

Contemporary Art Taps Vitality of Boston's Historic Sites

Visitors to history-rich Boston have noticed a change in the red brick and cobblestone milieu of the republic's tumultuous early days. Enigmatic shapes at the Paul Revere house. Playful objects on Boston Common. Sculpture in Charlestown Navy Yard. They are part of an ongoing project that's using art to bring a living interpretation to the city's landmarks.

A joint initiative between Boston National Historical Park and the Institute of Contemporary Art invites New England artists to introduce their vision to the city's historic fabric. Using sculpture and interactive displays, the artists have responded to the eternal ideas behind the revolution.

The city witnessed some of the most stirring and remarkable events in the American struggle for independence. Clever and provocative, the temporary exhibits remind visitors of the ideals that moved New Englanders to extreme acts over 200 years ago, ideals that are just as powerful today.

"THIS WAS THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY MOMENT I'VE EVER SEEN IN PUBLIC ART." —MARTY BLATT, CHIEF OF CULTURAL

RESOURCES, BOSTON NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

GIVEN THE CITY'S HISTORY, IT SEEMS FITTING THAT THE FIRST PROJECT'S SETTING WAS A PLACE ENSHRINED AS A SYMBOL OF resistance to oppression. Artist Krzysztof Wodiczko interviewed the mothers of murder victims in Charlestown, which at the time had a high rate of unsolved homicides. The neighborhood's code of silence had practically ensured no one would be held accountable.

By night, Wodiczko projected a film of the interviews on Bunker Hill Monument. While art critics from the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* raved, some in Charlestown, a tough place with a fierce sense of pride, were not pleased. But according to Marty Blatt, chief of cultural resources at Boston National Historical Park, Wodiczko's message was, "Let the monument speak."

Says Blatt, "What could be more symbolic of freedom than these women who have lost their loved ones? It was the ultimate denial of freedom to have no one come forward. This was the most extraordinary moment I've ever seen in public art."

More projects followed, and the venues expanded to some of the city's private and locally managed historic sites. Inspired to explore how famous places became synonymous with high ideals, artists Laura Baring-Gould and Michael Dowling created *Conspire*, an exhibit with components at the African Meeting House, the Old South Meeting House, the Paul Revere House, and Copp's Hill Burying Ground.

The artists wanted to commemorate these places as sanctuaries, as sites of assembly, dissent, worship, debate, and remembrance. For each site they created house-shaped sculptures, or "vessels," of copper, silver, slate, and alabaster. Each vessel reflected the architecture of its associated structure, with details to evoke the place's history.

Abolitionist writings were etched on the vessel at the African Meeting House. Among the pews of the Old South Meeting House—which hosted gatherings that led to the Boston Tea Party—sat a luminous object surrounded by tea-colored water, at the bottom of which was a scattering of pamphlets on freedom (see page 3).

The house of patriot and craftsman Paul Revere was the setting of a sculptural meditation on colonial style and architectural ornamentation by ICA artist-in-residence Niho Kozuru. Displayed in the courtyard, her cast forms of brightly colored translucent rubber gave viewers a fresh perspective on the colonial aesthetic. Staid urns, finials, spirals, and pendants suddenly took on a feel of fantasy and exuberance.

The collaboration with Boston National Historical Park grew out of the ICA's Vita Brevis program, which commissions artists to create temporary works of art to interpret Boston's landscape and history. Exhibits have appeared in the Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Emerald Necklace—a series of urban parks—

Right: Artist Krzysztof Wodiczko's Bunker Hill Monument Projection, a meditation on the first amendment via the testimony of the mothers of murder victims.





Above: Artist Christopher Frost's *Pumphouse* on display at the Charlestown Navy Yard, a tribute to the men and women who worked there. Their contributions were often overshadowed by the massive vessels they produced. Far right: Exterior view of the pumphouse.

and other public spaces. The arrangement with NPS evolved into a regular artist-in-residence program. "It's a wonderful relationship," says Carole Anne Meehan, the director of Vita Brevis. "It's great territory for artists to dig into."

In the latest exhibit, artist Jerry Beck brings his interpretation to Charlestown Navy Yard. Home to the U.S.S. *Constitution*, the park testifies to the early projection of American power as a young nation struggled to preserve its security and independence. Beck's work, *The Secret Ark of Icon Park*, addresses the post-September 11 climate of fear, the current war, and violence in American popular culture.

Beck's 64-foot-long boat-like structure calls to mind Noah's biblical voyage, suggesting safe harbor in a hostile world. While some of the elements speak of imminent danger, the exhibit also hints at the need for optimism, borrowing imagery from American carnivals and arcades and incorporating the ideas of inspirational figures. Beck ran a series of workshops with local schools in which the stu-



Right: Niho Kozuru's renderings of colonial architectural elements.

dents created lifeboat-like forms made of rope, filling them with items related to their families and hopes for the future. This work became part of *The Secret Ark*.

The exhibit is made from industrial, military, and maritime materials, some borrowed from the Navy Yard. It will be on display until October.

The term Vita Brevis is from the Latin expression, *Ars longa, vita brevis*, or "Art is long, life is short." Says Meehan, "It refers to both the temporary nature of the projects and also how the meaning of art outlives us. Something

that's on view for a few days can have a long life in people's memories."

From the park perspective, ICA artists have helped define the enduring value of Boston's historic sites, and



the dynamism enriches the visitor experience. For this reason, contemporary art has a future at Boston National Historical Park. Says

Blatt, "It's important that we have an ongoing relationship with the objects, monuments, and historic landscapes under our stewardship rather than maintain them in a spirit of antiquarianism."

For more information, contact Martin Blatt, Chief of Cultural Resources, Boston National Historical Park, Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston, MA 02129, (617) 242-5648, marty_blatt@nps.gov, or go to www.nps.gov/bost. For more about the Institute of Contemporary Arts' Vita Brevis/Artist-in-Residence Program, call (617) 266-5152 or go to www.icaboston.org.



INSIDE THE ROCK

WEB EXHIBIT GOES BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE ICONIC PRISON

Because of its legendary history, Alcatraz is one of the most-visited places in the National Park System. The former federal penitentiary is famous for its high-profile alumni and dramatic setting in the middle of San Francisco Bay, a feature that earned it the name, “the Rock.” But there is more to the island’s story than the prison that operated there from 1934 to 1963.



Now—thanks to a new online exhibit developed by the Museum Management Program of the National Park Service and Golden Gate National Recreation Area—visitors get a virtual tour of the island’s many incarnations, illustrated with objects, documents, and photographs drawn from the park’s voluminous collections. It’s an intimate and instructive look at a place synonymous with notoriety and exile.

Little is known about the early story of Alcatraz; the history of the area’s indigenous peoples was unwritten, passed down in stories from generation to generation. The local Ohlone Indians could have fished and gath-

BY 1934, ALCATRAZ HAD BECOME too costly for the Army to operate, so it turned the place over to the Bureau of Prisons, which modernized it into a maximum-security prison for high-risk

ALCATRAZ WAS AN EXPERIMENT, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE TO POST-PROHIBITION, POST-DEPRESSION AMERICA . . . THE NATION WAS APPALLED AT EACH NEW OUTRAGE BY THE LIKES OF AL CAPONE, MACHINE GUN KELLY, AND ALVIN “CREEPY” KARPIS, ALL OF WHOM SERVED TIME HERE.

ered eggs there and—according to legend—it may have been a sacred place. Though there are stories of the island as an area of banishment, some scholars consider them anecdotal.

THE GOLD RUSH OF 1849 TRANSFORMED SAN FRANCISCO FROM A TRANQUIL SETTLEMENT OF 300 INTO A RAPIDLY GROWING city—and a prime target for hostile navies. In 1859, the military built a fort on Alcatraz, one of the most formidable defensive installations west of the Mississippi. By the outbreak of the Civil War, the fortress was bristling with cannon and thickly fortified, and on the watch for Confederates too.

They never arrived, but the Army imprisoned deserters, insubordinate soldiers, and southern sympathizers. The crew of a captured rebel privateer was among the first inmates.

The early 1900s heralded the age of the great battleships, whose powerful, accurate guns rendered the fort’s defenses obsolete. Alcatraz became a full-time military prison in 1907.

In the exhibit, artifacts such as cartridge belts and binoculars are complemented by period photographs. Giant cannons leveled at the horizon, with prisoners breaking rocks, portray a grim isolation. Historic documents provide a touch of the personal, such as the record of one Charles Glover, imprisoned in 1904 for embezzlement and neglect of duty.

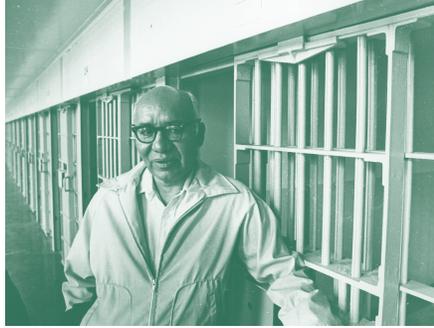
criminals. Although authorities had considered an isolated site in Alaska, in the end Alcatraz was the final choice for the new prison.

Alcatraz was an experiment, the federal government’s response to post-Prohibition, post-Depression America. It was

Above: The hardware of a hard business, artifacts from life at Alcatraz Prison. Right: Inside the Rock.



HISTORIC PHOTOS GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL RECREATION AREA



Far left: A former prisoner.
Near left: Al Capone.



Above: An inmate's personal space. Until Alcatraz, segregating the most troublesome had never been tried on a such a large scale.

the first time troublesome inmates were isolated from the rest of the prison population on a large scale. The nation was appalled at each new outrage by the likes of Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly, and Alvin “Creepy” Karpis, all of whom served time here. Their stays helped perpetuate the myth that the place was reserved for A-list offenders. In fact, they had plenty of less illustrious company. And Alcatraz was not packed beyond capacity, as is often the case with modern prisons. At its peak, it held 302 inmates.

THE INSTITUTION’S 29 YEARS AS A FEDERAL PEN MAKE UP THE HEART OF THE EXHIBIT, WHICH HAS sections on the prisoners, the correctional officers and their families, and the paraphernalia of incarceration. Visitors get the full experience of the site’s gloomy legend—with locks, handcuffs, weapons, mug shots, and billy clubs all viewable close-up.

The exhibit also explores the everyday business of Alcatraz, and how inmates passed their time within its walls. Compared to other federal prisons, Alcatraz was harsh. To minimize contact (and the potential for trouble), prisoners were housed one to a cell. Activities such as work, classes, or recreation were not a right, but privileges earned through good behavior.

A slide show examines the famous escape of 1962, in which Frank Lee Morris and John and Clarence Anglin disappeared without a trace. It’s all here—the fake heads that fooled guards into thinking beds were occupied; makeshift tools; and the *Popular Mechanics* magazines the escapees used as a reference to build a raft.

OFFICERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND CLERKS SHARED THE ISOLATION WITH THE INMATES. EMPLOYEES and their families lived in government housing; children commuted to school by boat to San Francisco. Ninety officers staffed the prison, working three eight-hour shifts. There was a social club, a bowling alley, and a soda fountain—as much of the normalcy of mainland life as possible under the circumstances. In the words of one long-time staffer, it was like “a small town with a big jail.”

The officer section of the exhibit includes letters, personal effects, uniform insignia, testimonials, and other trappings of their lives. In one photograph, the teenage

COMPARED TO OTHER FEDERAL PRISONS, ALCATRAZ WAS HARSH. TO MINIMIZE CONTACT (AND THE POTENTIAL FOR TROUBLE), PRISONERS WERE HOUSED ONE TO A CELL. ACTIVITIES SUCH AS WORK, CLASSES, OR RECREATION WERE NOT A RIGHT, BUT PRIVILEGES EARNED THROUGH GOOD BEHAVIOR.



A domestic bowl, a sharp contrast to the penitentiary’s purpose as a warehouse for the most incorrigible.



Item from a shaving kit.



Dominoes for the plentiful idle hours.

daughter of a staffer poses on a cannon from the island's days as a 19th-century fortress.

Close-up photos of the famous such as Al Capone and Robert Stroud (the "Birdman of Alcatraz") are also part of the exhibit. Items from the daily grind offer a view of Alcatraz as experienced by the inmates. The objects tell the story like no narrative can—from the homespun conveniences to the homemade weapons—complemented by a rich collection of correspondence, records, and administrative paperwork, all of which offer a unique view into the workings of the prison.

Visitors can go inside, as it were, panning around the cellblocks and zooming down the long corridors. The prison's imposing tiers and blocks, preserved today by the National Park Service, still convey a strong sense of the inmate's environment.

CONCENTRATING THE MOST DIFFICULT PRISONERS AT ALCATRAZ MADE IT POSSIBLE TO MAINTAIN a less restrictive environment in other prisons. But by the early 1960s, the place was falling apart and getting more expensive to run. The Bureau of Prisons began shipping inmates off the Rock to other places. Alcatraz closed in 1963, but it wasn't the end of its notoriety.

OFFICERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND CLERKS SHARED THE ISOLATION WITH THE INMATES . . . THERE WAS A SOCIAL CLUB, A BOWLING ALLEY, AND A SODA FOUNTAIN—AS MUCH OF THE NORMALCY OF MAINLAND LIFE AS POSSIBLE UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES.



In 1969, a group of Native American protesters occupied the island for over a year and a half, symbolically claiming it for all Indian tribes. The move garnered international attention, which the Indians used to advertise the plight of their people. The episode was a catalyst for the burgeoning Indian movement. "Alcatraz encouraged young people to become themselves, as opposed to hiding their Indianness," recalls Joseph Myers, a member of the Blackfoot tribe.

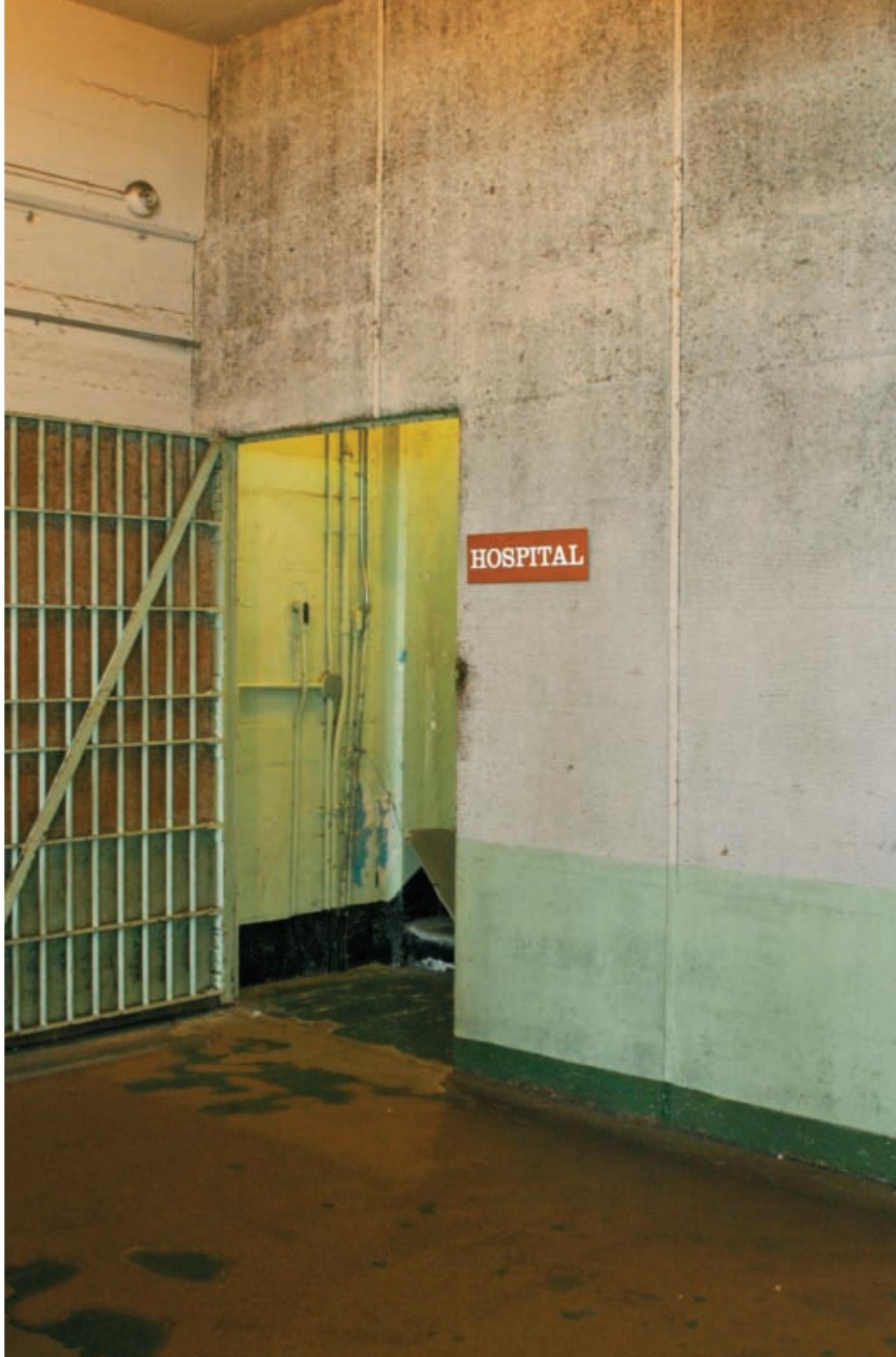
BY 1971, THERE WAS CONFLICT AMONG THE OCCUPIERS AND WANING INTEREST. U.S. MARSHALS forced them to leave and Alcatraz was once again abandoned. The protesters left their mark, however, decorating the prison with political graffiti. The marks remain a strong evocation of the activist spirit of the time. They, too, are part of the online exhibit.

The island became part of the National Park System—a component of Golden Gate National Recreation Area—and the place that had long captivated the public's imagination was no longer forbidden.

While there is no substitute for an actual adventure on the Rock, the inside story is now as close as the nearest computer.

Above: The paraphernalia of incarceration. While guards and their families lived with all the trappings of life on the mainland, the reality of Alcatraz was ever-present. Right: Entrance to the infirmary.

The exhibit is online at www.cr.nps.gov/museum. The park's website, at www.nps.gov/alcatraz, provides a comprehensive history of the island.



HOSPITAL