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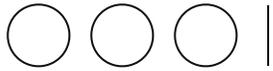
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# S.F.'s Belden Place was once a hot spot. Smart design could help bring back the buzz



John King

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Belden Place, an alley between Bush and Pine in San Francisco, could see possible changes that will give it a less cluttered feel — a sensation that was exacerbated by the pandemic, with everyone putting out large canopied parklets to stay in business.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Belden Place is one of those atmospheric slices of San Francisco that feel as if they could be nowhere else. Too bad they also can feel as if they've seen better days, especially after two years of pandemic-fueled stress and strain.

The question now is whether a focused design intervention can bring new life to the cafe-lined Financial District block without homogenizing it — and, in the process, serve as a model for how other pedestrian nooks can evolve once their novelty wears off.

“We could be a prototype for using other alley spaces downtown,” said Peter Quartaroli, the managing partner of Sam’s Grill, which has been at the corner of Belden and Bush Street since 1946. “We definitely don’t want Disneyland, but we’ve lived with what was in the initial era and now we want to improve it.”

To understand why Belden matters, you need a quick history lesson.

For most of its life, by all accounts, the block-long byway was nothing much. It began at Bush near Kearny Street, the hinge between Union Square and the Financial District, and ended at the base of the 52-story 555 California St. Belden’s low buildings were lined with garbage bins and not much else.

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Belden Place on a summer evening in August of 2004. Since then, several restaurants have traded in their umbrellas for canvas tents, and the block-long dining destination has suffered during the pandemic.

Michael Macor/The Chronicle 2004

But it stirred to life in the 1980s, and became a bona fide destination in the early 1990s, when such culinary outposts as Cafe Bastille and Tiramisu began to fill the aged storefronts. Owners also started taking over the asphalt, without planning and without permits.

“Italians, that’s what we do, put tables outside with umbrellas,” said Giuseppe Scoppetta, who opened Tiramisu in 1992 with Pino Spinoso. The pair remain the owners.

A decade later, nine restaurants lined the east side of the block. The cosmopolitan scene was embraced by City Hall, which repaved the street to bring it level with the sidewalks while improving drainage and adding bollards and the lone design

flourish, a pair of low iron gates. The city had also proposed banners and custom pavings, but the restaurateurs weren't interested.

“We didn't want to become, like, high hat,” one said at the time.

While that's still not the desire, Belden's varied players have joined forces with the local business improvement district to draw up plans to refresh a block where a mural featuring Salvador Dali cloaks a wall beneath a sign for “facial waxing.”



Server Siobhan Creedon converses with a customer at Sam's Grill in the alley at Belden Place, between Bush and Pine in San Francisco. Belden Place could see possible changes that will give it a less cluttered feel.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

There's talk of investing in new overhead lighting to replace the battered strings that now are there, or adding more art. Ideally, there should also be a lightweight canopy or a single elegant canvas extending overhead the length of the block — a

unified span that could keep out rain and wind while reviving the sense of a lively and open linear piazza.

“They don’t want to ‘pretty it up’ — it’s an alley — but they want to up their game,” said Claude Imbault, deputy director of Downtown San Francisco, which works with funds raised by a fee charged to property owners in the district. “They know it’s not what it was.”

Blame this in part on COVID-19: When your customer base draws heavily from nearby office buildings, you’re going to struggle if most of those employees are working from home.

But time has taken a toll, as well.

Decades have passed since Belden Place was a hip spot for locals in the know. Today, restaurateurs and diners seeking the cool frontier are more likely to head to Dogpatch than the Financial District (assuming they don’t bypass both to head for Oakland).

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Nor is Belden’s ambiance what it was, honestly. For a variety of reasons, including afternoon winds exacerbated by the rise of a 19-story tower nearby at [350 Bush St.](#), most restaurants traded in their colorful umbrellas for large canvas tents. That’s good for a pandemic, when outdoor dining often has been the only option, but oversize enclosures don’t offer much in the way of visual appeal to passersby.

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“The sight lines got narrower and narrower,” said Imbault, a longtime fan of the once-vibrant scene.

These factors make it difficult to conjure up a nimble makeover of a strip that came to life in fits and starts. The good news at Belden? There's still plenty to work with.

That isn't the case with other onetime hot spots such as Claude Lane, which now seems totally vacant. Or the alleys that were upgraded by the city in the 1980s but are ghostly without people around. The busiest outdoor lunchtime spot is the alley alongside posh Wayfare Tavern on Sacramento Street, but I'm guessing its diners will head back inside once they feel they can relax.



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Mark Schachern sweeps away cigarette butts outside Sam's Grill near the alley at Belden Place, between Bush and Pine streets in San Francisco.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Belden can seem forlorn, as when cars pull off Pine Street after lunch to grab an illegal parking spot. Yet you can imagine a relatively small investment in well-

designed extras helping to bring a renewed spark as summer arrives and (we hope) the latest pandemic variant fades.

“We need to look at downtown as a destination that attracts more than workers, come up with a new template,” said Kate Sofis, who heads the city’s Office of Economic and Workforce Development. “Belden and some of these sweet spots are what can set the place apart — they’re jewels, spatially, within the city core.”

Sofis moved to San Francisco in the 1990s. She remembers discovering Belden Place while working in a typical tower. The setting was a welcome counterpart to corporate sameness. Soon, she was exploring other downtown lanes and byways to see what *they* had to offer.

If Belden gets a fresh burst of energy, it might bring a fresh wave of people checking things out. Not just on a single block, but beyond. A revival of this sort can plant seeds — and help to spark the creative excitement that today’s San Francisco so desperately needs.

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John King is The San Francisco Chronicle's urban design critic, taking stock of everything from Salesforce Tower to public spaces and homeless navigation centers. A two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist and author of two books on San Francisco architecture, King joined The Chronicle in 1992 and covered City Hall before creating his current post in 2001. He spent the spring of 2018 as a Mellon Fellow in Urban Landscape Studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C.

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