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Fort Ord

3,996 words

Abrams Park is a subdivision of low-rise duplexes overlooking the sparkling expanse of Monterey Bay. Its streets are a tangle of loopy cul de sacs, each embracing a shrub-filled island or playground. The city of Monterey, with its famous aquarium, museums, parks, golf courses, and Fisherman's Wharf, lies 10 minutes away, and the beach is reachable by bike. As a place to raise a young family, Abrams Park would be hard to beat. Yet the place is deserted. Weeds grow waist high in the lawns and playgrounds, and the houses' windows are either broken or blinded by plywood. The silence is absolute.

I'm on my bicycle, and in the course of an afternoon I've ridden for miles and miles through one abandoned neighborhood after another. Some are nicer than others, ranging from boxy cinderblock duplexes to enviable ranch houses. No matter which, every time I turn a corner, Monterey Bay is glittering beyond the dunes. A door creaks in the breeze, and pushing it open I find myself in a sunny living room with spotless white carpet and clean paint. The gas stove and

refrigerator appear brand new. A water heater – its labels still fresh – stands in a closet. It's like being in one of those creepy end-of-the-world movies, or the aftermath of a neutron bomb.

This ghost city is the corpse of Fort Ord, one of the biggest installations ever built by the United States Army. Stretching from the beach to the foothills of the coastal range, it is the size of San Francisco. In addition to the homes, I pass soaring auditoriums, baseball diamonds, gymnasiums, an airfield, office buildings, steepled chapels, a hospital, enormous tank hangars surrounding ten-acre parking lots -- a skateboarder's dream -- regimental rows of wooden barracks by the hundred, and dormitories stenciled with the names of the rifle companies that occupied them -- "Recon: Quick Silent Deadly." Just about everything is painted a dreary army beige and surrounded by knee-high palm grass, untouched for a decade.

When Fort Ord closed in 1993, its 45 square miles of extraordinary beaches, parkland, and wildlife habitat – along with more than 10,000 buildings – were to revert to civilian use. For many people in surrounding Monterey County, that gift amounted to a ready-to-dwell miracle, for this region has the greatest measurable need for affordable housing in the United States. The National Association of Homebuilders surveyed 199 places last year, comparing housing prices with local wages, and found that Salinas -- the Monterey County seat,

16 miles from here -- is the least affordable city in the country, followed by Santa Cruz, 25 miles to the north and Watsonville, which lies smack in the middle of the bay's coastline 11 miles away.

Housing prices are high compared to local wages because the climate and scenery here are peerless, which draws trustafarians and their wide-open checkbooks like fruit flies. At the same time, though, the primary local industries are agriculture and tourism, both of which pay rock-bottom wages. Almost half of the residents of Monterey County rent, but a full-time worker has to earn \$16.23 an hour to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment --about twice the average working wage. As for an chambersmaid or strawberry picker buying a house here, forget it. In March, even one-bedroom shacks started at \$300,000.

Not surprisingly, people here talk about real estate prices the way people in 1930s Oklahoma talked about drought. That is, constantly, anxiously, and often in the context of who's been pushed out. "Gone to Hollister," "Gone to Tulare," "Gone to Modesto" are the modern, local equivalents of "dusted out." People either move inland and commute an hour or more to their low-wage jobs, or pack two or three families into a one-bathroom bungalow and hope their landlords will look the other way. "On the east side of Salinas," says Fritz Conle, who organizes salad packers for Teamsters Local 890, "I'm willing to bet

you money you can't find a garage with a car in it."

So Fort Ord shut down in the wave of post-Cold War base closings, its thousands of perfectly servicable houses were a Godsend. Here, in a single stroke, was an opportunity to remedy Monterey Bay's excruciating housing imbalance, to give thousands of working families a chance at home ownership, to help businesses keep their workers nearby, to reduce commuter traffic, to relieve local governments of the social pathologies associated with families crammed into garages, and most of all, to bestow a measure of comfort on the lives of the dishwashers and artichoke pickers on whom the economy depends.

As my 10-year-old daughter would say, with a sarcastic roll of the eyes: Yeah, right.

Today, 10 years later. Fort Ord sits largely dormant, its surrounding communities unable to decide if it should become a playground of the mansioned wealthy or a workers' utopia. Until this complex and emotional stand-off is resolved, the area's congressman, Democrat Sam Farr, is threatening to hold up final transfer of the land.

For Monterey County, the dispute has meaning at every Motel 6, school, fast food outlet and golf course. For the rest of the state, it may be even more significant. The battle for Fort Ord is exposing trends that are quietly transforming California. By long tradition, communities along the West Coast, from Mexico to Canada, were

dedicated to the ideals of public access, preservation and equality—a determined response to failures along the Eastern seaboard. Also, the coast of California was for generations a working region like any other – the grim, impoverished Monterey of Steinbeck’s “Cannery Row” is a far cry from the gussied up playground that Monterey is today. Until relatively recently, ordinary people could live near their work.

(Remember those ocean view trailer parks in Malibu?)

In the past two decades or so, the rich have been abroad along California’s coast like a conquering army, planting their greenbacked flag on every ocean view and driving ordinary folks inland as refugees. (Wage earners in Boulder, Colorado; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and any number of other scenic, balmy places could sing the same lament.) Turns out, that when it comes to being to afford a home, the tremendous increase in national wealth since the early Reagan years may ironically have hurt working people more than it helped.

The nation’s 2002 gross domestic product was more than triple that of 1982 in constant dollars, and even with the dot-com bust the Dow Jones Industrial Average stood nine and a half times higher at the end of 2002 than at the end of 1981. Problem is, most of that wealth went to the richest 5 percent of Americans, whose incomes rose almost 60 percent since the early 1980s, while middle- and low-income Americans barely treaded water. The past few years have

been even more unequal, with the net worth of the richest top tenth rising by a stunning 69 percent from 1998 to 2001, while that of the poorest fifth rose by little more than a third as much. It was during these same recent years that housing prices shot up nationwide – 30 percent faster than inflation from 1995 to 2001. Here along the coast, the increase was even greater. A tiny portion of the population got richer, it seems, and bid up housing prices, leaving the rest of us unable to qualify for a mortgage.

Tax policy worsened the disparity. In the early 1980s, President Reagan pioneered tax cuts for the wealthy as fiscal policy. The idea, to use then-budget director David Stockman’s immortal phrase, was that money returned via tax cuts to the investor class would “trickle down” to working people in the form of new factories, new businesses, and new jobs. Alas, Reagan tried this during a recession when demand for goods was low and businesses weren’t expanding. Since it didn’t make sense for the wealthy to invest their tax cuts at that moment in new plants and equipment – productive investment – they put it into speculative investment like real estate. “People got a double whammy,” says Betsy Leondar-Wright of United for a Fair Economy, a non-profit. “First you lose your job because we’re in a recession, and then, because we’re in a recession, the rich aren’t investing in

productive investment and run up the cost of housing you'd like to buy."

And now, she adds, President George W. Bush is trying to do the same thing all over again by eliminating taxes on dividends, which are disproportionately paid to the wealthy.

Where the new rich settle, the demand for low-paid laborers – gardeners, maids, busboys, and the like –skyrockets, even as the housing for them disappears. Nobody ever talks about this, of course. The newly arrived wealthy assume living on the coast is their privilege. The laborers believe being pushed elsewhere is their lot.

At Fort Ord, the grinding dynamics of California land politics are no longer a dirty little secret. Here for all to see are the naked forces of economic power arrayed against ideals of social equality, all playing out in a loud and nasty public debate. Moreover, the enormous grant of land and houses offers the chance to upend the game. Ordinary wage earners are asking why they shouldn't be allowed to live along the coast, too, and because nobody has a compelling answer, they just might get a piece of the breezy coastal action.

LINEBREAK

At any one time during the salad days of World War II and Vietnam, some 50,000 soldiers trained at Fort Ord, drinking and

whoring and getting tattooed in the squalid little towns of Seaside and Marina that clung to the fort's south and north sides. The boom of cannon fire provided a steady backbeat to life here for generations, and anyone driving down Highway 1 could look seaward and see soldiers firing rifles into the dunes along the beach. When the army pulled out, it was as though one of its artillery barrages had gone off course and landed on the civilian economy. A third of the county's tax base was annihilated in a single blast. Seaside and Marina, always the poor stepsisters to the tony Monterey Peninsula towns of Carmel, Pacific Grove, and Monterey, were driven into penury. Not only had they come to depend on the buying power of 7,500 military families but the base also had provided ten percent of their civilian jobs.

At the time of the closure, nobody suggested renting out or selling base housing. "The last thing anybody was thinking about then was affordable housing," says Bradley Zeve, owner of the Monterey County Coast Weekly. After the soldiers left, a third of the rentals in Seaside and Marina stood vacant and half the houses went on the market simultaneously. The 6,000 units of Fort Ord being offered for conversion to civilian use seemed like rain in a flood.

Every conceivable interest had an idea about what to do with the land. Seaside and Marina inherited those portions of the Fort with the most existing buildings, followed quickly by Monterey County. The

federal Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service got the big, wild inland swatches. Marina and Seaside saw a chance, finally, to shed their honky-tonk past and go upscale with spreads of 5-acre ranchettes and million-dollar Bay-view mansions. Developers saw pricey subdivisions. Environmentalists saw priceless habitat. The county dreamed of new industry and jobs. Farmers, hotel keepers, labor leaders, immigrant-rights activists, the highway department, water commissioners and more--each had a vision for the Fort. The arguing was cacophonous. So the state created a "re-use authority" that forced everybody to sit down at one table and decide things by consensus; every party at the table had to agree on everything. It was like throwing two dozen cats into a burlap bag.

To its credit, the group was able to come up with a master plan. A new college, the State University at Monterey Bay, opened in 1995, using some of the Army's old buildings and putting up additional dorms and classrooms. The old airfield was converted to a civilian airport at which the county hopes to develop a research park with the University of California. Seaside inherited two golf courses and began trying to develop a four-star golf resort. Almost two thirds of the Fort's 28,000 acres were set aside as open space and wildlife habitat. Though broad swatches of the base are scattered with unexploded munitions or soaked in toxic chemicals, in the clean areas you can hike

through hills and oaken arroyos watching bobcats and red-tail hawks. Hike for a week and you never cover the same stretch twice.

But by the mid-1990's, the region's housing glut was a memory. Students and faculty at the new college needed places to live, and the Silicon Valley money machine was revving less than 90 minutes up the road. People priced out of San Jose and its environs began spreading down the coast like spruce budworm disease, snapping up "bargains" and sending prices soaring by about 10 percent a year. The phenomenal wealth of the new Internet barons also radiated outward in the form of demand for hotels, restaurants, and golf courses on the Monterey Peninsula. "Hospitality" jobs abounded – albeit low-paid ones -- and people streamed in to take them. The housing crunch was on.

LINEBREAK

Marina is little more than a strip of Philippine markets and discount stores surrounded by what Edith Johnsen(cq), former mayor and current county supervisor, calls "teeny-tiny scrunchie-wunchie houses." Of all the jurisdictions absorbing Fort Ord, Marina has done the most for low-income residents. Without fully understanding the precedent it was setting, Marina got approval from the re-use authority to renovate a fifth of the 1,700 Army residences it inherited

as a low-income rental community called Preston Park.

After roaming through acres and acres of abandoned subdivisions, to come across Preston Park is disorienting. The houses are tight and brightly painted, the playgrounds colorful, the lawns manicured. I stop two young mothers pushing strollers; they pay about \$1,000 a month for three-bedroom condos, they say, which is cheap considering they have a view of the Bay and are minutes from downtown Monterey. Preston Park, in other words, is a tiny taste of what could have been done with the other 5,500 houses and condos on the Fort. Marina also has arranged for a consortium of homeless and veterans' organizations to use about 100 units as transitional housing. And it has contracted with a developer to renovate another 400 army duplexes as a low-income "continuum of care community" for the elderly.

But then the three horsemen of the political apocalypse – race, class, and money – rode into Fort Ord with the same question that vexes communities nationwide: Who is responsible for housing low-wage workers? Who should be expected to forego more lucrative forms of development – fancy homes, big-box stores, industrial parks – to accommodate dense neighborhoods of needy but essential people who may not speak English? How much more should Marina have to do? Which of the jurisdictions inheriting Fort Ord's beachfront splendor should pass up the chance to create another Carmel or Pebble Beach,

and accept instead a teeming barrio of Mexican laborers?

Welcome to the bag of cats.

LINEBREAK

LéVonne Stone is broad-shouldered, round-faced, and black, with long hair in corn rows and magenta lipstick that perfectly matches her shirt. She moved to Marina from Chicago with her soldier husband in the 1970. For years she worked as secretary to the Fort's property manager and it's easy to picture her running the place with a master sergeant's gruff authority. When the Fort closed and Stone lost her job, she founded the Fort Ord Environmental Justice Network to be sure the interests of wealthy developers didn't overrun those of working people. She was able to gain title to an old barracks as her headquarters and painted it grape-bubblegum purple, much to the annoyance of the re-use authority, which wants her to make it conform with the 10,000 other tediously beige buildings on the Fort. The towns inheriting the Fort are getting free land, Stone growls as we sit in her tumbledown office eating hard candy. "And then they have these developers coming from I don't know where and all they want to do is make their money, money, money."

Stone, who lives in Preston Park, has spent much of the past decade trying to get the re-use authority either to let people move into the rest of the old army housing or to require any new development to

include substantial numbers of houses for low-income workers. "If they can do it in Preston Park, they can do it everywhere," she insists.

Stone is not a sophisticated politico. She can't keep developers' names straight or quote the relevant laws. What she brings to the fight is a hot beacon of righteous, if inchoate, working-class anger. To watch her bullyrag the mostly white battery officials and developers to be reminded that where most low-wage jobs are held by people of color, there's a racial aspect to excluding them from the coast. Stone never lets the re-use board forget it, either. Responding at a recent meeting to the authority's demand that she re-paint her purple building, Stone lowers her voice and growled into the microphone, "Color is important to me and my constituency."

Her attitude alone makes her something of a figurehead. Stone bird-dogs every meeting of the re-use authority and never fails to take the mike during public comment. At one, board members were discussing the the California law that requires at least 15 percent of houses in any new development to be "affordable," a notoriously slippery term. "What do you *mean* \$300,000 is affordable?" she boomed. "Affordable to *who*?"

To Stone and her allies, the primary villains in this drama are developers, who are happier building homes than watching people move into existing ones, and the towns of Seaside and Marina, which

are inheriting the portions of the Fort with the most existing housing. Seaside already has razed 400 of its windfall housing units to make room for an equal number of "market rate" (read: breathtakingly expensive) houses as big as six bedrooms apiece. Having gestured at Preston Park in the direction of "affordable housing," Marina now wants to knock down 900 cinderblock duplexes and let developers build more than a thousand houses, 85 percent of which will sell at "market rates."

Says Stone, "The problem with Seaside and Marina is they don't want to become the affordable-housing ghettos of the Central Coast."

Leaving Stone's office, I cycle down to Seaside to run her allegation past its city manager. Dan Keen is pale and mild, the milky yin to Stone's fiery yang. He meets me in his big office in Seaside's airy City Hall. I expect him to explode at Stone's characterization of Seaside's ghettophobia. Instead he shrugs and says, "she's right."

He patiently walks me through the economics of running a city in California. Houses, it turns out—even expensive ones--suck up more in services than they throw off in property tax in the post-Proposition-13 era of frozen rates. What little revenue homes generate goes mostly to school boards. City governments get only about one-eighth. It's businesses that pull the freight. In Seaside, hotel-bed and sales taxes fund half the budget.

“More housing?” Keen asks, planting an exasperated hand on his forehead. “We already have too much.” If Seaside must have more houses, he says, it deserves the big, fancy ones because there isn’t another high-end house in the city. “Seaside has a history that has not always been, uh, positive,” he says, referring to its bawdy past. “And yes, the city council did recognize that (Fort Ord) was an opportunity to change this community and raise it up.”

Seaside's residents—those who make bed, man stores, cook meals in the posh tourist towns of Monterey, Pebble Beach, Pacific Grove, and Carmel--generate sales and bed tax for those communities. Then they come home, Keen says, and require services. “We frankly don’t think we should bear the burden of all the affordable housing on the Monterey Peninsula when we don’t get the tax revenues those workers support.”

After a while, Keen excuses himself so he can beat the traffic heading home. He lives 40 minutes inland, because he can’t afford to buy a house in the city he manages.

LINEBREAK

The Fort Ord Reuse Authority is meeting in an old barrack across the road from LéVonne Stone’s purple palace, and I buttonhole Jim

Nakashima as he hurries inside. Diminutive Nakashima favors hair oil and checked jackets and gestures grandly as he talks. He used to manage housing on Fort Ord for the Army, and now runs the county agency that tries valiantly to provide low-cost rentals to workers at the bottom of the economic food chain. He comes to all the Authority meetings, he says, to hammer home the need for low-cost housing. "These towns want Fort Ord to buy them instant respectability," he says of Marina and Seaside. "We have a housing crisis in this part of California, and they're talking about half-million-dollar houses."

U.S. Rep. Sam Farr a democrat who still lives in his boyhood home in Carmel, arrives straight from the airport, alone, and sits through the meeting with his chin thrust out as though inviting someone to take a swing at it. Farr represented this region in the statehouse before being elected to Congress in 1993, and has argued from the start that Fort Ord should go largely to the region's majority, its low-wage workers. Of everybody in the room, Farr is the only one with a hole card: the government still hasn't completed the transfer of Fort land to the local jurisdictions, and Farr is threatening to hold it up indefinitely unless the cities agree to a high percentage of affordable housing.

Munching bridge mix during a break, he looks around at the collection of city and county officials and smiles ruefully. "There isn't a

single person in this room who could afford to buy the house he's living in," he says, "including me."

One of Farr's ideas for breaking the housing logjam is to sell businesses on the idea that affordable housing is in their interest. Workers who can live near their jobs are less stressed, easier to retain, and less often late to work. A promise of affordable housing could draw new businesses to the Fort. "Workforce housing is the number-one business lure in California," says Farr. "Businesses all over California say, 'We can't have our workers getting caught in traffic and being late.'"

Up the road, the Silicon Valley Manufacturers' Association recently ponied up \$20 million to leverage a trust fund 10 times that big to build housing for 4,800 families. As Carl Guardino, executive director of the association, explains it, they aren't even building the housing for their own workforce. They're building housing for the people their workforce depends on: firemen, police, and teachers. The idea, he says, is sustainable development--a stable population of laborers, service workers and professionals living close to their places of work.

At the meeting, Farr suggests Monterey Bay that businesses follow the lead of Silicon Valley to ease the dreadful traffic that crisscrosses the region every morning as low-dollar workers try to get to jobs in high-dollar towns. The suggestion seems to throw the room

into confusion, as officials wonder aloud who might play the role of the Silicon Valley manufacturers.

“Is there such a group around here?” someone asks.

“A bunch of business guys have breakfast once a week at some place out on Highway 68, I think,” someone says.

“We could try to get some of them to the table, I suppose,” says Monterey County Attorney Lou Calcagno.

Farr rolls his eyes at me as though to say: 10 years.

The Army has been gone for a decade, and the re-use authority is only now thinking of including local businesses in the housing discussion. It reminds me of something Keen, the Seaside city planner, said about what it would take for his mayor to accept low-income housing: “When other cities step forward and help us bear these costs, we’ll do it.” The re-use authority needs to arm-twist the Chambers of Commerce, the three dozen hotels, and the big commercial farmers to share the burden, but 10 years of talking hasn’t yet made them do it. I catch Farr as he hurries from the meeting.

“Fort Ord is the single biggest giveaway of military land since the Homestead Act” of 1862, he says. “But these are small towns. They don’t have the skills to deal with something as big and complex as this.”

LINEBREAK

Jeff Dack is the entirety of Marina's planning department. A young man of ghostly pallor and gelid composure, he is wedged into a cluttered office in the back of Marina's pre-fab city hall, dwarfed by a wall-sized multicolored development map of the Fort. Dack's dream is to knock down about a thousand old Army buildings and create an entirely new city on Fort Ord. "It will be a finely grained range of community incorporating a lot of concepts of the New Urbanism," he says. "Apartments over stores, mixed-use zoning so that homes are close to commercial centers, everything walkable, light rail"

We stare at the map for a moment, imagining a project that would take an army of planners to create. He sighs. "Of course the first problem is taking down all the old buildings, which, because of the lead-based paint and asbestos they contain, will cost about \$70 million. This is the cost of the land; no matter what anybody tells you, the land is not free."

Dack is justifiably proud of Preston Park, the one group of Army properties rehabilitated as the kind of homes for which Stone, Nakashima, Farr and others are clamoring. Like all other buildings on the Fort, the houses contained lead-based paint and asbestos that had to be removed or sealed, but Marina found a way to get it done. "The city just up and decided to rehab Preston Park," Dack says. "There's no book on doing this. We're writing the book as we go along."

Had he known in 1993 what he knows now, Dack says he would have pushed to rehabilitate more of the Army housing Marina inherited. "This whole process has taken way more time than we thought," he says. "There are over 60 different agencies to get coordinated with, from the federal EPA and the Army, DoD (Department of Defense), Fish and Wildlife, to the state Department of Toxic Substances Control, regional water quality control board, and on and on. There were lawsuits. The whole Fort is a Superfund site."

Preston Park, he says, was always seen as a stopgap measure because no one thought a city should build, own and operate housing the way Marina does there. "But in 20-20 hindsight we might have done things differently. Yes, it might have been better for Marina to have just done (with all its inherited Army housing) what it did with Preston Park."

LINEBREAK

Going round and round to the myriad agencies involved in the redevelopment of Fort Ord can induce a queasy longing for monarchy. Democracy here has a mixed scorecard. It has yielded an impressive new university campus, the seeds of a research park and a golf resort, acres and acres of wildlife habitat, and a couple of fancy subdivisions.

But it has produced precious little of what the region needs most: decent homes the workforce can afford. Each of the dozens of agencies and jurisdictions involved has been able to point to another as the reason housing the Army donated languishes. As Seaside city manager Keen, puts it, "The problem with the housing crisis is no one entity has the incentive to solve it. It's a crisis easily passed off to others." The people who need affordable housing don't have the clout to make it happen, and the people with the clout don't have the desire. The re-use authority's consensus-based organization means nobody can snap his fingers and order it done.

The long delay may, in the end, serve only developers. The thousands of houses the Army left behind have sat unoccupied so long that mold is growing in their walls, arguably making them uninhabitable. Hardly anyone talks about using them anymore; the debate now is only over how expensive new housing will be.

"We could still do great things here," Farr says. "We got all this incredible land from the Army. We got the buildings. We got the beach. All we're lacking is the will."

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