

## Brown's Idea For S.F. 'Camp David' Navy mansion catches his eye

By Carl Nolte  
Chronicle Staff Writer

It's perfect: 8,000 square feet, seven bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a dining room table that seats 20, spacious grounds and a stunning view of the East Bay. Only top admirals have lived there, and the most famous was Chester Nimitz, the hero of the Pacific in World War II.

That's why Willie Brown wants the Yerba Buena Island mansion as a ceremonial residence for the mayor of San Francisco.

The mansion, now occupied by Rear Admiral William Center, commander of Naval Base San Francisco, will probably be included in areas obtained by the city when the Navy pulls out of Yerba Buena and Treasure islands next year.

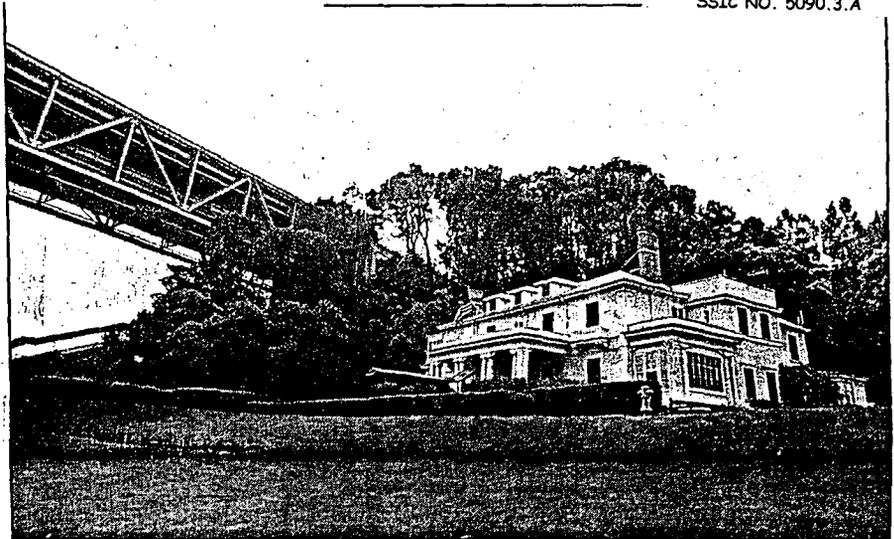
Brown saw Nimitz House, the mansion's official name, on a tour of the islands during the weekend with Captain Lynn Hamel, Treasure Island's commanding officer. The mayor immediately got the idea that Nimitz House was ideal for an "official residence" for San Francisco's mayor, where visitors could be entertained in world-class style, the way the Navy's top brass has entertained its guests there for 95 years.

"The mayor wouldn't actually live there," said P.J. Johnston, Brown's spokesman. "It would be more a ceremonial residence, perhaps a sort of Camp David."

Even if the city gets the mansion, Johnston said, Brown will continue to live in his Cathedral Hill condo, close to City Hall. The Nimitz House would be used for entertaining, Johnston said.

A ceremonial mayoral residence is only one of several ideas Brown is discussing for Treasure Island and Yerba Buena — including turning a Treasure Island building into a permanent movie set and film center, leasing the Navy's firefighting school for a state firefighting center and using the Navy brig to house female prisoners from the San Francisco county jail.

During last year's campaign for



BY MICHAEL MALONEY/THE CHRONICLE

Mayor Willie Brown has his eye on Nimitz House on Yerba Buena for use as his official residence

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mayor, Brown had proposed turning Treasure Island into an elegant Monte Carlo-style casino, where patrons could gamble and enrich the city's coffers. He later dropped that idea.

His ceremonial mansion plan at first seemed like a joke. "It's my guess the mayor was jesting," said Johnston, when asked about the mansion yesterday. But after checking, the aide said Brown is dead serious.

"He's mentioned it a couple of times," said Larry Florin, who is the mayor's staff officer for base reuse, notably Treasure Island, Yerba Buena and Hunters Point, all of which are part of Navy Base San Francisco.

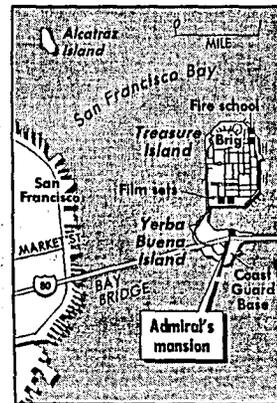
"We think it will be a real possibility," Florin said. "It's an interesting proposal."

However, the mayor hadn't told the city's Base Reuse Commission, which has been working on a plan for the surplus bases.

Gloria Root, the head of the Citizens Military Base Reuse Committee, said she had not been informed about the idea. Neither had Dick Robinson, a member appointed by former mayor Frank Jordan.

"I'm flabbergasted," he said. The mansion plan, he said, is "self-serving" and "rather outrageous."

"It's not a good idea," he said. Jim Haas, another member of



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The Presidio of San Francisco, the city's other major base, was turned over to the National Park Service in 1994.

The admiral's mansion is one of those hidden treasures found on some military posts. Built of redwood and brick in 1900 at a cost of \$14,824, it is now priceless.

Yerba Buena, once called Goat Island, revealed in isolated splendor in the center of the bay until the Bay Bridge was opened in 1933. The bridge engineers used Goat Island as the center of the bridge and bored a huge tunnel through it.

The noise from the bridge traffic can be deafening outside the Nimitz House, but the mansion is so well-built that not a sound penetrates the interior, according to those who have been there as guests.

The mansion was named for Admiral Nimitz, who was the architect of the American victory in the Pacific in World War II, and later Chief of Naval Operations. A five-star admiral, Nimitz never retired, and he lived in the house in his last years. He died there in 1968.

Besides the conference center idea, Haas said, Caltrans has an eye on the site. The agency wants to acquire a buffer zone 50 meters wide around the bridge. If Caltrans gets its way, he said, it would get Nimitz House.