



San Francisco: A City With Vision

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“Besides being architecturally stagnant, there’s another danger when ‘contextualism’ becomes nothing more than an exercise in painting by numbers. What gets ignored is the fact that the context itself keeps changing.”

- John King, 2006

What is good design? What makes a good-looking city? At a planning commission meeting for the City and County of San Francisco on February 2, 2006, Mayor Gavin Newsom gave a speech stating that the City of San Francisco needed to raise its quality of urban design. He urged the commission to think creatively about ways that the City could become more desirable, to challenge developers and architects to compete for improved quality of design, and to look toward the future rather than focusing on conserving the past.

Urban Design in San Francisco

San Francisco has a reputation in the field of Architectural Design for being “too conservative and risk adverse,” as quoted from John Schlesinger, representative of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Beginning with the design appraisal of 1968-1970, and the consequential master plan, San Francisco planners established a goal of strict neighborhood character conservation through a rigorous

public outreach process. This goal is still paramount today. However, recently there have been concerns about the city’s ability to adapt to changing market forces, and well intentioned architects have been repeatedly discouraged in exercising both their right to freedom of expression and their ability to satisfy changes in demand.

With the passing of Proposition 13 in 1978, which constricted increases in real property tax revenue, San Francisco was faced with a great limitation in meeting the growing demand for public services. Since the city was already built out horizontally, the solution was to build up. The Transamerica Pyramid, the Bank of America building, and a number of other highly dense buildings that were built downtown during the 1970’s led to an anti-growth initiative and subsequent passing of Proposition M. This measure capped building heights at 550 feet in order to preserve the city’s skyline and it reinforced the overwhelming public desire for neighborhood character preservation (King, 2006). These measures

have contributed to many of the public problems in the city, such as the lack of affordable housing and transportation services, because they have limited the city's ability to generate revenue. Moreover, they have limited the city's ability to meet the demand for business expansion and population growth, thus rendering it less competitive.

Cities around the world such as Beijing and Shanghai are growing rapidly and attracting many great business operations, in part because of their commitment to providing innovative urban design (Newsom, 2006). If the new goal of San Francisco's leadership is to improve the city's quality of design, then a clear

vision of the future needs to be defined. Architecture should not only represent the past, but it should also embody the present and the future. Schlesinger argued that the best designs capture innovation and originality, contrary to the intentions of Prop M. At first, some new ideas are controversial. However, as in the case of the Transamerica building, they can become icons as their context changes. If Mayor Newsom and the AIA expect to raise the quality of urban design in San Francisco, they will need to work with both the planning department and the public to let go of their current ideas about neighborhood character conservation and establish a new framework that will allow cutting edge design to flourish.



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Urban Design Guidelines of Yesterday

San Francisco is known for having one of the most demanding sets of design controls of any major city in the United States. Its general plan includes elements ranging from land use and density to circulation, housing, and conservation of the natural environment and open space. Its four objectives focus on preserving the city pattern, conservation, moderating new development, and improving the neighborhood environment. It also provides controls that govern key aspects of building codes, which combined to set unprecedented constraints on architectural forms across the city. As a result, critics complained that the plan all but dictates the actual architectural drawings for buildings. Further-

more, the plan designated six conservation districts to “facilitate preservation of the quality and character of the area as a whole” and included 251 historic buildings; of which, 42 were allowed to be altered providing the “consistency of architectural character” of new adjacent buildings (Punter, 1999). The guide suggests using adjacent buildings as a model to determine details such as façade, ornamentation, and shade. However, neighborhood groups went even further and requested citywide design control guidelines, which made use of original deed restrictions and community review participation. The Bernal Heights Plan guidelines prepared by a 47 member committee aided by a community planner analyzed and illustrated the problems of urban design in their neighborhood and proposed a means to address them. Their intent was to maximize the possibilities for diversity while striving for harmony between dissimilar features on neighboring buildings so that they fit in to a “satisfying whole” (Punter, 1999). However, in the process of deciding what was best for the members of the community at that time, they devised a set of guidelines that would restrict the design possibilities and the rights of future residents to express different values and their sense of good aesthetics.

Unlike administrative review, which refers to ordinances that limit personal discretion by requiring projects to satisfy clear, precise, and measurable standards, design review refers to ordinances in which the decision rests on the reviewers’ personal discretion in judging how well a project fits within accepted guidelines (Punter, 1999). Design review is relatively new, and like zoning, it is used by local government to control the aesthetics and design of real estate projects. Design review may evaluate many factors such as architectural excellence, visual

bulk or scale, but it most often evaluates the compatibility of projects with their surroundings. This is seen as a major problem to critics who believe that San Francisco is too conservative and infringes on individual rights to freedom of expression. To avoid such problems, communities need to understand how specific modifications of their physical environment will affect their community’s appearance, and they need to develop clear guidelines to support their objectives. They may also reduce problems in the discretionary review process through replacing ambiguous or unstated criteria with clear, specific, and explicit instructions (Nasar, 1999).

Ideally, a city’s general plan would contain a vision of the community’s future, and would identify hopes and aspirations and translate them into a set of policies that lays out the community’s physical development (Fulton, 2005). Although San Francisco’s General Plan addresses that objective better than most cities, much of its vision is based on conservation and values of the past.

To make a beautiful, functional, and sustainable environment, a master plan such as San Francisco’s must include a set of flexible regulations to guide the urban design and architecture of the city based on the needs of the future. One of the key benefits in the process of developing guidelines is the practice of defining the city’s character. It is necessary then, for San Francisco leadership to define the making of a beautiful, functional, and sustainable city as a goal for all of its citizens. A declaration such as the one mayor Newsom made in 2006 was a much needed step in the direction of an improved quality of life in San Francisco based on urban design guidelines that will serve the needs of the present and the future.

The Transbay Design for Development

“This is the future of Transbay”



Courtesy of the TPJA Transbay Transit Center

In an attempt to meet the many needs of a booming city, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency defined a plan for a redevelopment project area within the rapidly changing South of Market district. The plan, which is centered on the regional transit hub that acts as a terminal for many inter-city bus lines, includes a framework that established a goal of creating a whole new neighborhood. Included with the redevelopment plan is a document that has been referred to as ‘groundbreaking.’ This document, *The Transbay Redevelopment Project Area Design for Development*, is highly innovative and includes a set of design controls that are based on professionally directed public consensus. Previous design guidelines allowed for control on a functional level, but left much of the aesthetic control up to the discretion of the planning commission review

board (Punter, 1999). However, with the *Design for Development*, the commission can now apply general standards to aesthetics the same way as planning codes. This will allow architects to provide innovative design solutions that will meet the demands for growth within the city while respecting the values of the present community.

Despite the intentions of Prop M, this new plan allows for the development of a series of towers that will redefine the city’s skyline and change the face of one of the city’s oldest neighborhoods. Precisely articulated language based on the contemporary ‘smart growth,’ transit oriented urban development theory specifies the type of architecture that will be allowed, and expresses the vision for the arrangement of master planned blocks. These blocks will include one tower on the corner of each with retail spaces built into the ground floor level. In between the towers will be low to mid-rise townhouse buildings and shared open spaces. This will form a wavelike-height effect that will not only be aesthetically pleasing, but it will also ensure ample public space within the neighborhood. Furthermore, the towers will be staggered in a checkered pattern making certain that the buildings will receive adequate privacy, sunlight and airflow, and that they will preserve as many views as possible. Additionally, the buildings will be set back at least 15 feet from the street and will be raised above the sidewalk with landscaped stoops to provide a sense of privacy within the densely populated community (Redevelopment Agency, 2003). These changes would represent a sharp contrast to the form of architecture present in the area prior to redevelopment.

At the time of this research, one of the many new towers is currently under construction. The Millennium Tower stands to be the fourth tallest build-

ing in San Francisco and the highest built since the enactment of Proposition M (Wilson, 2005). In consideration of the proposition, the community spent a remarkable amount of time and energy to ensure that the city's skyline was treated with great respect. In doing so, the placement of the towers was arranged so that they would not be too tightly clustered. Moreover, to retain the skyline's existing rolling hill effect, which is so highly regarded; the building's heights will be set so that the tallest towers will be placed near Market Street and then subsequently step down until the new Rincon Hill project where heights will step back up again. Additionally, the new towers will be made slender do to extensive setback requirements that are designed to allow the optimum utility with the least amount of environmental impacts. Furthermore, rather than applying the traditional practice of superimposing

a historical veneer to an otherwise modern building, the new towers are proposed to consist of high quality glass facades with faceted panels designed to fragment light and change the building's appearance as seen from different angles, "Millennium Tower is a sleek, prismatic gem we can all live with" (Holden, 2007). By having such a complete plan, developers

and their architects are able to supply towers such as these quickly and efficiently. To that effect, they will be able to meet the city's needs for both office space and housing as fast as the market can absorb it. Moreover, with the highly stylish buildings and the tremendous sensitivity to the living environ-

ment, more affluent people will be attracted to the area. These new people are likely to afford higher property taxes and provide a good source of retail sales tax revenue that can be applied to the funding of needed city services.

Urban Design Guidelines of Tomorrow

If the purpose of urban design is to repeat old patterns, as Prop M is perceived to encourage, then there would be no opportunity to design new responses to changes in our urban environments (Scheer, 1994). Currently, the most significant problems in design review are that it is

expensive, easily manipulated, lacks expertise, and it is not efficient. All of these problems have a stifling affect on innovative design, and are the very same issues that Schlesinger and the AIA proposes that the planning commission address. Administrative review and zoning ordinances are great for controlling the economic growth and sustainability of the built



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environment. They provide valuable information for developers to devise efficient plans that meet the regional goals. They are also useful in protecting communities against undesirable or problematic uses of adjacent land. However, they can also be very binding in the pursuit of improved urban design.

The city cannot continue to be developed based on opinions of the past. It must continue to evaluate its changing needs and revise its identity. Above all, it must define its goals clearly if it can expect to make plans to meet those goals. Thus, it is crucial that San Francisco leadership continue to take steps toward community consensus based planning and communicate it in a way that would ensure that potential developers will not misunderstand it.

The *Transbay Design for Development* includes years of community participation by the affected public in the defining of new goals, objectives, and prescriptions for the urbanistic criteria and appraisal of architectural design around the new Transbay Terminal area. If Mayor Newsom expects the commission to do anything about changing the urban design of the city, he must work to ensure that the needs of both today's and tomorrow's communities are taken into consideration; and he must work to develop procedures that will allow for the development of innovative design. Clear and detailed guidelines will ensure that all development will meet aesthetic standards. In turn, more funding will be available with the omission of long review processes, and architects will be able to experiment and bring new technology to the city.

The city is constantly evolving. Changes in population size, demographics, and the economy all influence the shape and form of the city's growth. Past attempts in satisfying the demand for higher and better uses of land within the city have been crit-

icized for lacking consideration or compassion for the affected members within the community. During the Urban Renewal period of the 1960's, areas within the South of Market district were bulldozed in order to make way for highly desired improvements. However, many residents were displaced in the process, and some critics still believe that the Yerba Buena Gardens area would have been much more desirable if the community had some control over its design (Hartman, 1974). This issue lies at the heart of redevelopment and the question of whose needs should take precedent is always in debate. Major redevelopment projects such as the Moscone Convention Center and the Yerba Buena Gardens provide great benefits to the city at large including those provided from the function of the facilities and the revenue that they generate. However, nearby community residents often bear the burden of their negative impacts. This is often the case when community members are not consulted and allowed to ensure that negative consequences are mitigated. However, if handled successfully, as in the case of the Transbay Terminal area where extensive public outreach and professional consultation are combined, a consensus on excellent design can be achieved. This process should serve as a good model for future procedure, because only through ongoing community participation with imaginative planners and architects can an ever changing city adapt to the demands that it faces.

The *Transbay Design for Development* provides an example of a specific plan that satisfies the needs of a rapidly growing city. It also lays out the whole character of an entire neighborhood and presents clear guidelines for the development of highly dense buildings within a pleasantly landscaped environment. However, as the context of the area chang-

es and new people move in, the values of the community will change. Subsequently, urban design guidelines should also be changed to reflect the new values. Broad, ambiguous guidelines within a static framework put too much strain on the bureaucratic process; it leaves too much of the city's future at the mercy of political manipulation, and it limits the city's ability to respond to rapid changes in market conditions. Through on-going community planning, would be political manipulators can work with the community before developers commit to great risks, and an ever-changing public can decide on the city's future through a democratic process assisted by professional planners and thoughtful architects. This will allow the urban design planning process to keep up with the increase in the demand for productivity, while ensuring that community values and a neighborhood character are maintained. For Mayor Newsom, the public, and the real estate industry, a well-developed set of guidelines is worth the time and effort for good design and a good looking city. §

“It is only reasonable that a prerequisite for design regulation and review be the adoption of a public policy and plan that specify in advance the precise urban design objectives and the standards that the community is committed to enforce and against which the design of private development can be gauged without prejudice or arbitrariness.”

- Richard Tseng-Yu Lai, 1988

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