



Is this the future of downtown San Francisco?

A business group has come up with a plan to revitalize the area with street closings and outdoor gathering spaces. Here's what it would look like

BY NOAH ARROYO | JULY 18, 2022 | UPDATED: JULY 18, 2022 11:50 PM



Not many San Franciscans are likely to be familiar with Leidesdorff Street, barely more than a barren alley in the Financial District just south of the Transamerica Pyramid. Today, it is an in-between space. There's little reason to come here, or to linger.

But the street, and a few others like it, are at the center of a new vision for revitalizing the city's downtown area, hollowed out by pandemic closures and facing an uncertain future as legions of office workers continue to prefer working remotely.

The Public Realm Action Plan, created by the nonprofit business group Downtown SF Partnership in collaboration with a team of designers and urban thinkers, seeks to entice office workers, tourists and others back to the area by revamping the landscape — closing streets to car traffic, fostering frequent outdoor events and green space, and otherwise making the area more attractive.

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“We hope that our plan will serve as a template for the development of the downtown core,” said Robbie Silver, Downtown SF Partnership’s executive director. The group partnered with Sitalab Urban Studio, a strategic design firm with experience rethinking urban spaces. Sitalab’s projects have included the huge mixed-use 5M project, under way South of Market.



City officials have pledged to craft a downtown revitalization plan with local business groups, but so far, few specifics have emerged beyond \$8 million in Mayor London Breed's recent budget proposal for overall downtown revitalization. The [Public Realm plan](#), which was not created in partnership with city leadership, is a detailed proposal for reimagining parts of the **Financial District and Jackson Square areas** .



The plan's proposals fall into six categories: street alterations and some closures to make spaces more friendly to pedestrians and cyclists; improvements to open spaces for sitting and gathering; new trees and other greenery; spaces for events and art installations; signs that help people find their way and understand the area's identity and history; and new uses for ground-floor commercial spaces that have closed during the pandemic. There are proposals for both **short- and long-term pilot projects** for each of these strategies, such as an event stage at Robert Frost Plaza at California and Market streets, or getting a business into a retail space temporarily and later helping it sign a lease to remain.

The plan does not address some systemic problems that have stymied downtown San Francisco's recovery — one of the slowest in the nation — such as public transit woes or concerns about exposure to COVID-19. Nor does it address the thorniest challenge: growing the residential base in the area as a way of increasing sustainable economic activity. The hope is that the plan might encourage solutions to these problems down the line, its architects say.

Without knowing the details, some San Franciscans say ideas like these could help entice people back to the area.

“A big part of how we turn around downtown is that we’re going to have to reclaim the public space there,” said Eric Kingsbury, who lives in the Marina and has worked from home since the pandemic began. The tech worker, 33, said this kind of plan could pull him back to the area, and probably his colleagues and friends, too.

“People need to feel like there’s action down there, and that it’s safe,” Kingsbury said.

The next step is to pitch the plan to real estate owners and local businesses that might want to deploy these changes before the year's close. Downtown SF Partnership will raise money for that work and get approvals from city departments where necessary. Neither Silver nor Laura Crescimano, principal and co-founder of Sitelab, has projected how much the plan would cost if all of its proposals became a reality.

Silver said the first pilot area will probably be the **Leidesdorff alley** .

Today, you might enter at Sacramento Street and walk north, the pyramid's top barely visible over the crowns of the buildings. You pass Wayfare Tavern's outdoor eating area, one of the few lively parts of this street during lunch and dinner rushes. On your left are the rear entrances of various businesses and workspaces. On your right, there is only a long gray wall, dreary and blank as the overcast sky. The street can feel like a wind tunnel, characteristic of the FiDi, and with your ears tucked into your shoulders, you cross the **intersection with Commercial Street**, another minor artery with little activity. You note that Sababa Hot Pita Bar has permanently closed, just one more casualty of the pandemic. Beyond, approaching Clay Street at the foot of the Transamerica Pyramid, the only sign of life is a car lumbering out of an indoor parking lot.

Now walk this path again, as **reimagined in the Action Plan** .

This time, the entrance to Leidesdorff Street is partially blocked by a pair of trees in planters. You can easily get around them, but the wind can't, which is the point. Overhead lights cross back and forth between either building and sway in the breeze. Murals or light-projected artwork cover the sidewalk as well as the entire wall on your right, hiding the dead gray. But don't get distracted or you'll bump into one of the dozens of tables in the street, which is partially closed to car traffic. Some people sit reading or sipping wine together, while others eat their fill from a temporary restaurant in Sababa's old space — if you don't like the cuisine, just come back in a week to try the food at the next one. The murals continue into the intersection with Commercial Street, and here you discover signs that describe where the city's coastline originally ran: right under your feet. You may be standing atop buried ships, the sign tells you.

The plan's other **two primary pilot areas** are along Market Street, near the Embarcadero and Montgomery BART stations.

There are three additional, **potential pilot areas** : Belden Place, between Bush and Pine streets; Hotaling Place, between Washington and Jackson streets; and Steuart Street, south of Market Street near the Embarcadero.

The plan envisions a panoply of **urban improvements** , including wider sidewalks where people can spend time together; shortened and more prominent street crossings ...

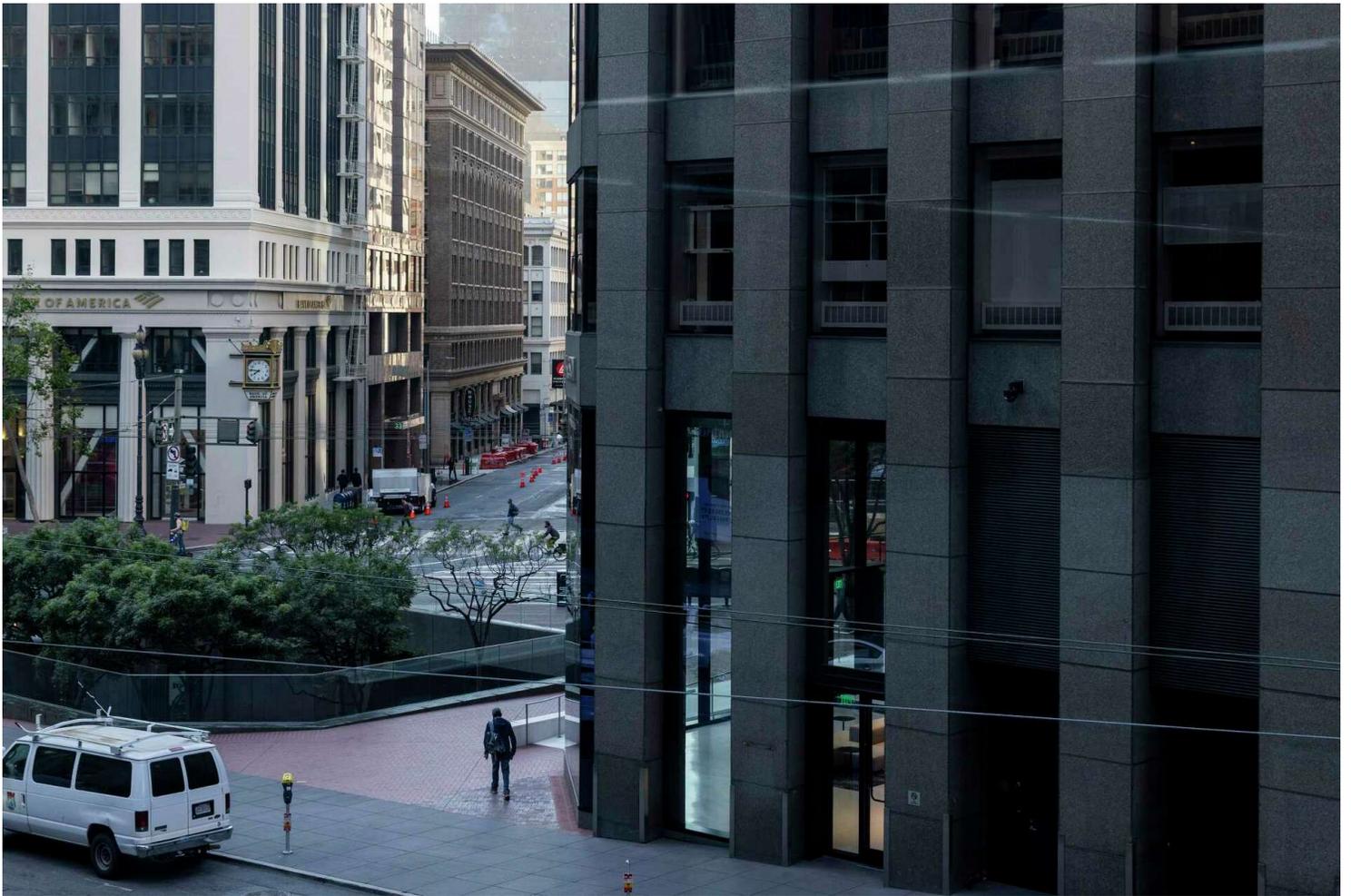
... bike infrastructure; more greenery, forming safety barriers between cars and cyclists ...

... and improved POPOS, or privately owned public open spaces, that might host events or art installations.

For Marina resident Kingsbury, transit has been a major issue keeping him from going downtown. During the pandemic, Muni suspended the 41-Union and 30-Marina Express bus lines, each of which used to get Kingsbury from the Marina to downtown in about 30 minutes. Now the trip takes at least an hour and involves either additional walking or transferring to a second line. And there's little point to heading in because so many of his peers work remotely.

He misses his old lifestyle. If the city brought back the express lines, he would return to the office. But he said that if the downtown area were made more lively and pedestrian-friendly, with events and new businesses, it would be worth it to brave the painful commute and try to pull others back to the office too.

“If Thursday night became the new happy hour, I would absolutely go in,” Kingsbury said.



Like many other parts of the Financial District, the intersection of Montgomery and Market streets is often mostly empty, but the Action Plan hopes to start to enliven sections of the district and bring people back. Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Another tech worker, who requested anonymity, said a revitalized downtown would draw him back to the area more often, but it wouldn't be a game-changer. He admitted to being less socially outgoing than Kingsbury — the two are friends — and the commute from his Bernal Heights home has always cost him about two hours per day. He cherishes having all that time back, as well as his personalized workspace where he can focus with minimal interruption.

Major changes to the city's transit systems fall outside the scope of the plan, said Crescimano of Sitelab.

“Those are big, long-term conversations to tackle,” Crescimano said, and they will fall to the government and individual employers to figure out.

“We are looking for things we can act on more quickly to build momentum,” she said.

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