

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Goldsworthy reaches high with Presidio 'Spire'

Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic  
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Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Neighbors of the Presidio who live near its Arguello Gate began to notice recently a strange protrusion in the sky above the de-commissioned base: a 100-foot-tall permanent sculpture by British artist Andy Goldsworthy titled "Spire." It was funded by a patron and collector in Britain.

In many ways, "Spire" is the antithesis of the piece the de Young Museum commissioned from Goldsworthy for its 2005 re-opening - a crack in its entry path paving stones that snakes into the courtyard, fissures its stone benches and goes unnoticed by many visitors.

"Spire" consists of 37 steel-armatured cypress tree trunks, felled as part of the Presidio's re-forestation program. The structure's core sits below ground in a metal sleeve enclosed in a massive reinforced concrete base.

I spoke with Goldsworthy about the work at its hilltop site.

**Kenneth Baker:** Tell me about the form of the work.

**Andy Goldsworthy:** Well, it taps into the architecture of a tree but also the architecture of buildings. ... It's interesting that you can see the top of the Transamerica building over there. And over there are some spires on top of a church. ... I love seeing church spires in England where somehow the hills cut off the roof and the building and you just see the spire coming out of the ground.

But this work for me is a very powerful image of growth, the determination of the tree to push upward. It feels as if it's coming from deep in the ground and that's another reason, besides seismic safety and wind, that it's got to be really rooted. ... While for the moment the site is really open and in-your-face, when the new trees grow up around it, this will be a very intimate, internal place.

**KB:** What was the biggest technical problem in getting this thing into shape?

**AG:** The biggest problem was that the trees, although they look straight, have these curves and twists in them and they kind of explode with branches at the top. So I've had to really tense them into place, but it's given the piece a kind of twisting energy, which I like.

**KB:** Is this work complete or will you add to it?

**AG:** This site was chosen not because of any great wish to make a work just here but because the materials came from here. The cypresses were cut here as part of the re-forestation. They'd reached the age where the park considers them unsafe and needing to be felled. ... It's hoped that I'll make three more along this ridge as they're being felled, so the trail will link them.



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

**KB:** Will the area be lighted at night?

**AG:** No. For the record, I really loathe floodlit sculptures. There's something really beautiful about a dark shape against a dark sky. I hate it when they illuminate mountains and churches.

**KB:** When I think of a dark shape against a dark sky, I think of van Gogh. At the top especially, there's that slight expressionistic quality that I don't often, really ever, see in your work. Is that something you've sought or something you've played with?

**AG:** It's something I've tried to get out. ... But that's what gives it tension, isn't it? I knew I'd never get the perfect spire. The trees wouldn't allow me that, but I was damn well going to go and try, within the constraints and nature of the trees. ... In the morning it becomes this red spire first, so it does take on a lot of variety during the different times of day.

**KB:** There is no carving except for the lopping off of branches, right?

**AG:** No. I resisted any kind of shaping of the logs, and I preferred a straight cut at the top, rather than try to do some sort of shaping of it.

**KB:** Are you worried about people trying to climb it?

**AG:** It's not my problem. Do they climb trees? ... In many ways the Presidio feels like home, like the British landscape. It's got a very strong social nature to it. When you think of dedicated spaces like Storm King Art Center, they're safe havens for sculpture, whereas this is not. And as you well know, San Francisco is a very contentious place to be socially, and for making sculpture, and its multi-layered, all the people's use of it, and that for me, although it can create difficulties, is what makes it more interesting.

**KB:** What's the biggest difference between "Spire" and other big projects of yours?

**AG:** I didn't actually work on the sculpture - now that's a difference! I sat at the bottom, in a director's chair, with a pair of binoculars and a walkie-talkie, telling the crew where to put the logs, which is something I've never done before. It was a really strange experience, and exhausting, in some ways more exhausting to do it by direction than doing it myself. I got sun-blinded the first week from staring at the sky too much. The crew had to become my hands. I remember being told by one of Henry Moore's assistants that when he got too old to work the material directly, he'd put his hands on their hands to show them what to do.



Andy Goldsworthy / Haines Gallery

Andy Goldsworthy stole away to do this ephemeral sculpture, above, "Grass Stalk Pushed Into Cypress Bark" (2008).

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