



# The Cardinal Inquirer

<http://inquirer.stanford.edu>

A Publication of the Stanford Graduate Program in Journalism

[Home](#) > [This Week](#) > [Still Here](#)

## [Honoring the Bay's Original Shorelines](#) By [Hugh Biggar](#)

February 5, 2004

[Home](#)

[Letters](#)

[Audio](#)

[Photos](#)

[Corrections](#)

[Archives](#)

[About us](#)

[Contact](#)

At the gritty corner of 5th and Market Street, a half moon hangs in the blue afternoon sky. There are also a few pigeons shuffling about, and stubby, leafless trees lining Market Street. These are the only signs of nature, otherwise this is very much an urban landscape-boxy office buildings, a newsstand covered by graffiti, the smell of urine and the sounds of streetcars and sirens. All around is concrete and asphalt.

It hasn't always been this way. A sign on a bus shelter explains: "141 years ago, the intersection of 5th and Market was a valley surrounded by sandy hills. The marshes of Mission Bay were three blocks away."

The sign is a part of the new Bay Boards campaign, a collaborative public art project chronicling the evolution of the Bay Area's landscape over the last 150 years. The project focuses on three places, downtown San Francisco, West Oakland and Albany Hill.

"Through the images and graphic space, we are trying to reconnect the community with the landscape, and engage with it as an ongoing dynamic process," says Robin Grossinger, a historical ecologist working on the project through the San Francisco Estuary Institute.

Adds Bay Boards' visual artist and photographer, Susan Schwartzberg, "This is really a literacy campaign about the environment. There are still chunks of it left and you can find it and know about it."

At the San Francisco site, this environment is largely left to the imagination, but six signs on a sequence of bus shelters and a billboard help make that possible. The sequence follows 5th Street down to Townsend, the former site of Mission Bay.

The route is now entirely flat, grid-like and covered with pavement. But at one time, it would have been uneven and wet, and required sturdy shoes and perhaps a boat to negotiate it. An old photo at the 5th and Market bus shelter illustrates this terrain; in the foreground are a few scattered wooden houses, dwarfed by dunes, and in the background, boggy ground flattening into open water.

Today, with the landscape looking quite different, the route requires walking shoes, an eye for traffic and some loose change for panhandlers. The old valley has been filled in and buried with sand from the dunes. The creeks and marshes are now twenty feet below. Where a five-story sand hill once stood is the old U.S. Mint, an abandoned site scattered with trash.

In the place of scrub oaks and wild flowers are now delis, corner markets and industrial supply businesses. A busy intersection anchored by a gas station marks the spot where the marshes once began.

Just beyond, the 101 freeway roars overhead, rush hour rising and falling twice a day just as the tides used to do in the same place. Finally, past a homeless shelter and warehouses, 5th dead ends into Townsend just in front of rail yards. "You're at the edge of Mission Bay...150 years ago," reads the large billboard here, with a painting of blue waters and open sky evoking the former beachhead.

The point isn't to be "in your face" about the changes says Grossinger. "We wanted to do this in an interesting way, not didactic, as we [as a society] continue to make choices about what we value and keep. It changes the way you see normal places, and makes them much more dynamic and interesting."

He points out that San Francisco's founders designed Mission Street to skirt the marshes and dunes, while connecting the downtown with Mission Delores. Over time, other roads were then built to connect with Mission.

"This whole grid [of streets] became based on historical landscapes," says Grossinger. "We want to show that the landscape is going to continue to grow and change-and some of it is still here."

And that is largely the aim of the Bay Boards project, says Schwartzberg. "Hopefully, it makes people start to think about what was here, what's still here and what could be here."

*In addition to San Francisco site, Bay Boards are on display in Albany Hill and Oakland. The Lawrence Hall of Science in Berkeley also has an exhibit on the project. The signs and exhibit will*

*be in place until the end of February. For more information, visit, <http://www.stillhere.org>*

Contact Hugh Biggar at [hbiggar@stanford.edu](mailto:hbiggar@stanford.edu).

[Go Back](#)

