

February 5, 2006

In Memory of 1906, a City Shakes Like a Bowl Full of Jell-O

By [PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN](#)

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb. 3 — In this centennial year of the great 1906 earthquake, San Francisco has tectonic shifts on the brain. Among the planned commemorations of the event are "Symphony No. 1: The Earthquake," to be played by the Contra Costa Wind Symphony, an "Earthquake Walking Tour of San Francisco" by the Northern California Geological Society and a tour of campus retrofit projects at the University of California, Berkeley.

But the loopiest ode to the unpredictable layers beneath the city's surface may well be "Earthquake" — a luminous, quivering rendering of the Twin Peaks neighborhood composed of nearly a thousand translucent Jell-O cubes.

Inspired by liquefaction, which causes water-saturated soil to flow like water, the work, created by Liz Hickok, a 32-year-old artist, combines two Bay Area obsessions: food and earthquakes.

Ms. Hickok's cityscape is the latest in her "San Francisco in Jell-O" series, which has also included likenesses of Telegraph Hill and City Hall. It was on display Friday evening on a "shake table" at the Exploratorium, a popular museum of art and science.

Jiggling jewels of Jell-O substituted for the city's Victorian houses, while a Tupperware container filled with dry ice simulated fog.

Jell-O, explained the artist — who was raised in Wilmington, Del., on her grandmother's lime-green Jell-O mold with maraschino cherries and whipped cream — is an apt metaphor for San Francisco. "It makes us aware of the temporary nature of it all," Ms. Hickok said. "We're sitting on fragile ground."

Her one-night tableau was constructed by pouring Jell-O mix into molds and then carving the cubes to create roofs, doors and windows. The hilly topography, executed in gelatin, was adapted from a contour map procured from the city's public works department.

The mini city spent the night in pieces in a refrigerator. Ms. Hickok will reconstruct it at the museum on April 1 to kick off the monthlong exhibit "Magnitude X: Earthquake Science and Survival."

Wobbling ominously and exuding a fruity bouquet, the Jell-O city offered food for thought, said Eric Muller, one of the museum's science educators.

"Jell-O is the ideal resonant medium," Mr. Muller said, referring to the ability of structures to respond to vibration. "It's a cool way to bring up structural engineering issues and earthquake awareness."

The museum, fittingly perhaps, is in the Marina District, which had heavy structural damage because of liquefying soil in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Nick Cain, a 33-year-old writer, said he found the display "strangely compelling."

"Like San Francisco," Mr. Cain said, "it's delicious but potentially unstable."

The city's capacity for cultural shifts and physical dislocation arguably makes Jell-O an ideal artistic medium. "I like making light of something scary," Ms. Hickok said. "It makes it easier to handle our fear."

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Jim Wilson/The New York Times

The artist Liz Hickok blew "fog" over her Jell-O version of San Francisco on Friday at the Exploratorium museum, in a look, don't eat, experience.

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