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## Work Stands Out Before It Blends In

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by Jori Finkel

It would be hard to imagine a better view. Standing on a ridge in the forest of the Presidio, a longtime military post that is now a national park, the artist Andy Goldsworthy had a broad, shimmering expanse of the San Francisco Bay at his feet. It was a brilliant day, with Alcatraz clear in the distance and the Golden Gate Bridge a reddish streak to the left. Sailboats dotted the ocean.

Only Mr. Goldsworthy was not looking in that direction. Instead, he peered toward downtown San Francisco and pointed out two tips of buildings barely visible over the hills in the distance: a tiny triangle's worth of the Transamerica Pyramid and the top sliver of St. Ignatius Church.

"I've always been attracted to the spires of buildings where you can't see the base," said Mr. Goldsworthy, who was dressed like a casual hiker in trail shoes, Levi's and a T-shirt. "I like the sense of the spire being something that is endless below, as if it's drawing form and life and movement from the ground below." He described the spire as a form that is both architectural and natural, noting correspondences in grass, trees and icicles.

Back in 1984, he used the spire for what he called his "first permanent work": wood sculptures he built in Grizedale Forest, England. Now he has returned to the form for an even larger project, a series of three wooden spires to be planted in a clearing in the Presidio where unhealthy Monterey cypress trees have been felled as part of a larger reforestation project. Made out of those cypress logs, the spires will reach as high as 100 feet.

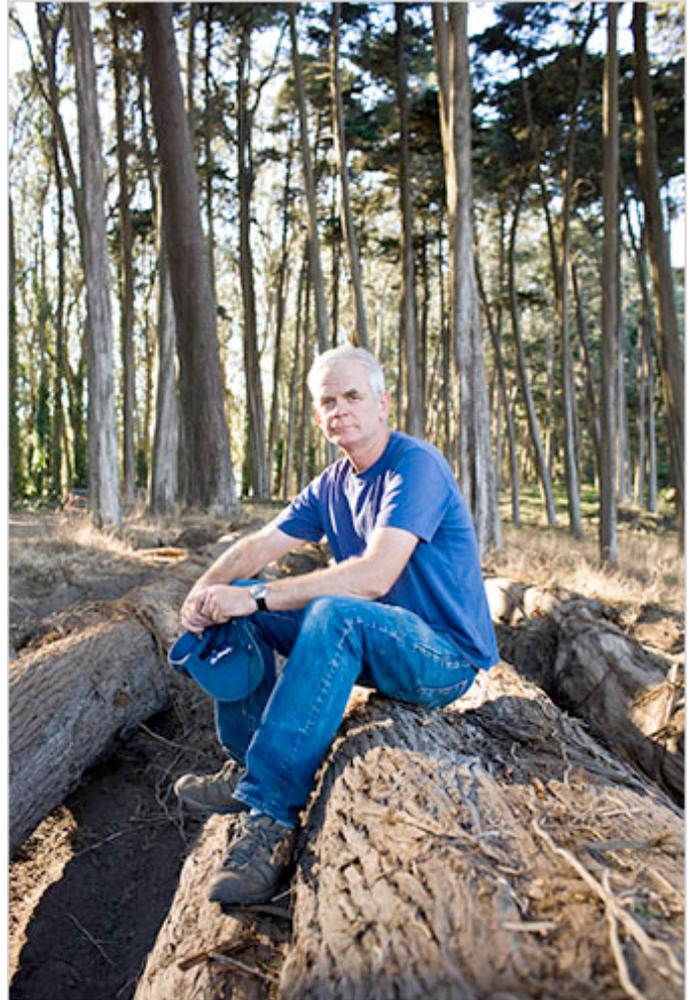


Photo by Drew Kelly for the New York Times

Once completed, it will be the Scotland-based artist's tallest project in North America. The longest is surely his languorous stone wall at the Storm King sculpture garden in New York.

Yet Mr. Goldsworthy, who is drawn to lyric rather than epic gestures, is not building the spires as monuments to anything. His concept is more organic. As the forest of new seedlings planted by the Presidio grows around them, the spires will grow less and less prominent, perhaps even disappearing in the thick of the woods.

“Over time the spires will change from an extroverted, outgoing sculpture to an internal, quiet work within the forest” — something, he said, you may be able to spot through the trees, but maybe not. “Or maybe they’ll take it down,” he added.

In October Mr. Goldsworthy spent two weeks in San Francisco building the first of the spires: a skinny, spiky form consisting of about 40 cypress logs pressed tightly enough together to form the impression of a single trunk tapering at the top. (He hopes to return over the next couple years, financing and approvals willing, to build the other spires, and he has ideas for companion works as well.) He guided a crew of Presidio foresters — one operating a crane and two hovering above in a cherry picker — as they fixed logs to one another or to a central 17,000-pound log with steel rods. They all wore hardhats that sported the artist’s black-marker drawing of the spire.

In some ways the project seems a departure for the artist. As reflected in the 2001 documentary “Rivers and Tides,” Mr. Goldsworthy is known for generating powerful effects out of simple or ephemeral elements in nature. He pins leaves together with thorns and sends them floating like snakes down rivers. He knits branches into larger-than-life balls. He balances stones to build walls and arches. He is famous for working with his hands, not with a sizable crew and hefty industrial machinery.



Photo by Drew Kelly for The New York Times

But Mr. Goldsworthy is quick to dismiss the popular image of himself as someone who “floats through the forest” making things. “I’m not a primitive,” he said. “I work directly with my hands when it’s the best way to make the works, not because it’s some sort of rule.”

As for the breathtaking site, just west of “Inspiration Point Overlook” on the Presidio map, he sounded allergic to its charms. “The site is not one I would generally choose — a real look-at-me kind of place here on the ridge.”

Rather, he said he liked the idea of making the work in the place where the logs once lived. “There’s a huge, huge difference between making sculpture offsite and seeing it grow in a place, rooted in a place,” he said. And he welcomed the chance to work with a natural landscape steeped in social history, a context that he said arises more often in Europe — “where I’m always working on farmers’ land, where there’s always some social use” — than in the United States. “I love the fact that the Presidio is a complex landscape, both geologically and socially.”

Contested, too. Originally built as a fort in 1776 by Spanish soldiers, the Presidio was taken over by the United States Army in 1846. Ten years ago a federal agency called the Presidio Trust was formed both to preserve the property and to develop it as a public resource. So far, balancing the two has been tricky, as some proposals under consideration — notably one by Don Fisher, the billionaire founder of the Gap, to open a new contemporary art museum there — have stirred public outrage. (A decision by the trust is expected by early 2009.)

In the meantime, trust officials hope that their reforestation plan — replanting 25,000 trees on 150 acres over 30 years — will prove less controversial. The military planted the forest's cypress, pine and eucalyptus trees in the 1880s and 1890s, so examples of the first two species are now deteriorating. The reforestation plan calls for staggered plantings and thinning as needed.

A spokeswoman for the Presidio, Tia Lombardi, suggested that Mr. Goldsworthy's project could play a crucial role in helping the public "understand and enjoy the Presidio's history and ecology." To this end the trust is using a small building on the site for an exhibition about the project and the Presidio. It runs from Nov. 12 through to May 3. Cheryl Haines, Mr. Goldsworthy's San Francisco dealer, secured financing for the first spire and developed the idea for the show.

Still, Mr. Goldsworthy anticipates some outcry from tree lovers who don't understand where the logs come from. That's what happened last year when he built at the Reina Sofia in Madrid an immense upside-down nest out of logs that had been destined for a paper mill. "One of the guards pinned a notice on the sculpture saying there is no reason to kill any living thing," he said, sounding more intrigued than distressed by the hostility. He chalked it up to a human tendency to romanticize nature and resist change.

"Wherever you work in a place that people use, people will take exception to what you do," he said. "The people who will be most annoyed at my work are the same kind who in 80 years will be most opposed to taking it down."

Asked about the status of his first spire sculpture in Grizedale, England, Mr. Goldsworthy said it remained there for about 15 years before being removed for safety reasons. He cited the poor quality of the timber and his own inexperience in building at that point.

But he said the loss didn't bother him at all. "We're always wanting to hold onto things as they are," he said. "But that's not the nature of life or things, is it?"