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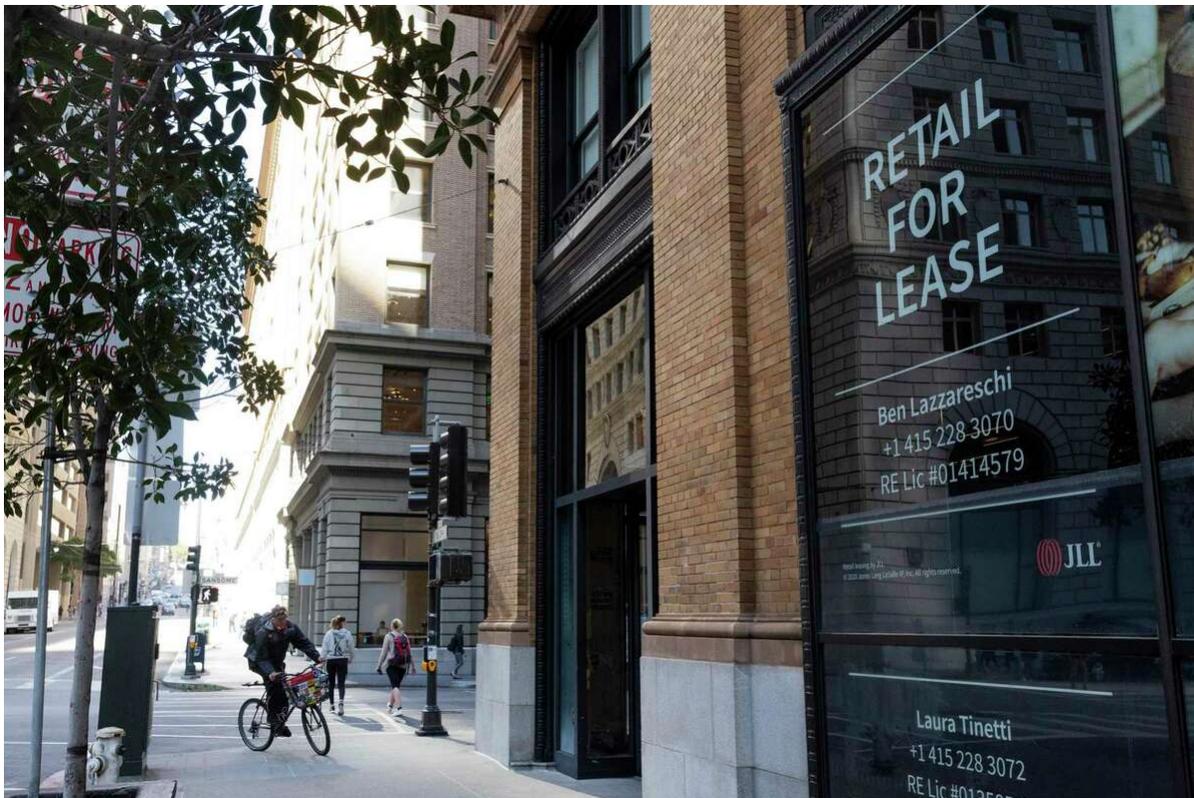
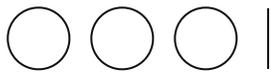
BAY AREA

Can pop-ups save downtown San Francisco? How Bay Area cities are trying to revive empty storefronts



John King

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The first thing to understand about the barren storefronts casting a pall over parts of San Francisco and Oakland and other large cities is this: Every parched void is a tale unto itself.

Union Square, hollowed out by a dearth of tourists, tells a different story than the blocks around Salesforce Tower, hollowed out by a dearth of young office workers. High-rise apartments in central Oakland pose their own distinct challenge with ground-floor spaces that have never been leased.

This is the urban reality of 2022, and it would still exist even if all of COVID's variants died out. The damage is cumulative and deep. What cities and building owners must do now is find intriguing, inventive ways to plug holes on a short-term basis — so that today's terrain of “for rent” signs doesn't become a permanent blight on too many urban blocks.

“Not all vacant spaces are the same, but they can all contribute to the overall sense that San Francisco is in decline,” said Kate Sofis, director of the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development. “We have to turn around the narrative.”

That narrative is a visual one in places like the corner of Bush and Sansome streets in San Francisco. This is a portal to the Financial District, with the rich masonry of 225 Bush St. and the Adam Grant Building at 114 Sansome St. setting a dignified tone, but the air of stability is clouded since both structures' retail corners — which held a Target and a CVS — are papered over.

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Across the bay in downtown Oakland, art displays fill windows on Broadway that would have held stores in 2019; a [33-story residential tower](#) at 17th Street meets the sidewalk with barren ground floors despite the 254 chic apartments upstairs. This holds true for recent mixed-use buildings in [other Bay Area hubs](#) — the goal is lively blocks bustling with shoppers and residents as well as workers, but empty storefronts hide behind all that new glass.

The pandemic played a huge role in this, forcing many retailers or cafes out of business. But the past two years only exacerbated trends that already were powerful. Amazon was already a behemoth. Department stores already were in decline.

That's why we can't assume that, even if Mayor London Breed is successful in persuading San Francisco's large employers to lure their workers back to the office, that retail tenants will suddenly clamor to be on, say, the 200 block of Pine Street — where four empty spaces face off at one end, a Subway squeezed between the north

side's pair. Cities need to find ways to prime the pump, and facilitate new types of ongoing activities within otherwise vacant ground floor spaces.

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Whet people's curiosity. Light a spark — like the parklets that kept so many restaurants afloat through COVID's surges, or the retail pop-ups that drew crowds during the 2007-09 recession.



Empty storefronts have taken over the heart of what long ago was the center of downtown Oakland's retail world.
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

One promising initiative comes out of Sofis' office: "Vacant to Vibrant," which would allocate \$750,000 in the 2022-23 city budget to "pairing property owners with artists and small businesses who can use the space for short term activations."

Done right, this could attract a basic concern of building owners who might see the advantage of filling a storefront for six months or a year with maker space or art studios — a hip ground floor can make space upstairs more marketable — but don't want the chore of lining up permits and managing the short-term tenants on a day-to-day basis. If the city serves as the go-between, or provides grants to nonprofit community business districts to take on that task, things could begin to happen.

“Something like this isn’t sexy, but it’s really important,” Sofis said. “We need to understand better what the issues are.”

This view is echoed by Michael Berne of MJB Consulting, who works with cities on retail planning.

“Having a nonprofit take on a master lease allows for more flexibility to manage the spaces,” Berne said. This could be especially true in the Bay Area, where “you assume there’s no shortage of ambitious entrepreneurs to try something creative.”

But why stop there?

Imagine if civic or cultural institutions committed to programming a year of exhibitions in a spacious storefront near Salesforce Tower, one after the other, each showcasing a niche within their collection. The novelty of immersing yourself in Bay Area travel posters, perhaps, or local sporting memorabilia (all those shiny recent trophies!) could make the space a draw.

Heck, regional transportation agencies could display maps of crazed freeway plans that never came to be. People would show up, if only to scoff or sigh, and from there they might do some exploring on foot.

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City Hall itself could commit to a storefront that would function as a service center — an easy spot for residents to get assistance face to face. Vaccinations and checkups could be provided one day each week for people who might not have convenient health plans.

It also makes sense to loosen the definition of what is allowed along could-be-busy sidewalks.

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Oakland is now exploring this for its 850-acre central core. Part of the reason for crafting a comprehensive [downtown plan](#), one document acknowledges, is that

“some areas need more flexible ground floor requirements after (the) pandemic.”

In storefronts lining commercial streets like Broadway, owners would no longer need special permits for tenants like a yoga studio or medical offices. Nearly all of 14th Street, meanwhile, would be rezoned to encourage “arts and culture and their supportive services on the ground floor of buildings.”

“When storefronts are vacant, it’s hard,” said Steve Snider, executive director of the Downtown Oakland Association. He describes part of his job as lobbying building owners to “take the ground floor out of their business model, and think of it as part of the public realm.”

None of this is easy. The novelty of something new can wear off fast.

That’s why San Francisco’s proposed budget next year includes \$2.5 million for special events and streetscape improvements in what the city calls the “economic core.” The goal: to “draw a wide range of both business and leisure visitors over the course of a week.” And give them a reason to stop by more than once.

“Whatever we do has to be a campaign,” said Laura Crescimano of Sitelab Urban Studio, who’s working with the Downtown Community Benefits District on efforts to enliven the traditional Financial District and its surroundings. “These things happen in layers.”

Another district, branded as the East Cut, is financed by a fee on property owners on Rincon Hill and in the blocks around the Transbay transit center. Back in 2016, its leaders tried to nudge owners of the then-new residential towers to pursue the idea of a “curated neighborhood,” where they’d work together to attract retailers who might give the emerging area a spark.

Few owners bought in, recalls East Cut Executive Director Andrew Robinson. But one developer made space available for neighborhood events until the space was leased. Another briefly devoted a storefront to an environmental art installation.

“That’s what makes a city. People want to meet people, feel like they’re part of something,” Robinson said. “If we just create a vertical suburb, we’ve failed as a neighborhood.”

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