

Moscone: This is an *Old* Neighborhood

by Chris Dichtel

Seen the news? There's a lot of flap these days over a plan to install a conceptual art piece in front of Moscone Center. The piece is to consist of a series of large arches spanning Howard Street, forming a message that reads: "This Is a Nice Neighborhood."

I'm a big enough fan of conceptual art, but personally I don't think much of the idea. I mean, what's the connection? Let's face it: the creation of the Moscone Convention Center played no small part in driving the Filipino neighborhood which used to be there into the back alleys and boardinghouses of the district.

So what "neighborhood" are we talking about here? Or are those L.A. artists just being slyly cynical?

If they've got to do it, it would be better to say, "This Is an *Old* Neighborhood." The site on which Moscone Center sits truly is one of the oldest known neighborhoods in San Francisco. We're not just talking Gold Rush ships; this neighborhood dates back to around the time of Christ.

No doubt you've noticed, over the past several years, the preparations for the Moscone expansion going on across Howard Street. Back when the ground was first being prepared, with all the heavy machinery and what-not lumbering around down in the pit, one might easily have overlooked a small crew of people chipping away at the ground in one corner.

These workers were not Union laborers, nor were they scabs, but rather a team of archaeological assistants unearthing the remains of a nearly 2,000-year-old Ohlone Indian village.

The discovery is thanks to a relatively recent law which stipulates that any exposed ground site in the downtown area be subjected to archaeological inspection before construction of a new building can begin.

The lucky fellow who gets to coordinate this is Mr. Alan Pastron, the founder of Archaeo-Tec, a private consulting firm specializing in archaeology impact reports for developers. Although

well qualified, he sort of stumbled into the job several years ago, and has never regretted it, though doubtless a few developers have.

Pastron's diggings have occasionally held up development projects for several years. They have also turned up treasure troves of old relics: Gold-Rush goods from a once-waterfront establishment at Montgomery and Clay, the remains of a Chinese store from the early 1850's, and several ancient Indian shellmound sites, including the one at the Moscone expansion.



The Moscone Center sits astride what was until the mid-1800's the high tide shoreline of Mission Bay, which at one time covered 500 acres, from Howard Street to as far south as Mariposa. This entire area--indeed, most of San Francisco--was covered over with large shifting sand dunes, tenuously held down in some places by scrub oak and other native plants.

Mission Bay, with its tule marshes plentiful with game, was precisely the sort of place the Ohlones would have chosen for a village. The bay was fed by Hayes Creek (which ran through Hayes Valley) and Mission Creek (whose headsprings originated well up in the hills of Twin Peaks).

Right up to the Gold Rush, it was possible to sail a boat through Mission Bay and up Mission Creek beyond Mission Dolores. In the early 1850's, tons of the local sand dunes were shoved into Mission Bay as fill, to provide land for vegetable gardens, and the like.

In 1988, archaeological crews

working the Moscone site dug down through about six feet of sand, and within thirty minutes had uncovered artifacts from an Indian village which had been covered over by shifting sands long before the Spanish arrived. The Moscone site, dubbed the "Yerba Buena shellmound," yielded the preserved remnants of this village, as well as an Ohlone cemetery. The skeletal remains of eleven Indians were unearthed, ranging from infants to adults up to forty-five years of age, all buried in the traditional posture with their knees tucked up in the fetal position. The bodies had been buried along with decorative beads, mica ornaments, obsidian spear points, and bird bone whistles. Many were found wearing pendants made of abalone shells.

Not long ago, the remains would have been carted off to a local museum. But in deference to changing times and the wishes and beliefs of modern-day Ohlone descendants, an observer from the Ohlone tribe oversaw the removal of the skeletons for a ritual reburial at a discreetly undisclosed location.

Time comes and goes, but mostly it goes, and is forgotten. So next year, when you find yourself in the new underground hall, give a passing thought to the once-thriving Ohlone village, whose people lived quite well a couple of thousand years ago on the shores of Mission Bay. With an incredible abundance of seafood, game, and waterfowl at its doorstep, and placed in a setting of natural splendor, this must once indeed have been a nice neighborhood.

P.S. I am told by quasi-reliable sources that in more recent archaeological history, our own Greyhound taskmaster himself was employed as a butcher in the basement of a shop near where Moscone sits now, and at about the same underground location where we find him reigning today, God bless him.

But that's another story. (And don't look at me.)