

Floating some theories about Google's mysterious barge

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If it weren't for Google Inc. trying to cover it up, the old sea-worn barge stacked four stories high with customized shipping containers may not have become an object of global fascination.

But Google being Google with all its out-there projects - many ripped from the pages of sci-fi bestsellers - the secrecy behind the barge has taken on a life of its own. Google isn't saying anything, and having guards shoo away prying eyes has only added to the mystery.

Since the barge was discovered 10 days ago, my imagination has raced through mind-blowing possibilities. What could be next for a company funding projects to end death, build robotic cars and take the Internet to outer space? A teleportation device? A time-travel machine? The world's largest Easy Bake Oven to make 8-foot-high cupcakes?

Or perhaps it's just an epic marketing prank to get us all talking about Google.

"This is like catnip for conspiracy theorists and nerds," said Paul Saffo, a consulting professor of engineering at Stanford University and a Silicon Valley technology forecaster.

The barge became my Area 51, the secretive military base in Nevada that every amateur sleuth has tried to uncover. Piercing Google's defensive shields was going to be tough, but I was undeterred. I picked up my notebook and camera and set off from my home in Oakland to

find the truth.

To get there, I drive west across the gleaming new eastern span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, which recently opened. At about the halfway point to San Francisco, just before the thoroughfare enters a tunnel, I turn off the exit for Yerba Buena Island onto a road that swirls around the island before taking me north to my destination.

That road connects to Treasure Island, a man-made no-man's-land trapped in limbo between its past as a U.S. naval station and its destiny as a proposed business and residential development with million-dollar views of the city.

Treasure Island, which is less than 1 square mile, was created in 1937 by dredging the bottom of the bay when boosters wanted a place to stage the massive Golden Gate International Exhibition.

By 1942, the U.S. Navy had seized the island for wartime use, and many of the Art Deco buildings created for the exhibition were demolished to make room for barracks. Today, the island is in transition.

After driving past the decaying wooden barracks that give it a ghost-town feel and making a few stops to ask questions, I eventually make my way to the southeast corner of the island to Pier 1, where the barge is anchored.

The entrance to the pier is secured by two wooden guard stations. A guard politely declines my request to venture out for a closer look. The structure on the barge remains partially wrapped by a white covering. Two workers are installing a chain-link gate topped with barbed wire to keep the curious out.

I turn around and face Hangar 3, which is about a football field away,

separated from the pier by the street and a large parking lot that has also served as a helicopter landing pad. This 67,000-square-foot warehouse is where the structure was built, though there is little activity on this day.

A CNN truck sits in the parking lot. As I walk to the hangar, I bump into a reporter from the British newspaper the Daily Mail. I joke that we should hire a boat to get a closer look. He says he's actually thinking about doing so. (Which he does the next day.)

We approach the hangar, where signs warn "Danger: Do not enter" and "Please prepare to surrender your smartphone, camera phone, camera, and or any other audio/visual devices."

The hangar door opens and a flatbed truck slips inside before the door quickly shuts.

We then walk around the building to Hangar 2, home of a company called Island Creative Management, which produces large-scale tech events and conventions. The warehouse, formerly a movie soundstage, is stuffed with odd props such as a rocket ship and a Salesforce.com sign.

A friendly employee tells me the owners had signed a nondisclosure agreement to not discuss their neighbor's project.

We go back to Hangar 3 and circle it again before crossing the street to Yerba Buena Builders, a construction company, where we meet Keith Miller.

Miller smiles as I approach, clearly amused by the buzz of media interest since CNet reporter Daniel Terdiman broke the story. His story speculated that it might be a floating data center, based on patents Google had received for using seawater to cool such a thing.

But if the project were a secret, it was hidden in plain sight, Miller says.

For months, TV news crews parked along the street as they did stories about the new Bay Bridge construction. Miller was tickled that they never seemed to point the cameras in the other direction and wonder about the activity taking place in and around Hangar 3.

"I thought there must be a media blackout or something," he says.

Late last year, a 5-foot-high fence was erected around the Hangar 3 parking lot, and hundreds of laborers, welders and plumbers descended on the site, working at least two shifts a day. When Miller chatted with them, they said they had no idea what they were making or who they were doing the work for, though some had apparently guessed it was Google.

Each day, a bunch of large metal shipping containers would be hauled into the site, where they were taken apart, modified, reassembled and eventually stacked on top of one another. Some had the sides cut out and large picture windows installed.

Eventually, the containers were stacked into a single rectangular structure - four shipping containers long, four containers wide, four containers high - and transported to the end of the pier and placed on the barge. And then, it seemed, everything came to a halt.

The company that held the hangar lease when the work started was G & K Media, a Spokane, Wash.-area firm that produces special events for large corporations. According to the lease, the purpose was "Fabrication of a special event structure and art exhibit only and for no other purpose."

The lease was signed by Kris Hemenway-Sheets, whose LinkedIn profile

describes her as a "line producer" for the media production company. Reached by phone Friday, Hemenway-Sheets says she signed a nondisclosure agreement and can't talk about the project.

"I have to remain silent on this for now," she says. "It's going to be fun. I'll promise you that."

The involvement of G & K Media supports a report from San Francisco CBS affiliate KPIX, which cited sources saying the structure "will feature luxury showrooms and a party deck" to market Google's new smart glasses.

The G & K lease expired in July, and Hangar 3 was then leased in August to a company called By and Large. That's apparently a joking reference to the Buy N Large corporation in the Pixar film "Wall-E." The lease doesn't give any definitive clues, saying it would be used for a variety of purposes, including fabrication and storage of equipment.

The U.S. Coast Guard has acknowledged inspecting the barge, leading to speculation that work has stopped because Google may not have obtained the proper permits.

A couple of weeks ago, Miller, the construction company employee, and his co-workers saw a large white yacht named Senses pull up alongside the barge.

"So we Googled it, and it turns out it's owned by Larry Page," he says, referring to one of Google's co-founders.

Heightening the mystery: A similar structure has been spotted in the harbor at Portland, Maine.

Despite all the media scrutiny, the company seems determined to keep

the project a secret.

I drive a few blocks north to where the shipping containers were being stored before being brought down to Hangar 3 for modification. On the other side of a chain-link fence, a man stands watch over several stacks of the containers. When I ask him about the project, he just smiles.

After taking a few pictures, I walk away and approach a guy sitting in a car across from the site. He says he was a welder but couldn't talk about the project because he had signed a nondisclosure agreement, or NDA.

As he is explaining this to me, the man guarding the containers shouts: "You can't talk about anything. You're under NDA! You're under NDA!"

The guard then crosses the street and snaps a photo of the welder's license plate. I give the welder my name and phone number.

He later calls me to say that his car was stopped as he was leaving the island, and he was told not to discuss the project. When he got home, he received additional calls warning him not to talk.

Which, after my daylong quest, just leaves me puzzled. Why is welding [shipping containers](#) prompting such obsession with security? In the past, Google hasn't hesitated to show off early versions of projects such as Google Glass or the self-driving car.

I can only hope the mysterious structure lives up to the ballooning expectations driven by the mystery surrounding it. Even if it turns out to be not a warp-drive engine but something more pedestrian like a corporate entertainment project (as one San Francisco TV station called it), I'm hoping Google will still offer a twist that delivers some wonder.

Maybe it's really the world's most unorthodox marketing campaign designed to maximize the company's mystique. Maybe it's part of a lavish developers' conference planned in some exotic location, such as an African jungle, the Nevada desert or Antarctica.

"I don't think anyone's surprised by anything the company does," Saffo said. "And so we wait for the next surprise."

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