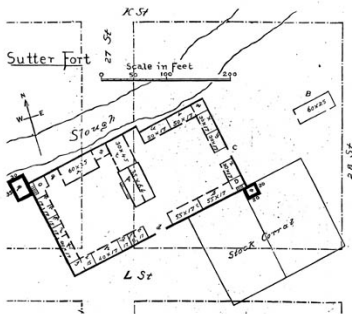


Archeology by Design : Temporary, Job-Site Construction Office

Hello!

“Another historic related project!”

Tom O. is a return-client who I had not heard from for many years. The last project I did for him sounded similar to this one: I was off to Sacramento to see what it was all about: a temporary, job-site construction office with historic issues - for a hospital?



Sutter's Fort Plan - Kunzel Map of 1848

Sutter Health is one of the largest healthcare providers in the area; and apparently was about to expanding tremendously. The expansion plans of the hospital included complete city blocks, and was expected to occur over the next seven years. Sutter Health is comprised of a variety of buildings within the historic area of down town Sacramento, and the hospitals facilities was best understood as an urban campus.

“Look around, there simply is no room for construction trailers”, said Tom. “This is what we are thinking of, let me show you the space. The Hospital owns this building, and there is a tenant space on the ground floor - over here - which is perfectly situated... but it has some problems”.

The suite was now empty: it was a hair salon in its previous life; lots of plumbing, which needed to be removed! Tom explains, “This space is comprised of three small buildings, interconnected by these openings in the masonry walls. We can't make additional openings in the structural walls, because it would be cost prohibitive. You will just have to work with it”.

He forgot to mention that there was no natural light to speak of!, just lots of glare from the small windows along the street. Each space was constructed in a different manner, and each had a different ceiling condition, or was it a roof, yes!, no!...it was hard to tell. The floors sloped all-over-the-place, simply not level! What a cacophony! ...I was focusing on the details.

“So what are we going to do here?”, I said”.

“ A temporary, job-site construction office, Tom replied. It will be a practical working facility. The users of the space will be the general contractor, (Turner Construction), the hospital architect (KMD Architects) and the construction administration staff of Sutter Health. Keep the design simple, build only what is needed.”

Tom continued, “You know all the requirements of this type of facility, you have done this work in the past. The real issue is - history - and what is inevitably going to be dug-up; literally. When the excavations begin for these future buildings, a lot of california history is going to surface. We are right next to Sutter's Fort.”

Cool!

“...and the hospital wants a way to inform the general public of the archeological finds. How can this be incorporated into the design?”



Historic view from Slough

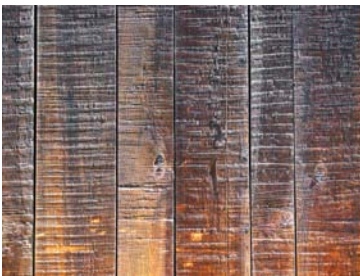
Perspective

A little history might shed-some-light, so what is Sutter's Fort all-about? An excerpt from The California State Parks literature on Sutter's Fort:

In 1839 a Swiss immigrant named John Sutter received a 48,000-acre land grant in the Sacramento Valley from the Mexican government. He used the land to create a flourishing agricultural empire and named it New Helvetia (New Switzerland.) This empire established Sacramento's earliest settlement and the first non-Indian settlement in California's Central Valley.

In 1847 Sutter sent aid to the Donner Party, a group of immigrants trapped in a winter storm in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Word spread and Sutter became known for his hospitality and for providing temporary refuge to travelers. This reputation made New Helvetia the destination for early immigrants to California.

Less than a decade after they were established, Sutter's properties were overrun by gold seekers and the fort is all that remains of New Helvetia. It has been restored to its former state based on an 1847 map published in Darmstadt, Germany.



Gate at Sutter's Fort

It doesn't take much to imagine the things that were going to be found; and the gate to the fort - it is absolutely huge and stunning! I noticed... in detail. Somehow I knew that it was going have something to do with this project.

The Find

So - to start - we need to demolish the hair salon; too many sinks, toilets and odd plumbing apperatti. The client doesn't want to build any thing they do not have to: and while we are at it, we should save anything interesting. So we go from a mundane hair salon - to a raw space, and feel very comfortable in doing so...better!



The Raw Space

And along with all of this, layers and layers of prior constructions - stuff on the walls - archeological finds from prior builders...perfect! The instructions to the demolition crew was..."Do not remove anything you think you may want to, the owner and the architect may want to keep it."

"Is this what Sutter Health was really thinking? It made sense to me."

The enforced historic issues in this project were simple, no changes to the exterior and no alterations to the masonry demising walls between each section. However, our own historic issues were becoming interesting.

The Approach

Again, the project was a working construction office, expected to be under constant use by a variety of interdisciplinary construction professionals and the construction arm of the contractor - the field crew. It was going to get a little messy and unruly at times. At our suggestion, the office workstations were arranged in a manner to promote team interaction. No cubicle confinement! We also expected that, over time, the actual office needs would change; the furni-

ture was to be flexible. Also, there needed to be a large areas of wall space to pin up drawings.

To summarize, this project needed to:

- Compensate for the lack of natural light.
- Provide large areas of pin-up wall area.
- Consider the local history - Architects suggestion, Sutter's Fort
- Retain existing construction conditions - keep the history, keep it rough
- Minimize new construction
- Flexible, team oriented, workstation planning.
- Large multi-use conference (war) room.
- Public relations area - sharing the archeological finds.
- Keep it simple.



Conceptual Model

This was the simple idea. A giant light-fixture-wall: that defined the circulation space between the three areas, was made of unfinished lumber (like Sutter's gate), was pin-up space on both sides (use nails if you need to), and a big gate in the middle of it to enter the activity of the conference room - like entering Sutter's Fort.

The front window, at the main entry off the street, would be a display area, like a retail display window. In this case, it would be historical artifacts - from the dig - displayed via flat-screen digital display, and areas for models and drawings of the hospital's expansion plan - public relations.

It all fit, and was very direct and simple. It is exactly what they asked for, were they really ready?

Concept to Construction

I have a great respect for builders; they tend to be fearless. This is the second time I had been asked to design working facilities for a builder, the first time was for DPR Construction in 1997. It took a few years to understand why builders like us to work for them: its' reciprocal. They say the projects are buildable, challenging and well thought-out. This probably has to do with the amount of attention given to the construction process and the caliber of the construction drawings. I thought that all architects did this: apparently that's not the case.

I do, always, present the project to the Job-Superintendent in the same manner as the client; after-all they do need to know the whats', and hows', and most especially, in this case - the why? There was going to be a lot of " *...at the builders discretion*" - on this project.

Initially Marc, the superintendent, did have a few questions; especially in the area related to patching wall surfaces next to "*wall surfaces which were to remain intact*". We worked through a protocol where the choices remained solely with the builder: as it should be in this case. Construction was smooth!

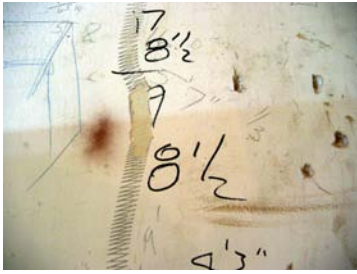


Sutter's Fort - Wall and Gate



Pondering the Construction

Construction Difficulties



Prior Constructions

Towards the end of the job, I asked Turner's Project Manager, Tom F., about the difficulties of the the project; if there were any. He looked at me; in pause - probably thinking that I couldn't be serious - then replied, "It was really hard for me to leave the old construction scribbles on the walls. You don't know, the effort we go into - in all of our projects - to keep this from happening. It is very important for us to keep clean construction sites, and that starts with - *not writing on the walls*"!

"A clean project, especially with a Hospital, is a huge measure of success: this time we couldn't keep it clean. It has hard for me to accept; that's the difficulty" - *as expressed by a consummate professional*.

Illuminate!



Installation

After a few months, the project was done, except for the only thing really designed - the illuminated wall. Even the furniture was installed prior to it. This would be the test, could the idea work? Would it be a success?

The wall was prefabricated, shipped to the site in parts and assembled in a day. The work required skilled finish-carpenters with a little fence building experience: an odd mix. It happened so fast! - it was done. Nice!

Sometimes nice is not good - because, some think, nice means *expensive*. I made a phone call prior to arriving at the site asking how the finished project was being received, "Not good, the CFO says its too nice"...

After reminding the CFO that the illuminated wall was not precious, he remembered the concept...pin-up wall; take a nail to it! No one was willing to (it was too nice), so I helped along; got a hammer and some drawings and made the first display; functional. Nice!

Build as Little as you Can

It has been a few years; I have not been back. I am anxious to see what they have dug-up and how well this temporary construction has survived.



Finished in the Raw

Paul Welschmeyer, AIA
2005