Sight Lines Thesis Projects 2004
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land mark: the form of history

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Landmark: The Form of History

"When one tugs at a single thing in nature,
he finds it attached to the rest of the world."
—*John Muir*

In considering the urban landscape, our gaze primarily focuses on one aspect—the built environment. So often our mapping and tracing of local history is defined by and dependent upon that built environment for clues. The manmade environment reassures us we are in control, that we actively shape the land and its elements to suit our needs, yet built structures, inherent in the definition of urban environments, are not a city's sole occupants. The land itself serves as an armature, a frame that shapes and molds the city's contours. Trees play a defining role in that framing; they mark boundaries, screen unsightly views, filter air pollutants, and buffer sound. As architectural elements, they lend their forms and their shade, balancing the grid of streets and buildings by providing texture and contrast—green complements to the city's grey maze. Trees are so seamlessly woven into the city's fabric, it is easy to consider their collective canopy as unadulterated, but train the eye on a patch of green long enough and the continuous field of color begins to break apart, its solidity infinitely graduated. Individual specimens come forward from competing layers of form; their distinctions, once subtle and muted, grow more obvious, more texturally diverse. (*Figure 1*).

PHOTO BY AUTHOR

Figure 1 A mature Araucaria, located in Oakland's Mountain View Cemetery.

The relationship of a tree's visible structural elements—leaves, branches, trunk, and sometimes roots—largely determines its formal character. Deciduous trees shed their leaves seasonally, and in doing so reveal an entirely new composition. Amorphous and cloud-like when fully cloaked, the leafless tree exposes its hidden armature, a webbed net of secondary branches and side shoots. Because evergreens retain leaves year round, their foliage plays a different formal role. The needle-like leaves of redwoods, for example, cover the branch entirely, creating a softer, blurrier texture with less distinct lines than those of oaks or elms. Trees whose branches and leaves are a combined structure, like palms, are arboreal minimalists—orderly, symmetrical, and formally balanced.

In the midst of these distinctions, one misfit stands out. The Araucaria, an ancient genus of conifers native to Australia and South America, is evergreen and shares with its redwood cousin a structure of needle-covered branches, but the adherence of leaf and branch is more palm-like in its unity. There is little enunciation between its spiky leaves and the woody midrib that holds them. The triangular leaves, each capped with a nasty barb, spiral around their support from its tip to its base, sheathing it entirely in a twist of leathery spikes (*Figure 2*). The geometric display is mirrored in the branch whorls, which radiate from the trunk's central axis with similar precision, winding down in sets of five and seven limbs. As though burdened by their own weight, the pendulous, ropey branches have a curious draping habit that is as intriguing as it is ominous. It is this effect that most distinctly defines the tree's silhouette (*Figure 3*).

When the Araucaria sheds old growth, entire branches are sloughed with leaves still intact (*Figure 4*). Each branch tears off a segment of bark as it drops, leaving behind a thick scar on the trunk in its place. Deeply furrowed and grey like an elephant's hide, the trunk of the mature Araucaria may be void of branches for a third or more of its height, resembling a palm in its bareness. Reaching heights of fifty feet or more, the Araucaria is not the tallest tree on the horizon, but by virtue of its odd form it is perhaps the most easily distinguishable.

In 1993, I inherited an Araucaria when my husband and I took over the rambling Victorian house in Oakland's Fruitvale district his mother had purchased in the 1970s (*Figure 5*). Built in 1886 and listed in the National Historic Register as the McMullin House, it was derelict and falling apart at the seams. Both the house and surrounding neighborhood were tarnished remnants of the bounty that once typified the affluent suburbs of a thriving post–Gold Rush California city. The tree at the corner of the lot evoked a similar image of

Figure 2
Shed branch of Araucaria.

PHOTO BY AUTHOR

something lost. It was healthy, thriving even, but looked liked it belonged to another era, a different landscape (*Figures 6 and 7*). The more I considered the tree and its relationship to the house and the neighborhood, the more it became a viable landmark of this area's unique cultural history and served as a window into alternative narratives, stories the house alone could not provide.

For years I regarded the tree as a menace. While I liked the curious splay of its limbs, it shaded too much of the lot. What's more, every now and then massive spiny seedpods dropped like cluster bombs to the sidewalk (entertaining until they smashed out the windshield of a nearby parked car). Thereafter, I had to cordon off the street below it with yellow DANGER tape; to the neighborhood's chagrin, the parking situation worsened by three spaces during the tree's fertile years. Its thorny leaf litter, which clogs rakes and requires hand picking, cloaked the yard, the sidewalk, and other trees. By day, the tree's form was intriguing, a queer oddity stamped on the horizon that could be seen three blocks away; by night, its shaggy drape was so ominous and forbidding, one of the tenants started using another entrance to avoid walking past it.

At obvious odds with its landscape, the tree's battle for space with power lines, retaining walls, and nearby structures was much like the ordeals the house faced, both of them marooned on a tiny island of grass, just feet from the sidewalk. The original address of the house is now two blocks away, and the new street (a somewhat awkward dead end that violates the numbered grid of the surrounding area) took off the house's side porch along with half of the lower branches of the tree when it was carved up to the house.

The Fruitvale district, once renowned for the splendor and variety of its estates and gardens, is a veritable map of Oakland's fluctuating economic and social triumphs and failures. Developed primarily in the Victorian era, Fruitvale is richly illustrative of its historical narrative, which varies house to house, from concerted restoration to complete erasure. Some of the finest examples of the era's architectural styles stand covered in stucco or vinyl siding next to their museum counterparts that charge admission on Saturdays.

The families who built most of these houses were east-coast and mid-west transplants who headed for California in the flush years

immediately following the Gold Rush. Colonial J. C. McMullin was already a successful banker and lawyer in Cowley County, Kansas, when he moved west in the 1880s to open a bank in Oakland.[1] The migration of established men like McMullin helped secure California's transition from a frontier of transient speculators to a stable, permanent settlement. The presence of bankers and lawyers gave burgeoning townships a stamp of authenticity; that Oakland could support another bank was a sign that its infrastructure must be solid.

The residence McMullin built for his family in 1886 is now considered a quintessential example of the Queen Anne style. Listed in the National Historic Register as the McMullin House, its image has been reproduced in local restoration guides, as well as in the City of Oakland's Planning Department rehabilitation guides, a fact I imagine would please its builder, whose obituary claimed he never did anything by "half measures."[2]

A rambling and unrestrained collection of elements, McMullin's house is a true Queen Anne cornucopia of surfaces, textures, planes, and forms. Symmetry was of little concern for the Victorians, as is evidenced by the roofline's multiple ridges; the offset turret tower; and the hodgepodge of jutting porches, balconies, and bay windows. The flagrance of its witch's caps and finials, festoons, and sunbursts is echoed in the house's interior eccentricities. Its inlaid floors, carved and beaded woodwork and prodigious use of colored and textured glass set the stage for the era's collecting mania.

The apportioning of interior rooms set the stage for collections by regulating orders of space. Each sector was designated for a specific purpose: drawing rooms, parlors, smoking rooms, libraries, billiard rooms, and conservatories. Entrance into the house was similarly codified; servants and deliveries came in one door, business and solicitors through another, friends and family through another. Once inside, visitors penetrated according to their degree of intimacy with the family. Brush salesmen remained in the foyer while more formal guests were ushered into the parlor. The house's interior recesses were accessible only by close friends and family.

The décor, or "internal decoration," was a veritable collage.[3] Every surface that could hold an object, a sconce, or a curio was made to do so. Small rugs lay atop larger rugs, tapestries hung on papered walls, intricately carved tables and cabinets were overflowing with all manner of vases, sculptures, photographs, potted plants, and albums. Claustrophobically stuffed with showy wares, domestic interiors were the occupants' personal museums.[4]

Material exuberance and formal eclecticism extended beyond the house and into the garden. Oakland, particularly noted for the scope and quality of its gardens, was a popular

Figure 3 Leaf whirl pattern and branch scars.

PHOTO BY AUTHOR

PHOTO BY AUTHOR

Figure 4 Leaf litter, Oakland's Mountain View Cemetery.

destination for tourists, who came from around the Bay Area to admire its showy gardens.[5] Gardeners made no pretense of maintaining the natural landscape. Gardens, they believed, should reflect the gardener's handiwork and masterful control of nature; to view a garden as anything but artificially contrived was "deceptive" and in "poor taste."[6] "Power not lyricism was the gardener's goal," observed one historian.[7]

Exotic specimens were particularly prized, and thanks to the Bay Area's mild climate, South American and Pacific island plants thrived here.[8] The Araucaria's bizarre draping habit and formidable presence so whetted Victorian appetite for bravura the tree quickly became a signature of exoticism for private gardens and public landscapes alike. Ornamental duty was best served by isolating it in a position of prominence on the lot, where its outlandish form could remind passersby of the owner's worldliness and cultured sophistication.

The Araucaria ornamented the Victorian garden with the same bold strokes the finial or widow's walk drew on the Victorian house. Because the borders of their physical and ideological worlds were so rapidly expanding and challenged by European and U.S. colonial expansion, the Victorians sought reassurance and order in the objects they amassed. They attempted to redress the balance by drawing the world close in order to study its contours, tempering the hard edges of its foreignness by stuffing, cataloguing, and displaying it under glass. There, tagged and arranged on a shelf or in the garden, nature could be observed at a comfortable remove, its disarray tamed by the hand of the collector, who could shuffle, define, and order his collection at will, prescribing his own continuum as he saw fit.

Ironically, most of those who planted young Araucarias likely did not live to see them attain their mature height. They probably never had to contend with its shed limbs or seed cones, which don't develop until the tree reaches twenty or thirty years of age. Many of the gardens that once contained Araucarias no longer exist; their former estates carved and parceled beyond recognition. The remaining few still found on those sites are often oddly situated and difficult to locate. The central position they once held in the garden has become, with the land's division, an illegible margin, cramped, and ill defined.

The issue of suitable space seems to have plagued the Araucaria from the start. Kew Gardens, which imported Araucarias far earlier than the United States, was already dealing with that problem in 1856. In a letter written to the British government, Sir William Joseph Hooker, Kew's director, pleaded for a more suitable arrangement:

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOAN FORREST

Figure 5 The McMullin House circa 1974, before restoration.

All the plant houses are progressing favorably, with one exception, to which I have already alluded, as a source of deep concern. Unless we have, at once, a structure suited to the reception of our large trees and shrubs which will not bear frost, especially that once celebrated collection of pines, Araucarias, Proteas, etc., they will have suffered extremely for want of space; many have perished, many are deformed and crippled, being shorn every now and then of their graceful and stately heads in order to bring them under the shelter of a dark roof, that of the "Orangery," or in a hovel of a building long ago condemned as discreditable to the gardens.[9]

Though it is difficult to say with certainty exactly when the Araucaria fell out of favor in California—or exactly why—lack of space and changing garden styles were likely contributors. As manor lots were gradually parceled and sold off, and the manors themselves converted into multiunit rentals, there was likely little sympathy for such an excessive lawn ornament. Their thorny attributes and demanding habits, once considered so novel, were now detriments.

The more one considers the tree and its relationship to the built environment, the more viable it becomes as a landmark of cultural history and a window into another narrative.

When the Araucaria first arrived in the Bay Area in 1867, it came, like many immigrants, on one of the thousands of ships that ferried passengers and cargo into and out of Pacific waters. The ships' names, such as *Free Trader, Gladiator, Precursor, Royal Exchange, Dauntless, Champion of the Seas, and Pioneer,* clearly reflected their intentions.[10] According to plant historian Thomas Brown, the Araucaria most likely sailed in on the *Schah Jahan*, a ship named for the seventeenth-century Mughal emperor.[11] The Shah's reign was marked by the grand scale of the gardens and architectural feats he financed (most notably, the Taj Mahal), but the ship's moniker was less likely a tribute to his accomplishments than it was another effort to appropriate the language and symbolism of "new" worlds—along with their land and their foliage.

At sixty-seven tons, the impressive three-mast ship had, for years, transported multitudes of British emigrants to the new colonies of Australia and New Zealand.[12] Passenger logs recount months-long journeys rife with hunger, rough seas, and cramped quarters. Bouts of illness and homesickness weakened many passengers. Tensions under such conditions ran high and fights were frequent. The diary of Keturah Davies, a twenty-three-year-old woman who made the four-month journey from Wales to Australia aboard the *Schah Jahan,* provides a rich account of the hardships global expansion entailed:

Figure 6 The McMullin House circa 1974, before restoration.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOAN FORREST

October 1st, 1850
We were agreeably surprised this morning by a French vessel homeward bound, they were Short of provisions. They had been 5 months out at sea; they had not had but half a biscuit since the 16th of last month. Our Captain was very kind to them, he gave them biscuits, Beef Oatmeal and Coffee and many things besides, enough to last them a month. The sailors were quite overcome with joy. One of the women gave them some cake. They burst into tears, they were so grateful. I think it ought to be a lesson to us not to grumble at what we have, in case a judgement comes on us. I have seen so many throw biscuits into the sea. I hope they will not waste anything again. All the emigrants were very kind to the French sailors.[13]

Laden with everything from coal, kangaroos, birds, cattle, swine, horses, timber, produce, and plants, cargo ships were often a motley assortment of paying passengers and professional collectors sent by their employers to forage for local goods at various ports of call. Nurseries, such as Veitch and Sons in England,

Figure 7 The McMullin family at their residence, circa 1914.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHY JANISSE/THE MCMULLIN FAMILY ARCHIVES

dispatched adventurous botanists and naturalists to the corners of the world for botanical specimens to supply the ravenous market for exotic goods back home.[14]

Inventions like Nathaniel Ward's portable glass case gave tender specimens better odds in surviving their arduous overseas journeys. Essentially a miniature conservatory or terrarium, the Wardian case, as it came to be known, so increased the viability of transplants that specimens from every corner of the globe could be reliably transported.

The aptly named Robert Fortune, a botanical explorer who was among the early adopters of Ward's case, single-handedly started India's tea industry when he transported twenty thousand tea plant seedlings from China to India in the portable greenhouse.[15]

On many ships, the crew was allotted space for their own collecting, so that each person was at some level a purveyor. Foreign goods and the experience of collecting them were regarded as valuable information.[16] As historian Hubert Howe Bancroft observed in a 1915 recollection

of the era, "The borders of the commercial world received sudden enlargement, and the boundaries of the intellectual world underwent a similar expansion."[17] Passengers, as Keturah's diary noted, were equally eager to collector such information in the form of natural specimens:

October 3rd, 1850
It's very cold and no wind here. There are 4 Arbutusses (sic) following the ship to day. There has one been nearly caught. (sic) We have caught two Cape Pigeons. Jane is to have one of them. Doctor has given the two prussic Acid. (sic) They died in two minutes and now we are to have them cured and we shall stuff them when we get to Adelaide. . . .There was a splendid Arbitruss (sic) caught this afternoon and we had as many feathers as we wished to have. The Arbitruss (sic) measured 12 feet, it was an immense one and the feathers are very downy and spotted nicely.[18]

To the sponsors of such expeditions, and the employees sent out on their behalf, these new lands were a veritable supermarket of opportunity and possibility. Raw materials flowed like water back and forth from the South Seas, Asia, and the Americas. As Hubert Howe Bancroft's statements make clear, the exuberance of Victorian colonial consumption sought the potential for further development in every possible resource.

Vast are the resources of the countries round the Pacific, they present themselves at the present time in the form of industrial potentialities rather than of concrete wealth. True, there are here, with the limitless natural wealth and possibilities, money and property in abundance, but accumulated stores of riches such as are found in older communities we must not look for in new and undeveloped regions.[19]

It was as a symbol of that natural wealth that the Araucaria, under the auspices of a young nation testing its territorial limits, entered the Bay Area landscape. That story is important to remember for it ties the everyday landscape to a much larger narrative and reminds us that perhaps the relationship between humans and their physical environment is, in fact, a much more reciprocal arrangement than we might suspect. By relying solely on the built environment for our historical narratives, we omit an important repository, for the land shapes and guides the way we live just as forcefully as we change its contours. As landscape architect and botanical historian Thomas A. Brown reminds us,

COURTESY OF HTTP://WWW.CITES.EC.GC.CA/ENG/SCT5/SCT5_6_E.CFM

Figure 8 Seed Cones.

The landscape of California, including many areas celebrated for their natural beauty, has been changed through the agency of man more extensively and more rapidly than perhaps any other. . . .It is often difficult for native-born and visitors alike to recognize how much the landscape of a given locality in the state has been altered. . . .Plants are a great part of these changes, and those who are familiar with their lives and travels, can better understand the process and extent of the transformation.[20]

EPILOGUE:
Keturah Davies died of illness four months after arriving in Adelaide. The Schah Jahan *sank in the notoriously rough channel just beyond the Cliff House in the San Francisco Bay in 1857, the same year it delivered the Araucaria.*

Endnotes

1 Much of my information about Colonial J. C. McMullin and his family comes from the genealogical research of Ms. Kathy Janisse, who kindly shared with me her family's history in ongoing email conversations.

2 Courtesy of Ms. Kathy Janisse.

3 Elinor Richey, *The Ultimate Victorians of the Continental Side of San Francisco Bay* (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1970), p. 65.

4 Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom* (New York: Pantheon, 1998).

5 Elinor Richey, p. 65.

6 Taken from on essay on Victorian garden design published by the Hamilton Gardens Company in New Zealand. Available at: *http://www.hamiltongardens.com. nz.victorian_flower_garden.asp*. Accessed November 20, 2003.

7 Elinor Richey, p. 24.

8 Elinor Richey, p. 20.

9 Joseph Dalton Hooker, *A Sketch of the Life and Labours of Sir William Jackson Hooker* (Oxford, U.K.: Calrendon Press, 1903), p. 1xxii.

10 Ships entering New Zealand waters and a description of their cargo as published in the Otago Witness, "Shipping News 1863." Available at: *http://freepages.genealogy. rootsweb.com/~nzbound/nzbound/ otago1863.htm*. Accessed November 28, 2003.

11 Thomas Brown shared this information with me during a phone interview conducted on January 25, 2004.

12 *The Otago Witness*, "Shipping News 1863."

13 Keturah Davies' 1860 log of her journey from Wales to Port Adelaide, Australia, is available at *http://home.clara.net/ wfha/wales/keturah/notes.htm*. Accessed December 3, 2003.

14 Toby Musgrave, Chris Gardner, and Will Musgrave, *The Plant Hunters* (London: Ward Lock, 1998), p. 136.

15 See *http://www.fortunecity.com/greenfield/ clearstreets/84/ward/sea.htm*.

16 Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The New Pacific* (New York: The Bancroft Company, 1915), p. 345.

17 Hubert Howe Bancroft, p. 345.

18 Keturah Davies' 1860 log.

19 Hubert Howe Bancroft, p. 210.

20 Thomas A. Brown, *A List of California Nurseries and their Catalogues, 1850-1900* (Petaluma, Calif.: Thomas A. Brown, 1993), p. 3.

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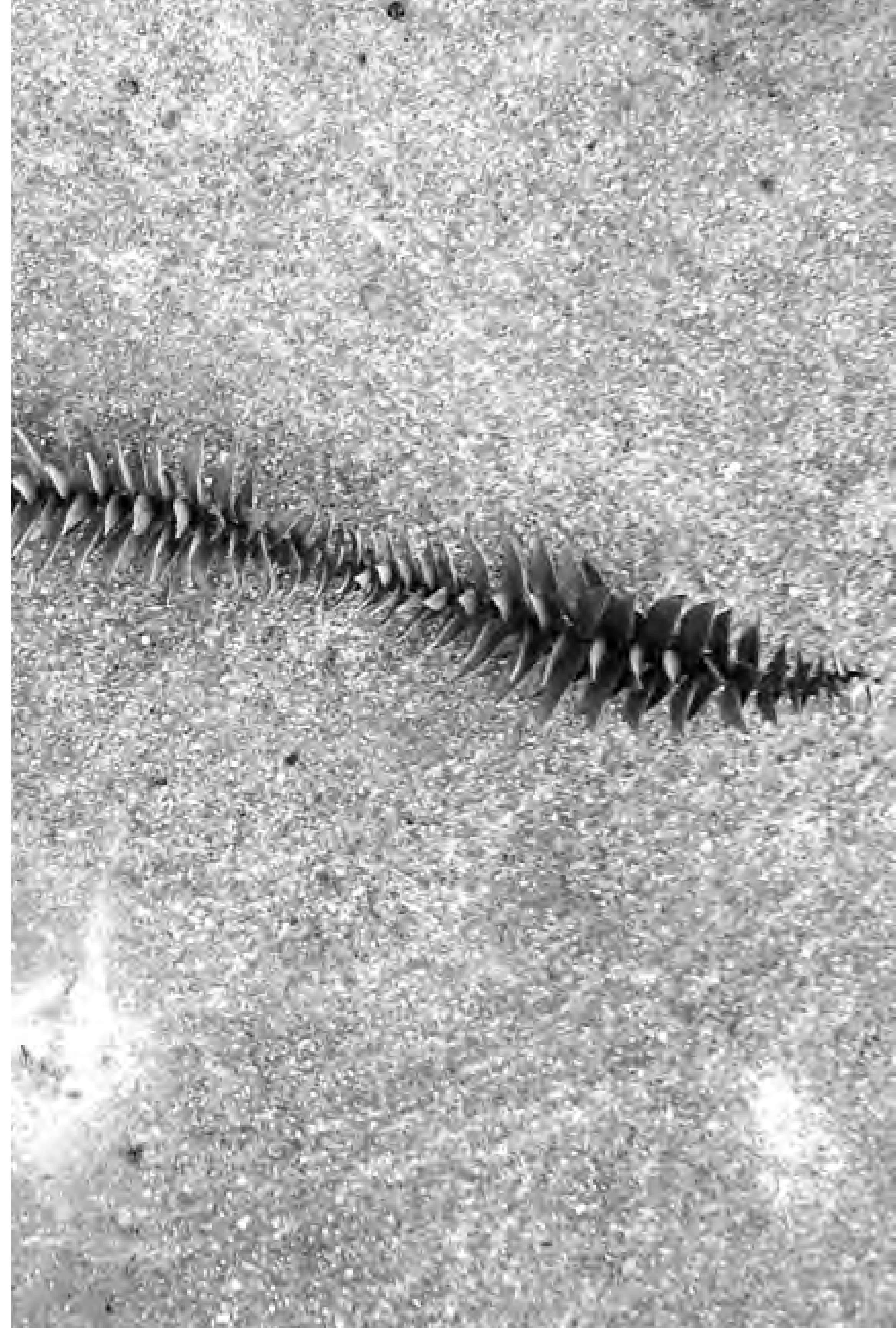

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About the Thesis Project

The following essay is a preamble or introduction to the general terms and issues covered in the final thesis. The aim of this project is to prompt a reconsideration of humanity's relationship to nature through an examination of the immediate environment. By tracing the migration of an ancient genus of conifers, the *Araucaria bidwillii,* I hope to show that even so-called "cultural relics" inform the ways in which humans understand and thereby interact with their environment.

About the Author

Mary C. Wilson earned a BFA in CCA's cross-disciplinary individualized major program, with her focus in film, video, and performance. Her senior year centered on a nine-month artist-in-residency at San Francisco's Sanitary Fill Company, where she collected and cataloged thousands of discarded family photographs and home movies. Through her writing, Wilson has continued scavenging culture's detritus for buried and alternative versions of history. Wilson and her long-time collaborator, Betty Jo Costanzo, are currently working on a book titled *Collaboration: A Practical Guide,* and the two will teach a course this summer in Ireland on the collaborative process. Wilson has exhibited in numerous galleries and film festivals, including Chicago's Renaissance Society 2002 *watery, domestic,* curated by Hamza Walker.