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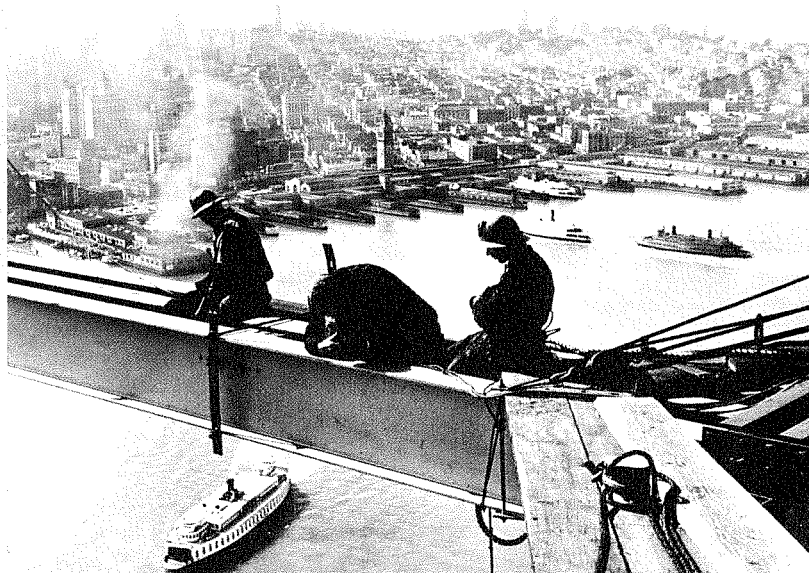
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Dreamscape, Reality and Afterthoughts



The *Visionary San Francisco* exhibition attracted a considerable amount of attention. Some critics found the title ambiguous and misleading, criticized the theme and structure of the exhibition and were disappointed by the collaborations produced by the teams of architects and writers.¹ Many felt the tone of the exhibition was too somber, if not cynical, and thought instead that architects and urban designers, especially those who claim to be visionary, should leap over the problems that plague our times and envision the environment of a bright, happy future.

This criticism implied a very different concept of “vision” from that accepted in the show and catalogue. The architects and artists who participated in the exhibition chose themes such as the AIDS plague, homelessness and earthquakes (always a danger in San Francisco) that contrasted with the Modernist vision of a radiant city, a vision that still seems to guide the expectations of American architects and architectural critics. A friend remarked that reviewers think of architects as essentially optimistic beings and look with suspicion or disdain at artists and writers who feel the need to focus on immediate problems as a way to envision the future. Yet, the latter was the message implicit in the exhibition.

In spite of these sobering themes, the exhibition was inherently optimistic in its effort to denounce current urban problems and focus public attention on finding solutions to them — solutions that will improve our urban condition. These problems are not limited to a single area of the city or to part of its population; they affect all of us. They are so complex that their solutions elude the imagination and the well-intended efforts of individuals and require the collaboration of the entire community. We need a vision to point us in the right direction to overcome the uncertainty and

unease that pervade contemporary urban life. The exhibition and catalogue manifested the view that San Francisco, like any other city, is more than a physical environment; it is an ethical and political environment.

Physical Change, Ethics and Politics

It would be absurd to imagine the body of relationships, traffic laws, human institutions and buildings that form a city without also imagining the people who live in it. These relationships, laws, institutions and buildings are made by and for people and establish a hierarchy of values that shapes the pattern of our lives.

There is a continuous exchange between the physical form of the urban environment and the people who inhabit it. Urban forms are not fixed but dynamic forms in which the parts — buildings, open spaces and infrastructure — interact constantly with one another and with the whole. Each new building establishes a new set of relationships with surrounding buildings. Other buildings are influenced by these alterations, as are the ways in which people use them, the activities performed in them and the economy of the area.

These changes are not always immediately visible on a map. Blocks remain the same size and street names do not change. Nevertheless, even small changes have an immediate impact. In San Francisco's Mission District and Chinatown, the pattern of shop fronts establishes the rhythm of the pedestrians' step and even influences the speed of passing vehicles. A change in any of these buildings—in their ownership or use, or their demolition—can provoke a change in how shop fronts are used and subsequently influence not only the visual character of the area but also the movement pat-

terns of pedestrians and vehicles. Each new building starts a chain of events that continues well beyond the edges of the building. Architecture, urban design and planning are engaged in mutual exchange. The difference between them is ultimately one of scale: Buildings have an impact on the overall form of the city, the city makes demands on individual buildings.

As buildings interact with people, so people constantly modify the city. Individual actions may have a small, immediate impact. But the accumulated acts of many people can change the city in much more substantial ways. Changes in the economy may cause entire areas suddenly to become affluent or derelict. If we understand the impact a group of people can have on the environment, we can direct this change to meaningful ends. If we do not, we will modify the environment irresponsibly or will suffer the change brought about by others.

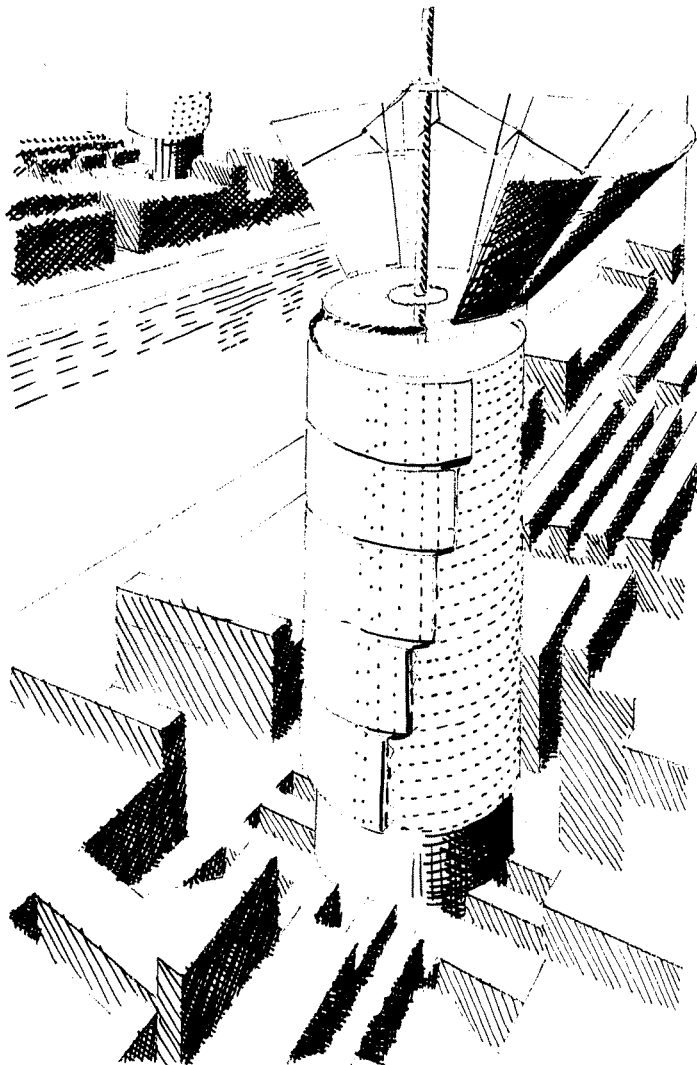
A problem seemingly remote to those of us who have a home and a job is homelessness. A homeless person on the street appropriates a public or semi-public area that pedestrians then take great pains to avoid or ignore. With the presence of the homeless, a building and a part of the city seem to decline almost overnight. Even Union Square, the premier shopping district of San Francisco, leaves us with a bitter aftertaste when we see its increasing population of homeless people. A consequence of their impact on the city is to make homelessness not only a problem of the homeless alone or of welfare officials, but also one that is ours, and for which we are responsible.

A controversial section of the exhibition was the installation designed by Ming Fung and Craig Hodgetts, which was based on a short story written by William Gibson. Gibson envisioned a San Francisco of the near future, in

San Francisco's skyline has changed dramatically since 1940. Yet, the characteristic elements of the city were there 50 years ago — for example, the downtown towers and the long spine of Market Street. The transformation has resulted from small changes made on almost a daily basis.
Top: Photo by Ben Blackwell, courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Bottom: Photo by Gabriel Moulin, courtesy Moulin Studio Archives.



which homeless people occupied the Bay Bridge, by then no longer used for traffic. Fung and Hodgetts designed the urban environment that could have triggered the transformation of the Bridge. Their installation included the model of a group of self-sufficient, self-contained high-rise buildings isolated in the amorphous environment of the city. Packaged in crates, and surrounded by pages of Japanese comic strips, scrap metal and computer chips, the installation had the seductive quality of the urban nightmare of the film *Blade Runner*. Its message, though, was to appeal to civic responsibility by showing the effects of its absence.



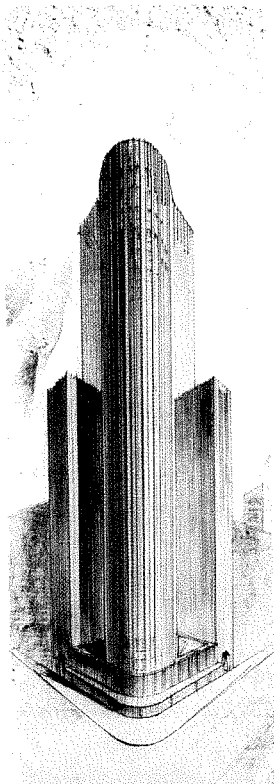
The Need for a New Vision

As painful as change may be at times, it is part of the urban environment. If efforts by planners or nostalgic activist groups to stop change from occurring in San Francisco were even modestly successful, the city would become nothing more than a tourist attraction. Already, there are telling signs that this is happening. The northern waterfront, one of the best known areas of San Francisco, is being transformed into a tourist ghetto, with hotels and shopping malls on the water. People come to San Francisco with the same expectations and frame of mind they have when visiting Disneyland: They want to enjoy the rides on the cable car, take a picture of sailboats on the Bay, drive down the serpentine section of Lombard Street and have a bite at a theme restaurant—Chinese, Italian, or *nouvelle cuisine*.

If this were to continue, the consequence would be serious. San Francisco would become a one-industry city; it would slowly decline and in a few years be a hollow version of what it is now. Venice has suffered a similar fate during this century; it has been transformed into a museum, seemingly unchanging but constantly decaying.

In an article published in 1988, San Francisco historian Kevin Starr attributed the unease that seems to have been part of San Francisco civic life since the 1970s to a loss of public identity. Large-scale works like the Civic Center, produce market and Sutro Baths were not only picturesque landmarks but also social and cultural points of reference. With their demolition, part of San Francisco is gone.

The loss of public identity has led to reluctance to change. Any change, it is feared, would be a change for the worse. New public or semi-public development projects, such as Yerba Buena Center and Mission Bay, and



Skyscrapers — both as envisioned and as built — have been regarded as signs of progress. But in this contemporary vision of San Francisco's future (left), citizens have given up hope for the city and retreated into self-sufficient high-rise towers.

Left: Drawing by Ming Fung and Craig Hodgetts, courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Above: Drawing by Timothy Pflueger, J. R. Miller and T. L. Pflueger, courtesy Butterfield & Butterfield.

Right: Photo by Ben Blackwell, courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

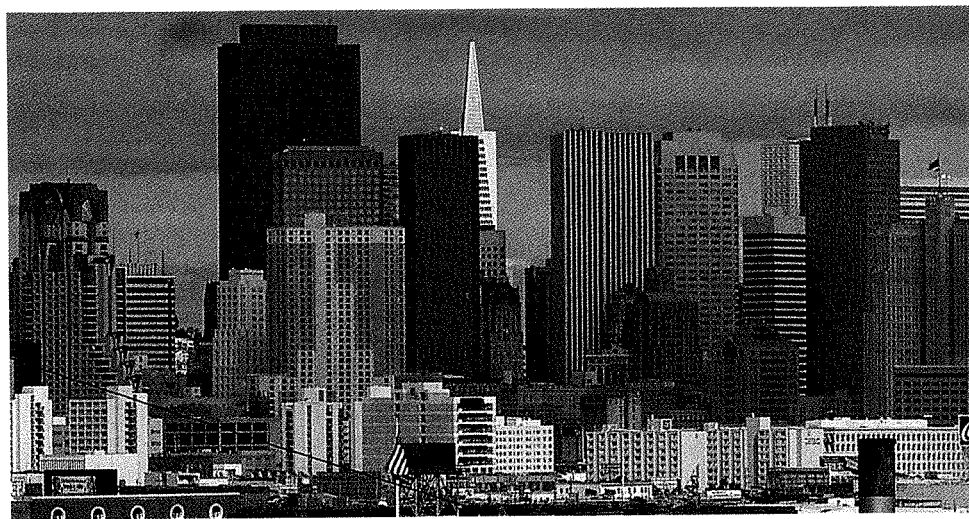
new ventures, such as the home port for the battleship *U.S.S. Missouri* in San Francisco and the city's candidacy for the 1996 Olympic Games (since awarded to Atlanta), have been blocked by factionalism.

By contrast, the history of San Francisco is that of a rapidly changing urban environment and of people who took responsibility, and delight, in envisioning and carrying out its transformation. These people had a goal and worked toward it; their vision did not refer to an imaginary future but to the problems the city was facing at the moment. In the early part of the century, they viewed San Francisco as the capital of the Pacific, the "Paris of the West." Civic leaders such as Mayor James Duval Phelan and Mayor James Rolph believed that a beautiful physical environment would result in a better urban society. During the 1920s and 1930s, civic leaders sought a prominent role for San Francisco in the Bay Area. Frederick Dohrmann organized the Regional Planning Association in the mid-1920s and envi-

sioned San Francisco as part of a larger metropolitan community in the Bay Area. More recently, civic leaders have seen San Francisco as a gateway to the Pacific Islands and the Far East.

Many architects and urban designers also consistently demonstrated a commitment to the improvement of San Francisco, independent of any prospect of gaining a commission. Bernard Maybeck and Willis Polk and, after World War II, Mario Ciampi, Vernon DeMars and Lawrence Halprin, to name only a few, always suggested new solutions for San Francisco's urban problems. In many cases, even though their plans may not have been realized, their visions helped to set the agenda for the future.

These visions were not distant utopias unanchored to reality; they were practical, realizable prescriptions for San Francisco's future. By showing alternatives to the city of their time, these visionaries focused on what it lacked and, by so doing, directed their efforts toward supplying what the city needed. Even though their ideas may

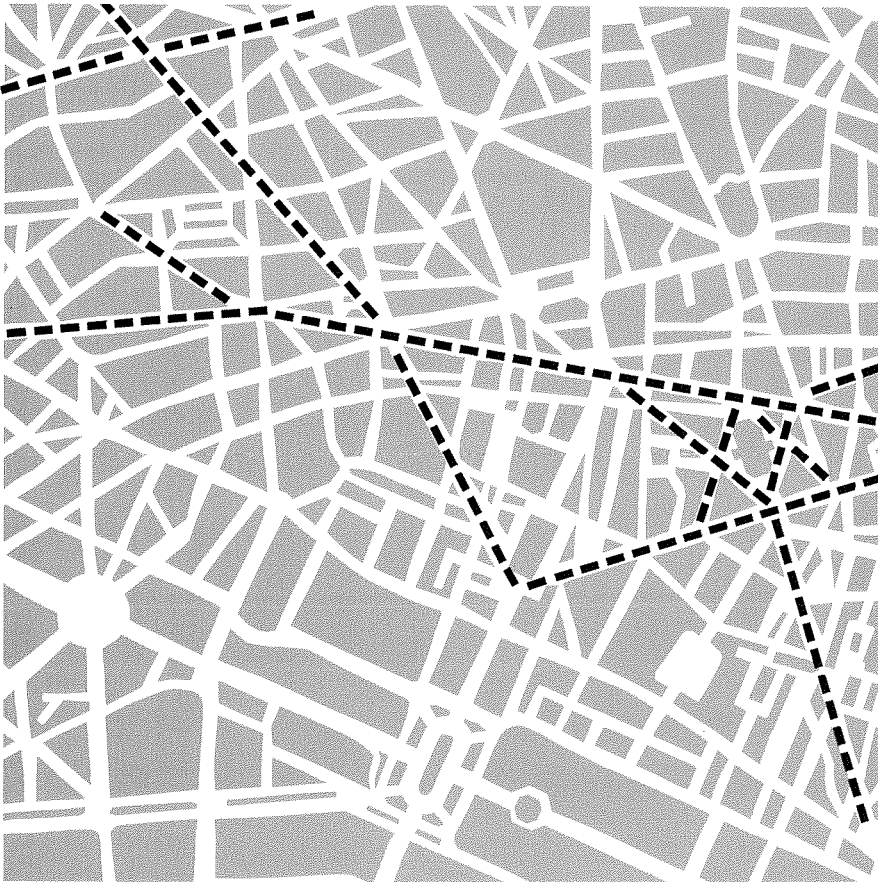


not have been realized, they nevertheless influenced architects' and planners' visions for San Francisco, set an agenda for the future and molded what was actually built.

Burnham's Vision for San Francisco

Nineteenth-century Paris, the model for Daniel H. Burnham and Edward Bennett's 1905 plan for San Francisco (the first complete plan for the city), was profoundly transformed by the pressures of a new social and economic order. Baron Haussmann, chief engineer of this transformation, had a plan that was ambitious yet practical. His main concern, and that of Napoleon III (to whom he reported), was to insert a new logic in the old city.

The grand boulevards of Paris inspired a generation of City Beautiful designers.



Over the old fabric of the city, Haussmann designed and imposed a new one that could accommodate the need for rapid transportation and new, large-scale buildings to serve commerce and tourism. The city of picturesque, rambling quarters gradually became a city of long boulevards. These streets cut ruthlessly across the existing web of irregularly shaped blocks to converge on monumental squares and to form a new hierarchy of urban spaces. Long, uninterrupted rows of apartment buildings of the same height defined boulevards lined with trees, which echoed the rhythm of the porticoes at the ground floor of the buildings. Instead of the quaint, European capital it is today, at the time Paris was viewed as a functional economic and political capital.

Burnham and Bennett adopted Haussmann's basic vocabulary in their plan for San Francisco. Unlike Haussmann, however, they did not start with an abstract idea of functional connections and formal design elements. From the top of Twin Peaks, Bennett surveyed the city, sketching out its major features, and allowed the topography to suggest the new pattern of boulevards. Burnham and Bennett surrounded San Francisco with a boulevard and from this ring reached into its center with radial streets. They also established a series of secondary centers that took advantage of the topography of the area. Each intersection offered new perspectives at the ends of the converging boulevards.

The new urban order would have established a new set of visual references and new landmarks, and would have provided a new sense of connection and orientation. The entire city would have been unified within this grand design, but the diversity of the city would have avoided the danger of monotony. Like Haussmann, Burnham

and Bennett emphasized the aesthetic component of their plan. Aesthetics, however, was elevated to the level of logic; the new city would work better because it would be governed by a higher natural order, and, therefore, it would be more beautiful.

Unlike Haussmann, however, Burnham and Bennett could not count on a monarch to carry out their plan. Strengthened by the experience of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition and the planning of the Washington, D.C., Mall, they understood that a plan of such dimensions for San Francisco (Burnham urged his clients not to make modest plans) could not be realized without the support of its citizens. From the very beginning they proselytized wealthy businessmen and influential politicians, convinced that these men would convert all the others to their ideas. To assist civic leaders in reaching as broad an audience as possible, they published the *Report... on the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco*, a book richly illustrated with plans, renderings and seductive bird's-eye views of the whole city.

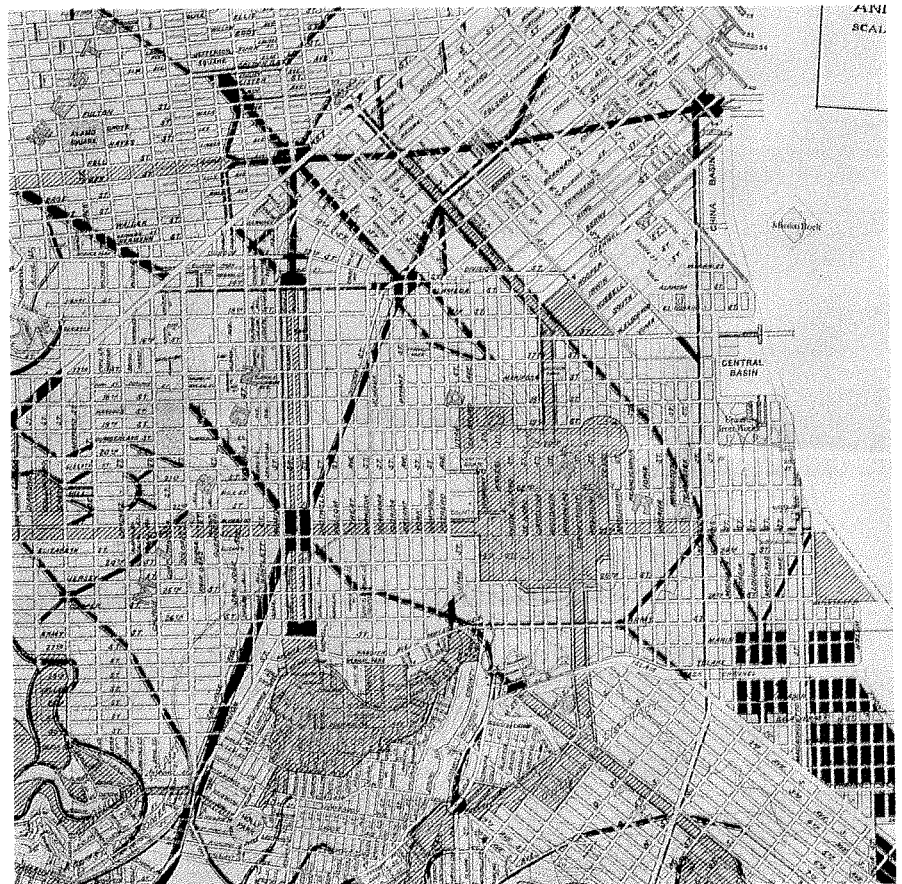
While the plan was not adopted, Burnham and Bennett were partly successful. The Panama–Pacific International Exposition of 1915 and the design of the Civic Center, projects in which both Bennett and Jules Guerin, Burnham's favorite renderer, played an important role, successfully incorporated Burnham and Bennett's ideas in the design of the city.

Never in the history of San Francisco was civic unity stronger than it was during the Exposition. The preparations for it brought together civic, business and labor leaders, and all cooperated in making the Exposition an unprecedented urban event. "Merchants, bankers, clerks, stevedores, high-salaried corporation

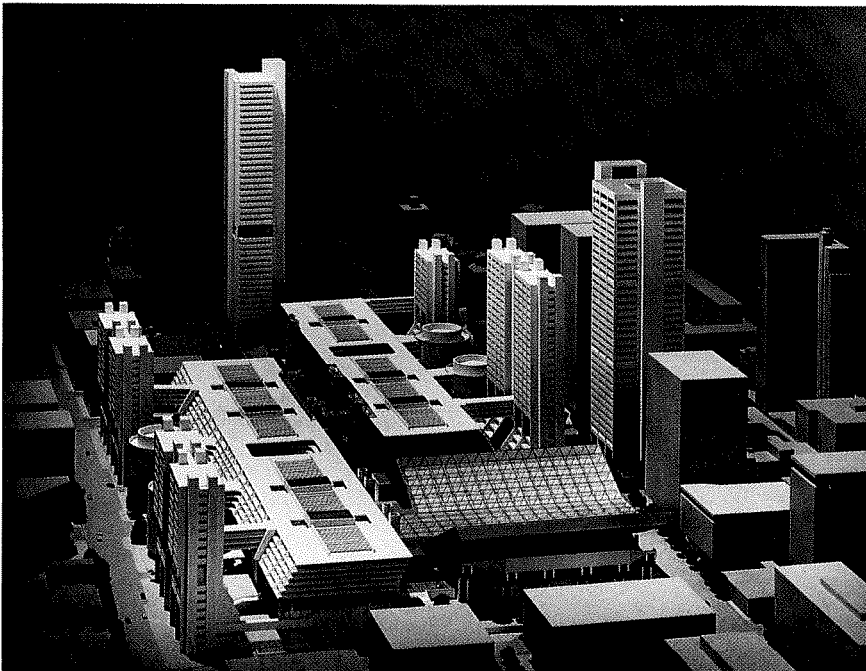
managers, factory hands," writes a historian of the exposition, "all marched in the same columns, in the same ranks." Architecture and urban design created consensus.

Burnham and Bennett's plan remained a reference for the city long after City Beautiful ideals had lost their appeal, and some of its suggestions are still valid today. In promoting their plan, they relied on its aesthetic appeal; this was evident in the monumentality of the plan and in the care and time they lavished on its presentation. Burnham thought of monuments as poles of urban growth. Monuments were the only firm points in his grand plan of broad outlines. He maintained that monuments appeal to the imagination of planners and the

With this plan, published in 1905, Daniel H. Burnham and Edward Bennett proposed to transform San Francisco into the "Paris of the West." Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



public and that in time, monuments come to symbolize entire districts. He knew that large-scale projects take many years, require a long-term commitment by the public and undergo many transformations before being completed. Without a monumental focus, a reminder of the scope and form of the project, this commitment may fade over the years, or disappear altogether. Because of the aesthetic emphasis of Burnham's presentations, he was able to communicate his goals to a broad public, not just a small elite.



Yerba Buena Center Central Blocks, 1969. The main features of this proposal were two massive parking and commercial structures with a pedestrian mall in between. Office towers and a sports complex were also included. Photo by Gerald Ratto. Courtesy John Dykstra.

Vision Diffused

Architects' reliance on the aesthetic appeal of drawings diminished after World War II. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, the attention of planners and architects shifted from the city as a whole to individual areas, and public attention turned from visionary goals to finding the means to resolve everyday problems.

Politicians, architects and planners enthusiastically prescribed visions that acknowledged an increasingly complex urban reality by employing increasingly complex techniques. Their goal was to replace planning based on aesthetic considerations (considered insufficient to provide solutions to complex urban problems) with objective planning techniques based on statistical information. The new planning required that urban designers' physical model of the city be replaced by the planners' abstract model. "Function" became the key word used in the new planning.

Between the end of World War II and the late 1960s, architects educated in the climate of European functionalism responded enthusiastically to this call. Drawings became an abstract means of communication and required an understanding of codes and conventions that was usually limited to trained architects or experts in the field. Aesthetics lost its prominent position in the architects' list of priorities in favor of a seemingly more logical mode of representation.

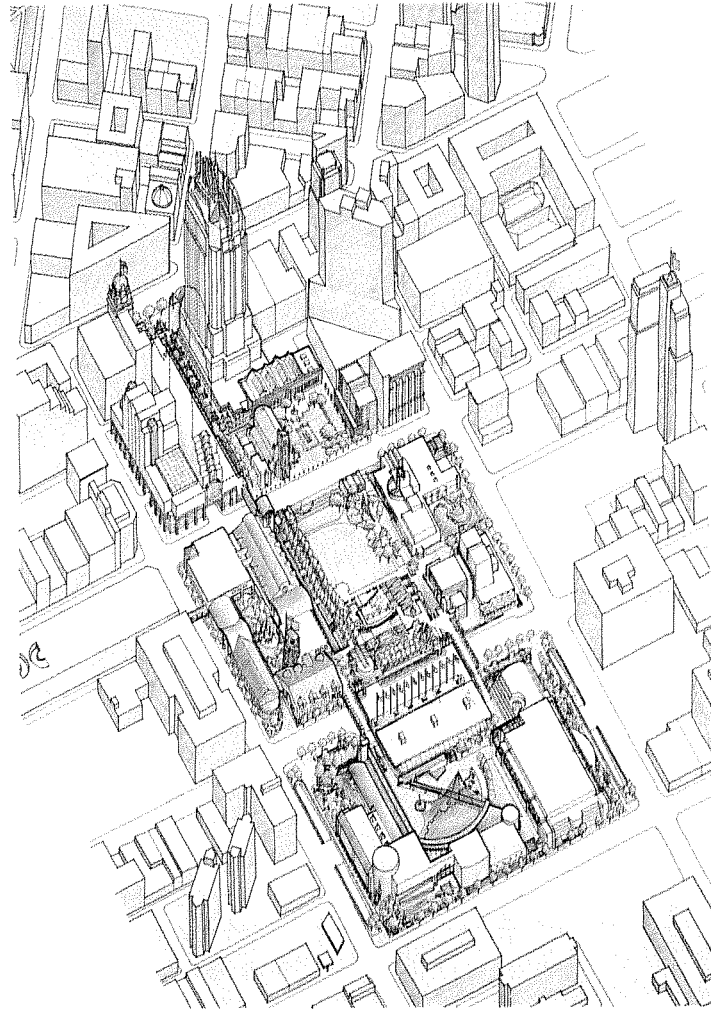
This change was dramatically evident in the exhibition. The large and impressive water colors by architects trained at the École des Beaux Arts were gradually succeeded by diagrams sketched on yellow tracing paper. As this change occurred, architects' drawings lost their appeal for the public and became an exclusive means of communication among experts; information contained in these drawings relied on a complex set of conventions

that were significant only for other experts. By excluding a large part of the public from understanding and appreciating their ideas, architects and planners also limited public participation and support.

More recently, increasing opposition to large-scale development projects and increasing factionalism have succeeded in delaying projects like these for decades. As Professor William Issel noted at the symposium following the opening of the exhibition, the decline of level-headed, non-partisan liberalism (a rationalist and progressive position that emphasized that all human institutions could be improved by individuals working toward the common good) at the end of the 1960s coincided with the rise of activist groups who relied on emotional appeal to pursue their interests. This movement culminated in the supremacy of local interests and neighborhood or activist groups — the NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard) — over the goals of the entire city.

So rampant is the skepticism about improving our condition that when new opportunities present themselves, we immediately anticipate wasting them. With the closing of the U.S. Army base at the Presidio (in the northwest corner of the city), the Defense Department will bequeath 1,400 acres of park and unspoiled coast to the Golden Gateway National Recreation Area, a unit of the National Park Service. Architectural critic Allan Temko has written that although the Presidio offers an unprecedented opportunity for a new, visionary plan, he fears its future could be undermined by the lack of vision and parochial interests of petty bureaucrats, technocrats and “populist nuts.”

Focusing only on immediate surroundings or interests, seeking only short-term gain and losing sight of a



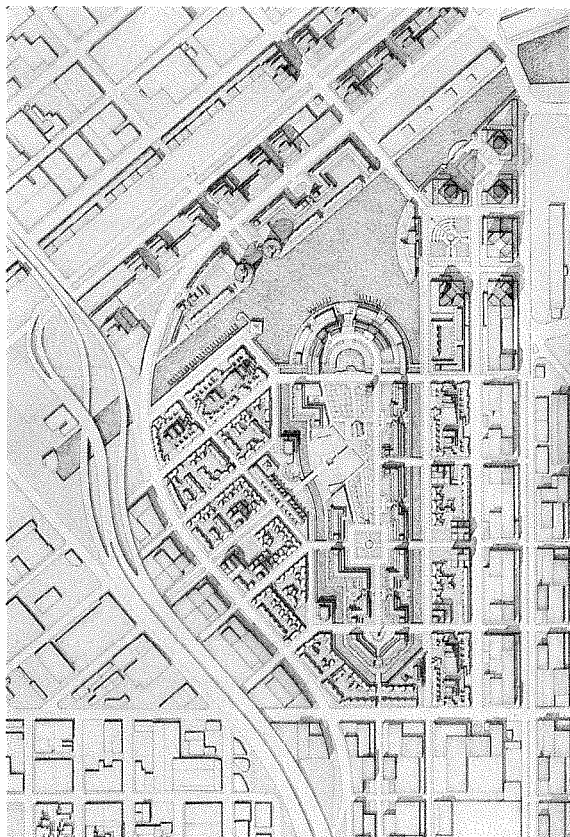
Yerba Buena Center, 1989.
This plan maintains the existing street grid and provides room for the nearby tourist and office activities to expand.
Courtesy Olympia and York.

broader perspective seems to be endemic to contemporary American culture. The agendas of groups, individuals, or public officials, even when legitimate, polarize viewpoints not shared by the entire community. Along with a lack of consensus comes strong opposition to any ideas that are proposed. The decision-making process slows to a standstill. A vision to bind the public spirit seems to be lacking.

Two Modern-Day Visions?

In San Francisco, an opportunity to overcome these obstacles rests with Yerba Buena Gardens and Mission Bay, two large-scale redevelopment

The 1983 plan for Mission Bay proposed a row of office towers that would mark the project's place in the city and an island with residences and open space — monumental ideas in the tradition of the City Beautiful movement. Rendering by Walter Vangreen, Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



plans in or near the central business district. That projects as large as these can even be pursued today, when we are so tentative in our plans for building cities, is in itself sufficient to put Yerba Buena and Mission Bay in the category of visionary projects.

Both projects rely on a grand design, and both emphasize the importance of the connecting redevelopment to the existing fabric of the city. Similarities, however, end there. Yerba Buena Gardens would be part of the city, an extension of the financial district south of Market Street. Mission Bay would be almost a separate area, its land uses and urban design different from the surrounding area and an idealized imitation of the rest of the city. It would provide enough housing, work, shopping and recreational opportunities that residents, theoretically, would not need to venture into the rest of the city.

Yerba Buena was conceived more than 35 years ago, when the area south of Market Street was designated for redevelopment. The first design for the area, however, appeared a decade

later, when Justin Herman, director of the city's Redevelopment Agency, commissioned Japanese architect Kenzo Tange and San Francisco architects Gerald McCue and John Bolles to work on the project's design. The result was a megastructure, which, by its very imposing presence, was expected to spawn the growth of the surrounding area.

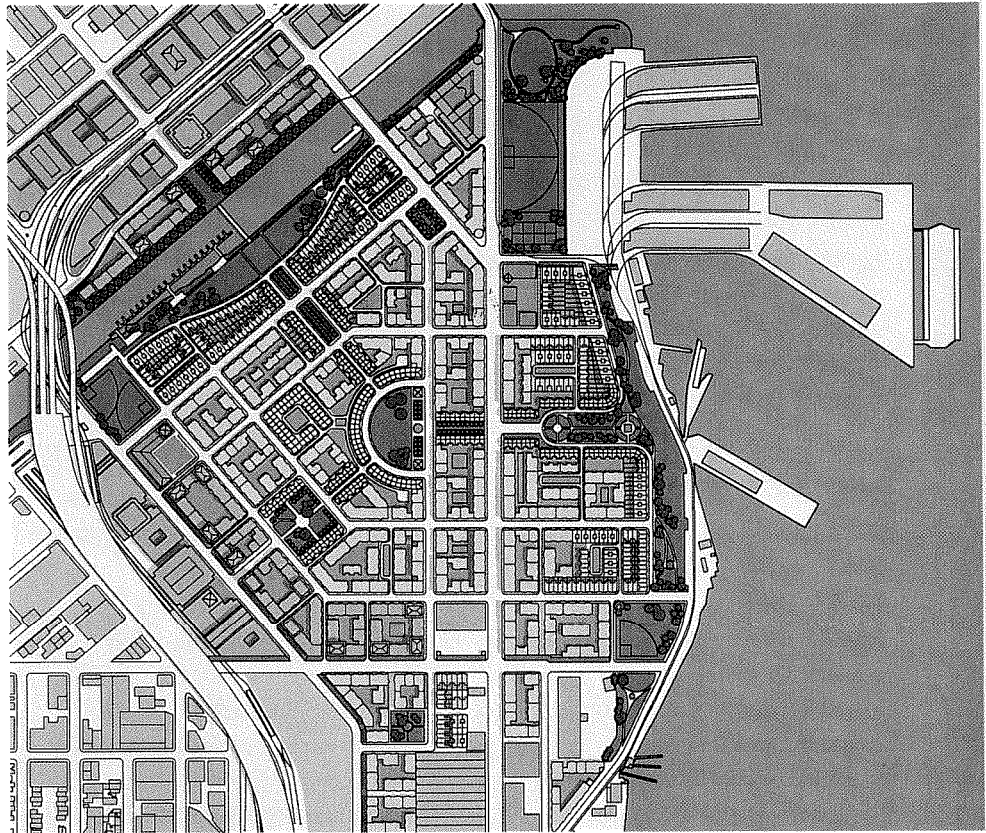
This and a modified design in 1973, however, did not attract the attention of developers. The project was hit by lawsuits, and the proposed design and the proposed plans for relocating residents of the area came under heavy public criticism. Only a reconstituted group of concerned citizens and public officials, under the guidance of Mayor George Moscone, was able to overcome public opposition and complete a convention center in 1981.

In 1980, the Redevelopment Agency tried a different approach. Rather than proposing a design and then seeking developers, it called for proposals by competing teams of architects and developers. The winning proposal, by a team composed of architects Zeidler-Roberts from Toronto, Beverly Willis of San Francisco and Canadian developer Olympia & York, suggested a much closer connection between the new and the existing urban fabric and relied on a more traditional architectural design than the Tange/McCue/Bolles scheme. The strong emphasis on visual axes and the predominance of public spaces recalled some of the urban design principles from the Burnham and Bennett plan. Also from the Burnham and Bennett plan was the concept of making Yerba Buena a monumental area, a pole of urban growth that could stimulate the renewal of the surrounding area by mere virtue of its presence.

But the fragmentation of uses and spaces and, even more importantly, the involvement of several prominent architects (such as Fumihiko Maki, Cesar Pelli, James Polshek, Romaldo Giurgola and Mario Botta) in projects within a short distance from one another, promises to detract from the unity of the project and reduce both its visual strength as a monument and its impact on the surrounding area. Also, as a monument and a future cultural center, its success is far from certain; the project will compete with special districts in the city, such as Civic Center and the financial district. Because of the uncertain real-estate market, bureaucratic slow-downs and fresh public opposition, only construction for the expansion of the convention center has begun.

The origin of Mission Bay is more recent. Architect John Carl Warnecke proposed to develop this large area, formerly a railroad and warehousing yard, one mile south of downtown, in 1981. In 1983, a comprehensive plan was prepared for the site owner, Santa Fe Pacific Realty, by James I. Freed of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners. Under this proposal, new development would have been carefully inserted into the existing urban fabric. The connections with the three street grids bordering the triangular site, the use of high-rise buildings to identify the district on the skyline, and a mixture of housing, commercial and office spaces (similar to that of the surrounding area) would have strengthened the project's connection with the rest of the city. The plan won a *Progressive Architecture* citation in 1984.

In 1985, in response to public opposition and criticism of the commercial density (and the height of some of the office buildings), the San Francisco Planning Department issued a set of guidelines for what it termed a



new “planned neighborhood.” A new plan, prepared for Santa Fe Pacific by EDAW and associated architects, was presented in 1987. This proposal reduced the amount of office space and emphasized housing; it, too, won a *Progressive Architecture* citation.

With the election of Mayor Art Agnos in 1987, the city won funding from Santa Fe Pacific to prepare its own plan for the site and commissioned a team headed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill’s San Francisco office. In this scheme, the conceit of creating a new neighborhood is developed to the point of suggesting separation, rather than integration, between the new area and the existing urban fabric. The street system would be less connected to the rest of the city than it was in the Freed scheme. The predominantly residential character of the new neighborhood would discourage the use of monumental architectural elements. Some elements, such as open spaces and converging boulevards, might recall the Burnham and Bennett plan, but Burnham had relied on monumentality and unity of design to

The 1990 plan for Mission Bay would produce a nearly self-sufficient neighborhood, with housing, work places and a shopping strip organized around two main streets and several formal open spaces.

By Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, San Francisco, courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

guarantee the long-term continuity of the plan. The current plan for Mission Bay will also require several decades to complete. With the absence of a strong goal and aesthetic integrity, what guarantee is there that the final result will look like the initial idea?

A New Vision for San Francisco

The exhibition and catalogue illustrated not a vision of the city's future, but the urgent need to gain a vision. Would Burnham and Bennett's plan, or any other grand plan, still be a solution today? Burnham and Bennett envisioned a unified plan for an equally unified society. In that time, San Francisco was a far more cohesive social and political entity than it is today. Expectations, leadership, commitment to and participation in civic life were different then. Any new vision for San Francisco's future must take into account the current social and political fragmentation.

We seem to have lost control of social problems like poverty, homelessness, AIDS and isolation. We can no longer provide adequate housing, health care, transportation and education. Any vision for San Francisco's future must consider solutions to these difficult problems.

As a political and ethical environment, the city embodies — or should embody — values shared by all of its inhabitants. Yet, the presence of large numbers of citizens who occupy a marginal position in urban life indicates that the opposite is true. Most of us display concern only about problems that touch us directly, and are disinterested in or apathetic about broader issues.

The understanding of urban and architectural issues is limited to a small, specialized and professionally trained segment of the public. The lit-

tle that is written in newspapers about architecture and the design of cities only accentuates its distinctiveness and, therefore, reinforces the notion that design ideas and the design process is remote from the general public. As a consequence, much of the physical environment is unknown and incomprehensible to the majority of its inhabitants, even though it is they who, willingly or by default, are the real designers of the city.

If we are successful in reconstructing this lost public dimension of architecture, architects and planners should not fear a diminished role. They should anticipate a future in which architecture and urban design play a much more relevant role in society and politics, and in decisions people make that affect the physical environment. Architects and planners can be the leaders in envisioning an urban environment that is diverse enough to reflect the changing values of its inhabitants, but coherent enough to develop a community.

Note

1. The four collaborative teams of writers and architects were: Joe Gores with architects Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsonas; Richard Rodriguez with artist Sohela Farokhi and architect Lars Lerup; Mark Helprin with architect Barbara Stauffacher Solomon; and William Gibson with architects Ming Fung and Craig Hodgetts.