
MOST POPULAR

1. San Francisco mom killed in wrong-way I-280 crash identified
2. SF's Stern Grove Festival announces 2023 lineup
3. 'Quickly causing shock': Tahoe put on flood watch this weekend
4. The Warriors are miraculously alive and can smash the beam now
5. 'It just blew up': Northern lights wow sky watchers in California

Local

Despite reports of San Francisco's deserted downtown, this bar feels like 2019



Amy Copperman

April 26, 2023



Bartender Sammy Demecillo makes a cocktail for customers at Heartwood in the Financial District of San Francisco on April 25, 2023.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

There have been so many reports about San Francisco's deserted downtown lately, I almost expected to kick tumbleweeds on my way to Heartwood, a cocktail bar from the team behind the Treasury and the Beehive that opened last week on Commercial Street.

The streets are undeniably quieter now that around 150,000 workers have left the neighborhood, but inside Heartwood on the second night of service, it could have been happy hour circa 2019. Almost every table was packed with co-workers sharing bar snacks and sipping craft cocktails among exposed brick and murals that depict California poppies, trees and nods to the neighborhood's history.

The bar's name refers to the innermost part of the tree trunk, which produces the most resilient timber, and alludes to the neighboring Transamerica Redwood Park, still closed for renovations. It could also be taken as a reference to the core value needed to open a new bar in America's "most empty downtown" amid a weak pandemic recovery, mass layoffs and warnings things could get worse.



— Pedestrians cross Battery Street in the Financial District of San Francisco on April 25, 2023.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

But managing partner and director of operations Tristen Philippart de Foy reminds me it's spring, even if it's taken a long time to show up this year.

"It's fair to be critical. Yes, we've been in a downturn, and it's been a long winter. But anyone who is spending time here can see we're at the beginning of an upswing," he said.

Hope for downtown San Francisco

Heartwood isn't the only business to move into the neighborhood. According to Robbie Silver, executive director of nonprofit community benefit district [Downtown SF Partnership](#) (DSFP), 14 businesses in the hospitality and retail sectors have opened in the Financial District since 2021. The San Francisco Business Times [reports](#) that more are on the horizon from hospitality greats, like Wayfare Tavern and House of An. And real estate investor Michael Shvo, who bought the Transamerica Pyramid in 2020, is [investing \\$400 million](#) to reimagine the building and the surrounding blocks. That's a big bet for a downtown deemed dead.

Despite touring many spaces throughout the city, the Heartwood team landed on the FiDi location partly because of the promising recovery that the Treasury, just a short walk away, has seen in the past year.



— Heartwood managing partner Tristen Philippart de Foy inside his restaurant in the Financial District of San Francisco on April 25, 2023.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

“There’s been a resurgence, and we’re miles ahead of where we were a year ago,” Philippart de Foy said. “There are smaller windows in which we are busy, but those windows are promising.” So are the corporate buyouts for conventions, which he said is even stronger than in 2019, and the hybrid work models that are bringing back co-worker lunches and happy hours, at least a couple of days a week.

Of course, trying to make a business work with far fewer hours and customers isn’t sustainable. And neither, as the area has sorely learned, is relying on workers in one industry to keep businesses afloat.

That’s why DSFP, Philippart de Foy and many other business owners are collaborating on a [Public Realm Action Plan](#), aimed at reimagining FiDi as a cultural destination.



— Customers enter Heartwood in the Financial District of San Francisco on April 25, 2023.

A pilot of the program, which is being funded by the city and deployed by DSFP and Sitelab, an urban design studio, is set to launch just outside Heartwood's doors this summer at the intersection of Leidesdorff and Commercial streets.

Bringing pedestrians back to FiDi

Outside Heartwood, Philippart de Foy tours me around the block as if it's an extension of his bar. Where there are a few parked cars and a boarded-up storefront with someone camped out at the entrance, he sees potential, painting a picture of a vibrant pedestrian thoroughfare that you'd find in most European cities. The projects promise murals and historical plaques here, a coffee cart there, exercise clubs to lure workers out of their offices and cultural activities to draw families and visitors.

"Building these hot spots of culture around downtown is going to be a critical part of recovery," Philippart de Foy said.



Light displays are projected onto the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange building as part of the "Let's Glow SF" art installation, in San Francisco on Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2022.

Charles Russo/SFGATE

There's already evidence that activities like these work in the neighborhood. In December, DSFP hosted "[Let's Glow SF](#)," a 10-night holiday celebration in which 51,000 visitors and residents watched light shows projected on four downtown buildings. According to Silver, the majority of attendees were families, and the project brought in \$3 million to the area and its businesses.

In addition to cultural activities, DSFP recently launched its first micro-grant program to provide up to \$40,000 in funding to eligible restaurants in order to enhance their sidewalk and curbside dining spaces.

Peter Quartaroli, owner of the 150-year-old [Sam's Grill](#) and board member of DSFP, says the beautification of downtown streets is an important piece. "If we can just make the curb a little bit better in front of our business, in front of our neighbor's business, that will make a big difference," he said.

SZA's extended tour lineup includes new SF show



11 gadgets to boost your WFH productivity



Disney packing tips from a park pro



Customers exit Sam's Grill in the Financial District of San Francisco on April 25, 2023.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

Grants like DSFP's, along with Mayor London Breed's recently announced plan to modify the city's tax structure to make it easier on businesses, aren't the only indications of impending change that have some businesses bullish about downtown.

Philippart de Foy said landlords are starting to work with business owners on unconventional deals to weather the slow recovery and inspire long-term tenancies, such as profit sharing in which rents are based on the success of the business.



— A “for lease” sign hangs in a window in the Financial District of San Francisco on April 25, 2023.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

Mason Harrison, a representative for the Transamerica Pyramid, said there’s promising leasing activity in the area among creative agencies and design firms. Silver hopes that nightlife moving into the area will also help diversify the neighborhood’s economic core and notes that incubator programs could enable artists to create a more permanent footprint in the area, helping to shift the perception of what the neighborhood has to offer.

The road to recovery

San Francisco’s pandemic recovery is slower compared with other cities, but the Bay Area is still one of the top 10 fastest-growing metro areas in the U.S., according to [research by LinkedIn](#). And though tourism spending in the city is at about 77% of what it was in 2019, it [more than doubled in 2022](#), according to the San Francisco Chronicle, making some hopeful that full recovery is now in view. (The Chronicle and SFGATE are both owned by Hearst but have separate newsrooms.)

There’s still a long road ahead. Heartwood’s most immediate neighbors are still a boarded-up storefront and construction zones. But inside the bar, the focus on natural elements, from the exposed original wooden beams to the tiny pinecone adorning my cocktail, is more than a gimmick. It’s a reminder that spring always returns.



Customers have lunch at Heartwood in the Financial District of San Francisco on April 25, 2023.
Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

A less tangible, yet perhaps even stronger, element is also fueling business owners' hope for downtown. And that's the spirit of San Francisco itself.



Next Up: San Francisco mom killed in wrong-way I-280 crash... >

Amy Copperman is a freelance writer and artist based in Oakland, CA. Find her on [Instagram](#) or on her own corner of the Internet, amycopperman.com.

Taboola Feed

Our Editors Tried Nutrisystem - Here's What We Learned

Exclusive Offer: Save 50% On Nutrisystem Today!

Topdust for Nutrisystem | Sponsored

Learn More

Seniors: Don't Forget Your Free Test Kits

Free test kit program expires soon. Tap to learn more or claim while you can!

My Home Test Kits | Sponsored

Learn More

Family still baffled by disappearance of Sydney West on Golden Gate Bridge

Sydney West was last seen at San Francisco's Crissy Field approaching the Golden Gate Bridge on Sept. 30, 2020.

SFGate

How to make yogurt at home - TopThermUSA

toptherm-usa.com | Sponsored

Learn More

Waitress Was Worried To Serve Texan "Cowboy," Then He Wrote A Note On The Check

A waitress was anxious about serving a Texan "cowboy" until he left her this note on the check.

Noteably | Sponsored