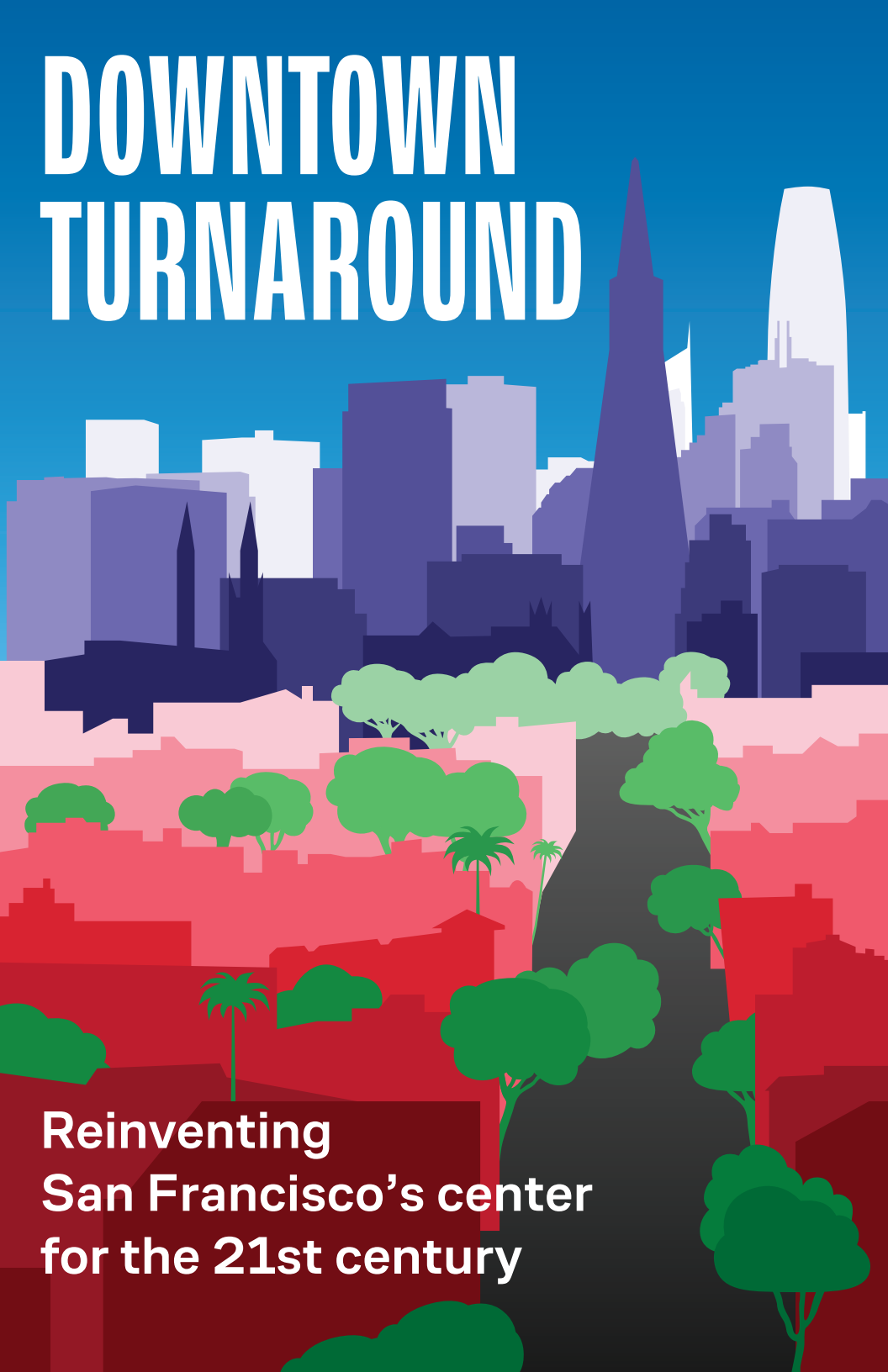


DOWNTOWN TURNAROUND

A stylized, flat-design illustration of the San Francisco skyline and surrounding hills. The skyline is composed of various geometric shapes in shades of purple, blue, and white, set against a solid blue sky. The foreground features rolling hills in shades of red and pink, with several green trees and palm trees scattered across the landscape. The overall aesthetic is modern and graphic.

Reinventing
San Francisco's center
for the 21st century

Downtown Turnaround
Reinventing San Francisco's center for the 21st century

Project Director
& Studio Lead

Alex Yuen

Art Direction & Design

Piknik Press

Editor

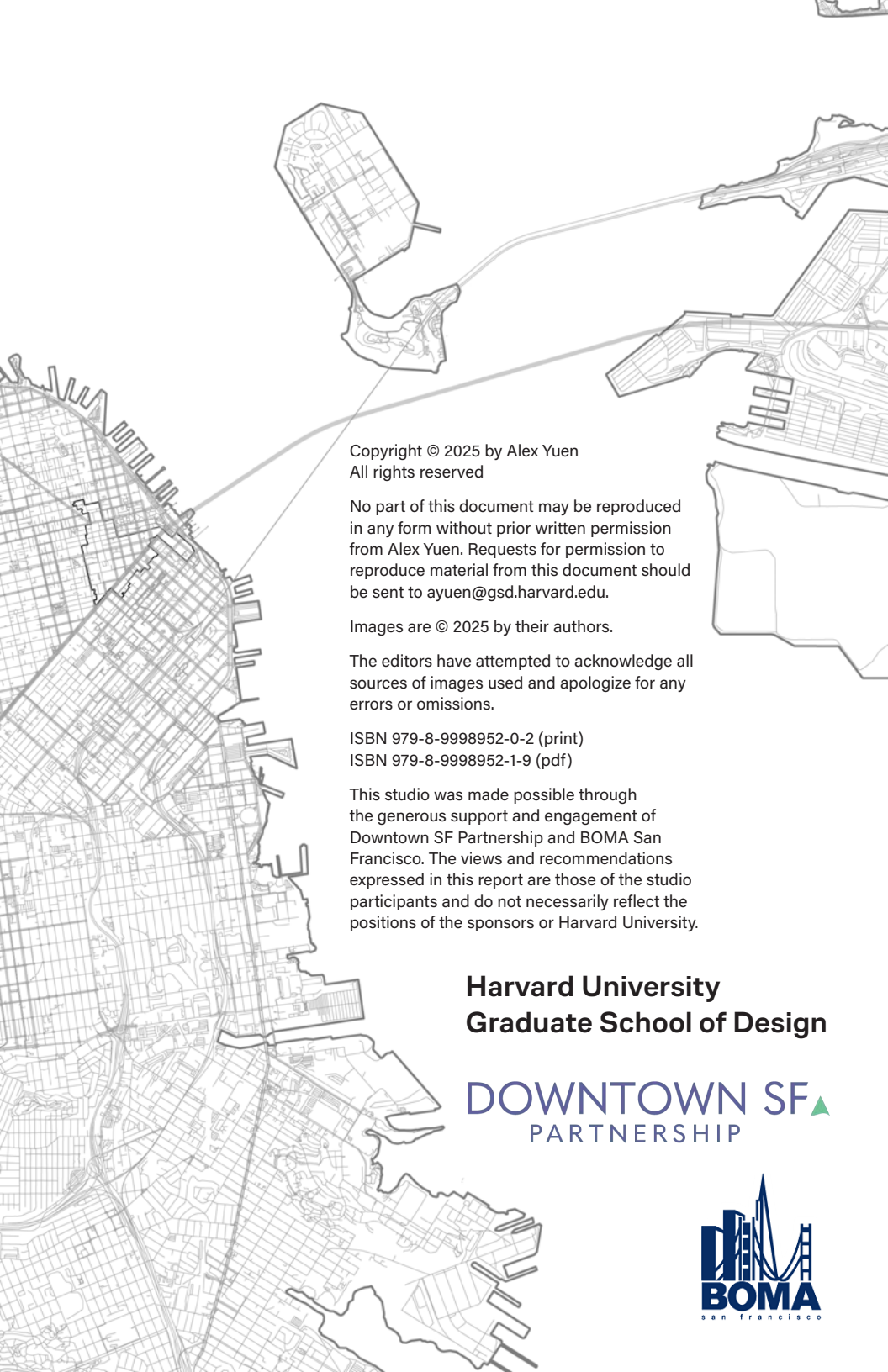
Nancy Friedman

Editorial & Layout
Assistants

Harry Liner
Daisy Son

Project Sponsors

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The editors have attempted to acknowledge all sources of images used and apologize for any errors or omissions.

ISBN 979-8-9998952-0-2 (print)
ISBN 979-8-9998952-1-9 (pdf)

This studio was made possible through the generous support and engagement of Downtown SF Partnership and BOMA San Francisco. The views and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the studio participants and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the sponsors or Harvard University.

Harvard University
Graduate School of Design

DOWNTOWN SF ▲
PARTNERSHIP



For decades, downtown
San Francisco followed
a simple formula.

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{office} \\ \text{access} \\ + \quad \text{work} \\ \hline \text{downtown} \end{array}$$

COVID broke that equation.

Today, we have an
opportunity to formulate
something far better.

office

access

work

live

play

+

gather

a thriving neighborhood

**A NEW
FUTURE**

Imagine a downtown that is **inviting, active, and attractive.**

Imagine a downtown that is **not just for work, but for playing, learning, and living.**

Imagine a downtown that reflects the diversity and beauty of perhaps **the most diverse and beautiful place** on this earth.

That's the vision Downtown Turnaround establishes: not a return to what downtown San Francisco was, but **a transformation into what it can be.**

A strategic vision

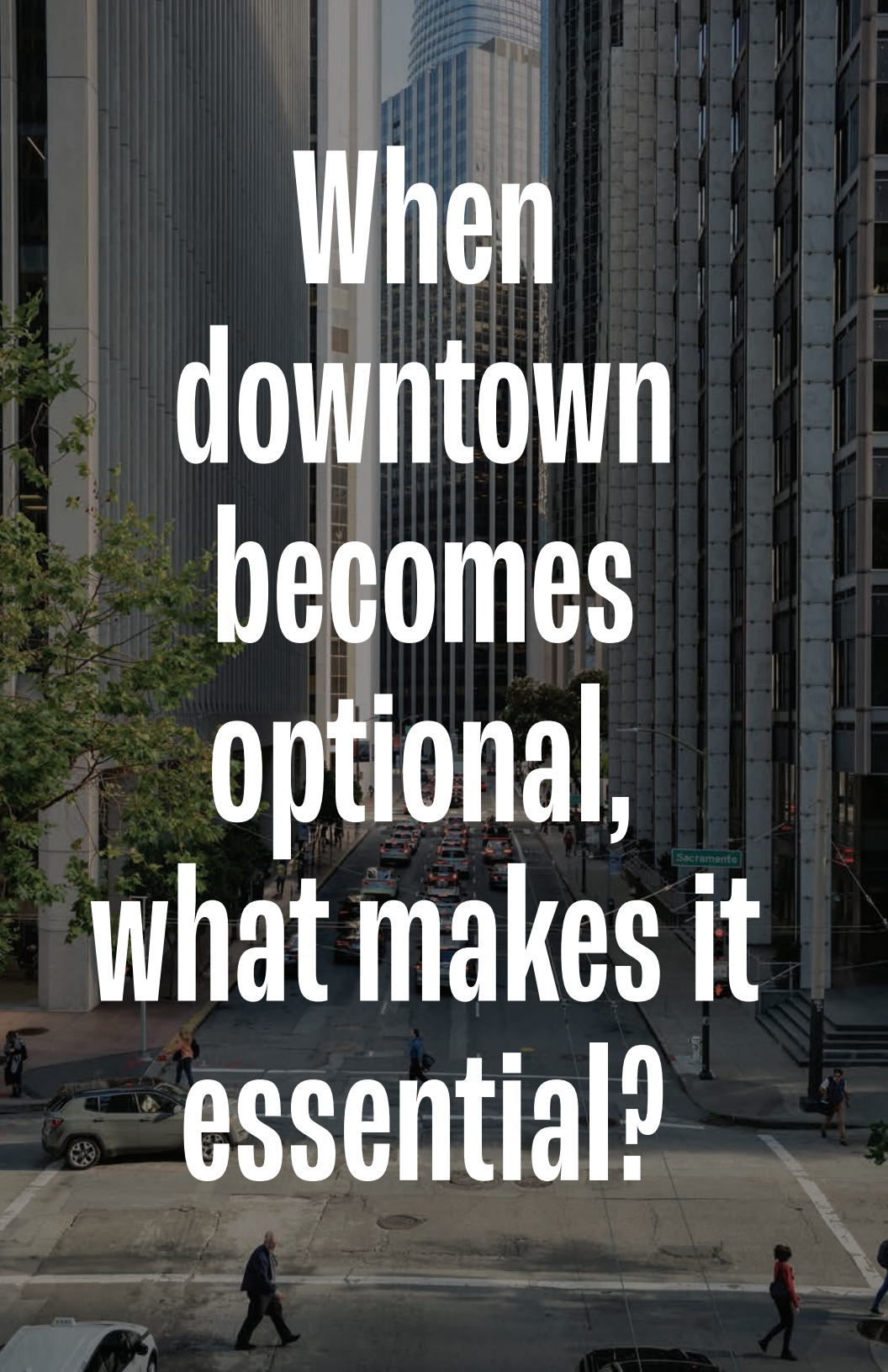
Downtown Turnaround reveals how to transform cable car turnarounds into urban parks. How to turn existing buildings into citywide attractions. How to create a heritage trail that makes downtown a story-led experience. It demonstrates the comprehensive thinking needed to design downtown's future—because it won't design itself.

This is the strategic vision downtown needs. For residents and visitors, it reveals downtown's potential as a vibrant neighborhood. For property owners and developers, it shows how coordinated investment creates greater value than isolated projects. For city leaders, it provides a roadmap for bold decisions that build on downtown's assets.

Developed by Alex Yuen, architect, urban designer, housing developer, and native San Franciscan and researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, in collaboration with the Downtown SF Partnership and BOMA SF, this work offers the bold yet practical vision San Francisco needs to move forward over the next generation.

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**When
downtown
becomes
optional,
what makes it
essential?**

In March 2020, downtown shut down.

But the work didn't stop. Instead, it dispersed away from downtown, to zoom rooms, kitchen tables, and the cloud. Offices emptied, foot traffic vanished, and the urban core lost its gravitational pull. Tech—the Bay Area's economic engine—went remote faster than any other industry, revealing how fragile and over-specialized our downtown truly was.

Vacancy rates now hover above 30%. Billions in tax revenue have evaporated. Entire blocks sit inert. But beneath the numbers lies something deeper: downtown no longer supports the daily lives of people. It has too much office, not enough of everything else—housing, childcare, clinics, schools, cultural spaces, third spaces. This is fundamentally a spatial problem, and the response must be spatial too.

This project began as an urban design initiative to confront that reality. Built through a studio at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, it brought together a team of designers and planners to study downtown's past, present, and possible futures.

Freed to investigate widely and broadly, we asked big questions with real-world implications:

- What spaces draw people in?
- What makes a district not just functional, but beloved?
- How do we design for flexibility, sustainability, accessibility, and joy?

This work bridges architecture, planning, finance, landscape, transportation, and culture to not just propose fixes, but a new ecosystem for urban life.

We believe this moment, ripe with challenge, is also rich with opportunity. Downtown San Francisco's foundation remains strong: timeless architecture, human scale, proximity to natural beauty, accessibility and centrality.

But good bones alone don't make a city. This is a once-in-a-generation chance to shape something better, and we can't afford to waste it. What follows is a framework for change: visionary but grounded, aspirational but feasible. We offer it as both provocation and invitation—to imagine what downtown can be, and to help make it so.

A bold reset

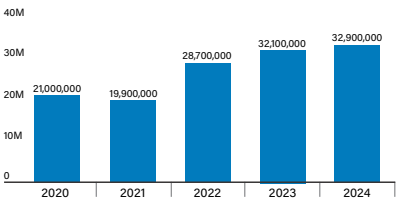
From the Gold Rush to the Great Depression, from bustling port to financial recession, San Francisco has repeatedly boomed and dipped. Now its downtown is at the center of a debate about American cities and their role in a post-pandemic world.

Downtown San Francisco’s office monoculture is felt not only in vacancy statistics, but in empty sidewalks, shuttered storefronts, and quiet streets that once thrived with daily activity. For generations, people came to work in downtown San Francisco, drawn by rhythms of daily life that have now quietly vanished. What remains is a city that looks the same but feels different.

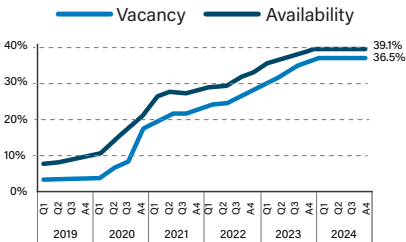
Yet to understand downtown’s potential, we must look beyond the symptoms. Downtown is more than an abstraction. It is shaped by the people who experience it each day. It is also an assembly of spaces that support economic and social life.

Hoping for a return to the past will not bring downtown back. We need to revisit what downtown is and what it can become.

Recovery will require a bold reset rooted in today’s realities and tomorrow’s needs. A thriving downtown comes from vision and deliberate choices, backed by action. We need to see downtown not just as buildings and streets, but as a living system shaped by its people. Real transformation starts by rethinking how space, access, and experience intersect at the city’s core, creating a downtown that can compete with the best neighborhoods San Francisco has to offer.



↑ Visits are increasing in DSFP area via The Downtown SF Partnership

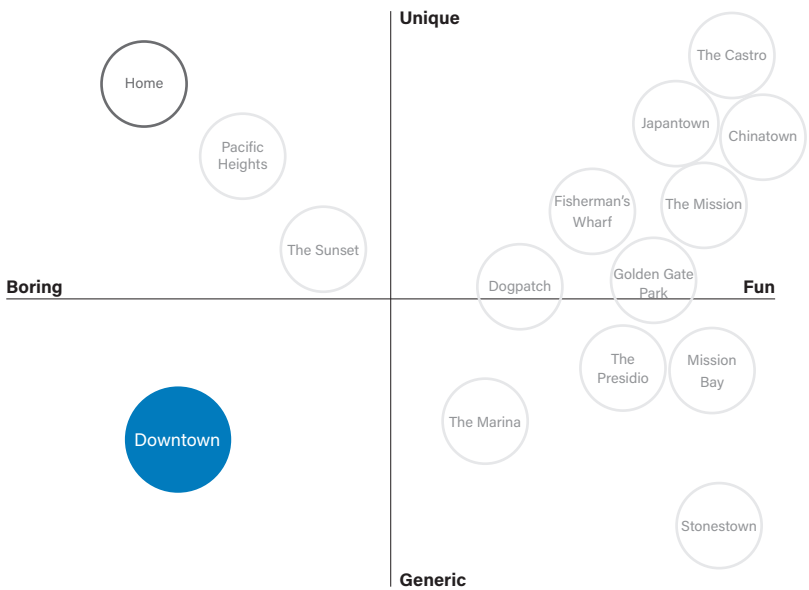


↑ However, office vacancy still hovers over 30% via CBRE



↑ Corner of Sutter and Sansome / Photo by Alex Yuen.

↓ Inventory of SF Neighborhoods / by Clara de Castro and Seoyoung Lee.



More than 43 blocks

Downtown San Francisco sits within a layered system: a neighborhood in a city, and a hub for the region. Having always been connected physically through transit and infrastructure, now it must reconnect culturally, economically, and socially with the city and the wider Bay Area.

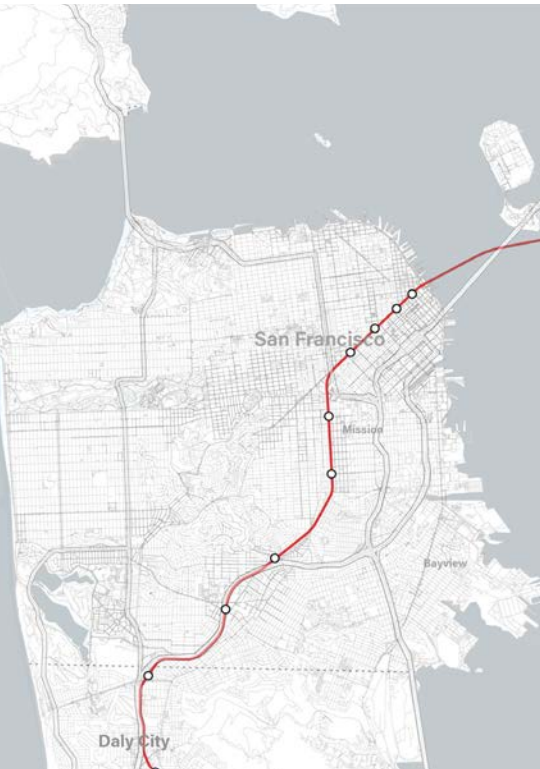
Region

The Bay Area is one of the most attractive places to live and visit, with unparalleled access to world-class nature and innovation. Downtown San Francisco's revival serves the entire nine-county region that depends on its vitality.



City

San Francisco's cultural influence spans globally, but downtown feels disconnected from the vibrant neighborhood life that defines the city. A revitalized downtown reunites these worlds while strengthening San Francisco's role as the region's urban heart.



District

Downtown is the region's primary transit hub—where BART, Muni, ferries, and highways converge. Its transformation into a mixed-use neighborhood would directly benefit the thousands who pass through daily and anchor downtown as the Bay Area's central hub.



Focus on FiDi

This transformation must begin with focused action. Downtown San Francisco's revival starts in the Financial District—its economic heart and the key to unlocking broader change.

The Financial District (FiDi) faces downtown's most urgent challenges—but also holds its greatest promise. As the city's historic and economic core, it symbolizes downtown's identity. It's also where a network of deeply invested stakeholders is situated.

This set of proposals builds directly on the Public Realm Action Plan (PRAP), released in July 2022 by the Downtown SF Partnership and SITELAB Urban Studio. The PRAP identified key priorities and

opportunities. This work translates those insights into concrete design proposals.

What follows are eight strategic interventions that build on the PRAP's foundation. Each project uses different tools—architecture, landscape, placemaking, programming, or real estate development—to catalyze change. Together, they reimagine downtown as a magnetic and resilient neighborhood built for the future.



↑ The Landing at Leidesdorff, originally proposed in the PRAP, has become an active part of the downtown ecosystem. Image by SITELAB urban studio.

Action Areas

Based on these considerations, we identified six Action Areas where the Public Realm Action Plan could have a big first impact, with Action Areas A-C as priority Action Areas.

- A Landing at Leidesdorff***
 - Streets + Ground Floor: Leidesdorff St, Commercial St
- B Downtown Gateway***
 - POPOS + Public Spaces: 101 California St, 100 California St, 50 California St, One California, Robert Frost Plaza
 - Streets + Ground Floor: Market St, California St, Front St, Drumm St, and Davis St
- C Market Oasis***
 - POPOS + Public Spaces: 1 Bush St, Citicorp Center Atrium, Ecker Plaza, One Montgomery, Battery Bridge Mural Project
 - Streets + Ground Floor: Market St, Sansome St
- D Belden Place**
 - POPOS: 555 California St
 - Streets + Ground Floor: Kearny St, Belden Pl
- E Jackson Square**
 - POPOS: Transamerica Redwood Park
 - Streets + Ground Floor: Hotelling Pl, Jackson St, Gold St
- F SoMa/Steuart**
 - POPOS: One Market Plaza
 - Streets + Ground Floor: Steuart St

SITELAB + DOWNTOWN SF PARTNERSHIP

↑ The Downtown SF Public Realm Action Plan (PRAP) from the Downtown SF Partnership and SITELAB urban studio, first unpacked and laid the foundation for meaningful changes and adjustments to be made to downtown.



↑ Spaces like Mechanics Monument Plaza have emerged to create public zones of interaction.

→ Meanwhile, downtown's architecture remains bold and timeless / Photos by Alex Yuen.

↑ Downtown Turnaround builds upon the foundation for downtown change, developed by the PRAP, and overlaps with many of the Action Areas identified by the initial study.



Designing downtown together

This project emerged from a Fall 2024 studio at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where an interdisciplinary team of urban designers, planners, architects, and landscape architects explored downtown San Francisco's transformation potential under the direction of Alex Yuen.

The studio partnered with two organizations already addressing downtown's challenges daily, recognizing that meaningful insights come from those embedded in the district's transformation.



Research grounded in action

Rather than approaching downtown as an abstract design exercise, this work treated it as an urgent opportunity to advance bold practical ideas for the city's future that exist outside of the mandate of the standard architecture or design commission.

The team examined downtown's systems, structures, and spaces at multiple scales, asking what it would take to bring life back to its streets and buildings. This work was grounded in direct field research, with the team spending a week in San Francisco engaging with stakeholders, policymakers, developers, and designers.

This process combined real-time insights with design exploration, moving toward proposals that are locally informed, ambitious, adaptive, and feasible.

Sponsorship & collaboration

Urban design is not a solitary effort. It requires deep, sustained collaboration across public, private, and civic institutions. This studio was made possible through the generous support and engagement of two such partners: Downtown SF Partnership (DSFP) and Building Owners and Managers Association San Francisco (BOMA SF).

As key players in the downtown ecosystem, DSFP and BOMA SF helped launch the initiative with the GSD, connected the studio to local expertise, and supported the work throughout the process.

Transforming downtown requires shared vision and collective action. This close partnership between the Harvard GSD, Downtown SF Partnership, and BOMA SF demonstrates how academic research and industry expertise can combine to create actionable strategies. It exemplifies the kind of collaboration essential to turning vision into reality.

DOWNTOWN SF 
PARTNERSHIP

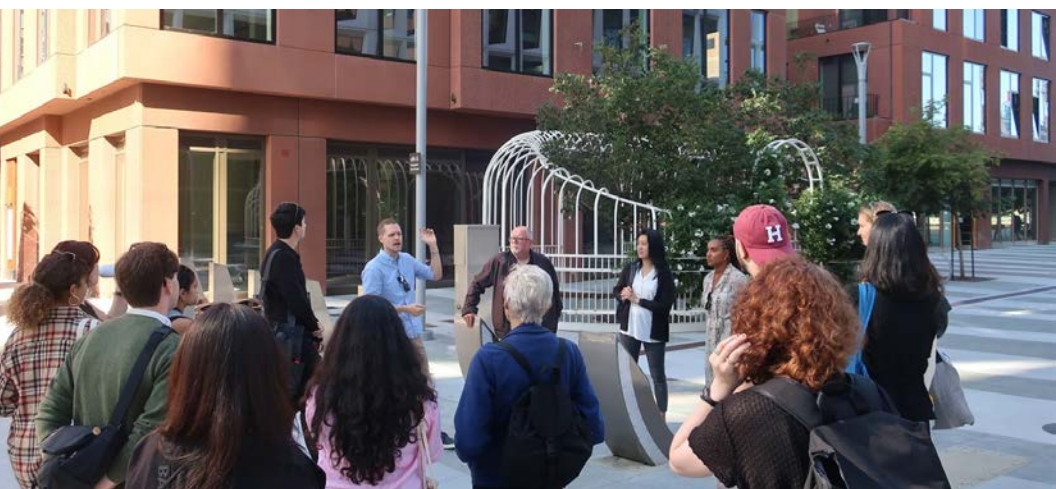


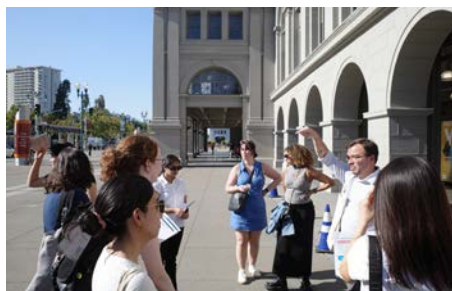
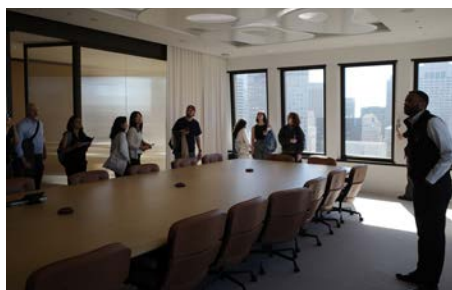
Verify in field

This collaborative approach extended into the field research itself. Great cities are built through dialogue and design. In October 2024, through support from the Downtown SF Partnership and BOMA, the studio traveled to San Francisco to ground this research in the lived experiences of those who know downtown best.

Over the course of a week, the team met with building owners and managers, public officials, designers, developers, and community organizations, each offering essential perspectives on downtown's challenges and possibilities. These conversations grounded the research in human needs, reminding us that these places must be designed for people, not just economic forces.

Beyond stakeholder conversations, the team also documented downtown's rhythms firsthand, tracking how activity rises and falls on weekdays, quiets on weekends, and surges before and after work hours. This week-long immersive engagement gave the team a nuanced understanding of downtown's complexities, ensuring the design proposals grew from real conditions rather than assumptions.





4 strategic steps

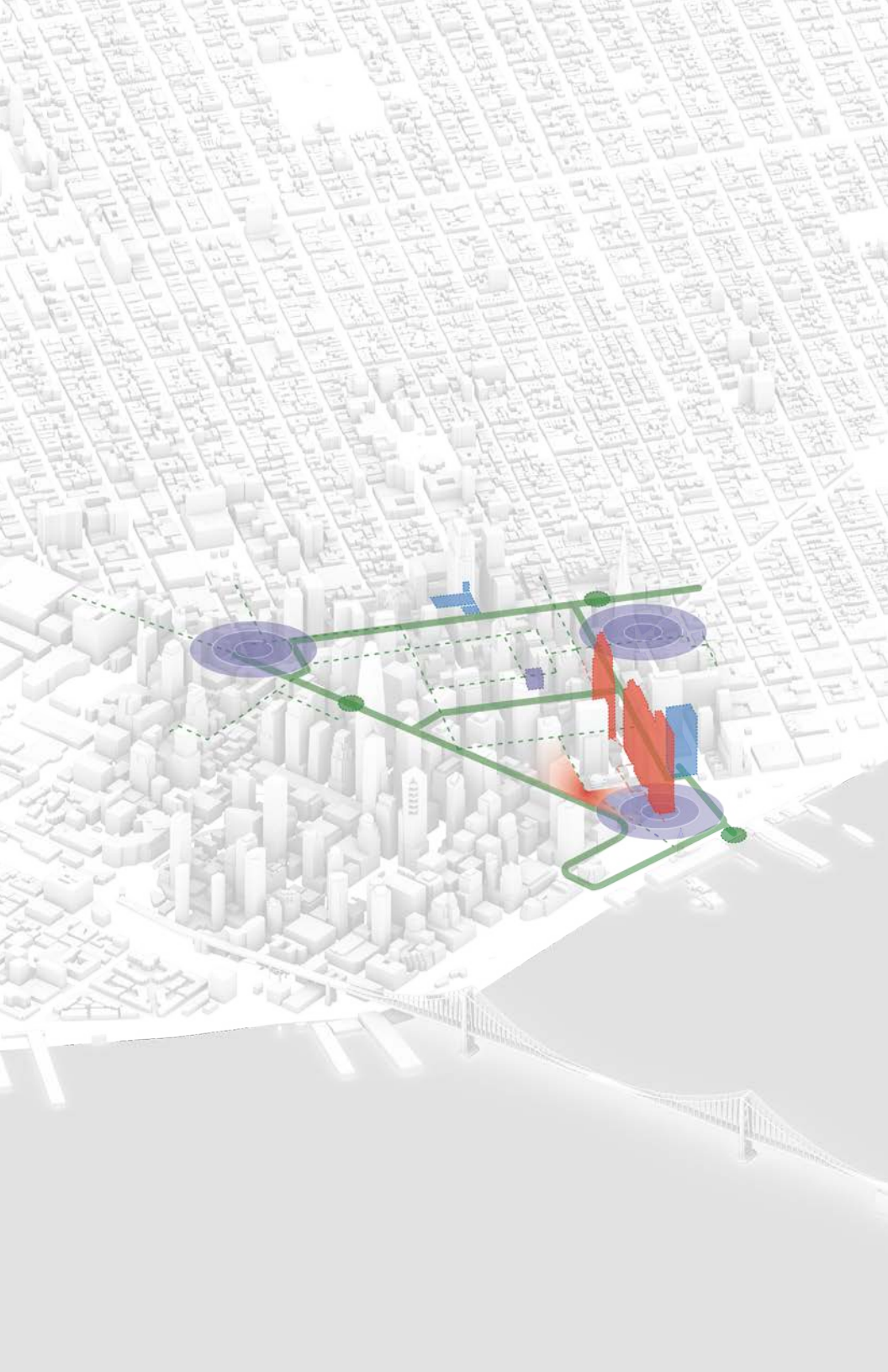
This vision for downtown unfolds in four actionable steps and eight interlocking proposals. Unlike isolated projects that compete for attention and resources, these proposals are designed as an ensemble where each one strengthens the others. Together, they create a network of momentum, reinforcing one another, amplifying impact, and transforming downtown into a cohesive, vibrant neighborhood.

01 **RECLAIM THE PUBLIC REALM**

02 **REUNITE DOWNTOWN WITH
SAN FRANCISCO**

03 **RESHAPE FOR LIVING**

04 **REWIRE FOR EXPERIENCE**



8 transformative projects





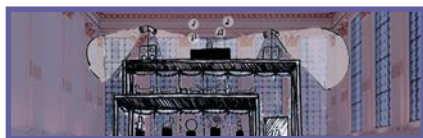
ENTER DOWNTOWN

THE GOLD LINE



**PORTALS TO
DOWNTOWN**

ENCOUNTER SF



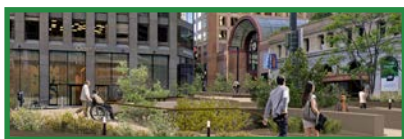
INHABIT DOWNTOWN

**PUBLIC SPACE
FOR PUBLIC GOOD**



**MAKING OUR WAY
DOWNTOWN**

THE PULSE MILE



RECLAIM THE PUBLIC REALM

01

San Francisco happens in the spaces between buildings.

ENTER DOWNTOWN

Priyamvada Gannavarapu
Gyulee Hwang
Mark Philip

THE GOLD LINE

Clara de Castro
Seoyoung Lee

**Downtown's
public spaces
are too
small and
scattered to
matter.**

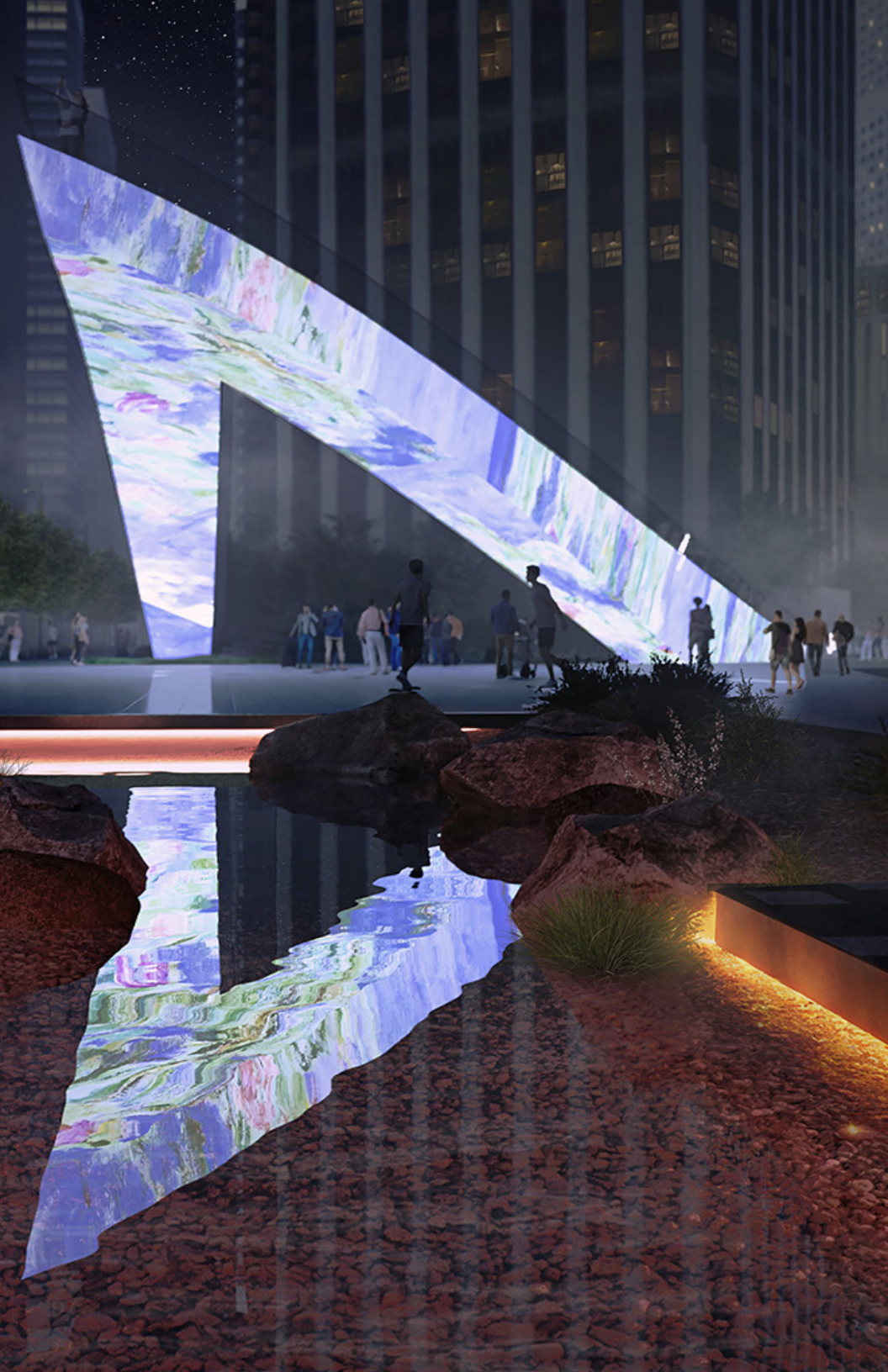


↑ **Privately Owned Public Open Spaces**
Downtown already features a large concentration of POPOS of various sizes and types, but they lie underutilized and inert.

Downtown’s transformation presents an opportunity to move beyond leftover open spaces toward destinations—public spaces that define the neighborhood rather than being defined by zoning codes. This moment puts public space back on the menu as a cornerstone of downtown’s reinvention.

Despite its density, downtown features remarkable open spaces that remain largely hidden and inaccessible. These privately operated public open spaces (POPOS) were designed as refuges for office workers, created as concessions to unlock density bonuses rather than intentional contributions to the public realm. The pandemic has left many eerily

quiet without steady foot traffic. Creating vibrant public spaces means designing for all users: not just office tenants, but also their children, parents, and neighbors. Strategic partnerships between property owners and community-minded organizations can work across lot lines to create connected experiences, building momentum for larger transformations over time.



**To experience
downtown,
you need to
find your
way in.**

ENTER DOWNTOWN



Priyamvada Gannavarapu

Gyulee Hwang

Mark Philip

Downtown's revival starts with a defined threshold. At the meeting point of **Market** and **California** streets, a **new civic space** transforms a familiar but overlooked environment into something lush, inviting, and unmistakably San Francisco.

A new civic anchor and a familiar icon.

Market and California Streets—two of San Francisco's key civic spines—form the unceremonious entrance of the Financial District. **Enter Downtown** reclaims this overlooked corner and gives it new purpose. It invites everyone—white collar, blue collar, or no collar—to experience downtown on their own terms. With its wide street and deep setbacks, California Street offers a rare chance to create a vibrant pedestrian scale space. If any location can anchor a meaningful public realm, this is it.

In great cities, public life is shaped not just by buildings but by the spaces between them. These civic moments are legible, open, and memorable. San Francisco still lacks a defining downtown space that brings people together and marks the city's core. Enter Downtown makes the case for that place—where the edge of building and street becomes the stage for civic life.

New York → Times Square
Tokyo → Shibuya Crossing
Paris → Champs-Élysées
SF → Enter Downtown



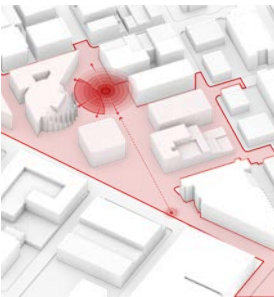
↑ **Turnaround Plaza**

New Cable Car Turn Around on California
between Front and Davis Streets.

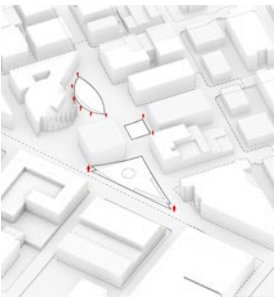
At its heart, the city's iconic **cable car** is elevated
as both landmark and experience, finally given
the presence it deserves.



Making room for public life



↑ Relocate the cable car turnaround to anchor a new center of civic activity along California Street.

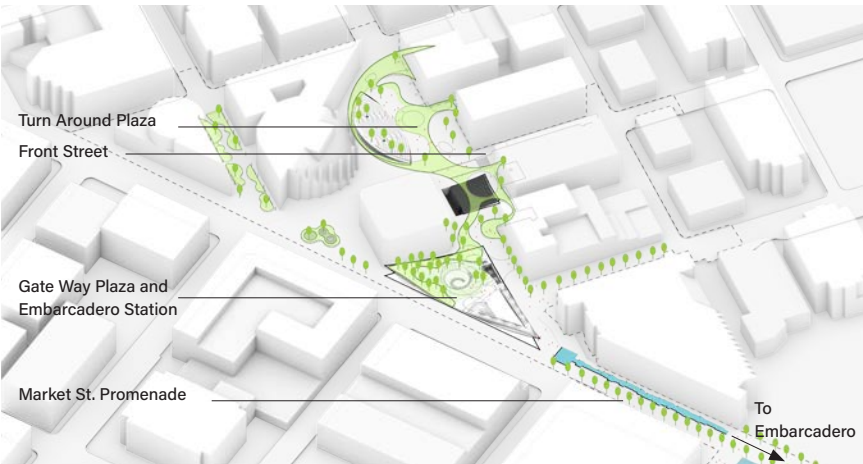


↑ Activate the public realm with outdoor nodes for gathering, programming, and daily use.



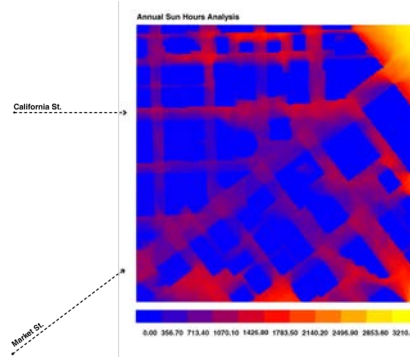
↑ Connect to Embarcadero Station below ground and introduce retail and cultural programming.

Through a series of open spaces, pavilions, and public structures, a variety of zones are created. Two key nodes—**Gateway Plaza** and **Turnaround Plaza**—anchor the site and shape its flow. These spaces draw people across California Street, establish new connections to downtown, **BART**, and the waterfront, and link directly to the food and dining options along Front Street.





Gateway Plaza turns a high-potential site into a welcoming civic space. California Street's unusual width and generous setbacks create the conditions for light, comfort, and openness—qualities often missing in the Financial District. This stretch of downtown receives more sun than most, making it ideal for public life.



The proposal builds on existing ground-floor privately owned public open spaces (POPOS) and connects them through a new pedestrian landscape. By reducing vehicle space and introducing trees, water, and seating, the design invites people to pause, gather, and move through at a human scale.





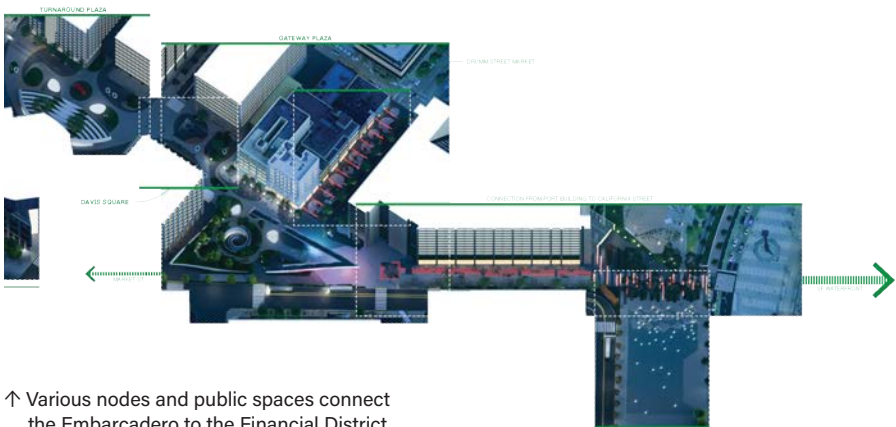
↑ Connections to the Front Street entertainment district allow energy and activity to flow throughout the neighborhood.



↑ The promenade on Market Street clearly marks the route to the water.

Well-lit spaces, active frontages, and inviting paths create **a safe, engaging downtown experience** that extends into the night.

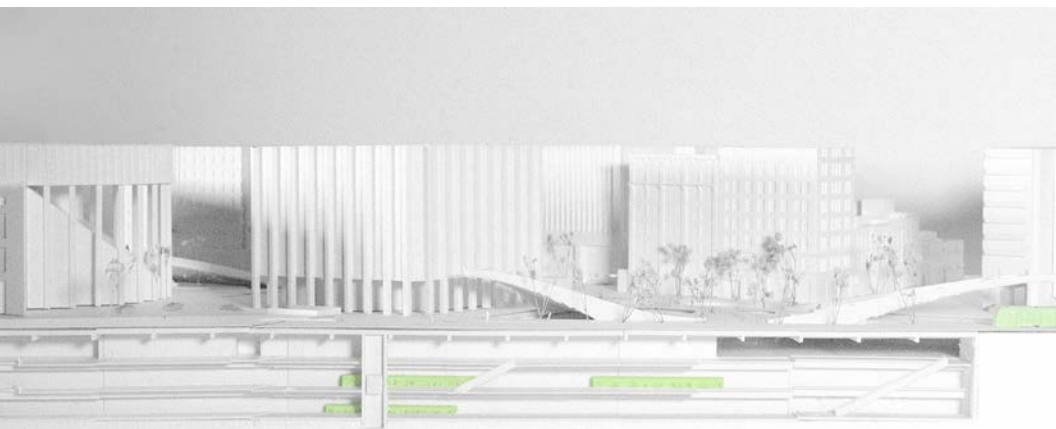
The landscape connects above and below, drawing people into a layered urban experience that invites **movement, discovery, and depth.**



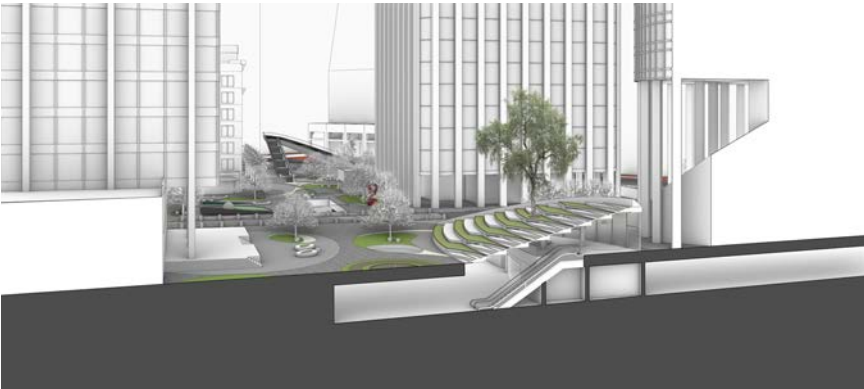
↑ Various nodes and public spaces connect the Embarcadero to the Financial District and mark downtown's front door, before and after work.

→ Scan the QR code or [click the link](#) to view a full video walk through of the project.

↓ Physical model showing the above-ground design and its connection to BART and MUNI below ground.

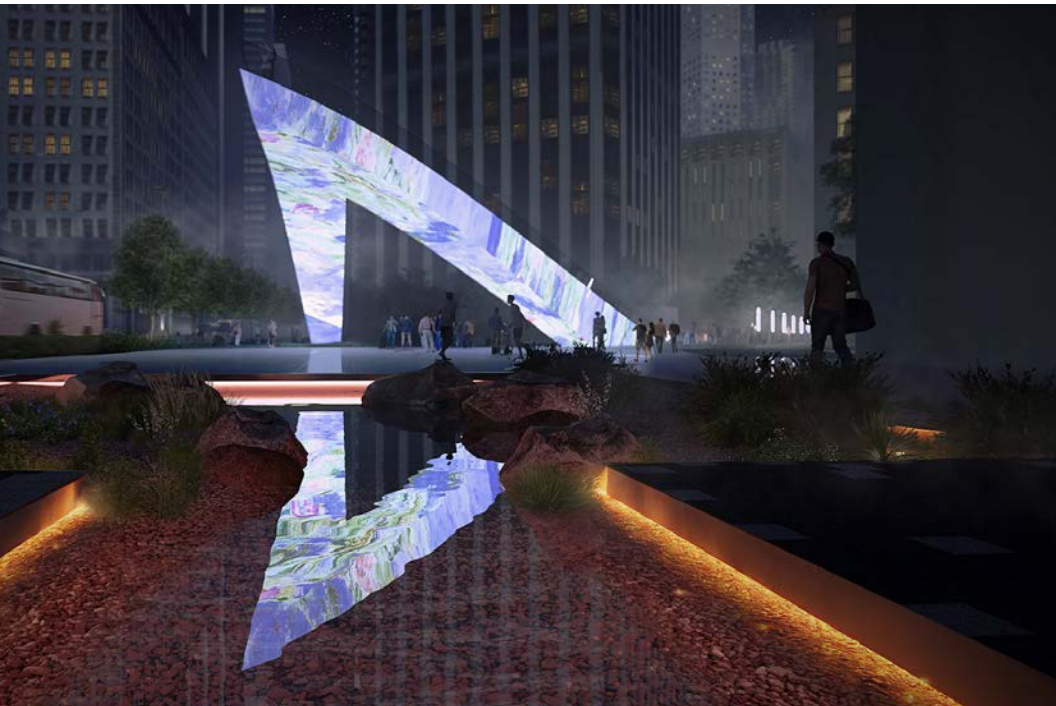


Mark an entrance



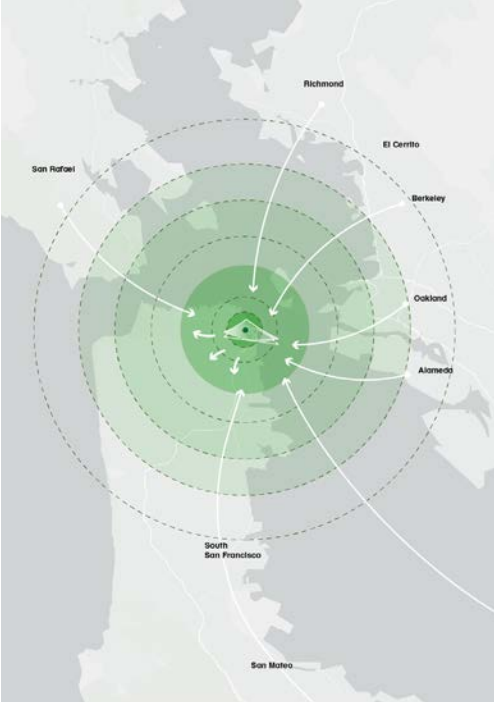
The **Gateway Arch** marks a clear entrance into downtown, drawing pedestrians from both Market and California Streets. During the day, it serves as a visible landmark and point of orientation. At night, it becomes an illuminated sculpture,

adding energy and movement to the district. Whether it's for a morning jog, a midday lunch, or after-work drinks, the arch creates a memorable meeting point at the entrance of the city.



Create a destination

Beyond marking arrival, the project creates reasons to stay and explore. The Gateway Arch and surrounding public spaces establish a new focal point that introduces a fresh way to experience downtown. Its proximity to public and regional transit makes it a natural arrival point for the entire Bay Area, positioning it perfectly to anchor downtown's renewal. Any vision for downtown's future must begin with how people arrive—and this is where that journey starts.



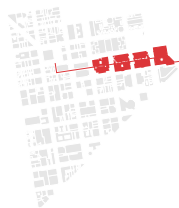
- ↑ The entire zone forms a hub of activity and concentrated programming at the epicenter of both downtown and the Bay Area.
- ↓ Experience California Street and downtown from a whole new perspective atop the Gateway Arch.



**How can
established
architecture and
public spaces be
repurposed for
today's needs?**



THE GOLD LINE



Clara de Castro
Seoyoung Lee

Downtown is already built, but it isn't built for today. **Designed for a 20th-century lifestyle**, many of its buildings no longer meet the needs of the moment. To bring downtown San Francisco back, we must reimagine what's already here, giving familiar places a modern makeover and a **new lease on life**.

The Gold Line is a civic proposal to re-center San Francisco's downtown by connecting three of its most iconic assets: the **Ferry Building**, **Embarcadero Center**, and **Transamerica Pyramid**. While each building holds a distinct place

in the city's history and identity, the spaces between them remain fragmented—shaped by outdated planning, disconnected circulation, and brutalist architecture that turns inward rather than engaging the city.



Stretching just over half a mile, the Gold Line reframes this corridor as a coherent and continuous spine. It is designed to be **legible** in its orientation, **livable** in its public life, and **local** in its programming. More than a path, it becomes a platform for civic activity, cultural moments, and economic reactivation. At once infrastructural and symbolic, the Gold Line offers a bold yet feasible framework to reconnect San Francisco's core with the bay and redefine what it means to experience and arrive in downtown today.



Connecting **3 iconic buildings** across **10 blocks** and along a **10 minute walk**.

Ferry Building → Embarcadero Center →
Transamerica Pyramid → **Downtown San Francisco**



From pyramid to pier



Much of downtown San Francisco was built for a past era. The **Embarcadero Center**, once a modernist icon of integrated office, retail, and hotel space, now exemplifies disconnection—its inward-facing podiums, elevated walkways, and megablocks create barriers instead of connections.

↓ The Gold Line establishes a civic promenade that stretches from waterfront to the heart of downtown, anchored by non-work experience.

Currently, circulation is disjointed, street life is sparse, and ground-level space remains underused. Though anchored by two major landmarks—the Ferry Building and the recently renovated Transamerica Pyramid—the corridor lacks legibility, continuity, and activation. Visual clutter, elevation changes, and unapproachable edges reinforce the experience of disconnection.



← Construction photos of the Embarcadero Center and the Transamerica Pyramid remind us that downtown San Francisco has historically been an incubator of urban design innovation.

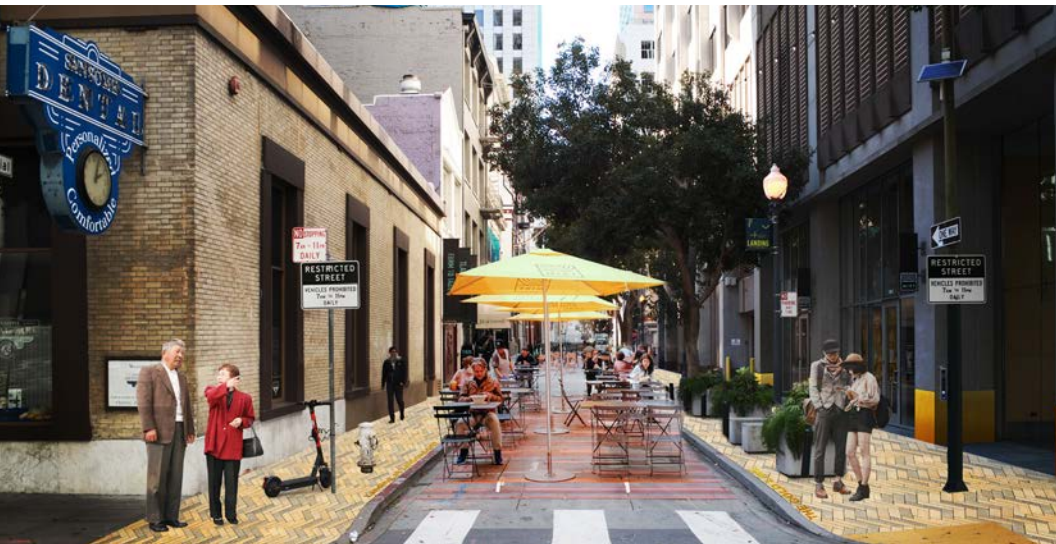
→ A continuation of the ongoing transformations at Leidesdorff point the way to the Transamerica Pyramid's Redwood Park.



The **Transamerica Pyramid's recent renovation** brought new life to its interiors and public spaces, but strong ties to the surrounding city remain limited. **Leidesdorff Alley**, the key link between Transamerica and the Embarcadero Center, presents a clear opportunity. Already targeted by the **Public Realm Action Plan** and improved

through efforts led by **Downtown SF Partnership** and **SITELAB Urban Studio**, Leidesdorff can become a connective hinge. The Gold Line extends this logic—tying together existing projects like the Landing at Leidesdorff and the redesigned Embarcadero Plaza into one continuous civic experience.

↓ Bespoke pavers at Leidesdorff Alley indicate where the Gold Line hits the ground.



Bringing the public to the podium



The Embarcadero Center is the heart of the Gold Line—and its most complex design challenge. Built to be efficient, elevated, and inward-facing, its podiums once embodied a self-contained vision of downtown. Today, that very structure isolates it from the public life of the city.

But what once created disconnection now offers opportunity. This set of interventions reimagines the Embarcadero Center not as an obstacle, but as a platform for civic engagement. Underused rooftops

become gardens, gathering spaces, and cultural venues. Inactive edges are opened up, softened, and programmed with public-facing activity. Interior voids are animated with co-working spaces, food kiosks, and family-friendly zones.

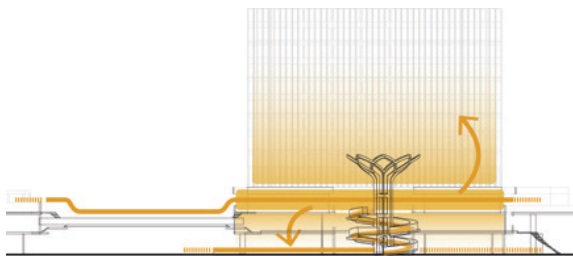
Rather than erase the existing architecture, these moves work with it—flipping its attitude from private to public, internal to external. By inviting the public to the podium, the Gold Line reconnects the Embarcadero Center to the city around it.

↓ Current



↓ Proposed





Office
Activity
Retail

↑ The Gold Line turns the Embarcadero Center podium roof into a space for activity, for shoppers, office works, and the rest of the public.

← The Embarcadero Center's podium roof is transformed into a lush space to gather, play, and experience downtown from a totally new setting.

→ Activities and programs engage office workers, families, and visitors, diversifying downtown's demographic makeup.



A plaza that connects to the water

The spaces at Four Embarcadero Center mark one of downtown's most important thresholds—where the city meets the bay. As ferry traffic increases and Treasure Island comes online, this edge is becoming an even more vital point of arrival. Yet today, the waterfront—arguably downtown's greatest asset—is severed from the city by Embarcadero Boulevard. The Gold Line establishes this site as part of a continuous sequence, linking the waterfront across the Embarcadero and into the heart of downtown.

Regardless of its design, **Embarcadero Plaza** should become both a marker and a conduit: signaling arrival while actively guiding people into the city. Through subtle material cues, flexible programming, and continuous

→ Embarcadero Plaza has the opportunity to draw people into and through the Gold Line, connecting the Bay to downtown and beyond.





↑ The Gold Line integrates downtown into larger civic loops and flows.

pedestrian infrastructure, this space anchors the Gold Line at its most symbolic moment—between pier and pyramid. It also connects to a broader civic network. Embarcadero Center sits at the hinge of several key paths through downtown and other neighborhoods. When rethought as civic infrastructure, this complex can finally fulfill its potential as a central connector in San Francisco's evolving public realm.

↓ The Gold Line is the journey. The bay and downtown are the destinations.



REUNITE DOWNTOWN WITH THE CITY

**Public life
and community
activity are
how the city
comes together.**

**PORTALS TO
DOWNTOWN**

Daisy Son

ENCOUNTER SF

Ellie Lauderback

**Downtown
comebacks
start with
small
victories.**



Not every transformation requires wholesale reinvention. Sometimes the most powerful changes happen at the human scale—through careful adjustments that build on what downtown already has going for it.

Downtown possesses remarkable bones: intimate spaces tucked between towers, timeless architecture that ties the street to the sky, and a clearly defined character that feels distinctly San Francisco. Our challenge isn't to replace these assets, but to fit them to the current moment.

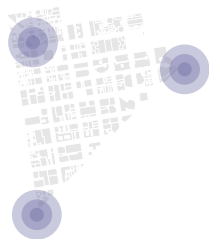
To do so means thinking about individual projects urbanistically—understanding how strategic partnerships

between can [work across lot lines](#) to create connected experiences. It means considering [how interior and exterior spaces can work together](#), and how to [mark downtown's entrances and center more clearly](#). These smaller interventions build momentum, with each successful project creating confidence for the next, establishing a pattern of positive change that can grow into larger transformations over time.



**How can
downtown
strengthen
ties with
next-door
neighbors?**

PORTALS TO DOWNTOWN



Daisy Son

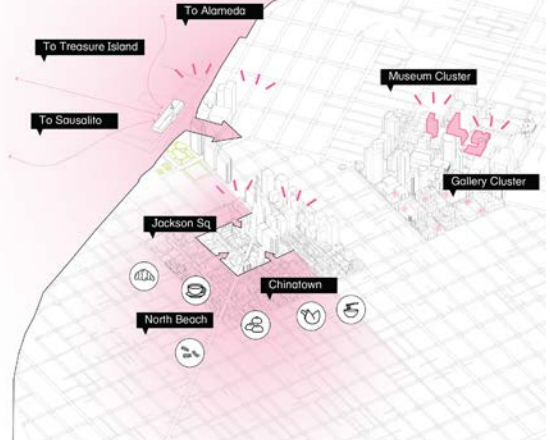


Downtown draws energy from the culture and people that surround it. Its future depends on stronger connections—not just through infrastructure, but also [through the experience of moving between neighborhoods](#). Chinatown, Jackson Square, SoMa, and Union Square carry rich histories, but their connections to downtown feel blurry. A series of portals help make arrival more [intuitive and vibrant](#).

Where the city's culture converges

← At one of downtown's busiest crossroads, public art becomes accessible to thousands of drivers and passengers—reaching far beyond traditional museum walls.

↓ Together, the three portals create active entry points that channel the Embarcadero's waterfront recreation, Chinatown and North Beach's food and drink culture, and SoMa's arts scene directly into downtown's core.



Bringing San Francisco's iconic neighborhoods together through shared culture.

Three strategic entry points transform downtown's edges into active thresholds. The [Embarcadero](#) portal channels waterfront recreation inward, the [Chinatown-North Beach](#) gateway brings food and drink culture downtown, and the [SoMa](#)

connection delivers arts programming to the core. Rather than treating downtown as an island, [these portals create continuous cultural exchange between San Francisco's iconic neighborhoods and its downtown.](#)

A place to meet and eat



↑ By concentrating complementary food businesses in one location, this culinary hub creates the critical mass that makes each vendor more successful while giving visitors multiple reasons to stay and explore.

↓ The transition from Jackson Square's historic scale to downtown's towers creates a unique opportunity for ground-floor dining that feels welcoming rather than overwhelming.

The **Gourmet Square** sits at the crossroads of **Jackson Square**, **North Beach**, **Chinatown**, and the **Financial District**, naturally positioning it as a dining destination for downtown workers and nearby residents. This location already draws people throughout the day;

transforming it into a dedicated culinary hub builds on existing foot traffic while creating new reasons to linger. Planned connections like the **Gold Line** and **Pulse Mile** will amplify this activity, connecting the square to a broader network of downtown destinations.



Downtown as a canvas

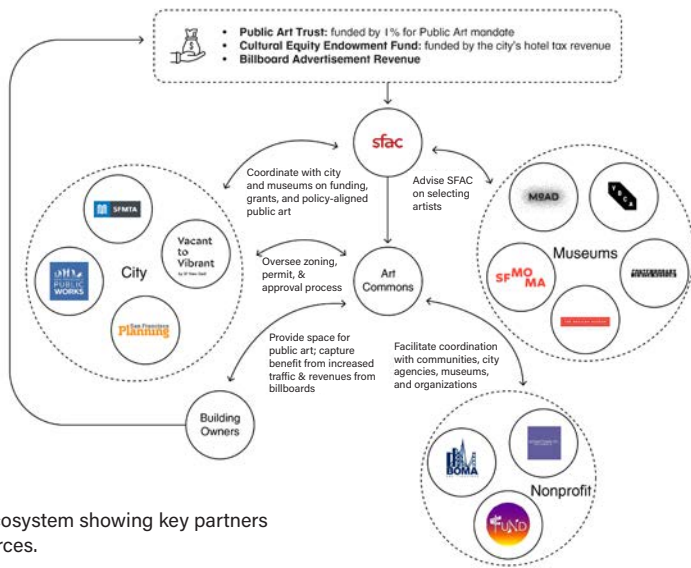


↑ Art enters the public realm through decorative crosswalks, sculptural installations, and digital displays, while partnerships with property owners activate underutilized retail spaces as rotating galleries and artist studios.

The **Art Commons** occupies a strategic position where **3rd Street** crosses **Market** and becomes **Kearny**, bridging **SoMa** and the **Financial District**. Proximity to established cultural institutions creates natural partnerships for public art installations, rotating exhibitions, and adaptive ground-floor gallery spaces.

This intersection already carries significant foot traffic and vehicle traffic; activating it as a creative hub builds on existing flows while strengthening the cultural corridor across Market Street. The result is a **more dynamic entry point to downtown** that draws both planned visits and spontaneous discovery.





→ Art Commons ecosystem showing key partners and funding sources.

Embarcadero Plaza reimagined

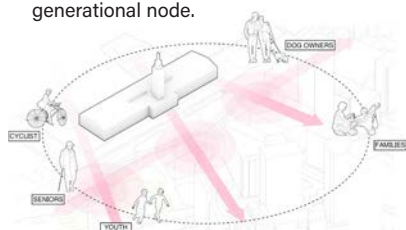
A redesign of **Embarcadero Plaza** is already moving forward through efforts from BXP, owner and operator of the Embarcadero Center and the city. The opportunity lies in **strengthening the plaza's role as a gateway into downtown from the Bay Area's most beloved public space**. By emphasizing recreation—fundamental to Bay Area culture—the plaza can better

serve non-office workers and draw waterfront energy across the Embarcadero into downtown's core.

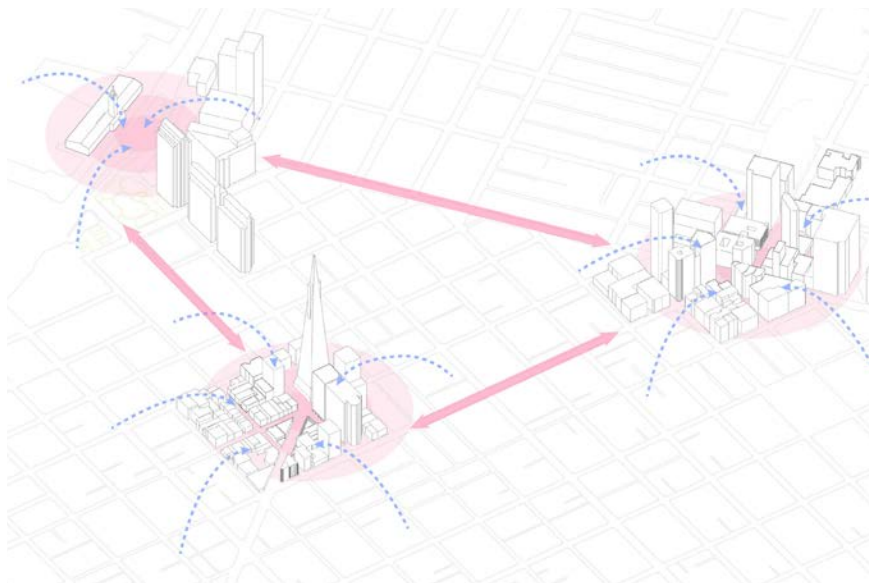
Bringing the portals to life depends on creative **cross-sector collaboration**, connecting city agencies, cultural institutions, nonprofits, property owners, and artists, while tapping existing assets to **build shared opportunity**.

→ Proposed redesign of Embarcadero Plaza, courtesy of BXP.

↓ Embarcadero Plaza as a multi-generational node.



Three portals, one connected downtown

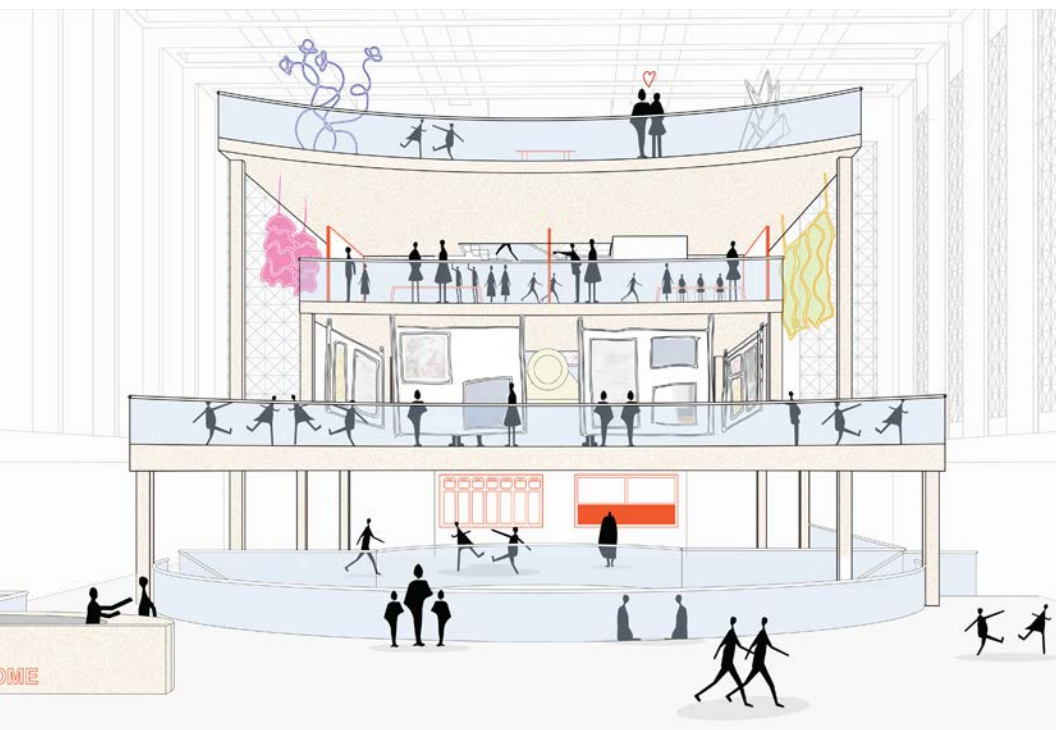


By reframing downtown as a destination, the three portals lay the groundwork for progress, giving people reasons to come downtown and engage with its renaissance.

These strategic interventions work across scales—from individual buildings hosting ground-floor galleries, to blocks transformed by public art, to entire districts [reconnected through cultural programming](#). The portals create clearer, more inviting entrances that pulse with energy from adjacent neighborhoods, welcoming everyone: downtown employees,

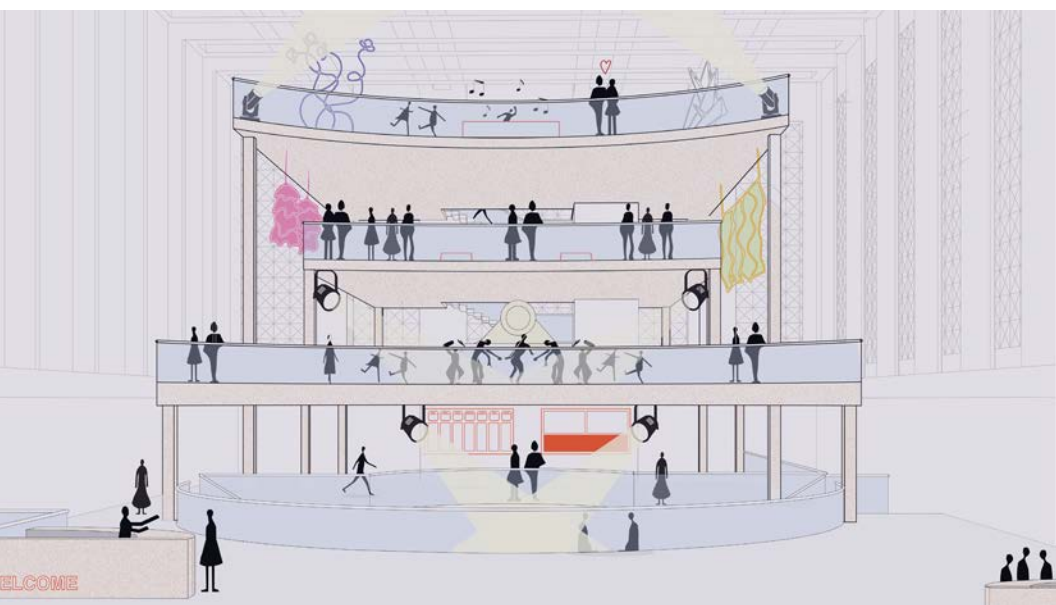
tourists, families, artists, small businesses, students, and seniors. Together, they lay the foundation for a more active, resilient city center that offers not just reasons to visit, but reasons to return and be part of [San Francisco's evolving story](#).

**How can we
transform
overlooked
places to create
third spaces
for the 21st
century?**



ENCOUNTER SF

Ellie Lauderback



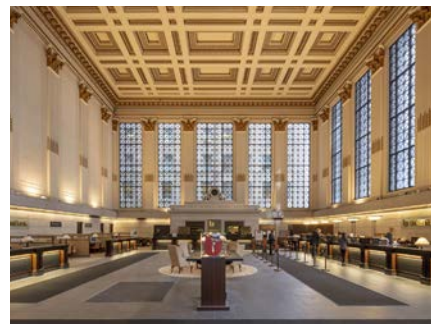
San Francisco's neighborhoods are rich with culture, but downtown feels disconnected. Despite being the city's core, it lacks a cultural space that belongs to everyone.

Encounter SF fills that gap by reimagining a vacant historical landmark as the city's **first one-stop, cross-San Francisco cultural space**.



Encounter SF reimagines the historic 400 California Street building, not only as a **cultural center**, but also as a **model for adaptive reuse**. Vacant since 2021, this 1908 Beaux Arts landmark is transformed into a flexible, community-driven space, demonstrating how **historic preservation** and **adaptive reuse** can coexist.

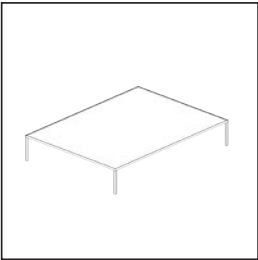
↑ Located in the heart of downtown, the new cultural center will draw people in, encourage them to linger, direct foot traffic to nearby destinations, and strengthen connections across the city.



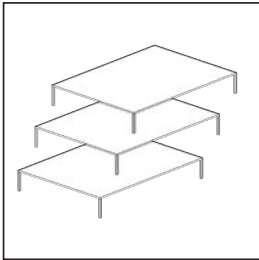
↑ 400 California Street Exterior and Interior.

Encounter SF transforms a vacant landmark into a civic hub, bringing neighborhood **energy** to the **heart of downtown**.

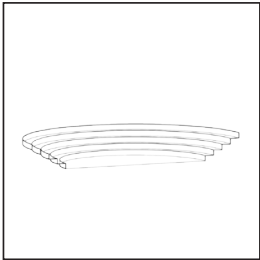
Reuse with a purpose



↑ Create new ground.



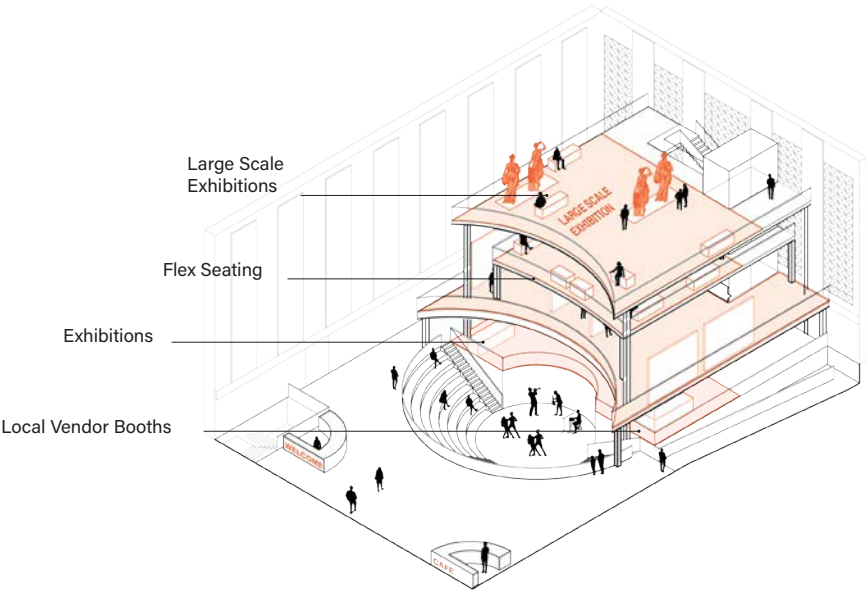
↑ Multiply new ground.



↑ Establish central forum.

Working within the critical constraints of **historic preservation standards**, the design adds interlocking platforms that double usable space, creating new surfaces for gathering, expression, and experimentation.

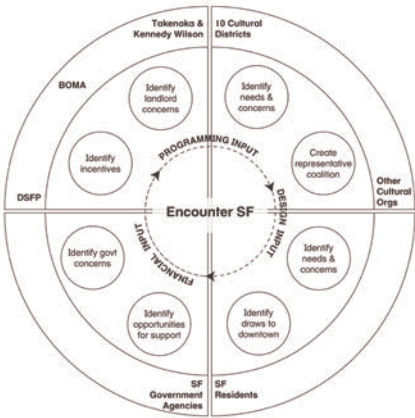
Each level is a blank slate that can be reconfigured with modular elements for exhibition one day, performance the next. The result is a building that's both structured and spontaneous.



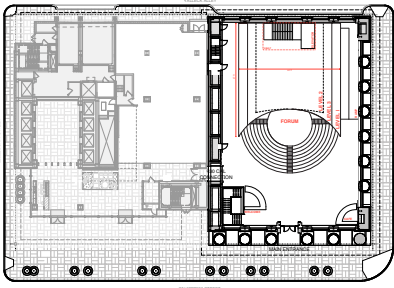
Success relies on community buy-in

Encounter SF's success is rooted in collaborative governance. From artists to local organizations, four stakeholder groups co-create and co-steward the project. From this process could emerge a new entity with representation from all four groups to oversee the development and management of the center.

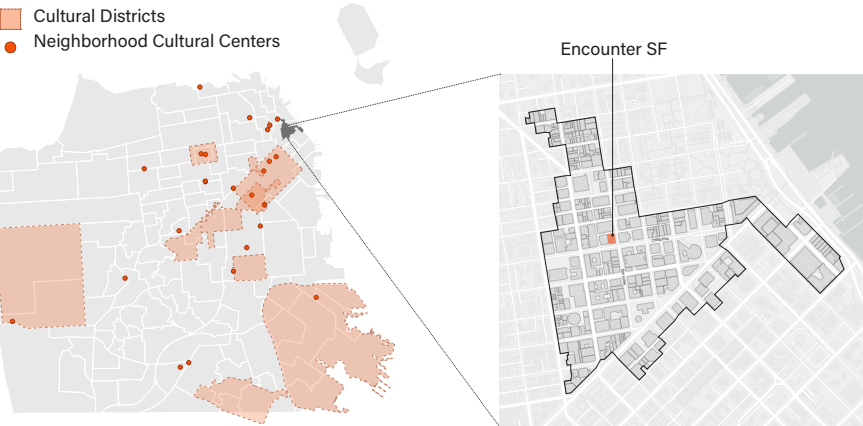
The space becomes a **programmatic heart for downtown**. As the city's cultural hub, Encounter SF builds on the city's greatest strength, its **diverse neighborhoods** and **vibrant cultural districts**, by connecting and amplifying existing communities and organizations.



↑ Encounter SF is built on strategic partnerships and collaboration between the building operator, community organizations, city government, and citizens.



- Cultural Districts
- Neighborhood Cultural Centers



↑ Downtown is the only part of San Francisco without a dedicated cultural center. Encounter SF provides what's been missing.

RESHAPE FOR 03 LIVING

**Downtown doesn't
just need a return
to the office.
It needs a return
to community.**

INHABIT DOWNTOWN

Harry Liner

**PUBLIC SPACE
FOR PUBLIC GOOD**

Jada Rossman

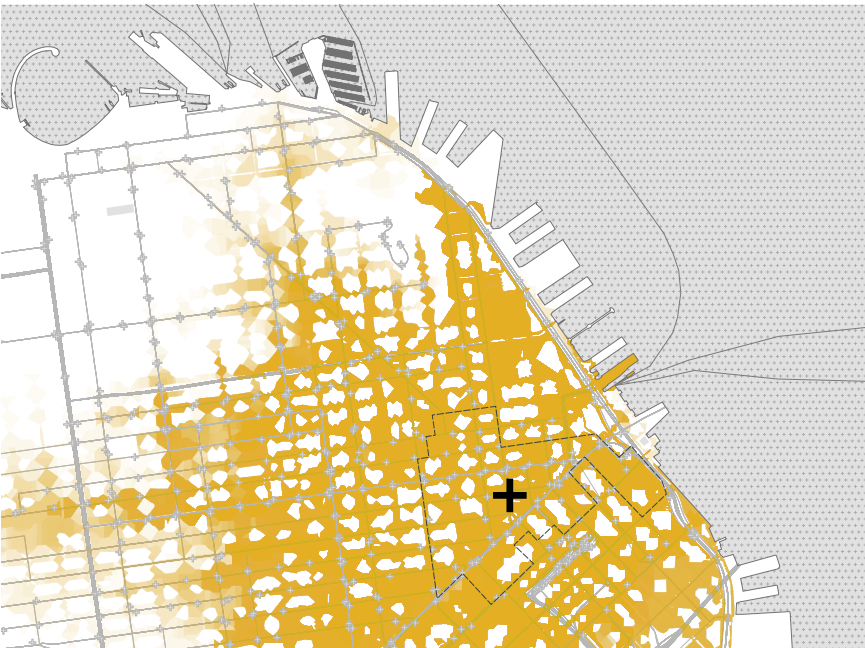
**San Francisco
needs to build
82,000 housing
units by 2031.**

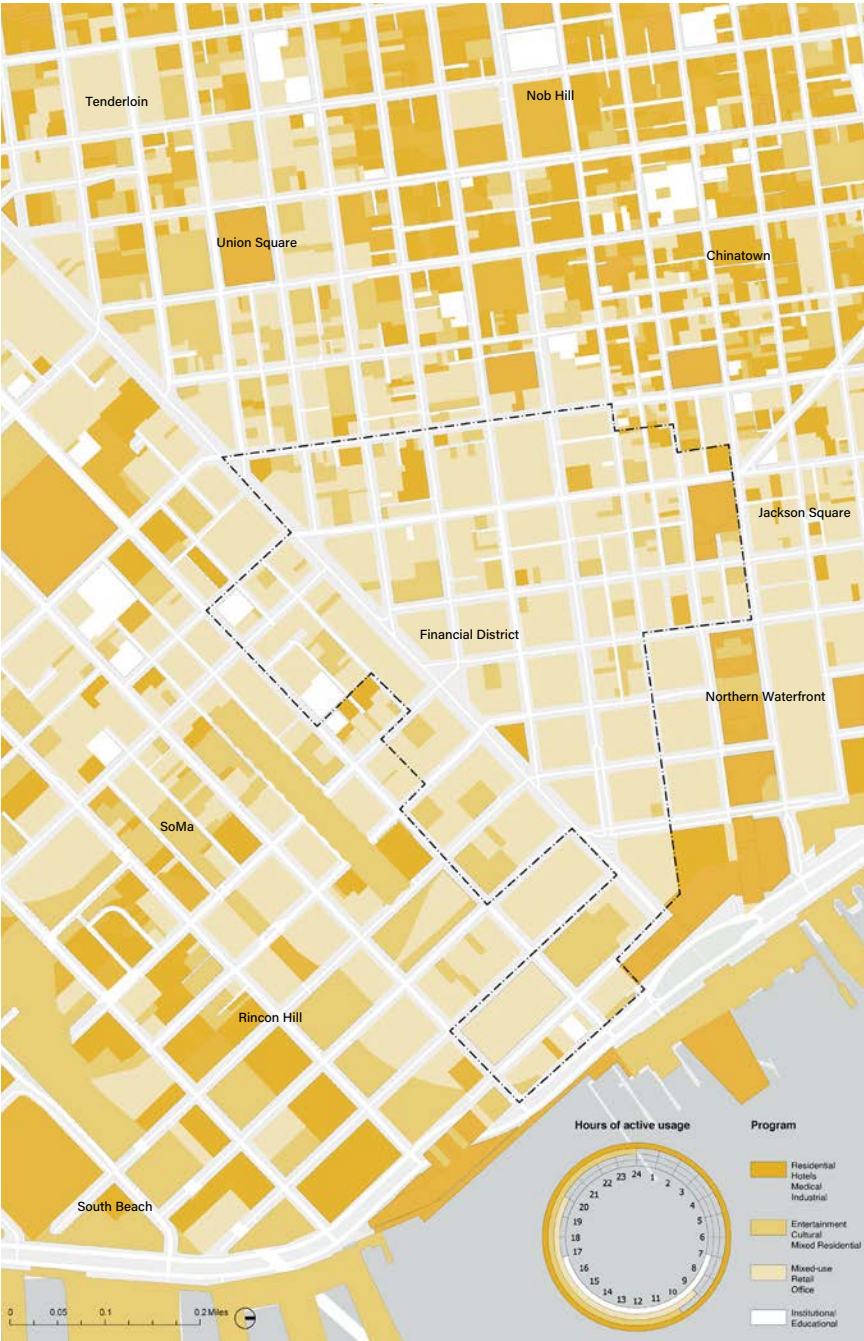
Where infrastructure leads, lifestyle follows. Downtown should anchor a 24/7 community.



↑ To meet its Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) goals, San Francisco must build 82,000 units by 2031. At its current rate of permitting and construction, this is nowhere near feasible. / Gyulee Hwang.

↓ The heart of the Financial District offers a 20-minute transit shed throughout downtown and to surrounding neighborhoods, creating the basis of an accessible community. / Mark Philip.





↑ The blocks surrounding the Financial District are already places where life outside of 9 to 5 is taking place. Downtown can bridge this gap. / Priyamvada Gannavarapu and Roua Atamaz Sibai.

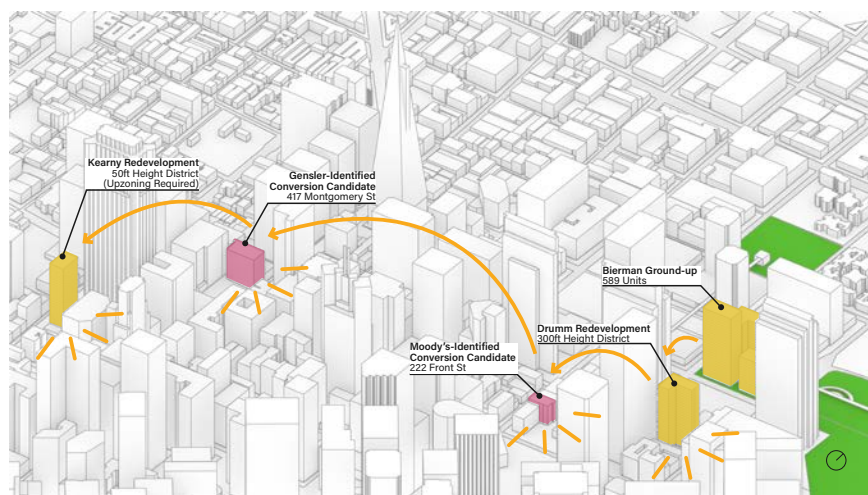
**Building some
of those units
downtown is
going to take
more than
conversions.**

INHABIT DOWNTOWN



Harry Liner

A better public realm sets the stage, but **housing** brings it to life.



New residents will amplify the impact of these spaces, making them **active, cared for, and truly part of daily life.**



Inhabit Downtown supports **housing, wellness, and public life** on underutilized land. It moves us toward a city center where people don't just work, they also live and recreate.

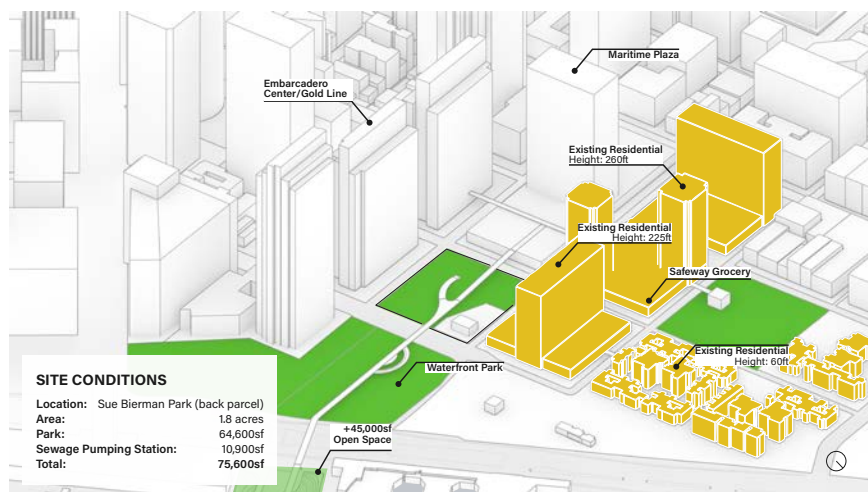
Downtown's housing shortage is stark. Within the Downtown SF Partnership boundaries, fewer than 315 residential units exist—a void where a neighborhood should be. Converting office buildings is slow and expensive. New construction faces regulatory hurdles. Public land offers the city's most direct path forward.

Sue Bierman Park's back parcel represents that opportunity. This city-controlled site sits adjacent to transit, schools, open space, and the waterfront—precisely where housing belongs. Rather than

leaving valuable downtown land underutilized, strategic infill can create new homes while enhancing the public realm around them.

The project demonstrates how housing and public space can strengthen each other. New residents activate surrounding areas throughout the day. Ground-floor spaces support neighborhood-serving businesses. The result moves downtown beyond its 9-to-5 identity toward a place where people choose to live, work, and build community.

As public space grows, so should housing.

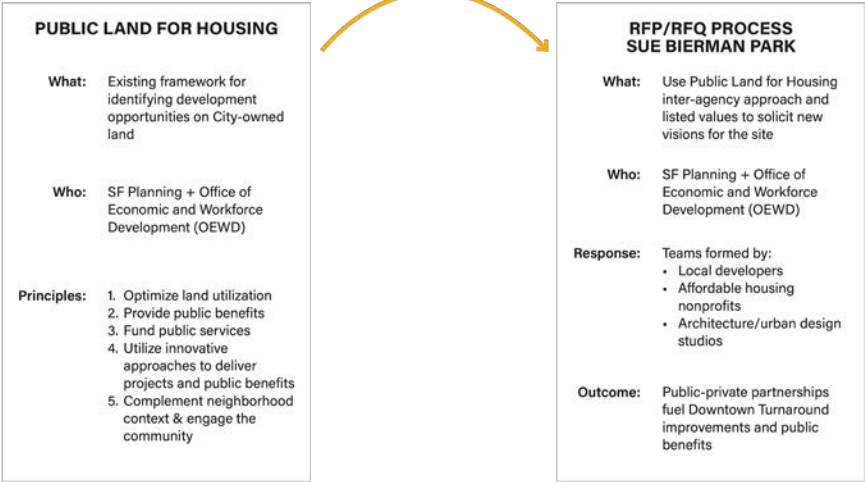


Housing creates downtown's 24/7 vitality. New residents activate public spaces and attract investment.

Downtown faces a chicken-or-egg problem. People won't want to live here until conditions improve—but conditions won't improve without more people. Sue Bierman Park's back parcel illustrates this challenge perfectly. While the city typically protects park land from development, this severely underutilized space could serve downtown better as housing—especially as major public space investments activate Embarcadero Plaza and other sites throughout the district.

Rather than isolated investments that struggle without supporting uses, downtown needs complementary programs that reinforce each other. New residents would activate the enhanced public spaces being created downtown, while those improved public amenities make downtown housing more attractive. [This systematic approach ensures each investment strengthens the others, creating a sustainable ecosystem rather than hoping individual projects succeed in isolation.](#)

Process to outcome



The city holds the key to unlock housing at this strategic site. Using the City's Public Land for Housing policy tool, this follows proven frameworks from other developments like around the

Transbay terminal. By acting on city-controlled land, this project could stimulate broader private development and [establish the City as a strategic partner in downtown's transformation.](#)



↑ New housing on public land establishes a residential anchor near key transit, retail, and open space. Mid- and high-rise buildings introduce density without overwhelming the neighborhood scale.



↑ Every new resident strengthens the network. Downtown Turnaround's public space improvements link to existing residential clusters, stitching together a fragmented downtown into a coherent, livable whole.

**How can we
make spaces
for human
connection and
engagement?**



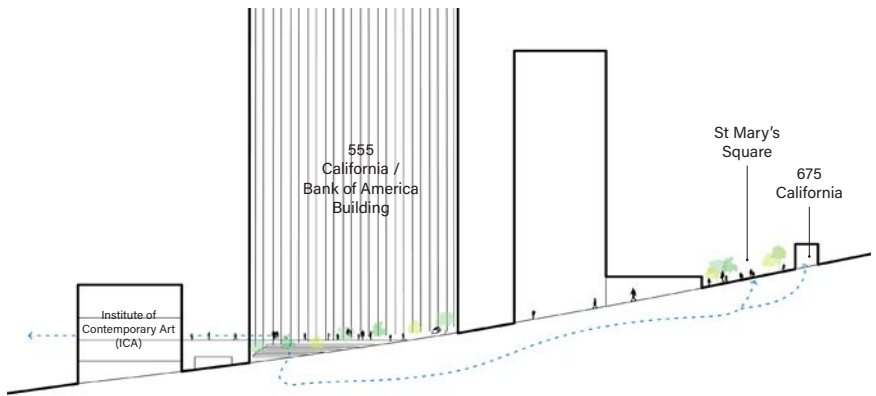
PUBLIC SPACE FOR PUBLIC GOOD



Jada Rossman



Community-driven programming activates downtown's underused spaces, creating gathering places that **appeal to visitors of all types** throughout the day. These human-scale interventions move downtown towards becoming a **complete neighborhood**, not just an office district.



Downtown's transformation happens when scattered spaces start working together. While major investments reshape buildings and public space, smaller interventions can weave the district into a cohesive whole. Three spaces along California Street—the Bank of America plaza, St. Mary's Square, and 675 California—offer immediate chances to test how this connection works.

Together, these sites create an urban corridor where people can discover, linger, and move naturally through downtown. Rather than fixed corporate amenities, they become flexible community spaces that can host morning tai chi, lunchtime performances, or evening markets. This adaptability lets coordinated interventions respond to the district's need for diverse programming and activation.

← The plaza between Bank of America and the ICA is the ideal platform for seasonal design competitions, creating an element of physical dynamism for the district.

↑ California street rises toward Kearny, and energy follows. A reimagined street scape builds momentum where the block meets the hill.

→ 675 California, now vacant, can offer career, financial/tech literacy, housing, and older adult services.

→ POPOS are no longer inert slabs of concrete, but places people want to be.



REWIRE FOR 04 EXPERIENCE

**Downtown should
be somewhere
you move through,
not past.**

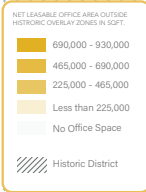
**MAKING OUR WAY
DOWNTOWN**

Roua Atamaz Sibai

THE PULSE MILE

Sheyla Chevarria
Naomi Mehta

**All of downtown,
not just its office
buildings, is one
big adaptive
reuse project.**



Opportunity:
good bones, existing flows and spaces.

83



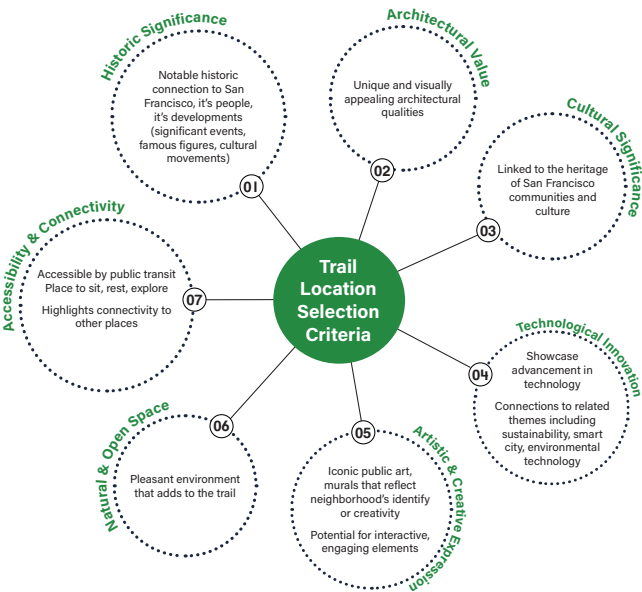
**Currently,
downtown's
unclear street
hierarchy
hinders this
transformation.**

MAKING OUR WAY DOWNTOWN



Roua Atamaz Sibai

Downtown San Francisco is full of cultural treasures, but few people know how to find them. Despite its walkability, downtown currently lacks intuitive connections between its landmarks, public art, and open spaces. This low cost and immediately implementable proposal redefines downtown as a destination to connect, explore, and experience the vibrant essence of San Francisco.



- ← Downtown is home to countless buildings and spaces of value and significance. Highlighting these urban assets would create reasons for visitors and locals to explore that the district currently lacks.
- The trail moves not only across the streets, but also vertically, through rooftops, lobbies, and Privately Owned Public Open Spaces (POPOS). These overlooked access points help reveal the city in layers.

Cultural heritage framework

The project uses **cultural heritage as connective tissue**, linking architecture, history, public art, and innovation across downtown. Stops are chosen based on the seven criteria latent in much of the current physical fabric of downtown.

Three themed trails—**Art, Architecture & History, and Heritage**—allow users to explore the city through different lenses.

Cultural Heritage

Definition

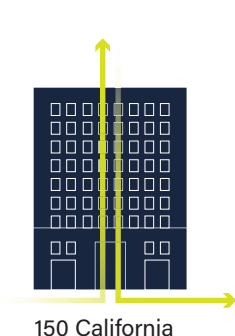
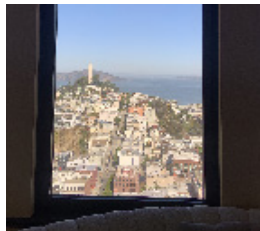
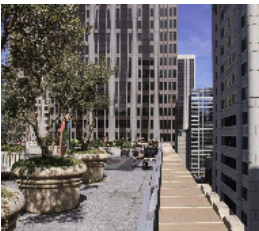
Cultural heritage includes artifacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics

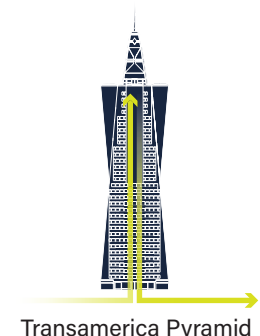
Types

- ① **Tangible Cultural Heritage**
Movable: books, artworks, clothes
Immovable: buildings, monuments, historic spaces
- ② **Intangible Cultural Heritage**
Non-physical aspects, social customs & values
- ③ **Natural Heritage**
Flora & fauna, biodiversity
- ④ **Digital Heritage**
Computer-based materials which are born digitally

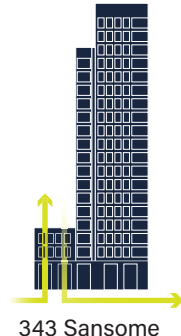
Downtown's micro-destinations—murals, historic lobbies, rooftop gardens, quaint alleys—accumulate into something larger. Organizing them into trails transforms downtown from a place you pass through into one you explore. Individual assets become **part of a larger cultural destination**.



150 California



Transamerica Pyramid



343 Sansome

Designed for discovery

Wayfinding becomes storytelling. Visitors navigate the trail using physical maps, digital apps, and augmented reality to unlock stories embedded in the city.

By reinforcing existing street and spatial hierarchies, the project gives people clearer cues on how to move and why.

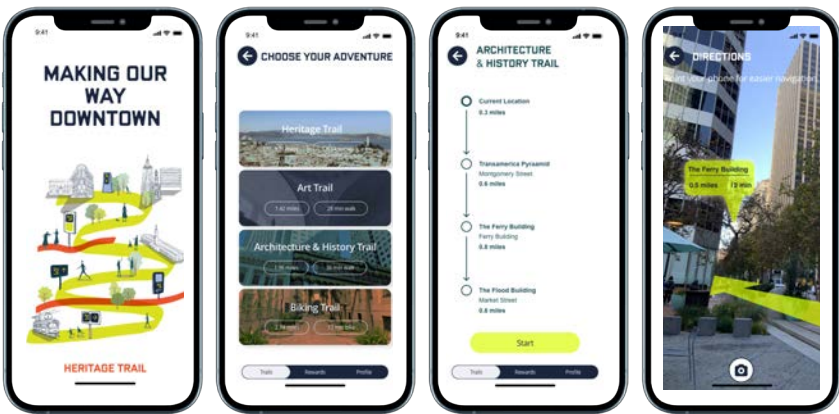
Clear wayfinding creates the conditions for discovery and connection.



↓ The trail brochure highlights key stops along the route, revealing downtown's hidden treasures often overlooked.



A trail that tells the city's story



↑ A mobile app provides navigation and contextual stories at each stop. QR codes trigger audio content about murals, buildings, and local history. The app connects cultural discovery to local businesses through recommended stops and partnership incentives.

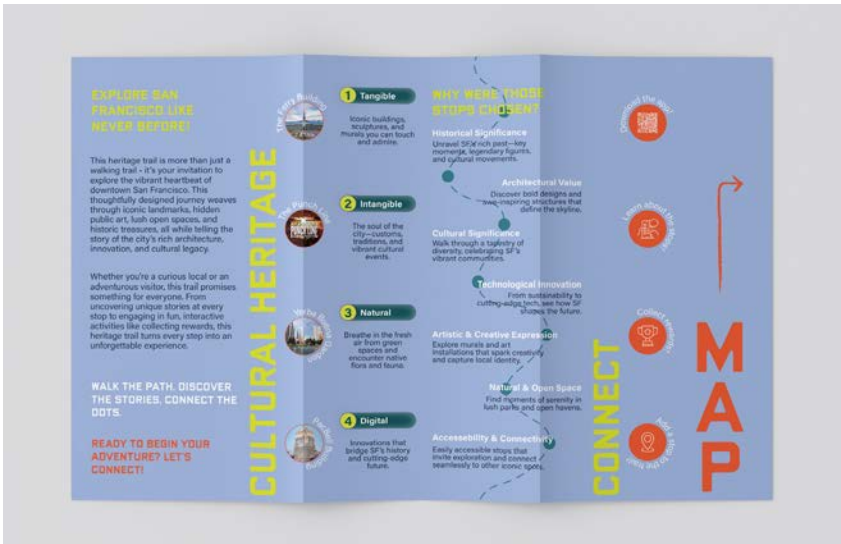


Scan to use the app!

Low-cost, quick-build

With minimal investment, this project reshapes how people experience downtown and invites visitors to engage with the area beyond its role as a workplace hub.

↓ Visitors can learn about the trail and the significance of each stop and discover what cultural heritage means in the context of the trail.

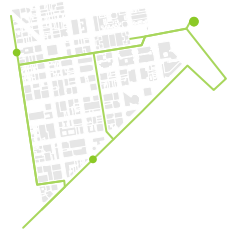


**How do we
reshape
downtown
into an active
experience,
not just a
district?**



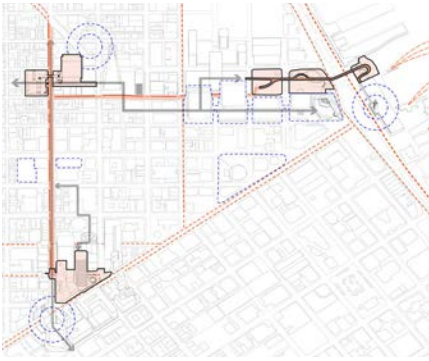
THE PULSE MILE

Sheyla Chevarria
Naomi Mehta



Downtown's transformation requires physical connections to link future improvements. While individual projects activate specific sites, a continuous loop can **weave these interventions into a unified experience.**

→ Landmarks like the Transamerica Pyramid and Embarcadero Center become part of a connected sequence that leads seamlessly to the Bay.



↑ New and existing spaces—POPOS, alleyways, and plazas—are transformed into anchor points along an inviting path.



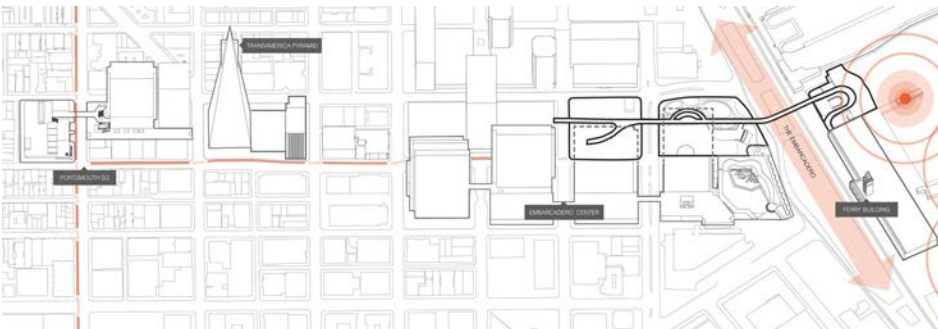
↑ Infusing green infrastructure and programming, the Pulse Mile reframes leftover downtown space as shared community terrain.

Stitch downtown edges together

The Financial District's boundaries tell different stories. Market Street creates a clear southern edge, but the district's other borders—along the Embarcadero waterfront, through Chinatown's Portsmouth Square, and south to SoMa—offer natural circulation paths that can connect rather than divide. These boundary zones become opportunities to create flows between neighborhoods,

integrating the Financial District with surrounding communities rather than isolating it.

The Pulse Mile weaves a multi-level path for walking and cycling along the district's western and southern edges. It links plazas, alleys, and POPOS into a continuous circuit, transforming leftover spaces into vibrant connectors where movement meets gathering.



Embed moments in movement



Key moments anchor the loop by channeling energy from the waterfront and adjacent neighborhoods into downtown. The loop creates a two-way flow where downtown's edges defined

by existing buildings and civic spaces channel movement and activity from Chinatown, SoMa, and the Embarcadero inward, while also extending downtown's energy outward to these communities.

↓ Where the loop meets the water, it opens to space, sky, light. These immersive landscapes reconnect to the shoreline's natural rhythms.

↑ The pulse loop integrates into tight alleyways and amplifies existing public spaces.





Walking , running, and cycling are essential aspects of Bay Area living that the Pulse Mile leverages to **transform utilitarian movement into community experience**. Rather than simple transportation infrastructure, the loop creates spaces where commuting, gathering, and recreation happen simultaneously—turning the journey within downtown and between neighboring districts into destinations themselves.

↑ Running atop the Sue Bierman park and across the Embarcadero, this engaged path ties the city to the Bay.



← Both a mobility framework and a recreational amenity, the loop closes long-missing gaps in pedestrian infrastructure between the city's most active waterfront zones and its vital thoroughfares.

NEXT STEPS



From future vision to downtown reality.

DESIGN DIALOGUE

PRINCIPLES FOR
THE REVITALIZATION

Alex Yuen

Design dialogue

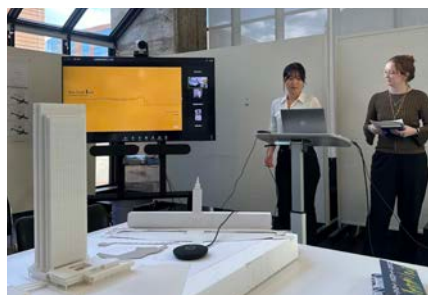
In December 2024, the Downtown Turnaround framework was presented to a panel of urban planning and design experts from San Francisco and across the country.

Panelists responded to different aspects of the work. Some were drawn to the boldness of certain proposals, others focused on the practical feasibility of specific interventions. What emerged clearly was consensus around a central challenge: downtown transformation requires unprecedented collaboration between public agencies, private developers,

community organizations, and cultural institutions.

The core tension throughout the discussion was implementation—how to move from compelling ideas to concrete action. These exchanges pushed the research team to refine both the proposals and their framing, sharpening the focus on strategies that could realistically gain traction across multiple stakeholders.

The insights from this review directly influenced the final framework presented in this report, ensuring the work addresses not just what downtown could become, but how it might actually get there.





Photos by Anita Kan.

Final review panel

Claude Imbault

VP of Planning & Economic Development
Downtown SF Partnership

Laura Crescimano

Co-founder and Principal
SITE LAB Urban Studio

Sarah Dennis Phillips

Executive Director
San Francisco Office of Economic &
Workforce Development (at time of event)

Aaron Fenton

SVP of Development
BXP

David Harrison

Associate Director of Advocacy
BOMA San Francisco (at time of event)

Diana Lind

Founder and Author
The New Urban Order

Joe McCarthy

Vice President
SKS Partners

Cyrus Sanandaji

Founder and Managing Principal
Presidio Bay Ventures

Cathy Simon FAIA

Architect and Urban Designer

Sean Webster

Manager, Level Up Downtown Initiative
Downtown Boston BID

Principles for revitalization

Downtown San Francisco's transformation won't happen by accident. Change requires intention, coordination, and bold action. These five principles distill the lessons from the research into a framework for moving forward.



Establish legibility

Downtown must be easy to physically read, navigate, and enjoy. People require clear pathways, intuitive wayfinding, and welcoming entry points that make the district feel accessible rather than intimidating. When a neighborhood is legible, it invites exploration and creates the kind of spontaneous encounters that make cities come alive.

Make value visible

Deliver experiences that people can see, touch, and feel immediately. Lead with programming, activation, and tangible benefits that give residents and visitors compelling reasons to choose downtown over anywhere else. Clear value creates the difference between a district people talk about visiting and one they actually do.

Practice collaboration

Great neighborhoods emerge from many hands, not master plans. Competing visions establish the creative tension that builds resilient, multifaceted places where different communities can thrive. Downtown's transformation requires developers, residents, businesses, and city leaders to work as co-creators, understanding that everyone's success depends on the whole district succeeding.

Think multiscalar

Think in layers of time and scale simultaneously. Quick wins tomorrow build momentum for transformative projects a generation from now, while major infrastructure investments create the foundation for countless smaller innovations. Like a well-told story, downtown's evolution requires carefully orchestrated beats, some immediate, some long-term, that compound into lasting change.

Dream big

San Francisco has always been defined by bold moves, not cautious increments. This moment demands world-class ambition that demonstrates the city's innovative spirit rather than playing it safe with borrowed solutions. We should set the bar high enough that success becomes a model other cities want to follow.

A city we can shape

As a high school student in the 2000s, I chose to go downtown. Every day after school, I'd get off BART at Civic Center, Powell, Montgomery, or Embarcadero before transferring to Muni. Drawn by the energy and the feeling of being part of something bigger, I'd study in cafes and plazas, energized by the city around me. When the ballpark opened, I'd cram onto Muni Metro with hundreds of others to catch the first pitch. From my college dorm, I watched Giants and Warriors championship parades fill Market Street with pure joy.

We don't have to think back too far to remember what a great downtown can be. But while nostalgia is comforting, it is not a strategy. The challenge in front of us is also an opportunity to evolve what downtown is: to make it better than ever so that new memories can be formed by all generations who visit it.

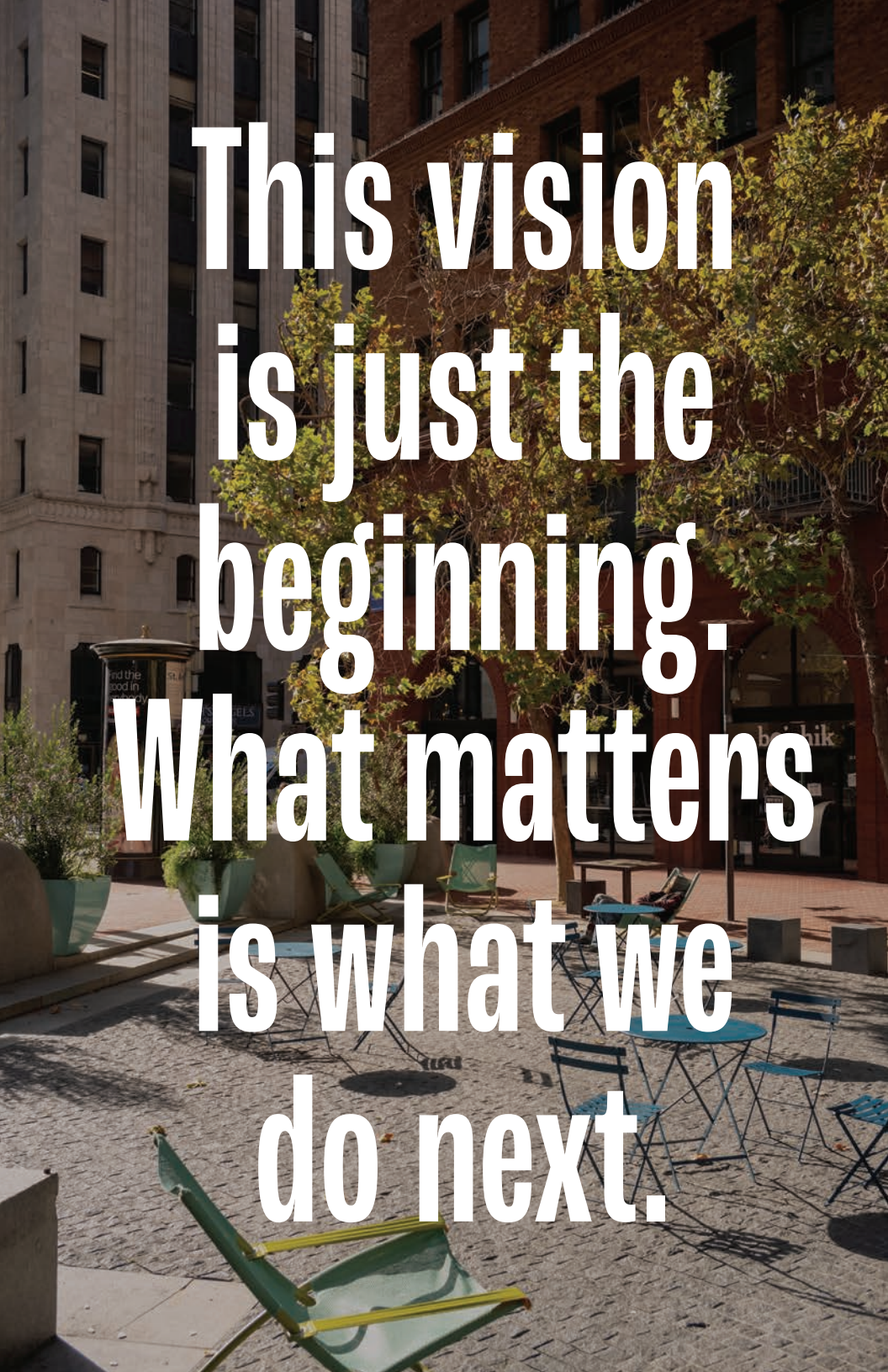
San Francisco is too important to the region, the nation, and the world to let its center drift into irrelevance. Few places have what this city has: a history that inspires, a setting that is unmatched, and a capacity for reinvention that runs deep. We have the tools, the talent, and the opportunity to create something extraordinary. What we need now is the collective will to act.

The power of these visuals and proposals goes beyond their specific recommendations. The brain processes images fifty times faster than words, and in a place where passionate voices often talk past one another, visuals offer a common language that brings focus to the conversation. Something remarkable happens when people gather around a model or gaze upon a rendering of what could be. Anyone can enter the discussion. This is how change begins.

This report is just the beginning of this research. There's extensive material—models, drawings, analysis, and proposals—that adds to the richness of the thought and work. Like this report, I hope for that work to be shared and exhibited with the community. Real transformation happens when these ideas meet the people willing to champion them, fund them, and build them. San Francisco has always turned bold visions into reality. Downtown's future should be no different.

If these ideas resonate with you, I want to hear from you. If you own property downtown, lead a community organization, or shape city policy, let's connect. Share this vision with your friends and neighbors—whether they just moved here or have been commuting to downtown for their whole career. Talk about it. Build on it. Make it better. The path forward starts with a conversation, and I'm ready to have that conversation today.

Alex Yuen
Architect and San Franciscan

A photograph of a city courtyard. In the foreground, there are several green metal chairs and small blue tables arranged on a cobblestone surface. A large tree with yellowing leaves is in the middle ground. In the background, there are multi-story brick and stone buildings. The text "This vision is just the beginning. What matters is what we do next." is overlaid in large white font.

**This vision
is just the
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What matters
is what we
do next.**

Credits



Alex Yuen, RA

Project Director & Studio Lead
Lecturer in Urban Design
Harvard Graduate School of Design
ayuen@gsd.harvard.edu
ayuen@co-operations.org

Alex Yuen is a San Francisco native and architect who has spent his career working to make cities better. After training at renowned firms like Diller Scofidio + Renfro and OMA, he returned home to co-found Collective Operations, where he designs and develops affordable housing across the Bay Area.

At Harvard, Alex’s teaching focuses on how people actually experience cities and what makes them work amid urban transformation. These insights directly shape his practice and research which has been featured in The Economist, NPR, and Fast Company.

Alex believes the best urban solutions come from bridging research and practice. Whether you’re working in policy, development, planning, design, or finance, he’s always interested in connecting with people who want to turn urban ideals into real solutions.

Project Team

Roua Atamaz Sibai
Sheyla Chevarria
Clara de Castro
Priyamvada Gannavarapu
Gyulee Hwang
Ellie Lauderback
Seouyoung Lee
Harry Liner
Naomi Mehta
Mark Philip
Jada Rossman
Daisy Son

Master of Urban Planning
Master of Architecture in Urban Design
Master of Urban Planning
Master of Architecture in Urban Design
Master of Architecture in Urban Design
Master of Urban Planning
Master of Landscape Architecture in Urban Design
Master of Urban Planning
Master of Architecture in Urban Design
Master of Architecture in Urban Design
Master of Urban Planning
Master of Urban Planning

Miguel Lantigua Inoa

Research Assistant

Downtown SF Partnership

Robbie Silver

Claude Imbault (Project Lead)

Franco Ferraro

DSFP Board of Directors

BOMA SF

John Bryant

David Harrison (Project Lead, currently with
SF Chamber of Commerce)

Maddie Campbell

BOMA SF Board

Harvard Graduate School of Design

Sarah M. Whiting

Ann Forsyth

Rahul Mehrotra

Harvard University Joint Center for Housing Studies

David Luberoff

Chris Herbert

Special thanks to

Cathy Simon, Sarah Dennis Phillips, Geeti Silwal, Gerry Tierney, Joe McCarthy, William Goodman and Laura Crescimano, and John King for lending their unique insight and perspectives to the project from the beginning. Additionally to Shiori Sasaki and Renia Kagkou from ESRI and Bruce Boucek from the GSD for their support with managing and visualizing urban data.

Project collaborators

The project benefited immensely from those who generously hosted the studio, shared their expertise, and engaged in thoughtful dialogue about downtown San Francisco's future. Their clear-eyed assessment of the city's challenges and creative approaches to practice, policy, and design were invaluable to this work.



Sarah Dennis Phillips and Jacob Bintliff – *SF Office of Economic & Workforce Development*

Dan Sider – *San Francisco Planning Department*

Maia Small – *San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency*

Adam Varat and Luiz Barata – *Port of San Francisco*

Kristy Henrich Klein – *World Economic Forum*

Jenny Feinberg – *San Francisco Chamber of Commerce*

Anne Hill – *Lincoln Property Group*

Ming Lo, Victor Tomanek, and Audrey Gould – *Tishman Speyer*

Yennga Khuong and Jack Bair – *San Francisco Giants*

Rod Diehl, Aaron Fenton, and Gail Poespowidjojo – *BXP, Inc.*

Sujata Srivastava and Erika McLitus – *SPUR*

Chris Meany, Lindsay Vargo, Dan Fedder, and Andrew Lin – *Wilson Meany*

Cyrus Sanandaji – *Presidio Bay Ventures*

Natalie Sandoval, Eric Tao, Kate Collignon and Mike Grisso – *ULI San Francisco Advisory Services Panel*

Jim Albrecht – *Barker Pacific Group*

Shayna Eskew – *Flatiron Building*

Christopher Trotier and Alex Moon – *SHVO*

William Goodman – *Strada Investment Group*

Joe McCarthy, Blaze Syka, Ivy Ta, and Jordan Doane – *SKS Partners*

David Baker and Amelia Muller – *David Baker Architects*

Riki Nishimura – *Populous*

Chris Guillard – *CMG Landscape Architecture*

Kristen Hall – *Kristen Hall City Design*

Geeti Silwal – *Perkins&Will*

Keith Garner – *Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP*

Ruth Todd – *Page & Turnbull*

Richard Kennedy – *Field Operations*

Laura Crescimano – *SITELAB urban studio*

Peter Pendergrass, Eduardo Zizumbo Colunga, and Ricardo Solar – *Gensler*

Alexander Quinn and Brandon J. Lee – *JLL*

Sean Webster – *Downtown Boston BID*

Weijia Song – *Collective Operations / Harvard GSD*

Minkoo Kang – *General Partner Office / MIT*

Neeraj Bhatia – *The Open Workshop / CCA*

Ethan Lassiter – *City of Chicago*

Sean Gazey – *Galleria Park Hotel*





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THE PULSE MILE

