

Growth Factor

URBAN PLANNERS ARE BETTING THAT SAN FRANCISCANS ARE FINALLY READY TO EMBRACE DOWNTOWN LIVING FOR REAL—AND MAYBE BEGIN TO SOLVE OUR HOUSING SHORTAGE IN THE PROCESS. BY ROBIN RINALDI

OUR ROUNDTABLE

(from left)

Gabriel Metcalf is executive director of San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR), SF's premier urban-planning think tank.

John Cary is executive director of Public Architecture, a nonprofit that focuses on education about, advocacy for and the design of public spaces.

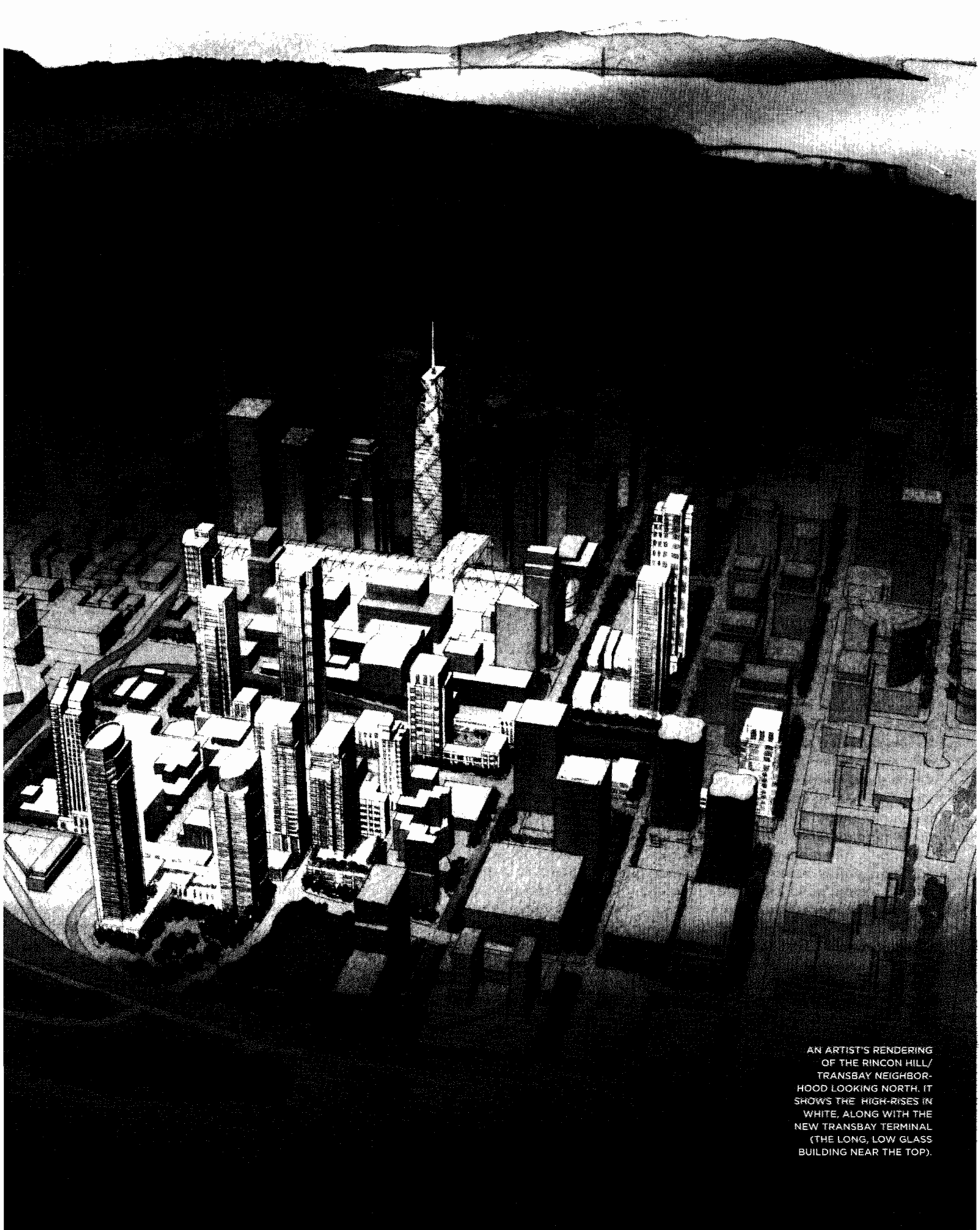
Joshua Switzky is a planner/urban designer in the San Francisco Planning Department who has worked on the Rincon Hill Plan for the past three years.

Mike Grisso is the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency's project manager for SoMa and has worked on the Transbay Redevelopment Plan for the past three years.

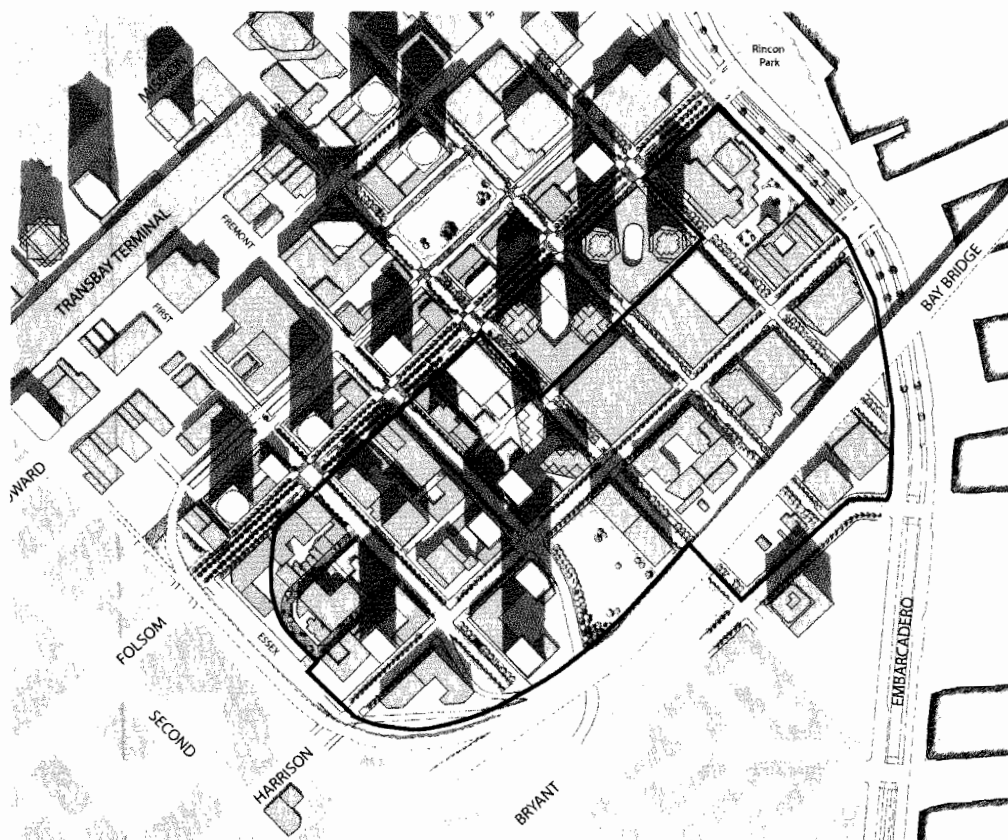


Fifteen years from now, there will be a whole new kind of neighborhood on the eastern edge of SoMa.

Rather than showcasing ornate Victorians and Edwardians or sleek modern lofts like other SF neighborhoods, it will attempt to combine elements of the two: merging small stores and townhouses with soaring residential towers that will change the city's skyline. The urban designers who created the Rincon Hill and Transbay Redevelopment plans—both of which were approved by the Board of Supervisors and Mayor Gavin Newsom this summer—have numerous goals in mind: to provide several thousand units of much-needed housing in the city, get people out of their cars and onto the sidewalk, redevelop the blighted blocks around the current Transbay Terminal and provide the parks, trees, public spaces, bike lanes, front stoops and small storefronts that make a neighborhood livable. Developers have lined up to pay the \$25-per-square-foot fee that will largely finance the changes—in addition to building nearly 2,000 new units of affordable housing. If all goes as planned, people will come to think of Folsom Street as the new Union or Polk, and the Rincon/Transbay area as the new Cow Hollow or Russian Hill—a place where city dwellers live, dine, shop and stroll. We talked to four urban planners—two of whom helped design Rincon/Transbay—to find out what goes into building a neighborhood from the ground up.



AN ARTIST'S RENDERING OF THE RINCON HILL/ TRANSBAY NEIGHBORHOOD LOOKING NORTH. IT SHOWS THE HIGH-RISES IN WHITE, ALONG WITH THE NEW TRANSBAY TERMINAL (THE LONG, LOW GLASS BUILDING NEAR THE TOP).



AN AERIAL VIEW OF RINCON HILL, OUTLINED IN RED, AND TRANSBAY AT THE FOOT OF THE BAY BRIDGE. THE PALE YELLOW BUILDINGS ARE HIGH-RISES; DARK YELLOW ONES ARE TOWNHOUSES, LOW-RISE APARTMENTS AND RETAIL.

RINCON/TRANSBAY BY THE NUMBERS

Location It's roughly bounded by Mission Street to the north, Bryant to the south, Second to the west and the Embarcadero to the east. Rincon Hill sits south of Folsom Street, which will serve as the neighborhood's main drag, while Transbay lies to the north.

New buildings Ten or 11 new residential high-rises, interspersed among low-rise apartment buildings and townhouses, will range from 30 to 55 stories each and will contain about 7,500 new residential units housing about 15,000 people in the city's densest neighborhood. These will include nearly 2,000 affordable apartments for buyers earning less than SF's median income (or renters earning up to 60 percent of the median).

Transit The new Transbay Terminal at First and Mission will be finished in 2013, connecting the Rincon/Transbay neighborhood to all regional bus lines. The Central Subway portion of the Third Street Light Rail, in the initial planning stages right now, will run below the neighborhood. Existing transit at Market Street and the Embarcadero is a few blocks away.

Parking All parking will be underground, with a maximum of one space for every two units if the spaces are independently accessible, and one space for every unit if tandem, valet or mechanical-lift parking is used.

WHAT WAS THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF REZONING AND BUILDING OUT THIS NEIGHBORHOOD?

Grisso: If you look at it in the context of the housing crisis, this is an opportunity to create housing that this region needs, and housing near employment centers so you don't contribute to suburban sprawl and transportation congestion. Downtown housing was one of the goals. This is a popular place to live—it may be impossible to ever build enough to satisfy the demand. But even so, the amount of housing we've been building is pitifully inadequate. Vancouver has built 10,000 downtown units in the last decade. We've built hundreds. This kind of housing is something that SF is behind other cities in. These neighborhoods are part of the reinvention of the downtown, and they'll make a dent, but this is not going to fully satisfy the massive demand that's been building up over the years.

HIGH-RISES ARE A RELATIVELY NEW PHENOMENON IN SAN FRANCISCO, NO?

Grisso: These will be much slimmer than the residential towers we have now, much more tapered. The look is very elegant. It minimizes the impact on the skyline and the local envi-

ronment. They must be placed at least 115 feet apart—the idea is to allow sunlight to hit the street, which makes for a much better environment and a friendlier neighborhood.

Metcalf: In this field 10 years ago, I'd hear people say, "San Francisco is not a high-rise town. We won't live in high-rises." That has been disproved; it was utterly wrong. We now have a few examples of high-rises that have sold out at extremely high prices. People love to live in high-rises. Rincon Hill and Transbay are the first attempts to create a whole new neighborhood on that concept. I think it's absolutely the right thing to be doing for the environment. Instead of sprawling outward and making people drive, we're going to build homes for people at extremely high density, where they can walk to work and walk to the store and finally grow up and embrace their urbanity.

HOW DO YOU COMBINE THE HEIGHT AND SLEEKNESS OF THE TOWERS WITH WARMTH AND AN "SF FEEL" ON THE GROUND? CAN YOU MAKE IT LOOK LIKE SF AND NOT JUST ANY GENERIC BIG CITY?

Switzky: The towers will certainly have a sleek appearance, but most of that is how they're experienced on the skyline when you see them

from a distance. We put a lot of emphasis on breaking down the scale on the pedestrian level. These aren't hermetically sealed office towers. They have balconies and operable windows. And they don't take up most of the street frontages—they're high, but from the ground, they are a minority of the space you pass by. Most of the housing you'll see will be townhouses with bay windows. We want to encourage modern architectural creativity but maintain a real fine-grained character and a residential feel.

Grisso: One way is by requiring that there be stoops and front porches on the townhouses. That makes them look like a lot of the nicer SF neighborhoods. That's as much a traditional SF prototype as any other housing element.

Cary: But I have to say, we lost the objective of making everything look like the Victorians. We haven't continued to place a huge priority on that, and personally I don't have a problem with it. This more-integrated streetscaping is much more significant than any one facade you can put on a building. Obviously you want it to look as nice and familiar to people as possible. But Victorian is for houses, as opposed to larger-scale buildings; you just lose that when you increase the scale. There are so many other parts of this plan that balance out what may be considered lost.

Switzky: This neighborhood will be uniquely SF. The combination of things we've planned here isn't found anywhere else in the world. A lot of it comes down to the richness of the details in the public realm, and how things meet the street. It'll feel warm and welcoming.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE DESIGN ELEMENTS THAT MAKE A NEIGHBORHOOD WARM AND WELCOMING?

Switzky: Individual and frequent entryways, residential units on the street level, small-scale shops, a lack of blank parking garages, trees on the sidewalks—all those create a place where you want to walk around. They're simple fundamentals. We just need to get them right.

Cary: There are also things like the scale and type of streetlights, and variety. These streets won't all be the same. You need to make sure there are a lot of new experiences that draw people down the street and keep them moving. That's what architects and designers look for. You may not be conscious of it, but it happens all the time, whether it's your work space or even part of your home that you hang out in more than others. Think about when you go to a party: Most of the time, people congregate in the kitchen. There are so many analogies to your own daily experience. Architects have never been good at really communicating what those core things are. They have success on a small scale, but they haven't been able to say that this is the single solution or formula for making a space livable. So every building, every street, every project is a new experience in many ways. But it'll become readily apparent in the first few years what spaces have been successful, and you can always change things.

Switzky: You want to create details that create a rhythm that builds up as you walk down the street. SF is traditionally built on a pattern of 25-by-100-foot lots, which are narrow and deep. What that means as you walk down the street is that things keep changing every 25 feet: the windows, storefronts, stoops. There's real richness in that. You can get that in larger buildings by architecturally breaking them down into sections or giving them different heights or setbacks. Downtown has a larger lot pattern, so

we tried to break down the scale of these larger buildings into smaller sections.

THIS LOOKS GREAT ON PAPER. BUT WHAT ARE THE CHANCES OF IT ACTUALLY TURNING OUT THIS WAY? HOW MUCH CAN AN URBAN PLANNER CONTROL?

Grisso: You can't just put in a sidewalk—there have to be reasons for people to walk down the sidewalk. You achieve that through development controls. For example, all the ground-floor space in both the towers and low-rises has to be what we call in urban planning "activated space": It's either retail facing onto the street, or it's independently accessible residential units like townhouses. That gives people a place to go, and makes it a friendly environment that people want to walk through. You could put in the nicest possible sidewalks, but if you put parking lots on the ground floor, people won't walk. We've learned this from other cities that

THERE'S THE POSSIBILITY OF WEALTHY PEOPLE BUYING VACATION HOMES AND PIEDS-À-TERRE, OR INVESTORS BUYING WHOLE CHUNKS TO RENT OUT, WHICH WILL PUT A DENT IN THE HOME-OWNERSHIP PROSPECTS OF PEOPLE WHO LIVE AND WORK HERE FULL-TIME.

Switzky: It's a tough question and a huge concern. Certainly a number of units are going to be pieds-à-terre, more than we'd like. But in terms of planning, it's hard to prevent that.

Grisso: One way is by building affordable housing. The affordable units in Transbay clearly won't be pieds-à-terre, and there's going to be more than 1,000 of those. If you look at the projects already built, like the Metropolitan, the people who live there—and I know three of them personally—work downtown. The phenomenon you're talking about is in very high-end buildings like the Four Seasons. But even in the Four Seasons, there are a lot of people who

“I'D HEAR PEOPLE SAY 'SF IS NOT A HIGH-RISE TOWN.' That was disproved. People love to live in high-rises. I think it's absolutely the right thing for the environment.”
—Gabriel Metcalf

have done high-density downtown areas, like Vancouver and Chicago. You have to spend a lot of time and energy on the public realm. "Public realm" doesn't just mean sidewalks and parks; it also means the public face of private buildings. It has to be pedestrian-friendly.

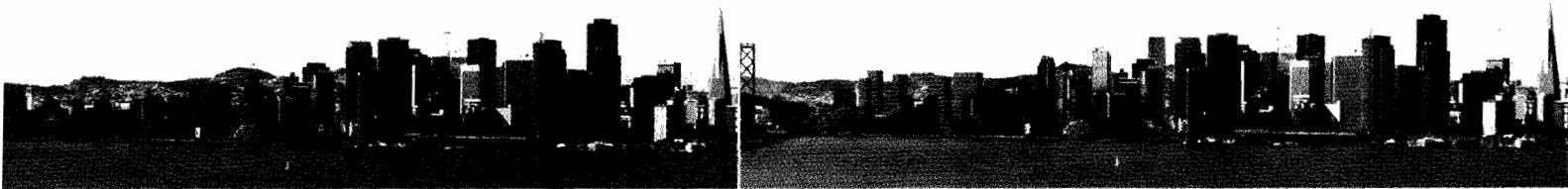
Switzky: Another fundamental land-use decision that encourages people to walk is putting the housing right next to the city's downtown office core. A lot of these people will work in the Financial District, so they'll walk to work a few blocks away instead of driving from the peninsula. And then they'll hopefully walk to other amenities like the Ferry Building, the ballpark and other parts of SoMa.

sold their houses in the suburbs and came to the city to live. Our mayor lives in the Four Seasons. My old boss from the private sector lives there. I don't think out-of-towners are going to be the dominant population. You can control who buys there to some extent, in terms of the size of the units and the layout of the building. But obviously, the market is going to determine that.

Metcalf: Ultimately, the only way to bring down the average cost of Bay Area housing is to increase the supply significantly. That can't all be done within the city limits of SF, but we have to do our part. So do Marin County and San Mateo County and Sonoma County. Here in the city, we have both the infrastructure to support

TODAY'S VIEW (LEFT) FROM MISSION AND THIRD STREETS, AND THE VIEW AFTER BUILD-OUT (RIGHT).





THE CURRENT (LEFT) AND FUTURE (RIGHT) VIEW OF THE SKYLINE FROM TREASURE ISLAND.

really high population density and a lot of land south of Market that's within walking distance of amazing transit. There will be pied-à-terre and vacation properties, but I don't know what you can do about it. The problem is that we're so far behind on housing; cities like Vancouver built so much housing downtown that throughout the '90s the average price of a condo went down every year. We've never done that.

Cary: Any new housing is helpful and represents progress, but we still have a long way to go. The need for affordable, multigenerational housing is apparent well beyond the city limits. There will probably be a significant percentage purchased by investors; we can only hope and trust that some level of affordability will per-

store needs a lot of space. So we're creating multiple storefronts.

Switzky: Recent land-use controls in neighborhoods like Hayes Valley and North Beach limit what's called "formula retail." To determine if something is formula retail, they look at things like how many establishments the business has throughout the city, whether employees wear uniforms, the signage. So we do have controls in some neighborhoods, but there's nothing for that yet here. The idea of controlling chains in the downtown area hasn't come up yet. It came up in Hayes Valley and North Beach because there's an existing fabric to the neighborhood businesses already there, and the idea was to preserve that.

too many people who think there shouldn't be any chain stores at all.

Metcalf: I think the most important thing to do is control parcel sizes. If there are many parcels and many stores, then the opportunity for retail diversity exists. So yeah, there'll be some Starbucks, but the local small-business owner still has a chance.

Cary: To be a destination, a shopping boulevard needs to differentiate itself with character. The sameness of chain stores to some extent undercuts the uniqueness we would like to foster. Yet by instituting certain planning codes, we can work with chains to modify their signage or exteriors, making them different from the strip-mall norm and more similar to the neighborhood aesthetic so many of us are hoping for. Truly successful developments strike a balance. They attract, seek out and accommodate a variety of retailers—and thus consumers. Restrictions or no, the market will achieve a balance in short order. Interspersed between the chic design boutiques on Union, there are chain stores in one form or another. Again, we can only hope and trust that the property owners respect the need for a variety of offerings.

Grisso: We're hoping Folsom will be a pedestrian-friendly retail corridor with "neighborhood-serving retail." That's a planning term that differentiates between the big-box type of stores that serve the whole region, and smaller stores that serve the immediate area and that create the right kind of feel when you walk down the street.

Switzky: We've envisioned some design options for Folsom to become a kind of grand civic boulevard. The idea is to have a planted median in the street—the term is "living streets." This will likely be the densest neighborhood in the city, so there's a need for open space. The space along the sidewalk is seen as a chance to get a lot more open space, whether it's seating, dog runs or community gardens. We're going to widen one side of the street up to 32 feet—of that space, about 10 feet is the traditional sidewalk, but the rest of it is landscaped space, eating space or community gardens. The closest thing we have to this idea in SF is in Duboce Triangle on Sanchez and

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sist. Personally, I hope there's a mix of income levels, as there are in other successful housing developments throughout SoMa, for example. San Francisco has never been known for—or expected to foster—homogeneity.

Switzky: And don't forget that everything surrounding the towers will be townhouses and traditional apartment buildings no higher than six to eight stories. You're not going to be drawing people from out of the region to buy a second home in a low-scale building.

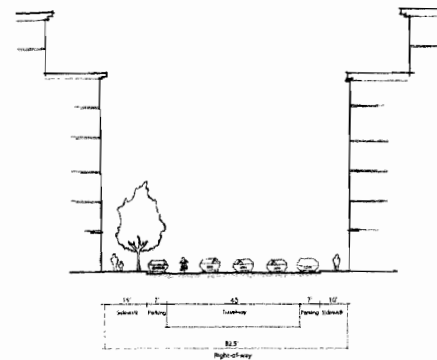
Grisso: But we shouldn't have any illusions. This is SF. Even the low-rise buildings are going to be expensive. The market determines that.

HOW DO WE PREVENT CHAIN STORES FROM DOMINATING THE RETAIL SPACE?

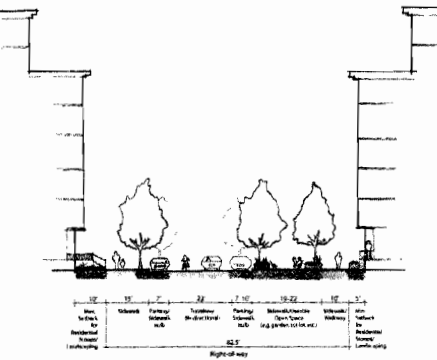
Grisso: The way you control the occupants is to control the size of the space. A big-box chain

BUT IF YOU'RE TRYING TO MAKE FOLSOM A POPULAR RETAIL STREET LIKE POLK OR UNION, CAN YOU ALLOW CHAINS IN AND STILL ACHIEVE THAT—NOT BIG-BOX STORES, BUT CHAINS LIKE STARBUCKS?

Grisso: Polk and Union have lots of non-big-box chains. There's a Starbucks on both those streets. Because the Redevelopment Agency will own the properties on the north side of Folsom, we could theoretically make it a condition that they don't put formula retail in there. But I don't know if that will happen. It depends on what the neighborhood wants. We have a very intensive community-planning process, we have a citizens advisory committee—and as of now, they haven't suggested that. I think there's a big divide in this city over whether chain stores should be kept out of every neighborhood. I don't think you'll find



Existing



Proposed



(ABOVE): CLEMENTINA STREET WILL BE EXTENDED AND LINED WITH TOWNHOUSES. (LEFT): ONE PROPOSAL PUTS MEDIAN STRIPS IN THE STREET, CREATING A SLOWER TRAVEL LANE FOR SHOPPERS TRYING TO PARK.

Noe streets, where sections of the sidewalk are widened out to about 25 or 30 feet. The extra space is used for plantings and seating, and it's heavily used. If you can imagine that wide section continuing down the length of a block, that's what we're talking about.

AND PARKING WILL BE UNDERGROUND?

Switzky: Yes. Except for some on-street parallel parking for short-term visitors and shoppers, all parking will be underground. Parking above ground is an inactive use of space; it doesn't add interest or activity to the street. We want a more engaging environment. Beyond that, it's losing a land-use opportunity to put parking above ground. Cars can live underground, and people can't. There's no minimum: Developers are free to have zero parking. And the maximum is one space per unit. We don't want to encourage people getting in and out of their cars on a daily

basis. We want them to think of parking as car storage, for the weekends. There are some mechanical lifts popular in Europe that stack cars two or three or 20 cars high. Efficient means to store cars like that take up less space and discourage everyday use. Then there's unbundling, which [separates] the cost of parking from the cost of a housing unit—you have the option, if you don't have a car, to pay less for your unit. Parking spaces in SF raise the cost of a unit by \$50K to \$100K, so if you're a young person who doesn't need a car, you can afford more housing. It creates more of a free market for parking, rather than hiding the cost of it.

WOULD YOU SAY RINCON HILL/TRANSBAY INCORPORATES NEW URBANISM IDEAS?

Switzky: I would say they fully incorporate and even go beyond New Urbanism. All the principles are there: [mass] transit, mixed use, attention to details, street frontages, walkability—but at a more intense scale than what generally is considered New Urbanism. SF is built on old urbanism, so we're just building on our traditions here. But even here, there have been suburbanizing trends in the last 50 years that we're constantly trying to guard against—like

the strip mall on Potrero and 16th, or grocery stores within the city limits such as Safeway and Cala Foods. Those are built on suburban prototypes. It's a waste of land in a city to have a huge parking lot for a one-story building.
Cary: New Urbanism is more prescriptive—or perhaps just more specific—than many designers seem to prefer, but it's far from a secret formula or a death stamp. In the design professions, the term "New Urbanism" has a strangely polarizing effect. The goal for Rincon Hill/Transbay should be to create a community that is seamless with the rest of the city.
Metcalf: San Francisco stands for something: It stands for tolerance, cultural experimentation, political radicalism. These are values I want other people to participate in. We can't just be worried about who's here now; we can't just pull up the drawbridge and keep people from moving here. It's not right. So if you believe that—and I sincerely do—then our only choice is to build up. So this is a really important step for the city and the region, to create this kind of urban neighborhood next to transit. The big question is, will we be able to keep going, in SF and in Oakland and perhaps other parts of the Bay Area? Will we be able to replicate this model and finally end the era of sprawl? Time will tell. x

THE CURRENT (LEFT) AND PLANNED (RIGHT) VIEW FROM POTRERO HILL.

