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Creature Comforts: The Presidio Habitats

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Two days after “Presidio Habitats” opened in the Presidio of San Francisco, a stunning 1,491-acre national park in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge, Hal Fischer took a visitor on a tour of the art installation. Fischer is the director of special projects for the FOR-SITE Foundation, the San Francisco arts nonprofit that spearheaded the show, for which 11 international architects, artists and designers created conceptual habitats for the park’s animal residents. The first site-based exhibition organized for and presented in a United States national park, the pieces in “Presidio Habitats” will be up for a full year, until May 15, 2011—unless furry and winged residents actually move into their new high-design homes, in which case their leases will be extended indefinitely, by decree of Presidio Trust naturalists. But will the Western screech owl actually find the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei’s glazed blue-and-white porcelain vessels hospitable, tethered in the branches of a cypress tree? Only time shall tell.

“There’s a great blue heron who hangs out here; he’s like an exhibitionist,” Fischer said as he stood amid “Patience,” which consists of 10 bright yellow metal chairs scattered around a meadow. Designed by Jensen Architects, the chairs invite visitors to sit and quietly observe the herons who favor this corner of the



park—while at the same time emulating the heron’s trademark stillness. Like the other pieces in the show, “Patience” is tucked discreetly in the natural landscape. “They’re not bombastic,” Fischer said of the installations. “It’s not like dropping a Richard Serra into the forest. There’s an element of discovery.”

Indeed, there’s real delight to be found in turning a corner and spying Philippe Becker and Brody Hartman’s “Winged Wisdom,” a collection of letters built from mesh and straw that work their way through a eucalyptus and cypress grove. The letters proffer nesting material for the park’s prolific bird species, as they spell out aphorisms inspired by the American robin, like “resolve conflict with song,” and “nest from the inside out.”