

# Resisting Homogeneity, Reconstructing Identity: Part 1 – Between Suburb and City: The Canyon Post Office

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## Identity and Place

....For all of these have those qualities I associate with a sense of place: a lively awareness of the familiar environment, a ritual repetition, a sense of fellowship based on a shared experience. <sup>1</sup>

Industrialized and corporate economies have failed to acknowledge the fundamental relationship between the development of individual character and the stewardship of place which makes stable communities and an ethos of place possible. <sup>2</sup>

The places that we make and those we preserve are irrefutable evidence of what is important to us and what we believe in. In turn, places that we inhabit influence our ideas. This mutually dependent relationship between places and people is a ubiquitous concept but one that is too often forgotten in a post-industrial world. The general drift to homogeneity has resulted in the loss of local culture and identity. In some small corners of the world, people are working to resist this trend. The preservation and reconstruction of a unique community's public identity has been the purpose of our work in Canyon, a small rural community in northern California. (This is Part 1 of a brief history of that work. Part 2 can be found on page 159 in this volume).

Canyon is located in a narrow range of hills between the city of Oakland and the suburban sprawl of Contra Costa county. Clustered alongside San Leandro Creek in a protected watershed and surrounded by a second growth redwood forest, Canyon remains one of the last communities of rural character in the midst of the otherwise cosmopolitan Bay Area. An unincorporated town of approximately 150 households, Canyon has no artificial nor arbitrary boundaries defining it. It is one of those special places that nature has provided in which topography combines with the forest to create a fertile ecosystem for memory, imagination, and myth. Because of a unique identity that differentiates Canyon from the recurring paradigms of city and suburb, it is an important place to preserve and nurture in the interest of



Fig. 1. Canyon

having a rich, diverse cultural landscape.

Canyon's legacy is rich and varied due to the landscape and to the people drawn to it. But by the 1980s the public realm there had eroded. There were two public buildings; the post office housed in a trailer and a small ramshackle schoolhouse which had essentially been condemned. Our work involved the reconstruction of the post office and the school into permanent public places that ensured the preservation of Canyon's unique identity, giving residents places to gather and providing a public realm for the community. Our method was to engage with the participants and understand the place as much as we could, and then to design public places that could promote identity by serving as links between the natural landscape and the people, to somehow make clear how essential is the link between experience of the physical landscape and experience of belonging to a small rural community.

## Background

In the 1850s, the area around Canyon supported one of the most populous communities in the East Bay as some of the largest ancient redwoods ever seen were being logged to frame houses in San Francisco and Oakland. Saloons, hotels,



Fig. 2. A Canyon Builder. Photo: L. Pratt by permission.

and other businesses supported by the logging community were built next to the creek that runs along the canyon bottom. The old Canyon Store, first built in 1852, was a private building but served as a community gathering place and location of the post office. After the first growth trees were logged off, the population in the Canyon declined. For a while the area was known as a sort of robber's roost or hideaway. Second growth redwoods grew in rings out of the enormous stumps, creating an inviting forest once again. An electric railroad line was built through Canyon in 1913 which supported development of whistle stop communities of private parks and summer homes that formed Canyon's new identity as a getaway from the city.<sup>4</sup> Passenger service was discontinued in 1941 but Canyon's population swelled with war workers employed in the Oakland area who converted the summer homes to year round housing. Canyon's identity was modified again through its popularity as a counter culture haven in the 1960s and 70s when a variety of people from many walks of life moved there to live a more rural and self-sufficient lifestyle. Much of this influence lingers in Canyon's contemporary identity. By the 1980s Canyon's population reflected the diversity of the entire Bay Area with a distinctly lower middle class median income, a marked contrast to the adjacent affluent suburban communities of Contra Costa County.

Parallel to the history of Canyon is the history of the East Bay Municipal Utilities District (EBMUD). EBMUD, a semi public entity eventually charged with the duty of supplying potable water and sewage treatment to the East Bay and its rapidly growing suburbs, was officially formed in 1923. Its purposes require the holding of extensive watershed areas, the cleanliness of which have been of paramount concern. One of its principal open reservoirs, formed by construction of a dam in 1926, is fed by San Leandro Creek, which is the creek that runs through Canyon. One of the whistle stop settlements along the railroad was known as Valle Vista. It was located on the upper end of the valley which became the reservoir. In the name of protecting the reservoir's water quality, EBMUD had the entire settlement condemned, and what wasn't submerged was plowed under.

Therefore longtime Canyon residents had plenty of rea-

sons to be nervous when "the utility district in 1951 adopted a sanitation policy which was to spell eventual doom for Canyon as a residential area." The policy stated, "Where feasible, purchase and remove from occupancy watershed lands where sewage disposal is impractical or constitutes a special hazard."<sup>4</sup> This was particularly frustrating for Canyon residents because EBMUD would supply neither water or sewer service to them nor allow legal access to be established to homes cut off by having to cross newly acquired EBMUD land, making home improvement loans impossible. Canyon residents had to continue to get along as they had for a hundred years, carrying building materials up wooded paths and relying on developed springs and wells for water and septic systems for sewage disposal.<sup>5</sup> EBMUD sanitary engineers continued to fear that the septic systems were somehow polluting the creek. But the many measurements and tests they conducted, including pumping hundreds of gallons of viscous green tracer dye into test holes and septic drain fields, time and again proved inconclusive. Nevertheless, between 1951 and 1968, EBMUD purchased and destroyed 69 homes in Canyon and many of the longtime residents became resigned to the eventuality that EBMUD would end up owning all of it. But EBMUD had a big appearance problem which was their apparent profit taking in land deals less than 5 miles away. In these cases watershed land which had been condemned and bought was provided with sewer service, declared as being "surplus," and then sold by private negotiation to in one case a private developer and in another case to a trucking company.<sup>6</sup> The idea that EBMUD might be churning property at the expense of people's homes so that some more sanitized conventional suburban community could result troubled some of the older Canyon residents and many of the more recent arrivals who were fiercely protective of the alternative community they had joined.

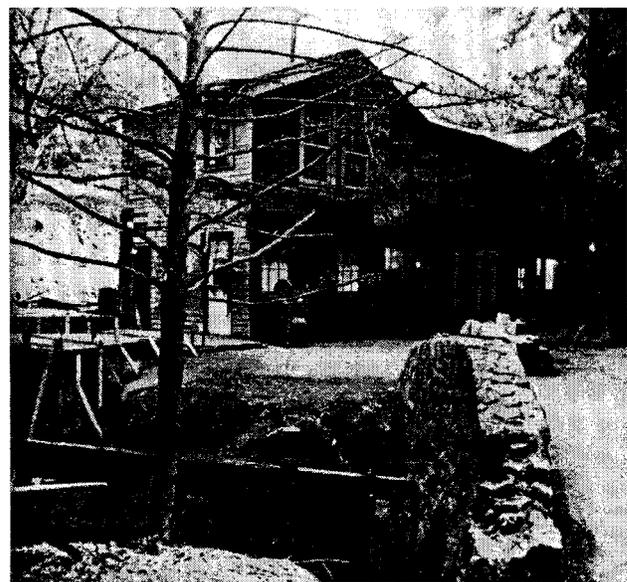


Fig. 3. Pentangle slab for the Post Office (left) added to the Canyon Store in 1967. Photo: Oakland *Tribune* by permission.



Fig. 4. After the fire. Photo: *Oakland Tribune* by permission.

In 1967 when EBMUD made an offer to buy the old Canyon Store and post office, residents were motivated to respond. The only access to the bulk of the houses, a private lane, crossed the Canyon Store land to connect with the county road. Located at Canyon's entrance intersection, this made the store property the most strategic lot in Canyon. With the stated goal of preserving the community, resident activists joined together to form the non-profit "Canyon Store Trust" and succeeded in raising enough money in Canyon to outbid EBMUD. The Trust developed plans to improve and expand the building but permits were denied by the County Health Department at the insistence of EBMUD. Work proceeded anyway in an on-going game of guerrilla construction and stop work notices. A pentangle shaped slab was poured as the foundation for an expanded post office that was added to the store. Eventually the addition was accomplished and permitted after the fact. Tragedy struck in 1969 when a saboteur ruptured a gasoline pipeline that crossed the canyon upstream of the store. Gas flooded the creek and exploded, destroying the store/post office and killing one person.<sup>7</sup>

### Reconstructing Identity

The power of space is great, and it is always active for creation and destruction. It is the basis of the desire of any group of human beings to have a place of their own, a place which gives them reality, presence, power of living, which feeds them, body and soul.<sup>8</sup>

Following the tragic events of 1969, the U.S. Postal Service continued to provide service to Canyon, zip code 94516, in a portable red, white and blue trailer parked near the old Canyon Store site. The Canyon Store Trust still had control of the property and there was a standing offer from the United States Postal Service to lease a new post office building if the Trust could build it. By 1982 I (Reich) was living in Canyon while completing a Master of Architecture degree at the University of California at Berkeley. I became interested in the history of Canyon and how a new post office could

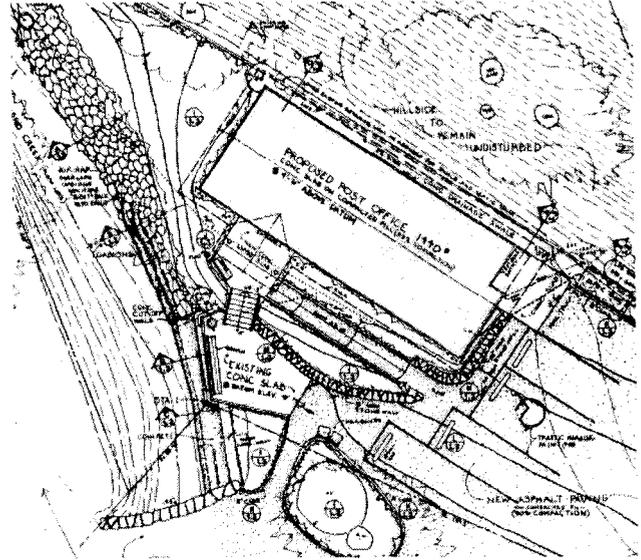


Fig. 5. Site plan for the post office.

contribute to the preservation of its identity. I worked out an agreement with the surviving Trustees to design a post office building and supervise its construction as part of my master's thesis. One of the trustees resigned from the trust so that his construction company could finance the project and then collect the postal service lease for up to twenty years as compensation.

The U.S. Postal Service offered their homogenized "standard specification" plan for the Canyon Post Office, which was neither regional nor place specific, and strongly encouraged us to use it. However, we (the architect and the Trust) were adamant that the design respond to the unique setting in Canyon. Although initially it was difficult to convince the Postal Service to accept a non-standard, site specific design for the Canyon Post Office, our viewpoint finally prevailed. Despite a stringent budget, we struggled to educate, cajole, and convince contractors, subcontractors, and Postal Service representatives to create a building that is deceptively simple while simultaneously sensitive in its use of space and detail of materials.

The difficulty of the old store site, a narrow piece of flat land between the creek and the steep former railroad embankment, required a creative solution. The standard U.S.P.S. plans illustrated a rectangular building in a suburban setting with a corner entrance directly off a parking area and a mail loading dock around the side. The physical constraints of the site and our desire to acknowledge the history of the store led us to a solution that put the entrance somewhat removed from the parking with the lobby actually on the *backside* of the building. Instead of walking from car directly into entrance, we would have visitors walk 60 feet along the creek bank, across the old pentangle slab of the former post office, up some steps (or the wheelchair ramp) to the entrance. When a visitor enters the building, instead of looking directly at the service counter, the visitor is presented with an intimate view upstream into a peaceful riparian habitat, the creek sparkling

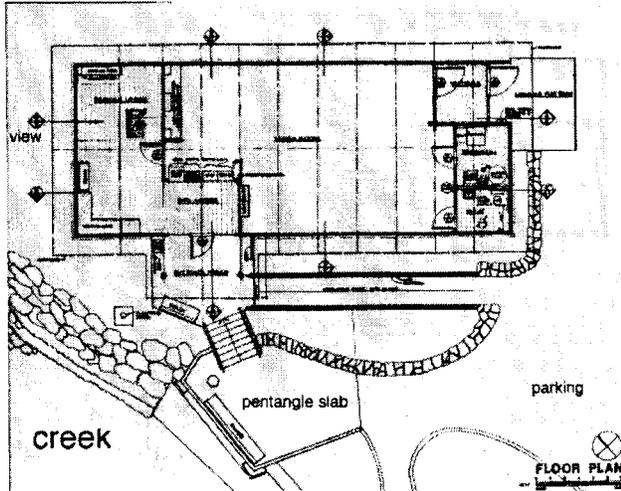


Figure 6: Floor plan.

in the dappled sunlight and murmuring in the shadows. This view makes the uniqueness of the place very clear.

Utilizing the concrete pentangle platform leftover from the old store, we designed the area in front of the building to serve as a small town square. The steps up to the entrance and the porch serve as a public speaking platform. Benches made of redwood slabs from storm downed trees do double duty as guardrails at the steep bank of the sometimes flooded creek. The area supports both formal gatherings such as the election day polling, and informal gatherings such as charity sales. This is where community events are advertised, family news is displayed, and political opinions are vented. It also serves passersby as a peaceful reflecting or resting spot, particularly for the numerous hikers and bikers passing through the canyon. Thus the simple combination of elements: the space, the creek, the platform, the benches, the porch, the public telephone, the bulletin boards, makes the setting work for key public rituals of social life in a rural community.

Our approach to the material design of the building emphasized simple geometry, good proportions and simple but substantial common materials detailed with great care. The walls sit flush to the inside of the concrete grade beam to put the slab/grade beam joint at the wall where it is covered by

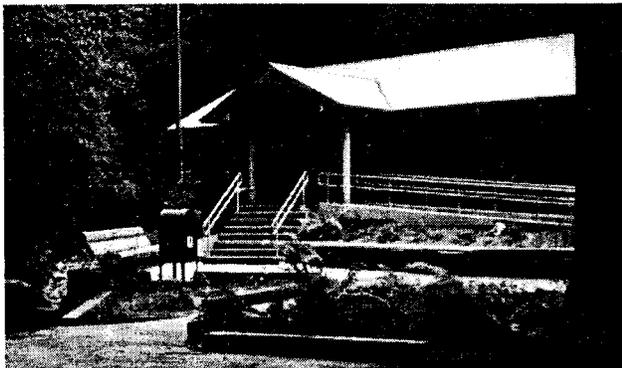


Fig. 7. Canyon Post Office and "town square"

finishes. The remaining outside width of the grade beam is chamfered both to shed water and to give the building more of a formal platform or plinth. The sono-tube formed concrete columns which frame the entrance lend a sense of permanence and suggest that if this building were to bum, there would be a respectable ruin. We rejected the more standard factory built monoplane trusses and dropped ceiling, finding instead that for a building of this size we could get king-post trusses site-built by the carpenters for the same cost, allowing there to be a vaulted ceiling. Fewer trusses were therefore required and we designed them so their top chords peek under the eaves at a studied rhythm. Inexpensive windows were detailed to have projecting sills which, with the chamfered grade beam and eaves, articulate the building's profile. We culled enough "remainders" from a ceramic tile yard to pave the floor and had counters built of local storm-downed black walnut. The key to getting the material quality was our willingness to take the time to understand what the builder could do, to understand what was locally available, and to challenge the carpenter's sense of craft rather than relying on a notion of "standard specifications." Completed in 1984, the 1,500-square-foot structure, including sitework and utilities, was built by the former trustee's construction company employing mostly community residents for a cost of \$125,000.

#### Canyon 94516

It is the practice of the U.S. Postal Service that zip codes are organized not to define boundaries such as census tracts but rather as centers. Therefore what zip code applies to your address has more to do with the geography of practical access routes (roads) and traditional usage than it does with some abstractly bounded area drawn on a map.

There is also an element of choice. Just like many other rural areas, there is no home delivery of the mail in Canyon. You get your mail at a P.O. box, or if you can't afford one, your address is "general delivery." Of course this also means you can leave off the P.O. box number and control your mail identity. You can choose an address that suits you, say "1001 Avenue of the Stars" or "13 Hobbit Glen." It doesn't matter,

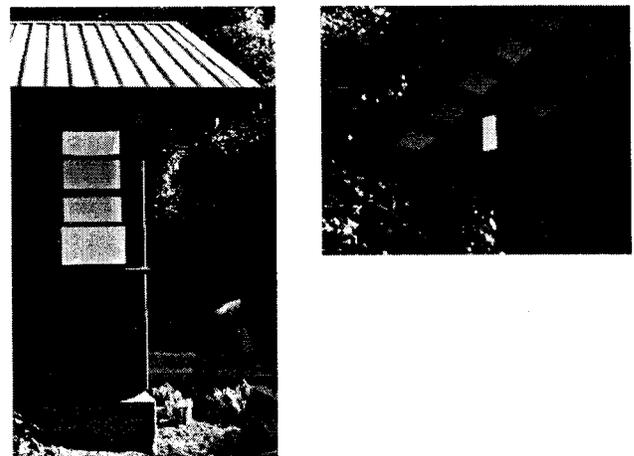


Fig. 8. Building profile (left), eave detail (right).



Fig. 9. Steps as choral platform.

the postmistress knows who you are anyway, and your mail goes in your P.O. box where you come to pick it up.

Despite the meteoric rise of interpersonal connections through local and global computer networks, the recognition of a postal identity is still strong. Particularly in an unincorporated rural town like Canyon, an independent zip code can provide a source of strength and an affirmation of community identity. The zip code acts as an identity marker that communicates to the outside world that Canyon is a place that is identifiably different from neighboring Moraga (the suburb) and Oakland (the city).

The post office building acts as a symbolic place marker, providing a sense of permanence, as one Canyon resident reflected: "It begins a whole new era – a kind of lease on time guaranteeing decades of permanence." A reviewer noted: "only Canyon could get a post office such as this - not your usual squat concrete or stucco structure, but a sleek contemporary building made of clear redwood, with a picture window overlooking the creek."<sup>9</sup> But more importantly, the rural post office serves as the public place of daily casual congenial interaction; and these face to face meetings, occasioned by the ritual of mail delivery, give residents of an unincorporated rural area an explicit sense of belonging to the same community.

Ironically the Western Regional Planning Division of the U.S. Postal Service, who we had worked so hard to convince of the value of site specific contextual design, was impressed enough with the Canyon Post Office that they subsequently adopted a new standard design for all rural main stations that was based on it. Apparently several were built. But whether this resulted in some other architect somewhere else having to argue against our prototype being built in their particular setting, we have not heard.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> J.B. Jackson. *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 159.
- Folke Nyberg. "Logo Architecture and the Architecture of Logos," *Column Five: Journal of Architecture of the University of Washington* (Volume 8, 1994), p. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Being relatively close to the city and accessible by mass transit, Canyon was a getaway primarily for those of more modest means who could not afford automobiles.
- <sup>4</sup> John W. Noble. *Its Name Was M.U.D.*, (official history of the East Bay Municipal Utilities District). (Oakland: East Bay Municipal Utilities District, 1970), p. 96.
- <sup>5</sup> John Van Der Zee. *Canyon: The Story of the last Rustic Community in Metropolitan America*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 22. As early as 1912 Canyon residents had formed small site specific water systems such as the "Moraga Heights Mutual Water System" serving and regularly billing 14 houses and registered with the California Public Utilities Commission.
- <sup>6</sup> Noble. *Op. Cit.*, p. 95. Van Der Zee. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 30-35, p. 155.
- <sup>7</sup> Van Der Zee. *Op. Cit.*, p. 117.
- <sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich. *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959). p. 16.
- <sup>9</sup> Frank Wootten. "For Canyon, the New Post Office is a New Downtown," *The Oakland Tribune*, 10/11/184.

## PHOTOGRAPHY CREDIT

All photos and drawings by authors unless otherwise noted.

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