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Constructing Memory

Rosie The Riveter Memorial

Richmond, California

By nature, monuments and memorials are fragmentary constructions of the past. Yet, under the right conditions, they can serve as catalysts for complex, robust connections between contemporary citizens, the history of the places where they live and their own place in history. The *Rosie the Riveter Memorial: Honoring American Women's Labor During World War II*, illustrates the fertile intersections between public art, landscape design, public history and community development.

The city of Richmond, Calif., initiated the memorial project in 1996 as a means of reclaiming an important aspect of its history. Few American communities offer a home front story as dramatic; a city of 23,000 when the war began, it quickly became a twenty-four-hour boomtown with more than 100,000 residents. Kaiser Shipyards, the nation's largest and most productive wartime shipbuilding facility, played a central role in this transformation by bringing people from all backgrounds and across the nation to work alongside each other on San Francisco Bay. The memorial focuses particularly on the experiences of women, who made up more than one quarter of the shipyard workers and whose labor was celebrated, along with that of their counterparts across the country, in the popular song, "Rosie the Riveter."

Richmond has suffered in recent decades from a reputation for crime, poverty and heavy industry, and its diverse citizenry found scant public connection to this story. While much of the city retains its wartime built environment, most reminders of those years had been erased from the waterfront. Beginning in the 1970s, Richmond's Redevelopment Agency transformed much of the former shipyard into a collection of industrial facilities, gated communities and public open spaces.

Civic recognition of Richmond's wartime contributions, especially those of local women, became a crusade for Richmond Councilwoman Donna Powers. She began talking about the importance of commemorating Richmond's "Rosies" (as she called them) and by 1996 others in the city's power structure came along.

A memorial committee, chaired by Powers and including city staff and community representatives, considered various strategies for recognizing women's wartime roles, from a "Walk of Fame" with names inscribed on a water-

front sidewalk to renaming a city park. Meanwhile, the city's Arts and Culture Commission was working on a public art ordinance, and the memorial committee settled on an interpretive artwork as the most desirable option. The city council directed the redevelopment agency, which controlled development in the area and administered a large budget, to fund and oversee a commemorative art project. A waterfront park at the former location of Kaiser Shipyard Number 2 was selected as the site.

When the agency hired me to direct the project in 1997, I searched for other commemorations of women's wartime efforts, but found none. This was not surprising, considering the scarcity of overt reminders of women's history anywhere in American urban places. The committee agreed to broaden its commemorative scope to develop the first national tribute to women on the home front.

We organized a design competition, asking respondents to interpret both Richmond's local history and the contributions of eighteen million women to the wartime labor force, and drew more than 75 responses from individuals and interdisciplinary teams. Cheryl Barton and Susan Schwartzenberg were selected for their skill in answering the competition's complex interpretive charge in a form accessible to a broad audience.

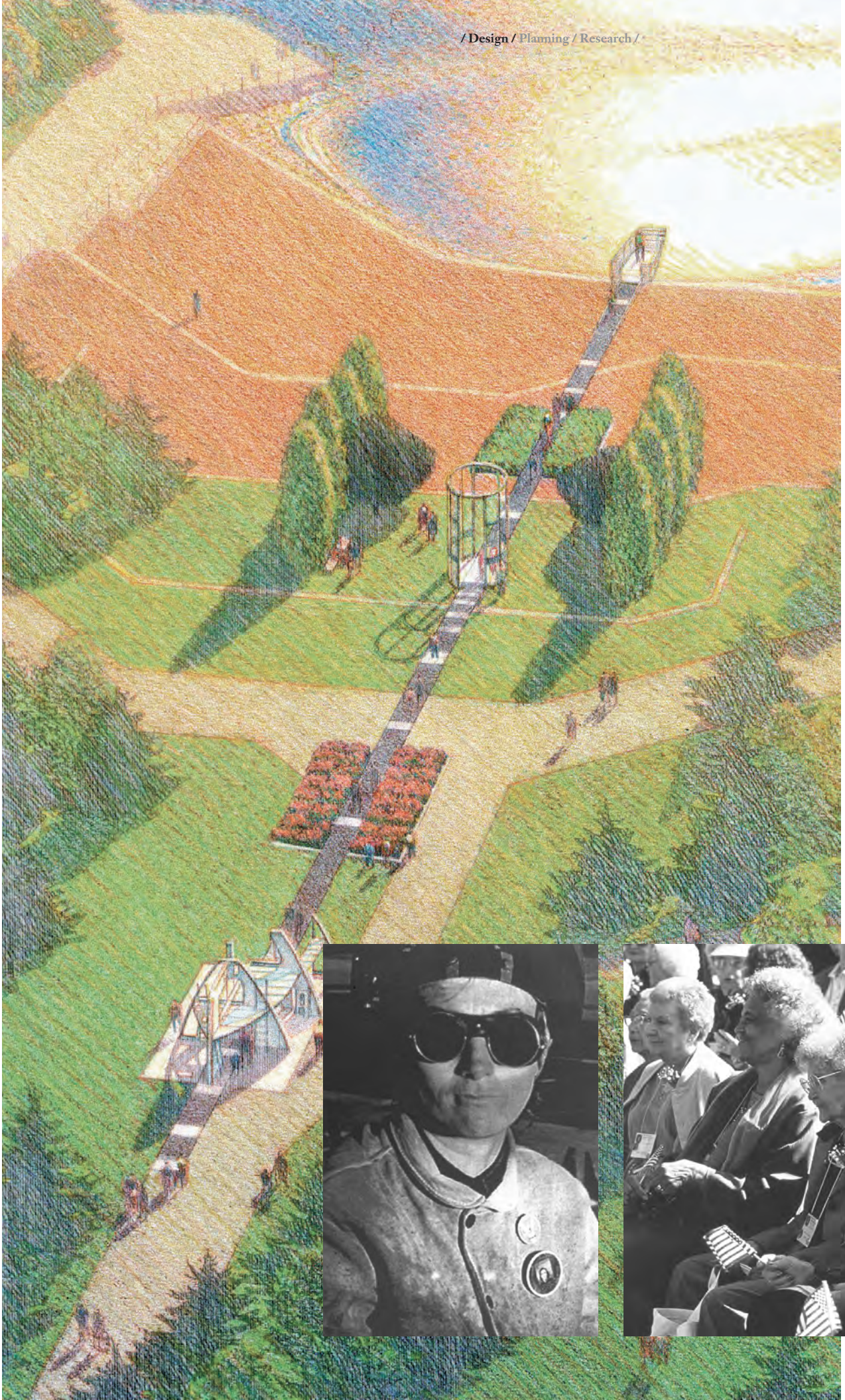
Their proposal for sculptures suggestive of a ship under construction recalled the work performed at the site and evoked the constructed nature of social memory. It is organized as a series of outdoor rooms created by sculptures that evoke the image of a ship hull under construction. The rooms—named the "Forepeak," "Fore Hatch," "Stack," "Aft Hatch" and "Fantail"—act as gathering places rather than detached objects in space. The design is a metaphor for the reconstruction of memory, the process of collecting fragments and bonding them together into a whole.

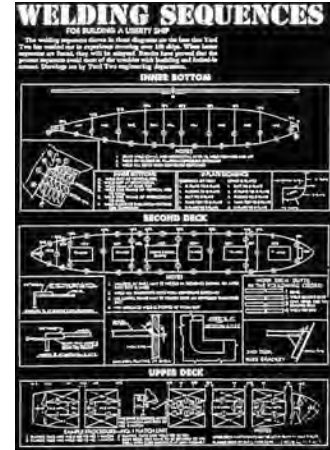
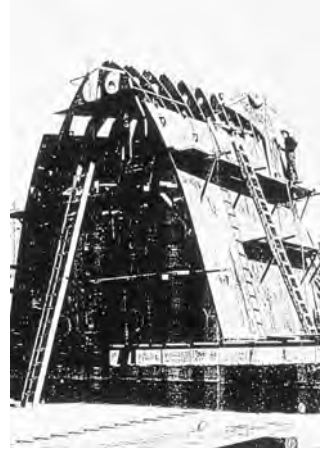
The rooms are arranged along a 441-foot-long path, "Keel Walk," that slopes down to and projects over the harbor's edge; along it are recollections of the women workers and a timeline of events that occurred during the war. Images of the shipyard, engineering drawings, artifacts and workers are arranged between the rungs of "memory ladders" that recall construction scaffolds.

The design process began with research into local and national archives and included efforts to locate and engage the many women around the country, now in their seventies and eighties, who had worked in the yards. We organized a "memory gathering workshop" that collected stories of everyday life and reflected on the larger social themes that shaped women's experiences. Women shipyard workers shared their stories, letters, photos and even trade tools—which were incorporated into the memory

Opposite: Plan of the Rosie the Riveter Memorial. Rendering by Christopher Grubb.

Inset: The research phase involved locating and interviewing women who worked at the shipyards sixty years ago. The women were invited to the dedication, and their mementos were incorporated into "memory ladders." Left photo by Hansel Mieth, right photo © Felix Rigan.





ladders and served as an inspiration for the designers.

The memorial's dense weave of labor, social and women's history reflects decades of work by historians that recasts the American past as a shifting collection of multiple narratives. This view of history has increasingly shaped the field of public art as cities and community organizations work to reclaim forgotten histories through monuments and memorials. Within this context, the memorial initiative is notable because it casts its attention broadly, situating the breadth of women's wartime experiences within the many factors that shaped the home front, and because it has been an agent for reconnecting a group that had dispersed and, therefore, had not focused on commemorating its history.

In addition to the design team's site-specific artwork, the memorial initiative included numerous components intended to create richer connections between the site's history, the local community and a wider public. We published a newsletter and developed a website; distributed a questionnaire that resulted in a list of more than two hundred women who had worked in the shipyards and shared a trove of memories; conducted an oral history program; produced a short video documentary; developed a high school education project; and worked with labor organizations to develop a campaign, "Tradeswomen: Pioneers Then & Now," geared to young women interested in employment in the trades today.

The most dramatic outcome of the project has been the creation of a new national historical park in Richmond. From the project's earliest days, it was clear that an even larger story was embedded in Richmond's streets, structures, civic organizations and personal memories. At the encouragement of Congressman George Miller, National Park Service staff visited in 1998, and we laid out the city's

complex story of migration, housing, childcare, health care, labor unions and racially integrated workforces on the home front. The memorial was dedicated in October, 2000, and ten days later, President Bill Clinton signed the official designation of Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park, incorporating the site into the National Park Service.

The resulting Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park will interpret a range of sites throughout the city—such as war-era daycare centers that still serve local families, the original Kaiser Field Hospital and housing for war workers. All are woven into a changing, and often quite challenging, urban fabric. With newfound recognition of its historic resources, and in response to encouragement from the park service, the city passed a historic preservation ordinance that can protect these places and additional historic sites that are identified as research continues.

The historical park, now in its planning and research phase, presents dramatic challenges to the park service, the city and the collaborative partners upon which it will depend. The quality of the architecture generated by frantic wartime mobilization raises especially difficult preservation issues in a city eager to grasp every development opportunity. The historic sites are owned both publicly and privately, raising questions about ensuring adequate protection and about whether the level of interpretation at each site will form a coherent whole. And the social history the park will interpret is itself complex and, in instances,

The Rosie the Riveter Memorial takes the form of a ship under construction, recalling the work performed at the site and evoking the constructed nature of social memory. Left photo © Felix Rigan. Center and right photos courtesy Richmond Museum of History.

contentious: While many prefer to highlight efforts to dismantle gender and racial barriers on the home front, subtle and overt discrimination affected day-to-day life for women and people of color; public policy and informal social practices shaped a segregated landscape in much of Richmond, including its war housing and daycare centers.

The Rosie the Riveter National Historical Park will face tensions between historical interpretation, aesthetics, politics and the requirements of commerce and tourism. Yet it is also a remarkable opportunity to develop innovative strategies for reviving neglected aspects of American social and urban history, and using them to reanimate the community at large.

—Donna Graves

Jury Comments

Hood: It's easier to do a project like Gantry Plaza, where there is something to respond to. With Rosie, nothing was there, just a ubiquitous suburban landscape, and now there is a place people can come to and identify with.

Griffin: There's difference between having a gantry as an artifact and making a place around it, and having the built experience of the waterfront gone and trying to explain it by putting artifacts into a kind of neutral landscape. You wish there had been fragment of something like a gantry here, or more content related to the waterfront. It would be interesting to think about what a good extension of this effort would be, other than more housing.

Hood: As a monument or as a memorial, this project is more like a large object rather than a place per se. It doesn't operate by taking over that entire green space, it's more like an abstract object. How do we talk about place within that framework?

Corbett: They did really use research, it's historical research.

Hanrahan: This project brings forward a story that may not have even been considered a legitimate memory twenty years ago. The notion that the U.S. can assume a stronger interest in the cultural aspects of its history is very powerful, and very well put here. The pictures of the women coming back for the dedication are impressive.

Sommer: The memory to me is the sad part, though. As a monument to industrial America, things were made in that whole tidal basin, not only in one part of it.

Hood: It's important for people to recognize the history of Richmond that is slowly being wiped away. I do think people will come to this site and remember the way it used to be, based upon the project, based upon the narrative.

Griffin: And it may be a catalyst, now that there's something there, implemented, to use. It's bringing back institutional support, and the prospects in a way are almost as exciting.

Constructing Memory: Commemorating Rosie the Riveter, Richmond, Calif.

Client: City of Richmond, Redevelopment Agency (Donna Graves, project director)

Design: The Office of Cheryl Barton (Cheryl Barton, design principal/sculptor; Zoë Astrachan, landscape architect; Burt Tanoue, landscape architect/technical advisor) and Susan Schwartzberg, visual artist.