

Chief Dutch architect wowed by S.F.

John King

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The Painted Ladies charmed her. The de Young wowed her. But Liesbeth van der Pol also savored a part of San Francisco that many locals ignore - Mission Bay.

No camera-toting tourist, van der Pol is chief government architect of the Netherlands. She touched down last week as part of a contingent for a conference on "The International Intersection of Sustainable Urban Planning & Green Building" organized by the Dutch government and the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

The afternoon she arrived, van der Pohl managed a brief tour of the northern half of the city. The first stop was Mission Bay - not for architecture so much as its status as a neighborhood being created from scratch. Every large city today seems to have such a district, former rail yards being given new life, and the Dutch designer was struck by the generously landscaped streets and pedestrian paths.

"It's a very nice atmosphere, so neat and well-maintained," she said after exploring the linear park along Mission Creek. "Some of the parts are absolutely beautiful."

The enthusiasm kicked into high gear across town, where van der Pohl contemplated the copper-plated M.H. de Young Memorial Museum from 2006, designed by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron.

"It's beautiful, really beautiful ... I like this," she murmured while staring at the long abstract form and its twisting diaphanous tower.

Informed that some San Franciscans loathe the new de Young - too different and dark - van der Pol waved away the complaints.

"This building is a *statement*," she said admiringly. "It may not be easy to love at first, but it will stay in the hearts of people."

The drive from Mission Bay to Golden Gate Park allowed a glimpse of older charms, like the Victorian homes of Alamo Square. And if you think a European proponent of contemporary design found the wooden whimsies cloying, think again.

"They are so romantic - outrageous!" van der Pol mused as the tour bus bounced along Hayes Street. "This is more decorated than any other city."

The moral of the story? Visitors appreciate the diversity of San Francisco - architectural as well as social. The more layers, the better.

Outsiders are impressed by our landscape architects as well as our landscape, judging by several high-profile honors heading this way.

Two were announced last week by the American Society of Landscape Architects. It named EDAW AECOM of San Francisco as firm of the year and, doubling down, presented Chief Executive Officer Joseph Brown with the ASLA Medal, its top individual honor.

When Brown joined the firm in 1972, there were 50 employees. Now it has a staff of 1,700 spread among 34 offices on four continents; even so, the firm continues to shape the local terrain with such projects as South Beach Park and the Mission Creek park admired by van der Pol. The firm also is helping map restoration plans for 13,500 acres of salt ponds in the South Bay.

Oakland-based Walter Hood won a nod of his own: His firm HOOD Design next month will receive a National Design Award in Landscape Design from the Smithsonian Institution's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

Hood's work includes the sculpture garden at the de Young, Splash Pad Park in Oakland near Lake Merritt, and the ongoing effort by some Berkeley residents to transform a block of Center Street into a downtown plaza.

The best part of the award: It's presented at the White House, by none other than Michelle Obama.

For the record, one of two runners-up to Hood is none other than San Francisco's Andrea Cochran - her second time on the short list.

Also for the record, in the June 16 Place, I referred to the cable-car-like design of a flower stand at Market and Spear streets. Transit-savvy readers e-mailed to say the stall actually is an homage to one of Muni's electrically powered vehicles of yore. They're right, I'm wrong, and I'll stick to riding BART - assuming there's no strike, of course.

If there is a strike next month, stranded East Bay readers can Go West vicariously by checking mashup maven Justin Beck's ongoing

archive of my Sunday Cityscape feature. It's at sfgate.com/maps/cityscape.

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