"X" DOESN'T MARK THE SPOT

Picking an aiming point to use in flying a traffic pattern shouldn't come as some new-age technique. Instead, it's one of the fundamentals we were taught. But what is the aiming point, really, and how can we use it best?

The FAA's *Airplane Flying Handbook*, FAA-H-8083-3A, tells us: "The point toward which the airplane is progressing is termed the "aiming point." It is the point on the ground at which, if the airplane maintains a constant glidepath, and was not flared for landing, it would strike the ground. To a pilot moving straight ahead toward an object, it appears to be stationary. It does not "move." This is how the aiming point can be distinguished—it does not move. However, objects in front of and beyond the aiming point do appear to move as the distance is closed, and they appear to move in opposite directions….

"If the airplane continues down the glidepath at a constant angle (stabilized), the image the pilot sees will still be trapezoidal but of proportionately larger dimensions. In other words, during a stabilized approach the runway shape does not change….

"If the approach becomes shallower, however, the runway will appear to shorten and become wider. Conversely, if the approach is steepened, the runway will appear to become longer and narrower."

Your actual touchdown point will be further down the runway than your aim point, because you'll ease the airplane into a flare to bleed off that last bit of airspeed before touching down. Even pilots who "drive it on" (necessary in some airplanes or under some conditions) will drift a little past the aim point. So choose your target accordingly. For that "aim point plus 200 feet (100 for the Commercial)" tolerance, aim for a spot about 50 feet short of the intended touchdown spot. You can't afford to undershoot by much.