

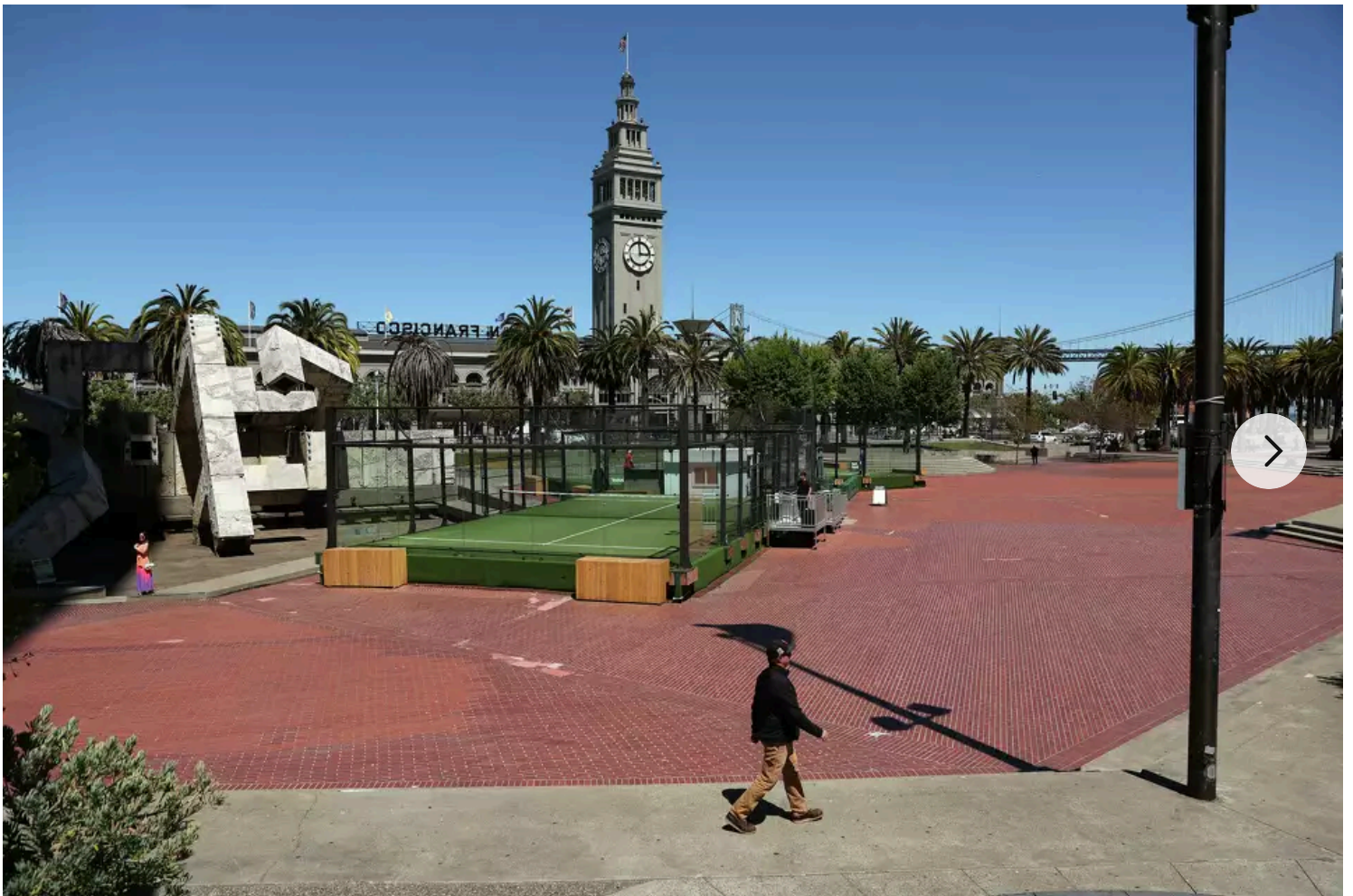
BAY AREA // SAN FRANCISCO

# Could S.F.'s Embarcadero Plaza become a 'world class' park? There are plans to make it happen

By **John King**, Urban Design Critic

Updated July 17, 2024 8:15 p.m.

[Gift Article](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Email](#)



Valliancourt Fountain in Embarcadero Plaza in San Francisco on Wednesday, July 17, 2024. Developers have proposed a plan to replace the fountain with a green grassy space.

Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

Largely ignored despite its prominent setting near the bay, San Francisco's stark Embarcadero Plaza is getting more attention than it has in decades — with a private developer and Mayor London Breed's administration working on overhaul plans while one of Breed's mayoral contenders on Wednesday floated a concept of his own.

The owners of the multi-towered Embarcadero Center complex to the west are working with city officials on the idea of remaking the stark red-brick clearing best known for the enormous, concrete-tubed Vallaincourt Fountain at its edge. The idea would be to demolish the plaza and replace it with a more parklike space that would attract nearby residents and workers on a regular basis, rather than just for large events.

The makeover would also include Sue Bierman Park directly to the north. The two spaces total 5 acres — roughly twice the size of Union Square.



A rendering of the conceptual proposal for a remake of Embarcadero Plaza at the foot of Market Street, including sculptures and walking paths.

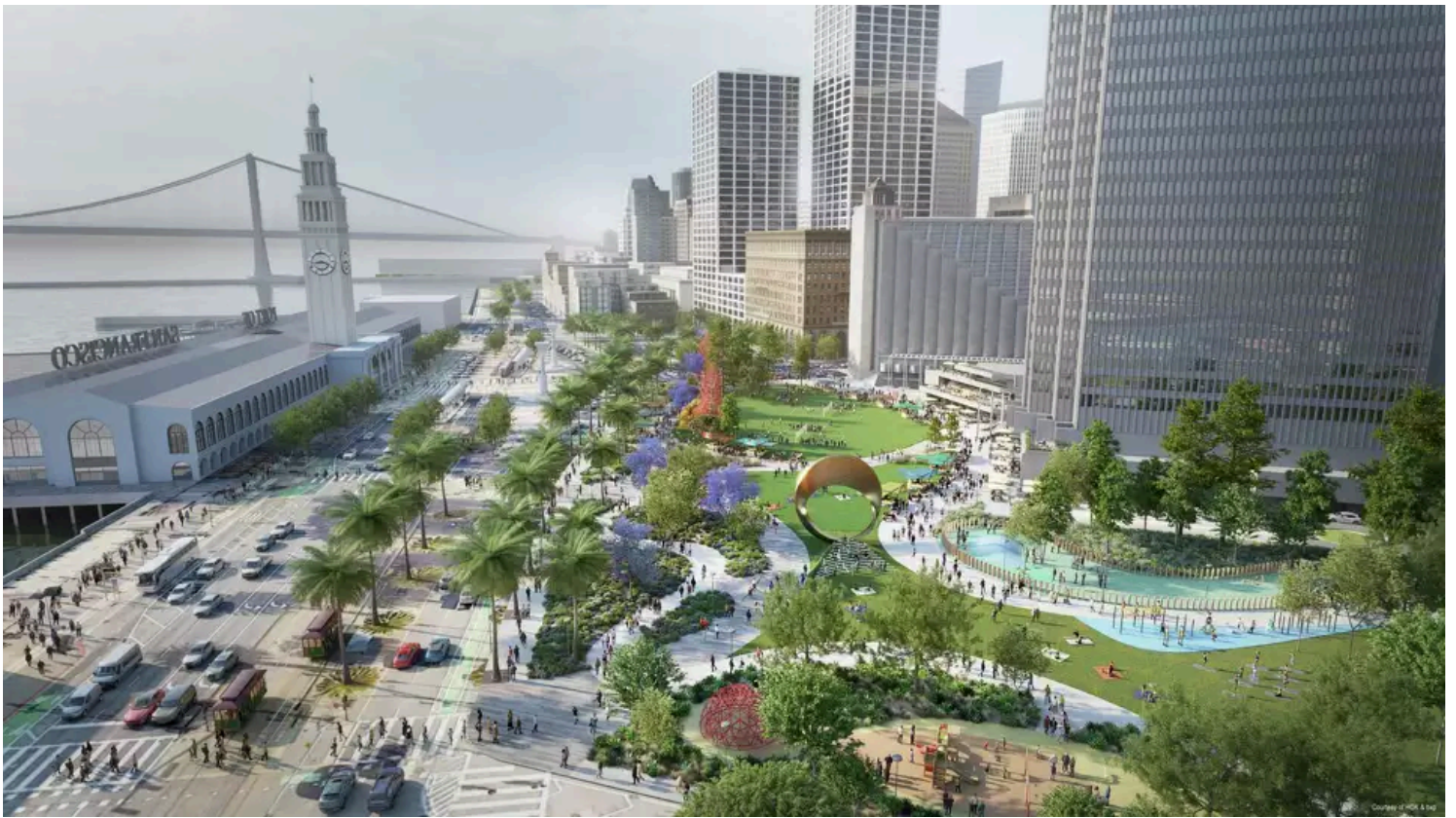
“The Embarcadero has been on our to-do list for a long time,” said Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the city’s Recreation and Park Department. “This is the most optimistic I’ve felt about the possibilities for the space in years.”

Any overhaul would be done by the city, rather than private developers. But Embarcadero Center owner BXP has been working on the idea since last fall with the design firm HOK, and several presentations have been made to city officials and planners in recent months.

“We want to kick-start a conversation. We’re not trying to command what the space should be,” said Aaron Fenton, senior vice president of BXP, formerly known as Boston Properties and the longtime owner of Embarcadero Plaza. “The plaza is our front door. ... Even on the nicest of days, you don’t see many people there.”

That was the case Wednesday morning, when the only people within the slightly sunken plaza either were cutting through it on the way to work or working up a sweat in one of the two padel courts installed last year by Rec Park in a bid to stir up activity.

As for the 40-foot-tall, defiantly right-angled Vaillancourt Fountain — famously referred to by former Chronicle architecture critic Allan Temko as something “deposited by a concrete dog with square intestines” — it sat at the edge of the plaza, devoid of water and life, a few tall poplar trees spiking behind it.



A rendering of the conceptual proposal for a remake of Embarcadero Plaza at the foot of Market Street. The idea is from BXP, owner of the multi-towered Embarcadero Center to the west.

HOK, BXP

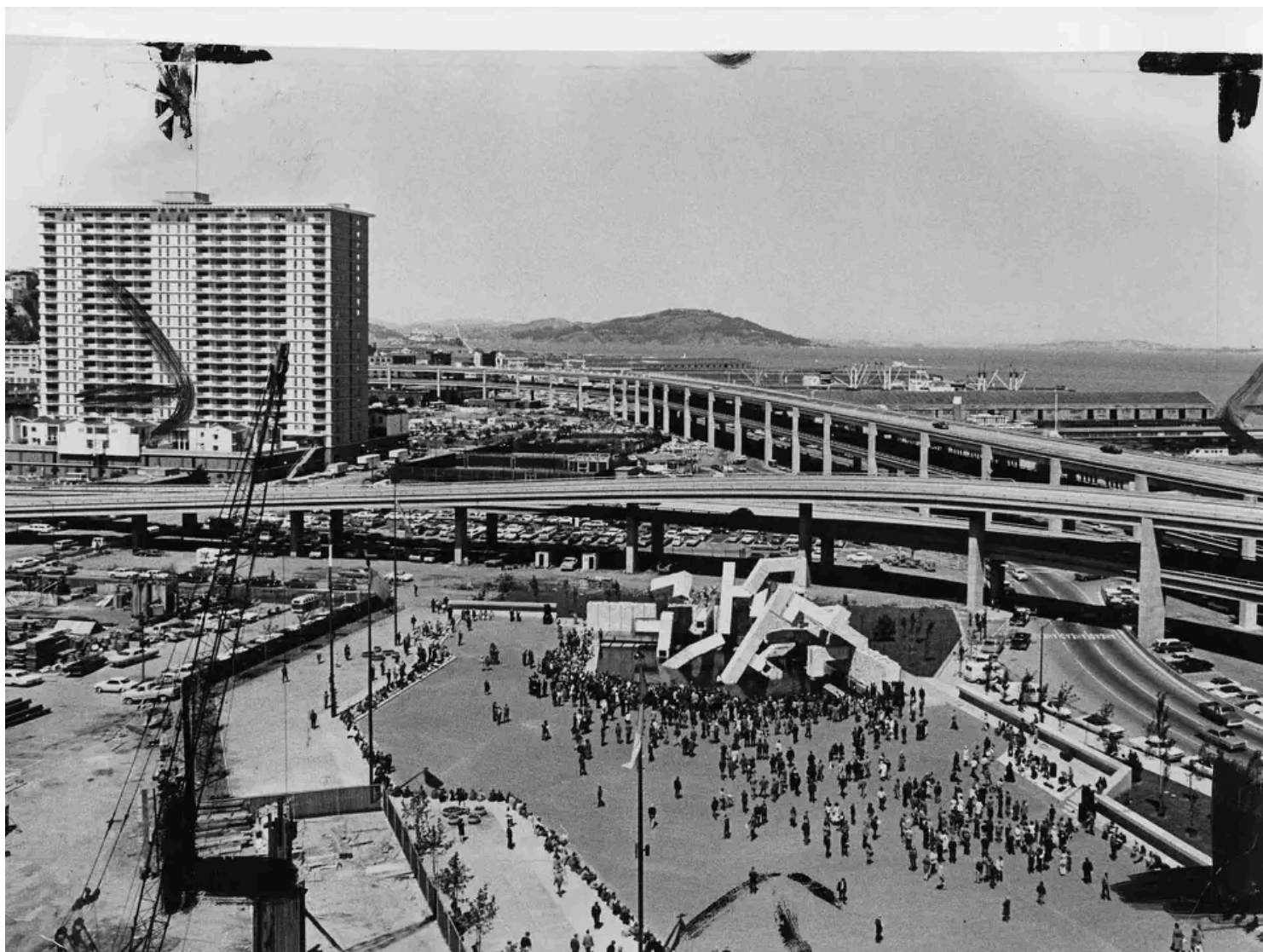
The fountain and the trees are the only clues to what stood behind the plaza until 1991: the double-deck Embarcadero Freeway, an elevated roadway that severed the Ferry Building and adjacent piers from the rest of the city. It ended abruptly a few blocks to the north, but also had ramps curving west to Clay and Washington streets.

The idea for the plaza that opened in 1971 was to create a European-styled gathering spot but also obscure the reality of the glum barrier behind it. The fast-growing trees were envisioned as a visual screen, while the roaring fountain would muffle at least part of the freeway's noise.

The approach that BXP dubs "Platform Park" would start by clearing away the existing plaza and treating the bare site as a blank slate. There'd be no depressed

brick plateau and no raised berm-lined walkway along the plaza's edge above the now buoyant Embarcadero.

“The plaza and fountain were designed for a different era,” said Brian Jencek, a landscape architect principal at HOK. “It puts a wall in front of what we now celebrate.”



People gather around Vaillancourt Fountain in April 1971 on the opening day of Embarcadero Plaza.  
Art Frisch/The Chronicle

Besides reconnecting with the Embarcadero, the makeover would unite the current plaza with Sue Bierman Park, a grassy but little-used block once reserved for

freeway ramps. It also would be rethought — though it has one popular feature, a fenced-in children’s playground would remain.

The conceptual approaches tosses in a bandshell stage and a dog run in the north, retail kiosks and public art in the south. There would be a large lawn that concludes near Market Street and, proponents say, could handle large crowds when a gathering spot is needed for marches or marathons, the sort of occasion where the current plaza shines.

“We want to explore the question of what this space can be,” Jencek said, emphasizing that it should serve a variety of publics, including families, in a variety of ways.

Ginsberg, who called the conceptual approach from BXP “a good starting point,” said that aside from the scale, such partnerships with the private sector to renovate parks are not unusual. He stressed that any design and rebuild would proceed after the city’s required process, with public hearings and reviews.

According to BXP’s Fenton, the firm “is committed to making a financial investment in the new park” if it proceeds. He also said BXP started to look at the potential of the publicly owned plaza following a report last summer from the Urban Land Institute, which offered ideas for how to shake downtown San Francisco’s malaise.

“After reading the report, a light bulb went off,” Fenton said. “We were the obvious ones to take the lead.”



A rendering to illustrate how the mayoral campaign of Mark Farrell wants to redesign Embarcadero Plaza in San Francisco so that it becomes “a world-class, family-friendly downtown park.” The rendering was released as part of a larger downtown revitalization plan proposed by the former supervisor.

Gensler

The importance of a revived Embarcadero Plaza to a revived downtown also surfaced Wednesday from mayoral candidate Mark Farrell.

Besides serving the new residents that Farrell and other candidates hope to attract to the area, “think about what a new park at the foot of Market Street, right in front of the Ferry Building, will do to people who are imagining and visiting San Francisco for the first time,” Farrell said. His campaign included a conceptual rendering for the space that it commissioned from the Gensler design firm.

Whatever the outcome of the current focus, Robbie Silver of the Downtown SF Partnership is happy to see all the interest.

“Downtown is being taken seriously, and that is so good to see,” said Silver, who has talked with BXP about the landowner’s initiative. His nonprofit’s boundary ends a

block or two to the west.

“I’m a ferry commuter and walk by Embarcadero Plaza five days a week. Right now it’s arguably the most underutilized space space in the entire downtown area. It should be a world-class park for a world-class city.”

*Chronicle reporter J.D. Morris contributed to this story.*

*Reach John King: [jking@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jking@sfchronicle.com); Twitter: [@johnkingsfchron](https://twitter.com/johnkingsfchron)*

July 17, 2024 | Updated July 17, 2024 8:15 p.m.



**John King**

URBAN DESIGN CRITIC



John King is The Chronicle’s urban design critic and a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist who joined the staff in 1992. His new book is “Portal: San Francisco’s Ferry Building and the Reinvention of American Cities,” published by W.W. Norton.

---

**More For You**





**ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT**

## San Francisco Symphony's financial struggles put its chorus at risk

Dozens of San Francisco Symphony Chorus members say leadership has proposed slashing their budget by up to 80%, putting their program at risk.

**ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT**

## Elton John to headline Dreamforce after announcing retirement

**SAN FRANCISCO**

## Elon Musk: X headquarters will move from S.F. to Austin, Texas

**RESTAURANTS**

## Where to find the best al pastor tacos in the Bay Area

**RESTAURANTS**

# Flintstone House sushi popup closes due to city's 'concerns'

## Let's Play



Cross|word



Flipart



Really Bad Chess



SpellTower



# San Francisco Chronicle

Top



About

Contact

Services

Account

HEARST *newspapers* © 2024 Hearst Communications, Inc. [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [CA Notice at Collection](#) |

[Your CA Privacy Rights \(Shine the Light\)](#) | [DAA Industry Opt Out](#)

[Your Privacy Choices \(Opt Out of Sale/Targeted Ads\)](#)