

It's got high-rises, it's got organic gardens and it just might be a model for cities everywhere

By John King | December 15, 2005



SOM/Ratio Design Associates / Gerald Ratto Photography

Photo: SOM/Ratio Design Associates; Pho



TreasureIsland-Overall View for John King's Column on Dec. 15th. Model by SOM/Ratio Design Associates; Photography by Gerald Ratto Photography

Whether or not it ever gets built, the most intriguing development proposal in America right now involves our very own Treasure Island. It's got organic gardens and a 60-story tower, wind farms and glitzy hotels. Restaurants beckon beneath an enormous glass roof that doubles as a solar panel. You don't need a car because everything essential is within walking distance, including a ferry straight to downtown San Francisco.

And here's the most intriguing thing of all: This urban utopia is being pushed by one of the largest developers in the United States.

That's why I hope that as San Francisco examines what Lennar Corp. says it wants to do with this 393-acre artificial island from the 1930s, cynicism doesn't totally cloud the fact that we're being shown an unprecedented vision of urban growth -- one crafted in response to the Bay Area's odd blend of urbanity and environmentalism.

Yes, the revised plan trotted out last month -- followed by models and polished images this week -- packs an intense amount of development onto an island that few outsiders have visited since the Golden Gate International Exposition of the late '30s.

There'd be as many as 5,500 housing units on an island that now has 750 apartments built by the U.S. Navy before it closed a base there in 1997. There would be two hotels, a conference center and a commercial district near a proposed ferry terminal sliced into the west side of the island.

There also will be five residential towers near the ferry. The model includes a central high-rise twisting 60 stories into the air, though Anthony Flanagan, president of Lennar's urban division, stresses that everything being shown is conceptual: "What we're trying to define is the character of the community, not the specific architecture."

So far, this is pretty much what you'd expect from a developer involved in five other base conversions across the country, including Mare Island in Vallejo and San Francisco's Hunters Point Shipyard. But look at the project's green wrapping.

The northeastern half of the island is treated, in the plan, as a landscaped world apart, a 120-acre swath with ball fields and marshes as well as conventional parkland and 20 acres reserved for organic farming.

The scheme has wind turbines along the shore, and streets mapped to deflect that wind. Towers would come with photovoltaic panels to generate electricity for the island; so would a glass canopy atop the open-air retail zone near the ferry.

Most ambitious of all, 90 percent of the housing is clustered within a 10-minute walk to the ferry. Developers would be required to subsidize ferry service from the day the units open -- say 2009 in the most optimistic scenario -- so that new residents wouldn't feel they need to own a car that can't force its way onto the Bay Bridge during rush hour anyway.

Why push sustainable notions to such an extent? Because Lennar and co-developer Kenwood Investments finally realized where they are. The Bay Area is a region where many of us think we can have it all -- scenery to rival Yosemite and neighborhoods that make New York seem dull. Food grown by nearby farmers, and urban culture at its most cutting edge.

With that parochial perspective comes a sense of entitlement that says if developers want to do business here, they'd better pay attention to what we want. In this case, "we" are the environmental advocates and planning watchdogs who have spent years saying a site this unique deserves a unique future.

And they're absolutely right. If large-scale growth is allowed to replace the remnants of the military base that closed in 1997, it had better be special. Otherwise, let the island's 20 million cubic feet of black sand filter back into the bay from whence it came.

What Lennar and Kenwood sought to build until last month wasn't special at all; it was quasi-suburbia. It was fashioned to win approval by avoiding controversy, but it had no spark.

The new approach is a profound change, especially the \$20 million ferry terminal: Lennar first wanted to use an existing pier that faces Oakland. And the shift in the development approach is a tribute to critics who lobbied for a better plan, rather than simply saying no. None of which means that what is on the table should now be rubber-stamped.

Here are two examples of things that need to be looked at more. Seismic issues can't be glossed over, certainly if high-rise condos are supposed to be attached to submerged bedrock closest to Yerba Buena Island. And even if towers make sense, consider this: The central high-rise would be taller than the nearby towers of the Bay Bridge. Aesthetic rationale aside, should a private enclave take precedence over public monuments?

The new Treasure Island proposals need intense scrutiny during the next few months as more details are released, and before San Francisco's Board of Supervisors votes on whether to endorse the broad outlines of the plan. It might turn out that this shining Xanadu is pie in the sky.

But what we have now is a starting point, a fascinating attempt to strike a balance between environmental principles and big-city life. If the Bay Area can find a way to make it work, the entire nation will pay attention.

-- For a full look at the current proposal, go to sfgov.org/treasureisland.