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OPINION // OPEN FORUM

Should San Francisco build a Trump 'Freedom City' in one of its iconic parks?

Whether development should be allowed in the Presidio isn't as cut and dried as the typical all-or-nothing San Francisco debate

By **Benjamin Schneider**

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The Letterman Digital Arts Center at the Presidio is an office complex that houses Lucasfilm, the Founders Fund and other tech firms. Rent from tenants of the center and housing in the Presidio covers the expenses of maintaining and improving the grounds of the national park.

Darryl Bush/The Chronicle 2005

The Presidio is one of the finest jewels in San Francisco's crown. To many locals, the idea of any new development in this exquisite public and natural area would be pure sacrilege. So, it's no surprise that the prospect of President-elect Donald Trump redeveloping the Presidio into a "Freedom City" would elicit an impassioned rejoinder from local commentators.

Whether development should be allowed in the Presidio, however, is not as cut and dried as the typical all-or-nothing San Francisco debate.

The Presidio, a former military base decommissioned in 1994, is a multifaceted district. It contains wild coyote-filled forests, landscaped parklands, restored historic buildings and vacant, crumbling military structures. It also welcomed a large ground-up office development in the recent past.

There's room in the Presidio to build significant amounts of new housing without impinging on natural areas, recreation spaces or historic buildings. Doing so thoughtfully and equitably would require an urban development paradigm shift. President Trump's libertarian Freedom Cities concept would be a disaster in such a sensitive place. Rather, the Presidio could serve as a proving ground for the ascendant social housing movement that seeks to create deeply affordable housing by leveraging the high value of urban land.

Though technically a national park, most of the Presidio is managed by the Presidio Trust, an independent, financially self-sufficient entity that supports itself with rent revenue and donations. It's an idiosyncratic arrangement for a place that defies easy characterization.

One of the most unusual parts of the Presidio is the Letterman Digital Arts Center, which now serves as the headquarters of Lucasfilm, the Founders Fund and other tech firms. When it was completed in 2005, the 850,000-square-foot space was the largest office development built in the city since 1982. Compared to the brutalist Army hospital it replaced, the Letterman Center blends much better with its surroundings. Its white walls and red tile roofs echo the buildings of the nearby Main Post. Landscaping by Lawrence Halpern lends the grounds a magical feel.

Nonetheless, it’s important to call this complex what it is: a Silicon Valley corporate campus in a treasured San Francisco park.

The Presidio is a popular destination for tech companies. Its 2.2 million square feet of office space had a 97% occupancy rate in January, compared to a 72% occupancy rate citywide.

The Presidio also houses some 3,000 residents who pay rent to the trust. With this revenue, the trust has restored many unique historic buildings and helped fund spectacular new play areas like the Tunnel Tops Park.

But it feels significant that the only major ground-up development project in the Presidio's post-military history is an office campus. It's a microcosm of San Francisco and the Bay Area's urban development story. Lucrative office development is perfectly acceptable, yet housing construction is unthinkable.

Why can't new housing be part of the Presidio's next chapter?

A quick look around reveals plenty of potential sites. The Main Post has acres of surface parking that pockmarks the urban fabric. Fort Scott remains largely vacant and ripe for reimagining after the Presidio Trust failed in 2019 to find an acceptable developer to rehab the historic buildings. (OpenAI, back when it was an Elon Musk-supported nonprofit, was one of the bidders.)

The Baker Beach Apartments is an aging, architecturally undistinguished and relatively low-density complex. It could conceivably be redeveloped like San Francisco's public housing projects through the HOPE SF program. Old buildings would be demolished and rebuilt gradually, at much higher densities than before, so that residents could immediately move in when their previous homes are redeveloped. These new buildings could be designed in a contextual style, much like the Letterman Center.

The Baker Beach Apartments could be redeveloped into denser housing that the city needs.

Chris Preovolos/The Chronicle 2019

The financial model for all of this development could follow the principles of social housing, in which a nonprofit builds homes for people across the income spectrum, using the rents of higher-income residents to subsidize those of lower-income residents.

In a way, the Presidio Trust already operates under this model, as housing activist Sonja Trauss has pointed out. The trust is a not-for-profit organization that redistributes rents from residential and office tenants to cover the expenses of maintaining and improving the parklands. The trust could simply add housing development to its portfolio and add affordable housing to its mission.

The trust and, by extension, the public, finds itself in a remarkable financial position in the Presidio. The land overlooking the Golden Gate is enormously valuable, yet it is forever protected from the speculative marketplace. The trust could siphon some of this value from market-rate homes and offices into deep subsidies for low-income households.

The Presidio is ringed by San Francisco’s wealthiest neighborhoods: Seacliff, Presidio Heights, Pacific Heights and the Marina. It’s hard to imagine a place where the addition of affordable housing could be more beneficial to low-income residents, or where it could do more to increase socioeconomic diversity.

These are thorny questions without easy answers. But they’re questions San Francisco and other cities should be asking. The Presidio already offers a potential model for balancing growth and the public good. Adding housing development to the equation would represent a true paradigm shift that the rest of the city could emulate.

The alternative to asking these hard questions and exploring new urban development models is relegating the next generation to Freedom City, Nev.

Benjamin Schneider is a journalist working on a book for Island Press about why American cities have stagnated *and how they can change for the better.*

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