

BAY AREA // SAN FRANCISCO

# Downtown San Francisco will be lit up at night this week. Should we do this year-round?

By [John King](#)

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 Gift Article



The Let's Glow SF projection arts festival places an image of a jellyfish on the San Francisco Ferry Building. The lights are projected on buildings throughout downtown through Sunday.

Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

It's not every week that a jellyfish bubbles up one side of the Ferry Building clock tower, or that a mammoth butterfly flutters across the surface of a PG&E substation built in 1914.

Which are good reasons to visit downtown San Francisco as an unusual “projection arts festival” uncorks illuminated light shows through Sunday, Dec. 10, on the sides of five historic buildings. The nightly splash is a smile-inducing change of pace, as is the sight of people eagerly exploring a district that has been in the doldrums since 2020.

Does this mean that the city's commercial core should be cloaked in illuminated extravaganzas 365 nights a year? Not even close. But the amped-up show serves as a reminder that familiar urban districts can come alive in unexpected ways — while also bringing into focus the syncopated allure of spaces that we might otherwise navigate without a thought.

The topic is sparked this week by Let's Glow SF, a 10-night effort to invigorate the downtown scene as the holiday season hits stride.



A projection art show from Let's Glow SF paints the San Francisco Ferry Building in rainbow colors.  
Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

The unusual festival is organized by Downtown SF Partnership, a business-backed nonprofit, and programmed by A3 Visual. The show starts at dusk and continues until 10 p.m., with facades serving as screens where projections accompanied by music spill and swirl and mutate in ever-changing colors. Except for the Ferry Building, the five structures are in the traditional Financial District (the project also programs the peak of Salesforce Tower, replacing the regular light shows atop that rounded obelisk).

The structures serving as three-dimensional screens for the fluorescent effervescence range from the 245-foot clock tower atop the Ferry Building — talk about center stage — to the stocky power station on an alley-like block of Commercial Street, tucked off Montgomery Street below the Transamerica

Pyramid. There are between one and four light shows at each location, the sequences punctuated by a two-minute illuminated countdown to the next loop.

I went on Monday night and — quibbles with the repetition of gimmicky images like melting glacial forms aside — it was pretty cool.

The lawn chairs facing the Ferry Building during the two sequences I watched were more full than not. So was the small BART plaza framed by Market, Post and Montgomery streets, seven blocks to the west. There, people clustered with their smartphones trained upward at the somber, 109-year-old Hobart Building — or, more precisely, the goofball whimsy of chunky cartoonish landscapes that segued through Victorian homes and the Golden Gate Bridge to culminate in two large evergreens, one spinning in each direction.

Sure. Why not?

I particularly liked my visit to Commercial Street, transformed from a backwater into a concentrated set-piece of urban potential. The narrow alley was full of life, people craning their necks to take in the show being projected onto a classically detailed blank wall that evokes a different world.

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Maybe the clusters of couples and map-clutching flaneurs were taking notes on the different styles of Let's Glow's 13 commissioned artists. Maybe not. In either scenario, they looked like they were having fun. And when the sequence segued into the obligatory listing of sponsors, viewers headed off to the next building and another show.

Except the show didn't really end.

Look east down Commercial Street this time of year, and your view culminates in the white-dotted outline of the towers of Embarcadero Center, a seasonal illumination dating back to the 1980s. Street trees are vividly lit along parts of Montgomery Street. The columned ground floor nearby at Sansome and California is delicately warmed by LED lighting of green and red.

All these visual sensations are tied to this part of the year; they underscore winter and a time when, with luck, friends and family can commune. That sense of ephemeral occasion also was the case last month when 12 laser beams shot west above Market Street from the Embarcadero, a four-night spectacle timed to coincide with the APEC gathering of world dignitaries. More than a fantasy made for photo ops — which it was — the vivid strokes turned that boulevard into one welcoming offshoot of the security-choked week.

It conveyed that *something was happening*. It became a happening itself.

The laser show was arranged by [the local nonprofit Illuminate](#), which also was responsible for the Bay Lights that covered the north-facing cables of the Bay Bridge from 2013 until last winter. That departure was no loss, because the artistic luster of Bay Lights dimmed [once the novelty faded](#); our rugged engineering landmark was treated as if it were nothing more than the backdrop for the world's biggest screen saver.



People watch the Let's Glow SF projection arts festival on the Hobart Building at 582 Market St. in San Francisco.  
Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

If Let's Glow SF ran year-round, the cool factor would wear off, too. Why make a night of going from building to building, perhaps buying drinks and meals from restaurants along the way, if you can do it next week or next month instead?

Instead, we have the product to turn out for a special event and, in the process, be reminded of how stunning the Financial District is year-round. Not as a commercial hub, and certainly not as a retail magnet (so many empty storefronts remain), but a densely packed amalgam of terrific buildings spanning more than a century, punctuated by small delights — like the view down Commercial Street, or the sight of individuals strolling down the regal steps of the former Pacific Coast Stock Exchange at Pine and Sansome streets because its immense columns now hide an upscale gym.

Though cities are made of and by people, the buildings and streets assume personalities of their own. The ephemeral spectacle of Let's Glow SF will soon pass for this year. With luck, the magic of potential it sparked will linger — leaving us wanting more, and opening our eyes to what we already have.

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By **John King**



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