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BAY AREA // SAN FRANCISCO

S.F. street chess could make a comeback in this corner of downtown



Chase DiFeliciano

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The Mechanics' Institute and the Downtown S.F. Partnership are piloting an outdoor chess program at a plaza on Market Street to give people more reasons to linger downtown.

Golnaz Shamirzadi/Special to the Chronicle

Chess has saved downtown.

Well, not all of it. But for an hour on Thursday afternoon the Mechanics Monument Plaza at Market and Battery streets felt like a scene out of an architectural drawing, with passersby lounging in sling back chairs as chess players hunched over boards beneath the looming bronze statue that gives the triangular plaza its name.

The lunch-hour chess program is a collaboration between the nonprofit Downtown San Francisco Partnership and the nearby Mechanics' Institute chess room. The idea is to give office workers, and anyone else, a reason to stop and linger in this wedge of downtown — and maybe to play a game.

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“Chess rules!” said Marc Savino, a tech worker who stopped by and decided to play a game with the knee-high oversize pieces standing in the middle of the plaza on a built-in cement board.

Savino dropped the game to Mechanics' Institute chess program manager Alex Robins after an admitted blunder with his rook, but was enthusiastic about the game's ability to bring people together.

“It's a funny, competitive game that gives you a reason to sit down with people” you otherwise might not, Savino said, recalling games he played when he lived in the Lower Bottoms neighborhood of Oakland that helped him get to know his neighbors there.



— Tech worker Marc Savino participates in a chess seminar put on by the Mechanics' Institute chess room in partnership with the Downtown S.F. Partnership. "Chess rules!" he said.

Golnaz Shamirzadi/Special to the Chronicle

"I'm definitely gonna put this on my calendar," Savino said of the event, which is planned to run every Thursday through October from noon to 1 p.m. as a pilot program.

Street chess used to be a common sight on the stretch of Market Street a couple train stops away at Civic Center, but authorities shut it down a decade ago after declaring it a "public nuisance."

The nearby Mechanics' Institute operates the oldest chess room in the country. In its heyday, players from a cross section of San Francisco society would check in for a quick game on a lunch break or after a shift.

Players have been drifting back as the pandemic ebbed, one more piece of the mosaic of a recovering downtown.

Downtown S.F. Partnership Deputy Director Claude Imbault said the group has sunk about \$40,000 into the area using grant money from the city’s Office of Economic and Workforce Development, including power washing the plaza, fixing lights, putting in planters with greenery and installing seating to make the area more welcoming.

“We’re giving people another reason to linger downtown,” Imbault said.

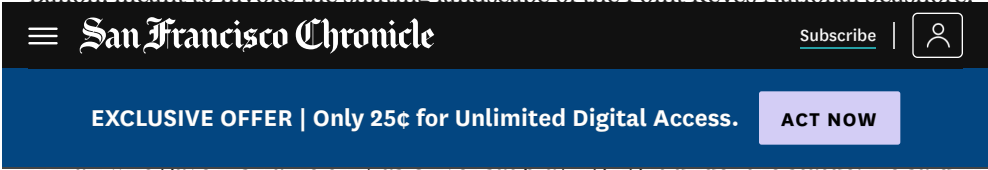
That investment has also spurred other efforts in and near the plaza.

Imbault said the more than 100-year-old Mechanics Monument featuring muscular workers straining at a gargantuan metal press also received a \$70,000 cleaning and retrofit paid for by the San Francisco Arts Commission.

He said one of the empty storefronts fronting the plaza at 22 Battery St. would soon open as a location of Flywheel Coffee Roasters, adding another piece to the downtown puzzle for an area that has struggled to attract workers and tourists and to keep them there.

The latest data collated by building security company Kastle Systems show downtown workers in the San Francisco metropolitan area are still less than half as numerous as before the pandemic.

The groups behind the chess program are also responsible for the mural on the nearby [Battery Bridge](#) by painter Talavera-Ballón, meant to invoke the shifting landscape of the Point Reyes National Seashore.



The image shows a dark blue header for the San Francisco Chronicle. On the left is a hamburger menu icon. In the center is the "San Francisco Chronicle" logo in white serif font. On the right is a "Subscribe" link and a user profile icon. Below the header is a dark blue banner with white text: "EXCLUSIVE OFFER | Only 25¢ for Unlimited Digital Access." and a purple "ACT NOW" button.



Spanish he was waiting for a friend at the Guatemalan consulate and only played chess sometimes, but stumbled on the new setup and decided to play a game to pass the time.

As the lunch hour wound down and the area emptied somewhat, a man in a white dress shirt and slacks came up to Robins, the chess program manager, and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Is anyone up for a game?” he asked.

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Chase DiFelicianantonio is a reporter at The San Francisco Chronicle on the Transformation team, where he covers tech culture, workplace safety and labor issues in San Francisco, Silicon Valley and beyond. Prior to joining The Chronicle, he covered immigration for the Daily Journal, a legal affairs newspaper, and a variety of beats at the North Bay Business Journal in Santa Rosa. Chase has degrees in journalism and history from Loyola University Chicago.

Top of the News



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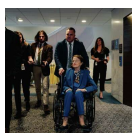
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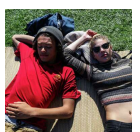
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