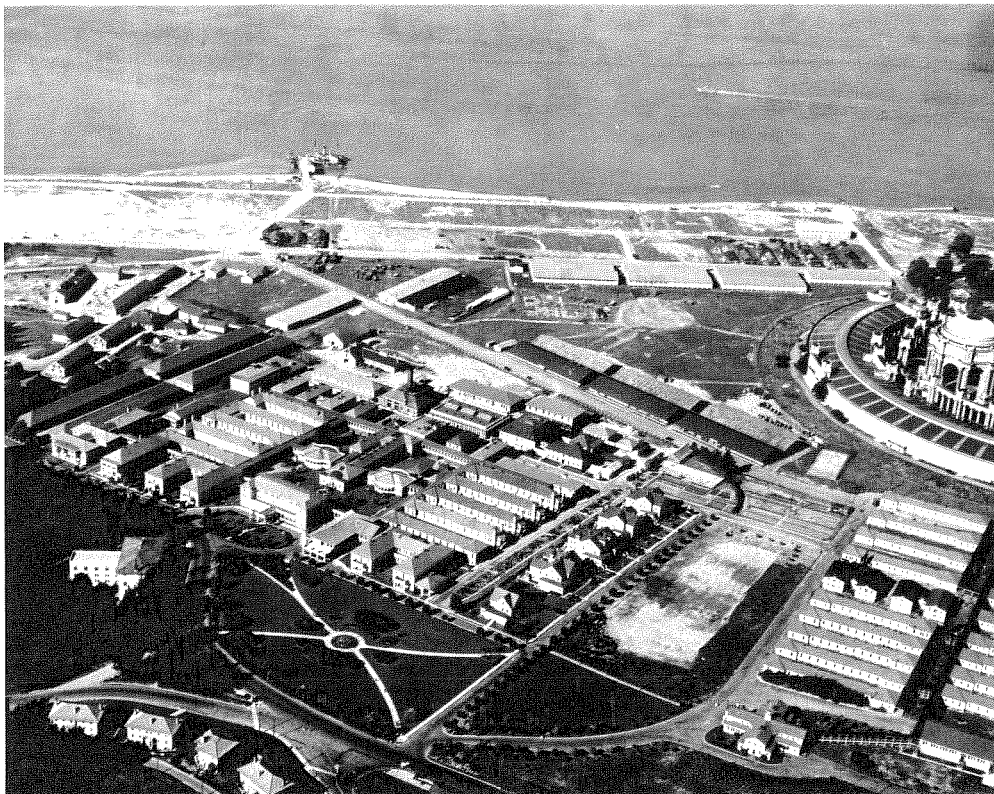
noted at the time in his proposal for a program of forestation on the base: "We are in the midst of a great and growing city. . . . The eyes of the people of calibre are upon us. . . ." He went on to note that a forested Presidio would "make the contrast from the city seem as great as possible and indirectly accentuate the idea of the power of the government."¹ That same idea is expressed in the permanence and dignity of the brick barracks.

One of the consequences of the military adventures overseas was the large number of sick and wounded soldiers returning from the Pacific. The original hospital was soon inadequate. In 1899 construction began on a new, much larger facility, Letterman Army General Hospital. Designed by a local architect, W. H. Wilcox, the hospital consisted of a series of long, narrow wards attached to two sides of a quadrangular circulation system organized around a central court. Administration buildings at the front and a powerhouse at the rear

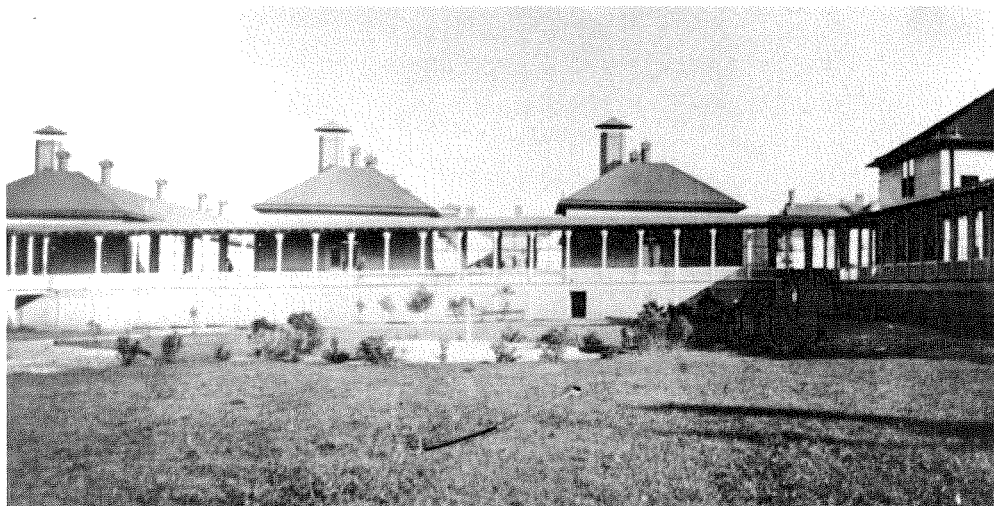
completed the hospital. In comparison with the old hospital, which was a simple element in the larger plan of the original fort, the new hospital was a complicated, completely self-contained entity in which the architecture served an enlarged medical institution. The building was both a clear diagram of the organization of the hospital and a machine for the supply of fresh air and light to the patients. Like the Spanish Presidio, this hospital marked a historical moment when the science and organization of the medical institution were perfectly matched by the architecture that served it.

Elsewhere on the post, however, new growth indicated only the increasing complication of the military institution itself and architecture's relationship to it. In 1908 an entire new base, Fort Winfield Scott, was constructed to serve the artillery troops manning the coastal defense batteries that had long been an important aspect of the military presence around the Golden

6 Parade in front of brick barracks, circa 1900.
(Courtesy of the Presidio Army Museum Library.)



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7 Aerial view of Letterman Army General Hospital showing offices and clinics in the front, with two rows of wards flanking a central court containing two therapeutic sunrooms. A line of doctors' houses stands to the right of the hospital. The Palace of Fine Arts is on the right edge of the picture. (Courtesy of the Presidio Army Museum Library.)

8 Photo taken from the courtyard of the hospital shows continuous ramped gallery connecting wards. (Courtesy of the Presidio Army Museum Library.)



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9 Parade ground and barracks at Fort Scott with Golden Gate Bridge in background. (Photograph by Britton Schlinke.)

10 General's house at Fort Scott. (Photograph by Britton Schlinke.)



11

Gate. The plan of this fort reveals another stage in the progressive fragmentation of the military institution as a cohesive typological entity. While the barracks still enfront a clear parade ground, the associated housing has broken free and now curves along the hillside in several isolated, fragmentary strands. This separation is emphasized by the fact that while the barracks were designed in the newly popular mission revival style, some of the housing was built in the Georgian revival style. The latter can be seen as a patriotic attempt to assert the connection between the military and the early history of the United States, while the mission revival style seems to be connected with the earliest Spanish history of the Presidio while actually appropriating it within an American dominion.

Like the earlier brick barracks, these new buildings reflect the self-consciousness of the military. But while the stolid physiognomy of the earlier barracks conveyed the crude

message of “the power of the government,” Fort Winfield Scott reflects a romantic mystification of the military institution through the use of historical symbolism. This genteel posture became the accepted architectural strategy for the post, particularly during the building programs of the 1930s, when a very restrained version of mission revival came to be the definitive style. The Presidio began to assume the character of an extended country club.

World War II awakened the sleeping fort. The Army suddenly had an immediate mission requiring large-scale mobilization. The “temporary” two-story barracks still standing on Crissy Field are the unpretentious result of that war. With their simple plan and cheap materials, the barracks were ideally designed for endless reproduction across the country.

The architecture of the Presidio today reveals a complex situation. Though

11 Officers' housing, circa 1930s. (Photograph by Britton Schlinke.)

still operating as a military base, it seems to be without a clear military mission. In some respects the fort is like a ghost town. The remaining typological formations are now either museum pieces or offices. Of the original U.S. fort, the barracks are gone and the officers' quarters have been converted to duplexes. The original hospital is a museum, and the parade ground, a parking lot. The other barracks are largely empty. The marching regiments are gone.

If, in the larger scheme of the defense establishment, the Presidio is superfluous, it still retains a powerful role to play in the military. Though they may have been rendered functionally obsolete by the changing needs of a now vast and complicated institution, the historic buildings of the Presidio, standing peacefully against the green hills, are still symbolically potent as the conscious representation of the military to the larger world.

NOTE

- 1 James Delgado and Mark Brack, "Presidio of San Francisco": *Historic American Building Survey no. CA 1114*, p. 7. (Available from the National Park Service, Western Regional Office, 450 Golden Gate Avenue, Box 36063, San Francisco, CA 94102.)

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"Presidio of San Francisco, 1776–1976" (San Francisco, CA: National Park Service, 1976).