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Folsom Street Blues

Trevor Boddy

As visiting critic “in wolf’s clothing,” here are some of the propositions I overheard spectators and speakers make at the December 4, 2003, meeting of the San Francisco Planning Commission, where the Rincon Hill and Transbay Plans were discussed in the context of an application by Heller-Manus Architects for four massive residential towers on high podia along two blocks on Folsom Street.

- Vancouverites have always preferred smaller, higher apartments than close-to-the-ground, ever-sprawling, gas-guzzling, free-marketeering San Franciscans.
- Vancouver city planners have more sweeping powers than those in San Francisco. Combined with a passive populace that likes being told what to build, their regulations have helped shape innovative architecture downtown.
- Regarding its skyline, Vancouver has a Marine-style “flat-top” hairdo,

while San Francisco prefers a sculpted “big-hair” look that amplifies the curves of her hills.

- The soon-to-be-approved plans by Heller-Manus for \$600 million worth of housing in four towers represent a direct application of Vancouver innovations to San Francisco.
- Immediately approving projects like these, which do not conform with the city’s pending urban design policies, will make it harder to bring in Vancouver-style innovations later.
- San Francisco needs lower buildings along the Bay Bridge ramps in Rincon Hill to provide a “buffer” and “transition” to Vancouver-style high-rise blocks.
- The requirement that developers pay a tiny percentage of construction costs in Vancouver-style development levies for public-realm improvements will be so onerous it will kill future housing in Transbay/Rincon.
- Bulkier buildings than Vancouver’s are mandated by San Francisco’s

building codes, which ban scissor stairs. (Vancouver and virtually all other cities in the same seismic danger class as San Francisco have long permitted them.) And even though everyone knows San Francisco’s codes derive from 1950s engineering, they can’t be changed “because of public safety paranoia after 9/11.”

- The current developers in Transbay/Rincon are the only ones who will build there. If the city does not make them happy by scuttling most of the principles of the Rincon Hill Plan, the area will be forced to endure further empty, bleak decades.

Previous spread: Downtown Vancouver from the south, with False Creek in the foreground. Image by Waite Air Photos.

Above: Rincon Hill, south of San Francisco’s Financial District, is seen by some an ideal location for a new highrise residential district similar to those in Vancouver. Image from the Rincon Hill Plan, San Francisco Planning Department, November 2003.

The housing crisis necessitates okaying anything big and apartment-y, right now.

Here is the bad news: from my Vancouver viewpoint, almost every statement on this list is wrong, or at least partially wrong. The good news is that the misunderstanding is almost evenly spread among developers, their architects, urban planners, public-interest lobbying organizations, and the concerned citizenry at large.

Pretzel Logic

Rather than elucidate a comparative theory of urban design practice in our sister cities, I will pass right to the crux of things.

The physical center of the problem is Folsom Street. For many years Folsom carried traffic on raised ramps as part of the Embarcadero Freeway — one of the most hated segments of the U.S. Interstate system. But with the demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway in the wake of 1989's Loma Prieta earthquake (Seattleites pray for a similarly non-life-threatening catastrophe to compel demolition of their analogous waterfront-walling Alaskan Way/Highway 99), what was once a barrier is now widely seen as a link bringing together the Transbay and Rincon Hill mini-neighborhoods immediately south of the Financial District.

Yet, despite being the “zipper” for this reviving portion of the city, Folsom Street is also the somewhat strange dividing line between two urban plans awaiting approval and implementation. Folsom's north side is covered by the October 2003 “Transbay Redevelopment Project Area Design for Development,” produced by the local franchise of Skidmore Owings and Merrill, along with specialist consultants to the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency and city Planning Department. The

future of the south side is the subject of a somewhat more timid document authored by the city's own staff planners. This study came out just a month later, and is entitled “The Rincon Hill Plan: Draft for Public Discussion.”

One street, a different urban design plan on each side — what gives? While architects at SOM and city planners have recognized this contradiction and invested a lot of time in talking to each other, it has been difficult to surmount the facts of provenance: the two plans are essentially adjacent and competing documents.

Further complicating this dialogue has been the preexistence of two large double-tower housing proposals by different developers — but the same local architecture firm (Heller-Manus) — for sites on two adjacent blocks on the south side of Folsom. Over the last half decade, these schemes have evolved in tandem — but not in agreement — with the city's planning thinking for the area. Naturally, the developers and designers have also sought to exert political influence behind the scenes to get their projects built before the urban design rules are changed.

To an outsider it was immediately apparent at the Dec. 4 meeting that this situation has led to is an unfortunate cross-contamination between what should be two separate activities: urban planning and the design and construction of individual buildings. Indeed, a close reading of the Rincon Hill Plan today reveals how the pair of double-tower projects are the source of some of its weakest ideas, especially those dealing with built form, public space, and sunlight on public spaces.

Here is my own Cliff's Notes version of events: weak development proposals by two firms using the same architect are improved somewhat in dialogue with city urban designers,

but at the expense of the Rincon Hill Plan which has now been bent to accommodate flaws in the architectural schemes. Unfortunately, this pretzel logic of planners trading urban design principles for political success is the dirty secret of a once-idealistic profession.

You Can't Have It Both Ways

Having given such a reading of the political landscape, I should now back it up with specific analysis of why the approved Heller-Manus designs (and the flawed plan which tries to accommodate them) are pastiches — not exemplars — of the “Vancouver model.”

The first approved Heller-Manus design is Union Property Capital's 300 Spear Street (at Folsom). This would include up to 820 units of market-rate housing averaging 1,150 sq.ft., and up to 139 units of family-oriented affordable housing averaging 1,400 sq.ft. It is worth noting, to start, that average housing unit sizes here are very large compared with comparable projects in Vancouver, Chicago or San Diego. This could either mean a very high-end target market or inefficient floor plans in need of redesign, or both. Most of this housing would be in one 400-foot tower and one 350-foot tower set only 83 feet apart at their east and west corners respectively.

Another portion of the housing would be located in an 80-foot base that rings the site. However, it is unclear if one of the most successful aspects of Vancouver's new downtown streetscapes — continuous townhouses with stoops and Jane Jacobsian “eyes on the street” — will be incorporated here. My suspicion is that without a specific commitment up front it is unlikely this will happen.

Downtown Vancouver developers also resisted mandated townhouse



configured housing on streets at first, largely because these corporations had built concrete and steel high-rises downtown, and had limited exposure to this scale of building. But ten years later these same Vancouver developers can hardly imagine building any other model, especially since zoning amendments permit live-work arrangements in many of the townhouses.

Be forewarned: this is something that will happen increasingly in San Francisco, no matter what official land use policies say. The absence of discussion of live-work possibilities is a weakness of both plans, the result of stifled debate on how most of us actually live these days.

The second approved Heller-Manus design is located one block west at 201 Folsom, on what is currently a U.S. Postal Service parking lot. Here the powerful international developer Tishman Speyer is proposing what — in urban design terms — is a virtual clone of the previous project, except that it is even bulkier at its base. The reason is an underground Post Office facility will remain, making the base of the new project an 80-foot-high platform covering almost the entire site.

One should note that such podia are twice Vancouver’s mandated height and will have unfortunate impacts on Folsom Street. City planners envision this widened and

tree-bedecked street as the key public way in the new neighborhood, and renderings show it heavily peopled and lined with cafes. But this is unlikely if it is in permanent darkness and buffeted by amplified wind gusts.

Only when the Heller-Manus schemes are compared at the same scale as the Vancouver projects they superficially resemble does it become apparent just how bulky they are. Their towers are too fat and too close together, and the four of them taken together would create an unfortunate wall. Indeed, both the Transbay and Rincon Hill plans demonstrate the unfortunate impact on views, light and streetscape of the bulky towers that already exist in the area.

There is a single, deadly, urban design confusion at work here. Both the Heller-Manus architects and the city planners who compiled the Rincon Hill Plan apparently believe that seven- to nine-story, European-style “perimeter blocks” can be combined to form a base for high-rise towers. Sorry, guys, it is either one or the other. I know of no project, anywhere, which has successfully combined the two typologies without compromising surrounding streets utterly. We all love the urban blocks of central Paris, but to stick a “Plan Voisin” tower in each compromises the strength of both. Planners and architects tend to know and love Paris, Barcelona or Berlin. But they know

Vancouver only superficially, and thus misapply its lessons.

Now for a solution that would apply the Vancouver experience. Starting, for argument’s sake, at Vancouver’s suggested podium datum of 40 feet above grade, there is no reason why the massing of both San Francisco projects could not be cut back along their northern ends. This would be made even easier if the city would apply its current parking reduction policy: a Dr. Atkins regime for sunlight-robbing bulk.

Once demanding more than one parking stall per unit, Vancouver developers now happily provide less than half this rate — in a city with a weaker public transportation system. The same developers now enthusiastically support shared car cooperatives as alternatives to extremely expensive (for everyone!) parking spaces, costing up to \$20,000 each for land and construction.

Unnatural Birth

There was not much argument at the Dec. 4 hearing that these two massive projects will set the tone for all subsequent developments in Transbay and Rincon Hill. There was, however, considerable discussion as to whether the current designs should be “grandfathered” into premature birth, or whether the city should require that they be amended to concur with the urban design principles of the Rincon

The Rincon Hill Projects

Allan Jacobs

Hill Plan. The decision is now in: they got their “grandfathered birth.”

This unfortunate and contradictory metaphor should give the game away: who could argue that grandfathered births are not some freak of nature? While they have different developers, the two projects have been designed by the same firm, aggressively promoted as a single project, and accompanied by a flashy website and public-relations campaign.

Despite slightly different corporate parentage, the two projects are siblings; two sets of dumpy fraternal twins, to put it bluntly. Vancouver has learned the hard way that if the quality of architecture is not good at the beginning, it never gets better. The architecture here is uninspired at best, and will set a standard of mediocrity that will prevail for years.

Do us one better, San Francisco. Demand better architecture and more enlightened urbanism. Do it now!

Left: The Vancouver model combines highrise towers with continuous townhouses to create an active, pedestrian-oriented streetscape. Photo courtesy of the City of Vancouver, Planning Department.

Middle: Heller-Manus Architects’ project for 300 Spear Street. Birds-eye rendering from submittal to the San Francisco Planning Commission. Courtesy of the City of San Francisco, Planning Department.

Right: Heller-Manus Architects’ project for 201 Folsom Street. Street-level rendering from submittal to the San Francisco Planning Commission. Courtesy of the City of San Francisco, Planning Department.

The approval of the two Rincon Hill-Folsom Street behemoths by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors is a standout example of non-planning, ad-hoc, project decision-making at its worst.

Initially planned as speculative large-floor-plate office developments of the late 1990s (themselves totally out of keeping with San Francisco’s finely scaled development pattern), they were quickly reconstituted as housing proposals when the dot-com market dried up.

The proposals, to start, were far out of scale with the 200-ft. height limit of the area and the requirement that there be 150 ft. between towers. San Francisco City Planning Department staff were then working on a Rincon Hill Plan that was looking to a 250 to 300-ft. height limit, not the proposal for 400-ft. heights and only 82 ft. between towers the developers’ architects were offering. So why not go for broke? My understanding is that the developers and their architects decided to try their own zoning proposal, and that they did a great job of railroading their rezoning through the city and around concerned neighborhoods. Loads of people spoke out against the proposals and the conditional use — to no avail. In the end, only one supervisor, Tom Amiano, voted against the project.

This project will have a floor area ratio of close to 2.1. There will be 800 dwelling units in each of the two buildings, and the density will be about 460 units per acre.

To say that this development follows the Vancouver Model, as some of its proponents do, where the highest floor area ratio in the downtown housing areas is about 5 is an insult to Vancouver and to sane, knowing people’s credulity.

I am advised that as the hearings were coming to a close, one of the

supervisors asked for one hundred additional affordable housing units, and got them speedily, presumably as the price for his vote. One of the local city planners estimates that the developers made about \$100 million as a result of what the city gave them.

There is an old, old lesson of city planning here that few seem to be able to learn. When design-development decisions are made one by one, case by case, and there are either no plans or community requirements, or those that exist are easily up for grabs, then the side with the most power will usually win. And in our society, in large development matters, the side with the most power is the side with the most money. That side is never the city planners or urban designers working for the public.

This is not a case study of making place. It is a study of ruining place. The place is San Francisco.