College Hill was original St. Mary's home

College Hill obscure, but with character all the same
Depending on the source you consult, San Francisco has anywhere from seven to 74 hills.

A visit to College Hill shows how subjective the very idea of a hill can be.

There's no discernible peak along the small fist of streets west of Mission Street and south of Bernal Heights. The one sharp slope is sliced by a utilitarian path leading down to San Jose Avenue and Muni’s J metro line. Tight-packed homes line up without regard for views, which, in any case, are confined by more prominent high points on the map.

Yet this terrain is as characteristic of San Francisco as Twin Peaks or Mount Sutro. It never stands still, angling in all directions beneath your feet. The streets are straight, the turns are brusque. A stroll of a few blocks is enough to work up a sweat.

As for the name, chalk it up to a city that has defined itself from the start by the collision of topography and urbanization. To live on a hill is a source of pride - no matter how modest the hill might be, or how hard it is to tell where yours ends and the next one begins.

"Given how much the place undulates, people in San Francisco have every reason to exaggerate 'their' hills and give them names," said Richard Walker, a professor emeritus in geography at UC Berkeley and author of "Country in the City: The Greening of the San Francisco Bay Area." "It just has to be visually striking from
College Hill was original St. Mary's home - San Francisco Chro...
Locked-in tension

That book was the work of Florence Lipsky, a French architect who was a visiting lecturer at UC Berkeley. What fascinated her was the locked-in tension of a landscape where "moments of crisis between the grid and the terrain are occasions for nature and the builder to enter into confrontation."

The crisis came by chance: San Francisco was laid out on an east-west grid in 1839 when it was a fishing village centered on Portsmouth Square. A second grid on a southeast pivot was added in 1847 to reach toward Mission Dolores.

Then came the Gold Rush, and a population that by 1855 had swelled to 45,000 people. Many hills near the bay were leveled - "it's amazing what guys with hand tools could do," Walker said. But the impulse to flatten was resisted by critics who saw the terrain as the city's most memorable trait.

"The hills are certainly not deformities," argued an 1854 report by the city's Board of Engineers. Rather, "all conspire to form a panorama which no other city in the world can rival."

Grid doesn't match up

Lipsky explores the result of those 19th century efforts to apply an orderly ideal, the grid, to a setting that rises and falls. Rifts in the urban fabric were inevitable; College Hill is listed among the "fractures," or "sudden breaks of streets into sections and distortions of the grid," which are "repaired" by things like stairways and ramps.
A runner jogs up Mission Street in the College Hill neighborhood in San Francisco.

College Hill ends abruptly at the Bernal Cut, which began as a narrow valley on the west edge of the slope. The first cut came in the 1860s for railroad tracks. It was widened to make room for San Jose Avenue in the 1920s. Concrete walkways lead down from the low crest. An overpass links one street to Glen Park.

But a fracture is also a void, and the isolation of the cut makes it attractive to homeless people who set up camp from time to time.

"You'd walk down the path and people would come lurching out of the bushes, or it would smell like an open-air toilet," said Cantrell, who helped found the College Hill Neighborhood Association. Now there are regular visits by police and social workers, and neighbors tend to the walkways.

"What we're trying to do is make the path an amenity, something that will be safe and clean for people to use," Cantrell said.

The association boundaries extend several blocks beyond the boundaries at www.sfgazetteer.com. In its entry on "How Many Hills are there in San Francisco?" - the answer given is 74 - College Hill is defined as Richland Avenue to St. Mary’s Avenue north to south, Mission Street to San Jose Avenue east to west.
Who is right? According to Russell Graymer, a geologist with United States Geological Survey in Menlo Park, the answer is all of the above.

"Any list is just a record of what people in a neighborhood see as their hill," Graymer said. "If enough people call something a hill for long enough, there you are."

**About the series**

The Chronicle is retracing the steps of its 1958 series "Hills of San Francisco" - one hill at a time. Each Wednesday, Chronicle Urban Design Critic John King explores what the individual hills reveal about today's city and its 812,000 inhabitants.

**How to find College Hill:** The area is served by several Muni lines. It also can be reached by a short walk east on Bosworth Street from the Glen Park BART Station.

John King is The San Francisco Chronicle's urban design critic. E-mail: jking@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @johnkingsfchron
Never having heard of it, I was going back and forth from the article to Google Map and in and out of terrain and street view. By accident I came across College Terrace, what a nice little development.

7 hours ago 0 Likes

LOCAL

Your Lucky Numbers

56% of patients don't follow prescription

SARS-like virus puts experts on alert

Experts brace for more genetic testing

Bay Area health and fitness events

Pertussis vaccine study: 'whole cell' better

More in Local
Health

Woman honored for LGBT health issues work

Movies & TV

Frameline37: Film fest ready to laugh

Home & Garden

'Butterflies and Blooms' at conservatory

Virtually tour San Francisco's most exclusive real estate. Start your home search now >>>

CaliforniaMoves.com Featuring over 139,800 properties for sale in California
College Hill was original St. Mary's home - San Francisco Chron...