

Bus Tour June 3, 2000

The Better Neighborhoods 2002 project seeks to develop specific plans to improve three San Francisco neighborhoods: the Central Waterfront, the area around the Balboa Park BART station, and the Upper Market area centered on the intersection of Market and Octavia. Following community workshops in each neighborhood, the Planning Department hosted bus and walking tours to explore specific issues in each study area. Listed below are the neighborhoods visited on our bus tour.

- Yerba Buena
- South Park
- South Beach
- Northeast Waterfront
- Upper Fillmore

On Saturday, June 3, 2000, approximately 26 people joined Better Neighborhoods 2002 Project Manager David Alumbaugh and Central Waterfront Plan Coordinator Jasper Rubin for a three-hour bus and walking tour. The tour took the group to five places in San Francisco that provided examples of various characteristics, both good and bad, related to the general concept of 'what makes a good neighborhood.' One of the primary goals of the bus tour was to start building a toolkit, or vocabulary, addressing the range of possible developments that might be appropriate for the Central Waterfront. The following notes summarize some of the main points and questions that were raised by David and Jasper and tour participants.

Yerba Buena

Yerba Buena between Folsom and Harrison was the first stop. The area is home to a variety of high density, public and private developments of various designs, and which serve different populations:

Museum Park Development: a 233-unit market-rate housing complex located at Mabini and Folsom, provides low- and middle-income housing. The building presents a poor pedestrian street front that is devoid of stores or other activities.

Alice Street Community Gardens, a large senior housing project, offers attractive exterior features and a quiet atmosphere. The public garden was felt to be a great idea. However, the area lacks vibrancy or community feel. How do you achieve a good mix of services and housing?

St. Francis Place presents another market-rate housing complex targeted at higher income residents.

Generally, the discussion focused on building form and design - for instance, the buildings are highest along the Folsom and step down as they go into the block, creating a development that responds to its surroundings more or less successfully. Individual buildings were compared to one another to highlight successful versus unsuccessful features, especially at the street level.

South Park

On the whole, South Park was looked on very favorably. It is a good example of a place that incorporates a variety of uses—retail, residential, commercial—in a way

that maintains an intimate scale and which respects the character of the surrounding area, both in re-use of older buildings and as expressed in new architectural forms. South Park elicited many questions and comments from participants. It was widely acknowledged that the intimate setting and scale offered by the park was successful, partly because it is pedestrian-friendly, and helped provide a sense of separation from nearby intense urban activities. People noted that pocket parks, such as in the Tenderloin, had failed because they were too small, while South Park struck a nice balance between being a good-sized open space and an intimate neighborhood park. South Park's latest development occurred when it was "down and out," and yet it became trendy. How can this process occur in the Central Waterfront? Should it occur in the Central Waterfront? How can the Central Waterfront grow without losing its sense of place and inherent diversity?; and that while there was obviously an influx of wealth into the area that spurred some of its transition from a run down area to a focal point for the hip, it still had a sense of authenticity.

South Beach

From South Park, the group walked to South Beach, a part of the City that has experienced tremendous change in a short time. This includes transportation improvements along the Embarcadero, Pacific Bell Ballpark, and several housing developments.

The group first looked at The Brannan, a soon-to-open high-rise development at Brannan and Delancey. While 20% of the units are designated for affordable housing, the building feels, "like a completely different city" due to its high-rise design.

Next came Bayside Village, another housing development, of which approximately one-third is affordable. This complex was compared to Delancey Street, just across the street. Delancey Street is a non-profit institution that provides mentoring, training services, and housing to people with very low incomes. Street frontages along Bayside Village are not well done - too many curb cuts, badly designed entrances, and no commercial activity make for a poor pedestrian environment create and a generally inactive feel. Delancey Street, on the other hand, is an example of good design, and though not as dense as the developments found in Yerba Buena, shows how it is possible to build fairly high-density developments that do not feel too imposing. This is achieved partly by stepping back the building from the street at the upper stories, while maintaining a strong street presence with minimal garage entrances and curb cuts and by including street-level shopping and entertainment, including cafes, restaurants and a bookstore. The general design of Delancey Street was also found to be favorable, with participants regarding favorably architectural design that includes flower boxes, fountains, and other amenities.

Other development in the area includes South Beach Marina, with 20% affordable units (felt by most to be the least percentage there should be), and Townsend and Embarcadero, a 100% affordable housing development project noted as offering a great mix of activities. Lastly the tour looked at One Embarcadero South. Comments were generally negative, with complaints about the parking entrance and building design. Still, the Embarcadero is a good model for 3rd Street, due to the similar street widths and presence of a light rail line, suggesting strongly the potential for extensive housing along 3rd, if it is designed well.

Northeast Waterfront

The tour next drove through the Northeast Waterfront to look quickly at the Levi

Plaza area, bounded roughly by Battery-Front-Embarcadero. Levi Plaza was chosen as an example of successful commercial development in an area that had a history of change similar to what is happening in the Central Waterfront today. The challenge was to incorporate new uses in a way that respected the past. In that regard, old warehouses were re-adapted to office and commercial activities and new construction was designed with brick exteriors and at the same scale as the older buildings. Is it possible, and appropriate, to adaptively re-use some of the existing structures in the Central Waterfront in a similar fashion? And is it possible, and appropriate, to encourage new uses if they can be incorporated respectfully into the existing industrial fabric of the Central Waterfront? At the same time, participants noted that retail incorporated into the buildings added to the neighborhood without detracting from its character.

Upper Fillmore

The Upper Fillmore neighborhood (located along Fillmore roughly between and Jackson and California) was the last stop. The neighborhood is wonderfully vibrant, with thriving businesses and a busy, pedestrian-friendly environment. Part of the reason that pedestrians feel safe here is that traffic is slowed by a fairly narrow street, and trees and parking provide good separation from traffic flow. That parking is scant in no way detracts from its commercial vitality and does not discourage people from coming to the area—in part because the area is well-served by transit.

One of the most important aspects of this neighborhood is the scale of the street, as well as its mix of uses. For most of this stretch of Fillmore, street level uses are below several stories of housing. The scale of the street, at 3-4 stories, remains intimate while urban in feel. However, some intersections stand out because they don't 'hold the corner'—that is, buildings are not built to the sidewalk and thus do not maintain the street wall. Furthermore, they are too small, and so don't create a strong entrance to the block. Indistinct corners and intersections detract from the sense of place, and one's general 'mental map' of an area. The neighborhood contains the kind of shops and services that are missing in the Central Waterfront. Partly, it is through a significant residential population that such activities are supported. Should the Central Waterfront seek to accommodate higher densities in order to attract such services?