



Peer Reviewed

Title:

Building in San Francisco [Speaking of Places]

Journal Issue:

[Places, 17\(3\)](#)

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Publication Date:

2005

Publication Info:

Places

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/78n4s6dw>

Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:

places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, speaking, building, San Francisco, Stanley Saitowitz

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Building in San Francisco

Stanley Saitowitz

Editors Note: In Volume 1, Number 1, of Places, published in the fall of 1983, we included a text and four drawings by Stanley Saitowitz entitled "A Vision of Four Cities." Saitowitz was then newly appointed to the faculty of UC Berkeley's Department of Architecture. Recently, we invited him to reflect on how his work in San Francisco since (which has been widely published and esteemed) is related to those drawings and their insights.

It was not easy for me to transplant myself to the diversity and dispersion of the American melting pot from a culture as rich and unique as South Africa. In South Africa, pressing social issues gave work focus, and the geography and landscape had become deeply embedded in my being. It was especially difficult to find a new sense of place in America, where there was only a marginal tradition of Modern architecture, a tradition in which I had been intensely schooled. My education had coincided with the rejection of the abstract universality of the early Modern Movement. Our heroes were the members of Team X, who had shifted architectural ideology from "space" to "place," from "time" to "occasion."

In South Africa, Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* had shown me a path to the vernacular homesteads of the N'debelle tribe of the Highveld, and they had become my model for new building designs in the Transvaal. But when I set out to follow this method of vernacular investigation as a graduate student in California, I struggled at first to find a footing. I had no way to appreciate the local obsession with Victorian architecture, which seemed such a misfit with the radical social values that had attracted me to the Bay Area. Such buildings also seemed uncomfortable for someone who had grown up in a modern house

I also didn't understand timber-frame buildings, having come from a culture where wood was used for furniture and fires. And I had no interest in brown shingles.

However, the dense urbanism of San Francisco was thrilling for a suburbanite, and the city's modern downtown buildings were inspiring. But mostly I was swept away by the geography, and from the first moment I saw the dry summer grasses of California, I felt I could find a home in this rolling version of veld.

The Drawings

While I was doing my Masters degree at UC Berkeley, I did not have any buildings to work on, so I began making a series of drawings to locate myself in this new environment. My first drawings of the "human geography" of my new home were about the landscape and people of Berkeley. Next, these moved across the bay to San Francisco.

Later, I did a series of portraits of what I thought of as the Family of American Cities, which described their physical and mental landscapes. Each tried to depict city form and culture to be as natural and particular as the site, the geological foundations. The subject of these drawings was the building of cities as collective intention and action in response to situation.

New York was portrayed as an assertive masculine city of towers, where the sun rises, and where every skyscraper which sticks up into the air is a microcosm of the phallic boat of land that sticks into the water—an echo of its shape. (As seen on inside front cover.)

San Francisco was portrayed as the receptive feminine city, where the sun sets, hugging the ground surrounding its hollow navel of bay, whose streets run like waterfalls over its hills, lined with shores of waving walls.

Washington was portrayed as the paternal city of authority, imported from Europe by its immigrant settlers.

Chicago was portrayed as the pioneer city of the prairie, whose grid of reason reflects in all its dimensions.

Finally, *Los Angeles* was portrayed as the playful child-city born at the end of the continent... a truly American city.

In some ways these drawings helped me define an agenda and recovery. And in particular the drawings of San Francisco, including the portrait of San Francisco as a member of the Family of Cities, became a text and prediction of work that followed.

Understanding the Place

At about the same time, I wrote an essay entitled "Bayscape: Notes on the Topographic City" about the geography and culture of San Francisco. Some extracts follow.

Topography and use are intimately connected in cities. While this quality is obvious in settlements of the ancients, it may appear neutralized in cities today, yet the siting and landscape of San Francisco is essential to its form and culture. The geological evolution provides the foundation of human habitation. Landform induces the setting for the structure and organization of the city.

The site was carved in a millennial drama of erosion and rising of water and land. Human activities today still follow the logic of water, flowing down from the hills, collecting by gravity in basins. The bay is the great navel, the stage around which the city gathers, the datum. Flat and low places are the sites of most intense human activity. Downtown, the main confluence of gathering, is on the level bayshore, mostly landfill. The flat shoreline is a circular route of least resistance, of freeway and boulevard.

Market Street, main street, is a river-



bed which ran from Twin Peaks to the flat Bayside. Polk Gulch, the valley between Nob Hill and Pacific Heights, riverbed, watering hole, now Polk Street, shopping strip, night street, hunting ground. Columbus Avenue, the valley between Telegraph and Russian Hills, the center of North Beach, is a continuous shopping and eating street which intersects with Grant Ave. and Chinatown.

The hilltops are the lookouts, castles—the bigger, the richer. The contours of cars on the street are a clear graph. From VWs to BMWs, from Pontiacs to Mercedes. Rent indexes rise with height. This concurrence of geography and use gives form to building: the bay window, which looks down the river of street to the bay.

The original material for constructing the city is redwood, cut from native trees. The redwoods of Northern California grow from a core of red heartwood, by the development of concentric annular rings, as the cities ring the heart of the bay. The coastal redwoods near the ocean, and the Sierra redwoods are alike in many ways. The coastal redwoods are taller and more slender. Sierra redwoods are twice the diameter, with large limbs. The bark of the coastal redwood is less than a foot thick. The bark of the mountain redwood can be over two feet thick.

Trees are naturally a compaction of the nature of place. At the intersection of the genetic direction contained in the seed and the specific natural context, is a unique manifestation. In this way cities are like trees.

The Projects

Twenty-five years later, I have had the opportunity to realize some of these ideas about the Bay Area in buildings. These projects show the continuing search for a modern and indigenous San Francisco, a city which clings like

San Francisco as seen in the original Family of Cities map.



a net to its landscape, and which hugs the void of bay, the empty reflective center; a city which Ambrose Bierce called “a point upon a map of fog.”

First are the New Victorians, the 25-foot-wide infill buildings, mostly in the South of Market area, in a landscape of mixed building fabric, which ranges from industrial sheds to Victorian flats. These buildings aim to be continuous and build the city, to synthesize the texture of the urban fabric in a contemporary and authentic way, and to mark their own

time and place. The powerful images of San Francisco streetscape, which I drew as a shoreline of waving walls in the portrait—the repetition and variation, the rhythmic measure—these are the conditions I have tried to express as the street fronts of the buildings.

These buildings are added to the city of buildings, mostly built in the last one hundred years, often to look older than they actually are. I have used modern materials and construction as the tool to achieve a textural continuity with the found fabric,

without faking history. I have been interested in reflection, in translucency and transparency. I think about the qualities of the shiny light, the bay and fog, as the basic materials. The qualities of the portrait of San Francisco, the reflective blue, the quiet beat, the lightness, predominate in a series of buildings where glass equates with water and sky, and ground is concrete or steel.

The interior worlds aim for contemporary habitable space, with maximum openness and flexibility,



and are in every way a counterpoint to the Victorian flats of confined rooms. Their internal organization and space is closer to the industrial sheds than the Victorian houses, with compressed service cores and optimal indeterminate open floor areas, minimizing predetermined program and constraint. They aim to create the smooth open space of the bay. They always have bay windows.

1022 Natoma Street, my own building, was the first opportunity to build in San Francisco. I wanted to continue

the textural quality of the typical San Francisco Street with the projecting bay facade, but to make it with a watery palette of glass and aluminum, and to achieve the richness of ornament through construction and making visible the process of assembly, rather than applied decoration.

Fourteen years later, next door, *1028 Natoma Street* is a more modern and mute version of a San Francisco facade, expressing the need for tranquility and serenity that life in the city in this new millennium implies.



1029 Natoma Street is across the street. Here the horizontal shading fins of the south-facing bays of *1022* and *1028* are turned vertical, shading it from the hot end-of-day sun, and making the building seem upright and Victorian.

Around the corner is *9 Lafayette Street* with its opposing bays—one all clear glass for the stairs, the other etched glass for the bays.

1164 Pacific Avenue is built on a south-facing lot, and features a grating of sunshades, which hide the interior from the noise and traffic of this hilly street, yet open it to views of water in the west.

1110 Green Street is a remodel of a 1960s house which is all bay window from the outside, with a watery stairwell that brings light down, and delivers the view of the bay at the top.

Recently, it has been possible to build bigger pieces of streetscape. In

Opposite: 1028 & 1022 Natoma Street

Left: 9 Lafayette Street

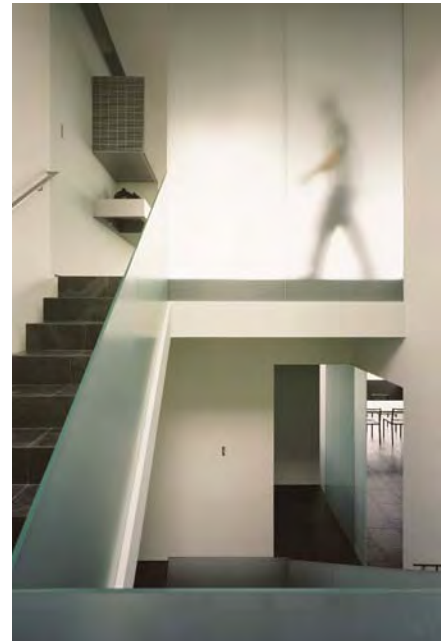
Right: Project for 1164 Pacific Avenue



a transitional industrial strip at 2002 *Third Street*, a long building is articulated vertically as a series of balconies and bays, clad in alternating transparent, translucent and reflective bands.

At 855 *Folsom Street*, the ubiquitous grid that structures the city is turned vertically to construct an egg crate for

lofts, which are considered more as individual plots in the air. Each “lot” in the grid is enclosed in an entirely glass wall as it meets the city, using channel glass for the bay window, which is articulated by carving an outdoor terrace with clear glass. The bays and balconies are dispersed randomly within the vertical grid, making a texture reminiscent of the typical bay-windowed streets in older residential parts of the city, here at a new and contemporary scale in the flat



Left: 1110 Green Street

Right: 1110 Green Street (interior)

Opposite: Project for 1601 Larkin Street

South of Market area.

When I drew the portrait of San Francisco, I was living in North Beach, and those streets of rolling bay-windowed walls climbing the hills remain an indelible image. At 855 *Folsom*, using systematic structuring and numerical construction, a rich texture, remembering the essential waving walls of San Francisco, is presented as a rational and economical modern building.

1601 *Larkin Street* is a new building in the original city fabric, and here the challenge is to bring the rational methods of contemporary building production and larger scale to this neighborhood of individual wooden Victorians. Some day, when the frail wooden buildings are gone, could this building continue the spirit of San Francisco?

Cities also have buildings which are exceptional, and whose context is defined by the family of exceptional buildings. Religious structures belong to this type. Their role is to be fabric



Design Principles

As a conclusion, I offer a summary of five interests which drive my projects today—projects which in many cases emanated from drawings done many years ago to capture the spirit of San Francisco. Perhaps, some years in the future, the editors of *Places* will again ask me to revisit these pages to reexamine these five interests. Again I may be able to show how buildings always emerge from ideas, however fragile and tentative.

Time and Place. Each building begins with the site and the particular desires to transform it. Buildings are earth, made of matter, and a continuation of the geological processes that produced their sites—a part of natural evolution. A building marks and amplifies its unique spot on the globe. Like a lens, it brings to focus its particular time and place.

Space. The essential medium of architecture is space—air, rather than substance, matter which contains the emptiness. Architecture is

the construction of charged voids, frames of opportunity, fields of possibility. I am interested in space, more than meaning; in the architecture of movement and flux, of time and event, rather than object and monument. I am interested in the emptiness that material constructs. I am interested in the invisible.

Material. In the search for the authentic over the image, the actual materials and systems of assembly, the process of construction, become the aesthetic. I want to make objects that expose their cause, buildings that are perceptual process. I like to think of construction as growth—not an idealized form, but the actual performing of the work made precious. I think less about architecture as an art of the visual, than architecture as cooking, or as haptic experience. I make buildings by the gathering and assembly of ingredients. The plan is the recipe.

System. The generative ideas of Modern architecture emerge from a consideration of buildings as systems, related to machines, or

natural organisms, or the phenomena of the city. I am interested in similarity and dissimilarity, in relations of relations, in theme and variation, order and accommodation. I search for the highest common denominator to establish the field of operation as a framework of unity and a panorama of resistance.

Number is the means to construct system. Number is the essence by which things perceived by the senses are dematerialized and liberated from contradictions. Number makes a unity of multiplicity.

Instrument. I am interested in buildings as apparatus rather than object, as instrument rather than monument. I think of architecture as support for human events, more like a camera than a photograph, more like a telephone than a conversation. I am interested in generosity and opportunity rather than program and stasis. I have always resisted the idea of programming as authoritarian, and aim instead for constructed freedom.





and monument simultaneously, to be both continuous and iconic. *Beth Sholom Synagogue* is such a project. It is a space for gathering and worship, and the vessel, which holds the community, is a piece of topography like the hills of San Francisco. At the lowest

point, the valley, the service is conducted from the bimah in the center. Years ago, I drew the section from Russian Hill through Columbus Avenue, the gathering street in the valley, to Telegraph Hill. Beth Sholom has the same section.

All images courtesy of Saitowitz/Natoma Architects, Inc.

Top: Project for Beth Sholom Synagogue
Bottom: Beth Sholom Synagogue (interior)
Opposite: 855 Folsom Street
Opposite (inset): 855 Folsom Street