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Author:

[Bressi, Todd W](#)

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Common Places: Anything but Simple Todd W. Bressi

“Common places,” architect Gianni Longo has written, “bring people together for the face-to-face contact that is essential for a healthy society.” But with the explosion of telecommunications media, are these everyday interactions — and the places that support them — all that necessary anymore?

This is the challenge that RUDC chair Don Miles, FAIA, an associate partner with Zimmer Gunsul Frasca, issued at the committee’s forum in San Francisco last March. But the forum left no doubt that San Francisco’s common places are still going strong. If anything, the range of common places in the city is becoming increasingly diverse, the demands on them are ever more complex, and their design ever more sophisticated.

The forum considered a diverse landscape of common places: traditional parks like Washington and Union Squares; reinterpretations of historic types, such as the new Embarcadero boulevard; inherited places, such as the Presidio, the huge in-city military base that is becoming a national park; and integrated networks, such as the streets and squares proposed for the Transbay Terminal redevelopment area. These places range in scale from the most intimate community playground to celebratory, civic spaces that are central to the city’s identity to regional networks that stretch around the bay and along the oceanfront. Designers must be attentive to how common places are woven into this wider landscape.

The forum also probed the complexity that can be found within each one of these spaces. Even the most straightforward common place, such as a neighborhood green like Washington Square or a regional street like the Embarcadero, is a space of many uses, with many constituencies and countless nuances in its design and occupation. The challenge for designers is to negotiate the complicated, often contentious, process of embedding common places with the ability to respond to this diversity.

The forum revealed the ways in which common places are in flux. A city’s common ground may start with a grand gesture, like platting streets or subdividing blocks, dedicating a green or a civic square, or preserving a valued landscape. But over time, common places require constant tinkering, adjustment and, sometimes, reinvention. The richness and complexity the forum observed in San Francisco’s common places reflects the richness and complexity of the city these places serve, and the acquired reverence San Franciscans have for the places they hold in common.

Perhaps the greatest revelation of the forum was the remarkable amount of change San Francisco has seen in the last decade. The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake unleashed a chain of events — from the razing of the Embarcadero Freeway to the closure (for seismic retrofitting) of many of the Beaux Arts buildings in the civic center — that have triggered subsequent urban design projects. Other legacies of the 1980s are coming to fruition: the collapse of the office market ironically jump-started the long-delayed Yerba Buena Gardens mixed-use redevelopment project; projects to move the main public library and the Museum of Modern Art have resulted in architectural icons that are catalyzing broader changes in the public realm.

Links in a Regional Chain

Perhaps the most remarkable changes have occurred along San Francisco’s waterfront. The earthquake so damaged the Embarcadero Freeway — an elevated, double-deck struc-

ture that cut off most of the downtown from the waterfront — that the city and state finally agreed to tear it down and replace it with a boulevard. In 1988, the military's base closure program targeted the 1,500-acre Presidio at the northwest corner of the city; unlike most military bases, the Presidio has been transferred directly to the National Park Service, thanks to special Congressional legislation passed in the 1970s. As a result, the city has opened to the bay in dramatic, unexpected ways and is forging its place in emerging regional open space networks.

One of first steps was to redesign the Embarcadero, a street that runs from Fisherman's Wharf to China Basin, into a formal, six-lane boulevard lined by palm trees and incorporating a new light rail line in its median. Neighborhoods are now trying to strengthen upland connections to the reopened waterfront; "a lot of the piers have come to be known by the streets that lead into them, not their numbers, a sign that people are weaving them into the city," urban designer Boris Dramov noted. Public spaces like Justin Herman Plaza (at the foot of the Embarcadero office-retail complex) and Levi Plaza (part of the Levi-Strauss company headquarters) no longer need to turn away from the port.

The most important upland connection is at Market Street, the city's main street, which terminates at the Ferry Building, one of San Francisco's most cherished landmarks. The key decision was to filter traffic that used the freeway through the downtown grid, rather than force it along the new boulevard or into a tunnel, explained Dramov, whose firm, ROMA, has worked on the design. Now the boulevard rights of way separate and encircle a new Ferry Plaza, which will be "the crossroads of the city," he said.

The success of this connection will depend on the treatment of adjacent spaces, Dramov said. Justin Herman Plaza is to the west, and an open square is to the south. "We cannot think of these as one large space, they will work only if you think of them as a series of linked places that, when combined, should be the living room of the city," he said. Thus Justin Herman Plaza, already a stage for formal events and informal performance, might be refined as a terraced amphitheater with the Ferry Building as a backdrop. The space to the south could be used for active recreation.

The reuse of the Ferry Building will also be important; ferry activities and connections through the building to the terminal, pier and waterfront, need to be clarified (the city's port agency is issuing an RFP for its ground floor). One proposal — relocating a farmers' market now held at Ferry Plaza — demonstrates the fractal nature of common places. Leon Sugarman, AIA, explained that the building and the spaces around it offer a variety of settings — street edge, interior corridor and bays, bayside promenade and pier. Various market activities — cafes, retail stalls, produce stalls and a wholesale area — would be matched to appropriate settings, creating a range of physical and sensual experiences.

These improvements are part of a chain of transformations that will make the Embarcadero a diverse common place. South of Market Street, a new public pier is open, a new waterfront park serves the growing South Beach community and a baseball stadium is planned. To the west, the reawakened Embarcadero will connect to established common places — Fisherman's Wharf, Aquatic Park, Fort Mason, Marina Green, the Presidio and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. This newly stitched together waterfront is an example of how common grounds are most powerful when they are related to the regional landscape.

This article reports on the spring, 1997, forum of the American Institute of Architects' Regional and Urban Design Committee, held March 13-16 in San Francisco. The next forum, which also will explore the theme of "common places," will take place in Chicago September 25-28. Call 800-242-3837 for more details.



Common Places and Compromise

For any place to survive, it must have constituents — people who are willing to activate it, monitor it, advocate for it, embrace it as their own. Common places, by their nature as shared places in a democratic society, must be claimed by a range of constituencies if they are to be successful. The design process is as much one of resolving physical questions as it is one of balancing various interests.

Quite often the constituencies that have claimed a place, and the interests they have staked, become evident through processes like charrettes or hearings. But Fred Kent and Kathy Madden, principals of New York-based Project for Public Spaces, argued that designers also need to hone their skills at assessing who inhabits spaces and how, and must apply those skills in their basic field research for any project.

Kent and Madden led a field observation exercise in which teams fanned out through the North Beach neighborhood, critically observing parks, street corners, alleys and pedestrian ways. Each participant interviewed users of these spaces and assumed an identity, such as that of a child, to imagine how well the spaces suited diverse kinds of people. In these spaces, at least, forum participants found that a series of small fixes would go a long way toward making those places more pleasant. One busy intersection at the corner of Washington Square Park, for example, is now controlled by a four-way stop; a traffic signal might cut down on the quick starts and reduce the noise that disturbs people in the park and sidewalk cafes.

Designing a new place poses a more difficult challenge. Constituencies must be identified and cultivated beforehand, and designers must help identify trade-offs and mediate compromises. Presidio landscape architect Michael Boland presented an elegant plan for reconciling the demands of preservationists, environmentalists and wind surfers in the redesign of Crissy Field. This waterfront wetland was filled by the military in the early twentieth century and turned into one of the nation's first air bases; it has since been used as space for large events and celebrations and most recently been claimed by wind surfers and people walking dogs.

Boland's plan includes a series of settings — a beach/parking area, tidal marsh, historic airstrip and bluff. Each is a careful balancing act; the tidal marsh, for example, includes carefully controlled access points so that schoolchildren can use it as an environmental education resource while placing the least strain on the biological resources.

One of the most contentious and long-running projects in San Francisco, the Yerba Buena redevelopment project, is finally bearing fruit. The recently opened cultural facilities and central open space, called Yerba Buena Gardens, emerged after contentious battles about whose interest the redevelopment would serve. "The day they opened, the press wrote, nobody needed a training manual, they knew how to use them," commented Helen Sause, the project manager for the city's redevelopment agency. In fact, the redevelopment agency has devoted great resources to establishing standards for the space and building a constituency of occupants and activities. It devotes great resources to cleaning the public spaces and having "security ambassadors" present; a special nonprofit group, the Yerba Buena Alliance, organizes some 90 special events in the gardens every year.

Designers can also be attentive to establishing a variety of common spaces, so that various groups can choose the settings that serve them best. Karen Alshuler, AIA (Simon Martin Vegue Winklestein), reported on redevelopment planning for the Transbay Terminal area; there, redesigned streets will be coupled with new interior block spaces to create a differentiated public realm.

Places Evolving Over Time

The earthquake has also presented new opportunities at San Francisco's Civic Center. Many of the buildings in the complex, perhaps the most fully realized Beaux-Arts civic

center in the U.S., were damaged and have been closed for seismic retrofitting. While this has resulted in a burst of construction, it has also cast the central plaza into decline and opened the question of how this City Beautiful-era space can be made a vital part of the city again.

San Francisco has built out its Civic Center patiently; new government or cultural buildings have been constructed in almost every decade. Last year the new main library opened, addressing complicated physical and social contexts. For example, two sides of the building face the formal Civic Center, another faces Market Street, which cuts by at an angle. To address both situations, and to encourage activity at street level, the designers (Pei Cobb Freed; Simon Martin Vegue Winklestein) wanted entrances on three sides; this made internal circulation complicated because libraries like to have one control point, according to Cathy Simon, FAIA.

The issue of how civic buildings activate public space will be faced again as the city turns its attention to redesigning Civic Center Plaza for the first time in forty years. Evan Rose, an urban designer with the city planning department, catalogued the problems with the space: pedestrian circulation is difficult, few constituencies have claimed the place, the elements in the plaza are a hodgepodge (a fountain and pool, bosques of olive trees, highway-style streetlights, vents for an underground parking lot) that undercut its ceremonial function. The forum brainstormed approaches to redesigning the plaza; observers commented that both the perimeters and center need attention. Since it is unlikely that the activity in the civic buildings will spill out vigorously into the sidewalks, designers should consider models like Pennsylvania Avenue and Bryant Park, suggested Marilyn Taylor, AIA.

San Francisco isn't even the most populous city in the Bay Area anymore (San Jose is), and forum participants wondered what the prospects for common places are outside the region's historic urban center. Gary Binger, Associate Director for Research at the Association of Bay Area Governments, a regional planning research organization, reported that the track record is mixed. Mountain View recently completed a new civic center whose park serves as a transition between a commercial main street that was rebuilt several years ago and surrounding neighborhoods. Walnut Creek has been requiring downtown developers to connect their projects to a network of pedestrian spaces that flow into the city's BART station.

Committee member Frank Spielberg remarked that the AIA chapter in Orange County, whose suburbs are of the same generation as Mountain View and Walnut Creek, has been giving awards recognizing excellence in "places in the public realm" for several years. "We have powerful Hispanic streets, all kinds of public places," he said. But he worried about California's rapidly emerging exurban development, particularly new cities in the Central Valley, where three to five million new residents are expected to settle in the coming decades. "There is a possibility of a new infrastructure for urban growth at a different scale than we have been talking about."

The forum did not probe this issue, but the underlying message is cautionary. Suburban common places like those emerging in downtown Mountain View and Walnut Creek may be important steps forward. But if San Francisco is an example, the most satisfying common places have a number of underlying strengths. They are products of a mature, diverse community, one that has developed a long history of both social and urban traditions. They are part of a network of public spaces that vary widely in their scale, function and the constituencies they serve, and at best are connected with regional landscape features. They are constantly evolving, always being reconsidered and improved by many actions, large and small. The greatest challenge and responsibility for designers, perhaps, is to cultivate these conditions; the prospects for building a common place from the ground up are poor, it seems, but the possibilities embedded in staying with those places are very rich indeed.

—Todd W. Bressi is Executive Editor of *Places* and teaches urban design at Pratt Institute.