



TODCO GROUP CENTRAL SOMA COMMUNITY PLAN: KEY TOPIC Place-Making And Character: Traditional SOMA and New SOMA

South of Market is perceived by everyone to have a special character – a genuine identity as a “place.” That perception is an exceptionally valuable asset – both economically (the globally-recognized “SOMA Brand”) and socially (a true Neighborhood) – that is vital to maintain, enhance, and evolve. But every community and generation does not perceive SOMA as a “place” the same way. It is the compilation of ALL their perceptions – even as SOMA continues to evolve – that add to up what this Community Plan is designed to carry forward – intact – for the coming decades.

(Attached is a matrix and locational map of at least 90 “Placemaking Character Assets” of all kinds and eras in Central SOMA, plus two maps showing particular sub-sets: a Community Character map and a New SOMA map. Many of these are addressed in detail in this discussion.)

What Is Generic In SOMA

Throughout the nation and Canada, almost every major city dating from the 19th Century industrial/railroad/port era, which ended with de-industrialization in the mid-20th Century after peaking during World War II, has a former warehouse/industrial loft district adjacent to its Central Business District that is now undergoing transformation to some degree (unless it was demolished for a redevelopment project).

- Many include designated historic districts and landmark railroad stations as well as many ornate brick buildings and interesting structures of many sizes and architectural styles, and especially significant survivors related to that city’s origins, such as the San Francisco’s Old Mint. Any surviving regional/AmTrack rail stations are still located there, such as SOMA’s CalTrain station. And the post-war interstate freeways typically sliced through them, creating a permanent blight, such as I-80 and I-280 in SOMA.
- Beginning possibly with the prototypical transformation of Ghiradelli Square in San Francisco in the 1960’s, many of the surviving large industrial structures in these districts have been thoroughly renovated and repurposed by now into contemporary shopping complexes, residences, hotels, and other commercial uses. The City’s 1983 South Beach Redevelopment Area on the SOMA waterfront and the adjacent South End Warehouse Historic District is a good typical example, and launched the

first wave of renovated loft living – a new lifestyle. And major convention centers are often located in these areas as well along with associated hotels, although San Francisco’s Moscone Center actually was a skid-row demolition/renewal project, not a former industrial part of SOMA (and the consequence was that skid-row moved only a few blocks west to Sixth Street/Tenderloin).

- In many cities, beginning in the 1970’s artists of all kinds found these districts’ cheap and empty old buildings to be ideal for workshops, galleries, performance and living spaces – legal or not. They not only pioneered a new era of activity in otherwise abandoned areas, but also laid the social foundation for nascent new neighborhoods. The South Park area of SOMA is a prime example, but gentrification has now largely displaced traditional creative arts.
- More recently, the popularity of new downtown sports stadiums built in some of these districts has had a major impact, drawing civic attention as well as substantial crowds during events. The new 2001 Giants Stadium in SOMA is perhaps the exemplar, and an instant City icon. But aside from a proliferation of sports bars and garages, the broader urban impact of these very costly stadiums is modest – unless it reinforces an established nearby tourist district, such as Seattle’s Pioneer Square district. That is not the case in SOMA.
- Restaurants, restaurants, and more restaurants, usually in remodeled old buildings. And nightclubs too, often in somewhat improved old warehouses. Drawing customers from the nearby central business district plus local workers and residents, they come in all sizes and price levels, from family owned to high-end with various themes, including brew pubs and lately wine bars. They come, they go. They have their prime, and then they fade. Only few last more than 10 years. Fortunately, unlike some other cities, SOMA has escaped being dominated by character-killing chain/fast food restaurants thanks to zoning restrictions.
- Auto repair shops, usually found in old one-story industrial buildings that were once built for truck/rail deliveries. A central city location is attractive for these businesses, especially those specializing in more expensive cars, because it is very convenient for their customers. The business income per building foot is substantial, and many buy their buildings in SOMA and upgrade them with new equipment. There are also the ubiquitous gas stations, especially near the freeway ramps, although their numbers in SOMA continue to diminish, usually to be replaced with new in-fill housing development.
- Lastly, a number of economically healthy central business districts have actually expanded into these areas, with typical downtown development including offices, hotels, and high-end housing – initially through building renovations but now including extensive new in-fill development. New York’s SoHo was the 1980’s prototype for this trend, and its name the inspiration for the “SoMa” contraction of South of Market that came into widespread use in the 1990’s. SOMA’s Second Street Corridor has been almost completely transformed in this way over the last 20 years.

“Traditional” South of Market

Beyond the accumulation of those generic elements similar to many other cities comparable districts, after the great mid-20th Century emptying-out by de-industrialization and bulldozer redevelopment, South of Market absorbed/evolved multiple new character elements that collectively came to define it as a unique “place.”

- The large amount of early-20th Century family housing – the hundreds of wood-frame walk-up apartment buildings in Central SOMA and West SOMA, mostly on the ubiquitous alleyways – is a very unusual element. Rail-oriented industrial (the many spurs that ran through SOMA streets have all been removed by now) and numerous residential properties were usually not so intermixed or close by in other cities. After the typical post-WW II “white flight” from central cities to the suburbs by South of Market’s former blue-collar worker households left many family flats available for new populations at very low rents, these several thousand housing units became a focus for two particular sets of new migrants to San Francisco.
- Some Filipino American families had settled in SOMA prior to World War II – immigrants who had been able to come to the United States initially as agricultural workers (the “Manong” generation). A second generation who had served in the American military was able to join them after the War. Most actually settled in/near the Fillmore District’s Japan Town initially, since cheap housing was readily available there thanks to the flagrantly racist “internment” of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during the War. But Japan Town’s bulldozer demolition for the flagrantly racist A-1 (north of Geary Street) “Negro Removal” Western Addition Redevelopment Project of the 1950’s resulted in most then moving to SOMA by the 1960’s. And they were joined in the 1970’s by new Filipino immigrants after flagrantly racist American immigration quotas were finally ended by the 1965/1973 Immigration Reform Acts (political companions to the Civil Rights acts of the era). As a result, SOMA had a sizable, very visible Filipino community by 1980, but its numbers, especially the families, have steadily declined since due to combined impacts of typical suburban out-migration (notably to Daly City) and gentrification. Their legacy though remains throughout SOMA: Bessie Carmichael/Filipino Education Center schools, the City’s primary Filipino-American public schools, St. Patrick’s Church, a substantially Filipino parish, the New Bindlestiff Theater and the Bayanihan Community Center on Sixth Street (both assisted by the Redevelopment Agency), a planned Filipino Cultural Center in Yerba Buena, and several other Filipino Community service agencies, murals, small retail stores, and small businesses scattered around SOMA, many in Central SOMA. This Filipino Community SOMA place-making impact will be specifically recognize by a new Cultural Heritage District to be established in SOMA as part of the West SOMA Plan approval next year.
- The great domestic migration of the newly-adult Baby Boom generation to San Francisco that began with the globally-hyped 1967 “Summer of Love” and continued in great numbers through the 1970’s included one extraordinarily significant new population: younger GLBT Americans. Until the election of the first Democrat-Labor Mayor Jack Shelly in 1963, Republican-controlled San Francisco had been adamantly homophobic, including frequent police raids on gay bars and routinely tolerated gay-bashing. But this change in civic leadership and the “cultural revolution” of the 1960’s overwhelmed the former restrictive social conventions in the

City (and its pro-military bias as well), and enabled thousands of new GLBT residents to establish some of the first repression-free communities in the nation. The Castro District became the principal residential neighborhood, but SOMA's plentiful cheap housing was also attractive. And in particular the ease of opening new bars, bathhouses, and clubs in this heavily commercial area quickly resulted in a new generation of GLBT SOMA businesses and social networks in the 1970's. This expansion came to a sudden halt due to the catastrophic AIDS epidemic of the 1980's, and today the numbers are receding due to the general aging of that generation and the inexorable gentrification of SOMA. But the GLBT SOMA legacy remains throughout West SOMA in particular, notably the classic clubs that are still open. This LGBT SOMA place-making impact will also be specifically recognize by a new Cultural Heritage District to be established in SOMA as part of the West SOMA Plan approval next year.

- Throughout the decades, the hundreds of small SOMA commercial buildings of all sizes have accommodated a very wide range of “Production/Distribution/Repair/Service” – PDRS – small businesses all kinds. From workshops to light industry, wholesale distribution to apparel manufacturing, specialized maintenance services to custom craft work they addressed markets that benefitted from close proximity to the central business district. Central SOMA's Flower Mart complex is an exemplar – a combination of two major wholesale sales halls with about two dozen small specialty businesses addressing related market niches. But the impact of economic globalization – fast delivery of cheap products from anywhere to anywhere – has rendered most inner city wholesale/distribution facilities obsolete. And gradual commercial gentrification has displaced many of the small business – often moving to the East Bay if they can survive. In particular, the phony “live/work” housing boom of the late '90s drove many small business out of SOMA due to demolition of their rented buildings, or merely property speculation by would-be developers who refused to renew their leases (but never actually developed the property, with many being foreclosed subsequently by their lenders). These “old PDRS” business will continue to gradually diminish in number, along with their one-time significant contribution to SOMA's sense of “place.” But there is a subgroup of them that will survive – the “high value” PDRS businesses that have much higher sales per square foot of building area than most and that still benefit from close proximity to customers in the central business district – especially if they also own their properties. This includes high-end specialist businesses, such as Arc Wood and Timber on an alley near Townsend Street, Ligature fine printers on Second Street, and Shaum Sinawi Cabinetry on Bryant Street.
- And then of course there is South Park itself, a unique legacy of a Gold-Rush era townhomes subdivision, modeled on high-end London mews. That all burned down in 1906, but the fine-grained mixture of small flats, rooming houses, and commercial buildings that were rebuilt have evolved over the years for one unusual population after another. Even before World War II it was one of the City's first substantially African-American neighborhoods, thanks to the proximity of Mission Bay's one-time Southern Pacific station and railyards where many worked. But by 1980 it had emptied out of most residents (except for two Filipino-owned/occupied properties), and the Park had fallen into disrepair. This vacuum was filled gradually by the City's growing Baby Boom generation, including many engaged in commercial arts and

creative media. This lead directly to the burst of new digital technology business start-ups here in the mid-1990's – first called “Multi-Media Gulch” – that boomed during the first Dot.Com bubble a few years later. After the sharp contraction that followed when that bubble burst, the next recent wave of Tech Industry growth has completed the transformation of South Park into the City's globally known Tech Industry “place” – and so the #1 icon of SOMA. Today South Park's gentrification is complete (except for two affordable housing SRO's that were preserved), and it is bursting with Dot.Com 2.0 bubble energy.

- Finally, scattered throughout SOMA are the quirky “one offs” that have somehow survived the decades, each contributing some genuine and special sense of place. The iconic Hotel Utah at Fourth and Bryant Streets is an exemplar, a timeless “dive bar” with who-knows-what going on upstairs that still embodies San Francisco's one-time bohemian character (now fading fast), that has also been able to adapt to contemporary markets thanks to its small but popular live music venue. So has Zeke's Bar on Third Street, the direct descendent of Jerry and Johnny's, a classic mid-20th Century newspaper bar. Those legendary bars are all long gone from SOMA now – the M&M, Breen's and others – along with the newspapers themselves. It was demolished for the Yerba Buena Redevelopment Project in 1980 (located on the site of today's St. Regis Hotel), and “Jerry's” relocated five blocks south, finally selling to its current owner, Zeke, in the '90's. Thanks to the new Giants stadium nearby, Zeke's has morphed into SOMA's “real” sports bar (compared to dumpy pubs or upscale scenes like MoMo's) - but on other quiet days it's the neighborhood's local version of Cheers. Another excellent example is the Bamboo Reef scuba school on Fourth Street – almost a shack, but one of the very few in the entire Bay Area. Each of these and several more is a surviving treasure of SOMA place-making that can't be replicated, and will never be found in some new building anywhere.

“New SOMA”

The transformation of South of Market from what it had been to what it is becoming today began with the massive Yerba Buena Center Redevelopment Project that was authorized in 1965, and finally got really underway around 1980. In the three decades since an entirely new generation of significant SOMA “places” have been built or at least started, adding to those from Traditional SOMA that remain. Add many of those older icons – such as South Park for excellent example – have evolved with the times to take on a dual identity, widely perceived to belong to both eras.

- The first New SOMA group are the many “Generic” – but important – additions to SOMA noted above. The Giants Stadium stands out of course, but the CalTrain Station and the I-280 Freeway – the City's direct connections to Silicon Valley 40 miles to the south – are economically even more significant, because they made the emergence of a new Tech Industry in San Francisco possible. And the old warehouse loft lifestyle that is popular throughout the nation that began here in the

South Beach Redevelopment Area also spread to many Central SOMA locations over the last 25 years, followed by a wave of trendy new pseudo “live/work” projects.

- The Yerba Buena Center, though, transcends any comparable undertakings in any other city. The great civic compromise fashioned by Mayor Moscone 1977 – a standard convention center underneath a wonderful new civic amenity – Yerba Buena Gardens – resulted in the creation of the best of both, an extraordinary place-making achievement. Moscone Center has become the highest-profile Tech Industry meeting location in the nation – perhaps the world – and with the many new hotels nearby, the focal point of the City’s vital visitor industry. The Gardens has become one of the City’s great gathering places with much to enjoy, including outdoor entertainment, cineplexes, ice skating/bowling, and of course shopping/restaurants. But it is also an important part of the SOMA Neighborhood with a Childrens Playground, Childcare Center, and restful mini-parks.
- And then in the 1980’s an entirely new element was grafted on to the initial Yerba Buena Gardens concept – a new “arts district” for San Francisco. There are similar efforts in many cities, but none as concentrated yet as diverse. The relatively modest initial program of a San Francisco-oriented Center for the Arts and (now Novellus) dance theater was dramatically expanded with the addition of the City’s premier Museum of Modern Art (now about to double in size again). This was followed with the further Redevelopment-subsidized development of the new Museum of the African Diaspora and the yet-unbuilt Mexican Museum. The privately sponsored Jewish Museum and other smaller institutions have followed. Collectively, all these have transformed SOMA into a nationally recognized focus of the arts, and a very popular venue for new generations of City residents.
- A second important shift in the Yerba Buena Project during the 1980’s was to add the creation of a new high density city-center residential neighborhood to its overall vision and formal Redevelopment Plan, greatly expanding the core of affordable senior housing required to replace some of the previous skid-row housing the redevelopment bulldozers had destroyed. This has resulted by now in more than 3000 housing units in/near YBC – the necessary “critical mass” for a Central SOMA neighborhood – with supporting elements including two supermarkets (Whole Foods and the new Target), many senior services, and even a large community garden. This high density residential district is now expanding rapidly toward the waterfront in the adjacent Rincon Hill neighborhood with Chicago-scale high-rise projects adding several thousand more housing units.
- The most recent – and last – redevelopment effort to have a major impact on Central SOMA place-making is the Mission Bay Project on its southern boundary. The almost-complete Mission Bay North section built during the last 10 years has added thousands more neighborhood residents, plus important new neighborhood amenities/assets/places – the cleaned up Mission Creek and its lovely Promenade, a local library, and another supermarket (Safeway). The numerous formula retail chain restaurants in its new buildings are of very little place-making value, but those new residents have also sparked the opening of other new neighborhood-oriented shops in the old commercial buildings along Fourth Street immediately north of Townsend Street, and more are certainly coming. Combined with the economic

support from the growth of the Tech Industry, a vibrant new neighborhood retail district is being born. A perfect symbol of this symbiosis is a local cafe that opened just a few years ago in a renovated one-story warehouse across from the CalTrain Station, The Creamery, that has now gained a reputation as a hot Tech Industry deal-making spot.

- The combined impact of these new Yerba Buena and Mission Bay residential concentrations interacting with Tech Industry growth is the urban blossoming of Fourth Street, the busy direct connection between them. The Traditional SOMA elements long in place – including the Hotel Utah, Fox Hardware, a notorious nightclub, and the Filipino Education Center – have been joined by this wave of new SOMA neighborhood retail and specialty businesses. After standing vacant for four years, even a small rough-shell retail space in the stand-out-like-a-sore-thumb Palms condo project has become a new art gallery. A renovated small two story former warehouse building at the corner of Fourth and Clara Streets, across from Whole Foods Market, is an exemplar. A Peets Coffee opened first two years ago on the ground floor, followed by the Coda Salon above it, then an apparel design support business, The Factory, on the alley sidewalk, with a small Tech Industry business office above.
- The future Fourth Street Central Corridor Subway, with a new surface stop at Brannan Street and a subway station at Folsom Street, will further concentrate local resident and worker foot traffic all along Fourth Street, which is certain to lead to more similar multi-purpose renovations of the small buildings along these blocks. At this same time Folsom Street west of Fourth Street, first “pioneered” by several popular restaurants in the ‘90’s, is seeing the opening of a few neighborhood businesses along the street level plus Class C Tech Industry offices above, although no single “place” asset has appeared yet. This is thanks to the several large residential projects built here in recent years, and will be further encouraged by the very large new apartment complex now under construction at Fifth Street.
- In addition to Class B/C office the other aspects of the new Tech Industry are popping up everywhere too, such as Sandbox Suites co-working center and the School of Audio Engineering Institute, both on Harrison Street, the 4th Street Studios media production center near Brannan Street, and the very high tech new Comcast broadcast studios inside 370 Third Street (with 7 satellite broadcast dishes on the roof). On Fifth Street, the future 5M project intends to devote substantial spaces to these Tech Industry off-shoots, and the new University of Pacific Dental School opposite it will become a national focal point of high-tech dental education.
- Finally, throughout Central SOMA, as described above, a number of “high value” existing PDRS businesses will continue into the next era. And they are being joined by “New PDRS” businesses as well, such as the Bluxome Street Winery. Likewise, commercial arts businesses and institutions will continue to expand in Central SOMA, such as Chronicle Books, the Academy of Art, the offices of Pocket Opera/Lamplighters, new galleries, and more. And of course nightclubs and restaurants will continue to come and go. Plus there will always be the one-offs, the odd places that embody somebody’s unusual vision or find some customer niche that brings real personality and a sense of place. Three recent additions that

exemplify this are the Epicenter Cafe on Harrison Street, which is a local geeky place exactly like what some movie about the Tech Industry would fantasize, Farmer Browns Little Skillet, one of the several hole-in-the-way unusual food joints that have opened on small alleys, and HRD Coffee Shop, a former greasy spoon on Third Street that now sells delicious Korean Cheesesteak Sandwiches (breakfast/lunch only) and other never-before-seen Korean-American fusion comfort chow.

What is evident from an overall review of this Community Plan’s survey of place-making SOMA character elements, both Traditional SOMA and New SOMA, is that virtually all the business/locations that collectively create SOMA’s special identity – except for those that due to their very nature must be physically big or new, like a baseball stadium or museum – are located in the smaller existing older buildings throughout Central SOMA. Almost none are to be found in rental spaces in newer buildings, unless purposely subsidized by below-market rents (such as Whole Foods and Safeway).

This leads directly to a fundamental premise of the TODCO Group Central SOMA Community Plan’s zoning and development proposals:

Both to protect and enhance, socially, our longtime/new SOMA communities and to reinforce and expanded, economically, the valuable “SOMA Brand” and our City’s new Tech Industry, it is essential to minimize the loss of the older relatively small multi-story commercial buildings, the several hundred (on lots smaller than ½ acre) that are found throughout Central SOMA. They are where most of the “good stuff” happens – the Tech start-ups, the local spots, the fresh ideas, the places that become loved, the ones that can’t be replaced by any real estate developer, ever, anywhere.