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Design

Inside Downtown San Francisco's Plan to Reinvent Itself

The city's pre-pandemic office culture may never return. A new plan considers how its half-empty financial district could adapt.



By activating its streets and restricting vehicle access, the Downtown San Francisco Partnership hopes to bring more people back downtown. *Credit: SITELAB urban studio*

By [Sarah Holder](#)

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For a city known for its green space, San Francisco's downtown is mostly gray. In the 43 blocks that are commonly considered the core business district, more than a third of the space is taken up by car-filled streets, and none by public parks or pedestrian-only roads. Three-quarters of the built square footage is offices.

But there are also 34 privately owned open public spaces – called POPOs, for short – hidden within that radius, along with many examples of historic architecture, 15 alleyways, about 300 units of housing and, according to planners, a lot of potential.

Unlocking that potential is the goal behind San Francisco's Public Realm Action Plan, a new 143-page report commissioned by the Downtown San Francisco Partnership, a community benefits district that has jurisdiction over the area composed of the financial district, Jackson Square, and part of the SoMa (South of Market) neighborhood.



The San Francisco Downtown Partnership covers 43 blocks of the city's downtown. *Credit: Downtown San Francisco Partnership*

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The plan, developed by [SITE LAB](#) urban design studio with urban design consultants [Fehr + Peers](#) and [John Bela](#), details how San Francisco can use public and private spaces to transform the look and feel of downtown – and to restore some of the foot traffic the neighborhood lost during the pandemic. According to data from the urban planning company [Replica](#) cited in the report, trip volume in that area on a typical weekday had fallen to about 150,000 in June, compared with about 240,000 in early 2020. Office attendance is even more dire: Less than a third of downtown office workers [had returned to their desks as of May 2022](#).

“It is clear that downtown San Francisco can’t continue ‘business as usual,’” the plan reads. “Creating invitations for people to come [back] to Downtown SF is essential for its recovery.”

The plan is a tacit acknowledgement that the Monday-through-Friday office culture that once defined these kinds of business districts may never return to its pre-pandemic primacy, and that cities like San Francisco will have to change accordingly. Though the tech hub’s workers have [clung to remote work longer than some others](#), and tourism has rebounded more slowly, this shift is reverberating through many major US cities: New York City Mayor Eric Adams recently [admitted](#) that Manhattan “may not have central business districts anymore,” as office occupancy there hovers around 40%.

“Now we have a competition for where we work,” said Laura Crescimano, the co-founder and principal of SITE LAB.

That competition is partly between offices and workers’ living rooms. But it’s also between neighborhoods that are moribund and those that are vibrant.

Central business districts, in turn, need to adapt. “To evolve and survive, [the CBD’s] offerings will have to become more local, authentic and actively curated,” urban theorist Richard Florida wrote in [CityLab](#) last year. “A day at the office will be spent less in a single building and become more like a localized business trip, with maybe an onsite meeting, checking some emails at an outdoor workspace, doing a group fitness session with colleagues, and taking some offsite meetings over lunch or coffee.”



A rendering of a downtown San Francisco corner that's more vibrant than today. *Credit: SITELAB urban studio*

The goal is to bring back that vibrancy through the workday, but also “into the evening and at night,” said Robbie Silver, the executive director for San Francisco’s Downtown Community Benefit District, called the Downtown SF Partnership. One way to do that is by holding more public events: A light show his organization held downtown last December brought an estimated \$2.2 million in revenue to surrounding businesses and restaurants, he said.

“It was a big test case for us that people want to come downtown, and they will come downtown, even at night, if we give them a good reason to,” said Silver, who’s planning to repeat the event again this year.

But the SITELAB plan also suggests more permanent changes. Through online surveys, interviews, and anthropological observation, the design studio identified six “action areas” where pedestrian improvements, artist pop-ups, green installations, and street activations could be most effective. Many of these improvements focus on restricting vehicular traffic, adding protected bike lanes, and generally making the area more appealing to people outside of cars.

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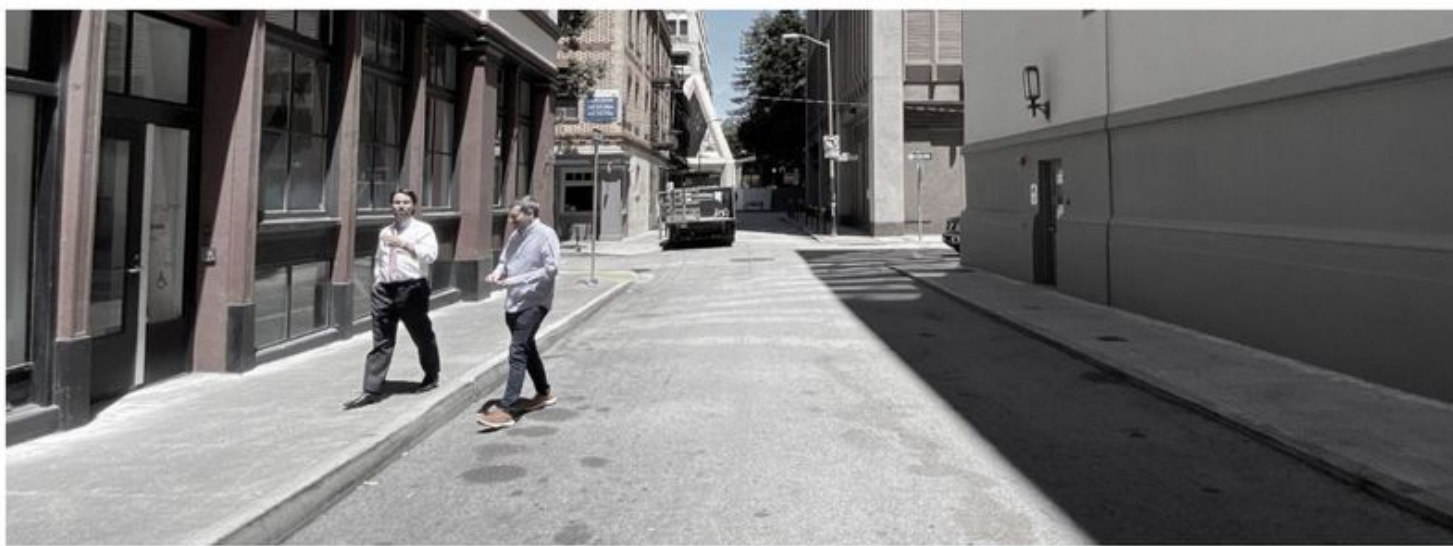
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The plan proposes pedestrianizing a section of Leidesdorff Street, for example, where two narrow alleys intersect. There, SITELAB's Crescimano envisions lunchtime diners gathering on new public seating, with projections from local artists covering two now-blank walls. Another site is at One Bush Plaza, where temporary street closures and added seating could lure shoppers and strollers to an often-overlooked sunken plaza in front of an International Style skyscraper.



Leidesdorff Alley, before and after proposed improvements. *Credit: SITELAB urban studio*

In some ways, San Francisco's downtown is caught in a vicious cycle: As fewer people work in or visit the area, the emptiness makes it less appealing. Despite expressing appreciation for the area's scale,

transit access, and historic legacy, residents surveyed also said that they wished it was cleaner and safer both for biking and walking.

The Downtown SF Partnership uses most of its budget to do regular cleaning of the area. But with office vacancy rates sitting at more than 20%, according to the report, the empty towers and unused ground-floor space feed a feeling of desolation. Introducing more pop-ups or food vendors, and amping up advertising for existing small businesses, could help bring more life to the streets even if broader efforts to get workers back to offices fail.

One thing that the action plan doesn't explicitly advocate for is transforming some mixed-use buildings to residential properties – a phenomenon receiving a lot of attention in several cities in the US and elsewhere as the pandemic upends work and commuting patterns. Such office-to-housing conversions can create more of a street life outside of peak work hours, and adding apartments would also help ease the Bay Area's acute housing shortage.

Silver acknowledges that San Francisco's post-pandemic downtown needs to be less office-dominant, and hopes that making the neighborhood more lively and pedestrian-friendly could spur zoning changes and real estate investment in one of the country's priciest cities. "Housing for downtown is extremely important," he said.