



CTBUH Research Paper

ctbuh.org/papers

Title: **The South of Market Area (SOMA) San Francisco: From Dross to Gloss**

Author: Carol C. Georges

Subjects: Architectural/Design
Building Case Study

Keyword: Development

Publication Date: 2001

Original Publication: CTBUH Journal, Spring 2000

Paper Type:

1. Book chapter/Part chapter
2. **Journal paper**
3. Conference proceeding
4. Unpublished conference paper
5. Magazine article
6. Unpublished

© Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat / Carol C. Georges

The South of Market Area (SOMA) San Francisco: From Dross to Gloss

Carol Carlson Georges, Ph.D
International Architectural Consultant, San Francisco, California

Abstract

A large area of downtown San Francisco adjacent to the Financial District, usually called SOMA (the South of Market Area) is undergoing a transformation that appears to be accelerating every week. For nearly one hundred years the area stood in desolation whose only purpose seemed to be as a place for cars to enter and exit freeways taking commuters in and out of the city. This rapid ascent in real estate values and building construction is being fueled by the high-tech sector of Silicon Valley. More and more companies are interested in having a second office in the city of San Francisco, and many start-up companies are desirous of having their workplace conveniently located within the city. And as it usually happens, when a particular sector of the economy becomes strong in one area, the rate of expansion can happen very quickly. Computer companies, software companies, and internet start-ups attract more of the same. In addition, the youthful flavor of the neighborhood is continuing to attract more of the young professional crowd for both work and living. Owners, developers and construction firms like what they see and are hopeful this trend continues.

The objectives of this paper are to examine the urban redevelopment currently taking place in the South of Market Area (SOMA) in the city of San Francisco and to contrast the Gold Rush years in San Francisco (1849-1854) with the current changes occurring in South of Market Area. The paper concludes with an architectural case study of Avalon Towers, a new development that has revitalized the South of Market Area.

Introduction

The South of Market area has worn many faces economically and culturally since the beginning of the Gold Rush in 1849. It has seen its residents gyrate from the lowest level of society to the highest in a period of less than five years, and then slide dramatically downward in a period of one year. In the period between 1855 and 1870 the neighborhood called Rincon Hill was home to the wealthiest sector of the city, with some houses having as many as forty rooms. The year 1869 was the beginning of the downward descent when a deep cut was introduced by a misguided politician, to shorten a route to the South, that created such decay that the entire area was slowly abandoned. With the assistance of



Fig. 1. Avalon Towers – Computerized Model

the newly created Cable Car, the rich slowly took over Nob Hill as a preferred residential area. Rincon Hill was sliced away bit by bit until not a trace existed of it. The twentieth century saw a rotting decay of the entire South of Market Area that only began to end in the 1990s.

The Re-Development Process. The re-birth of the area began approximately five years ago and the transformation has followed the normal pattern of speed in the typically San Francisco spiral mode. The new technology age of development that gave birth to near-by Silicon Valley has fueled an economic expansion that is unique to the San Francisco Bay area. The turn around could be described as "rubble" turned to "riches."

Avalon Towers: Catalyst for Change

The catalyst in this high-impact change is the new Avalon Towers residential high-rise complex at 388 Beale Street (Fig. 1). This is the first residential rental high-rise building to be completed in the city in more than twenty years. Designed by the architectural firm Theodore Brown & Partners, the 225-unit luxury building was completely leased within ten weeks of completion. It has been called the Internet.com building since a large percentage of the tenants are employed in the computer field. A New York Times article (August 29, 1999, p. 44) profiled The Towers in a half page article. It stated that 85% of the residents earn more than \$100,000 per year, 75% are single or divorced, 60% are under 40 years of age, and two-thirds are new to the city of San Francisco.

When Theodore Brown was asked to design the Avalon Towers in 1990, no one could have envisioned the clientele that would be resident. The word Internet was an obscure scientific endeavor until the innovation of the World Wide Web became a reality in 1993.

Since San Francisco is located very near to Silicon Valley, a region reported to produce 64 new millionaires every twenty-four hours, the South of Market Area is poised for an expansion of would-be gold seekers. Gold is in the blood running through these veins! In a job market that is shifting from seniority-based pay to personal-based pay, the new young employee is driven to put in more hours at work each week. Companies are now closely evaluating if these hours are productive. Recent trends indicate companies now offer stock options and bonuses that enable them to lure and keep talent without offering large base salaries. The 40 hour work week has about disappeared as most American workers now log in more than 260 hours of work a year than they did a decade ago.

Therefore, living close to work or close to a freeway access such as the South of Market Area provides is now seen as a positive for the new employee. The trend toward suburban living is not as attractive to the employee who logs in up to 80 hours of work each week.

The South of Market visual landscape is becoming dotted with restaurants, as the new employee working in the area has no time to leave to search for a place to eat lunch or dinner. The casual lifestyle of the computer industry in Silicon Valley has been brought into the center of San Francisco. The pin-stripe business suits usually remain North of Market in the Financial area while the South of Market restaurants follow the Silicon Valley casual style. The social and business atmosphere is fast-paced, intense, highly competitive, youth-oriented, and ephemeral as both jobs and relationships are oriented toward change.

Scaffolding and cranes now define the area visually. New buildings are sprouting up quickly. A few of the major ones are the Pacific Bell Park (home of the San Francisco Giants), 88 King Street (a high-rise residential project), the new Gap Corporate Headquarters on the Embarcadero, the Courtyard Marriott, the Brandon City homes, 246 Second Street (a residential high-rise), Pankow Residential (a high-rise), the Telecom Center, the Townsend Building and a dozen or more live/work lofts modeled after the So-Ho concept in New York City. In addition, many warehouses and last century factories that have stood with gaping windows and crumbling roofs are suddenly becoming conversion projects for either retail or office use. A number of streets have had to be closed because of extensive construction projects.

Sports clubs, bicycle and sports shops, chiropractors with sports medicine specialties and anything to do with competitive sports define the area. The new employee is as competitive in his or her personal life as in business. While the Financial area may close at 10:00 p.m. most evenings, the South of Market Area is more like a European city that remains alive into the wee hours of the morning.

Historical Aspects

The word "millionaire" may have been coined in San Francisco in the 1850s during the Gold Rush. Certainly the concept of instant wealth is not new to this area. It seems a second Gold Rush may be underway as more and more people globally arrive to seek out new opportunities. Nowhere in the United States is there a major city undergoing the transformation now visible in San Francisco.

The Gold Rush of the 1850s was the first truly global event of the world. Gold seekers came from every corner of the map. San Francisco became famous overnight! Psychologically, the Gold Rush changed every immigrant landing in San Francisco into becoming a new man in his own estimation. New arrivals were so convinced of their chance to become rich, that doctors and dentists became draymen, barbers or shoeblacks and lawyers and brokers became waiters and auctioneers. The Gold Rush mentality gripped the immigrant and no sacrifice was too great for this search for wealth. A similar trend has been occurring in the late 1990s as the Bay Area is attracting people from all over the country. These new workers (so-called twentieth century gold diggers) often must settle for inferior wages with the expectation of future riches. Working permits for foreigners are considered a coveted prize.

Rincon Hill. A large portion of the area being redeveloped in South of Market was once home to wealthy San Franciscans as they looked to find a desirable place to live. Rincon Hill rises 100 feet high and, in the mid-1800s, was laced with an abundance of springs, plenty of sunshine, was regarded by many as the best place to escape the fog and wind that characterizes other areas of the city. The streets were given English countryside names such as Hawthorne, Essex, Dover, and Laurel Place and were lined with wall-gardens and grassy areas. Living in this area were the lawyers, sea captains, bankers, senators, foundry owners, real estate investors, etc. There was no typical Rincon Hill estate as each house was unique; however, the Gothic style architecture was popular (Fig. 2). The shopping area near Rincon Hill was Second Street. Fancy ladies shopped at the milliners, jewelers, mantle makers, and ladies tailors, and of course, paid a visit to the hairdressers. However,

all of this was short-lived. The area became developed between 1855 and 1860 and by 1869, it was declining rapidly. In the late 1860s a rumor circulated that a "cut" might be made through the heart of Rincon Hill. The Hill was considered to be a hindrance to commerce between the Pacific Mail docks and the mills, foundries, docks and wharves that existed below Market Street and the waterfront. It also blocked plans for future traffic to the proposed Central Pacific Railway terminal.

John Middleton, a real estate developer, was the promoter behind the scheme to achieve the Second Street cut. He outlined an access to be achieved by cutting Second Street to grade directly through Rincon Hill. There was some objection from some of the residents so Middleton obtained a Supreme Court order compelling compliance. Most of the city was more interested in expansion and commercial progress so no vehement opposition occurred.

Within a year, 500 workers had gutted out a chasm that divided the hill and extended to a depth of 75 feet (Fig. 3). Heavy rains in the year of 1869 added to this disaster and the wealthy moved quickly off the Hill (Muscatine, 1975). This moment defined the beginning of the decline of the entire South of Market Area.

South Park. An Englishman, George Gordon, a successful builder, became a bit homesick for his native London. In 1852 he assembled a series of building lots on the south side of the South of Market Area which was described as the only level spot of land free from sand in the city's limits at the time. Gordon's plan was to lay out ornamental lots using the plans of squares, ovals, or crescents based on urban plan types in London. He was a man of taste and, therefore, desired a controlled environment with no stores, warehouses, or saloons. The lots were to be used strictly for residential purposes. By 1854 Gordon had acquired twelve acres for the South Park project. A well-known English architect executed designs and an oval garden served as a private gated park for the residents of South Park (Shumate, 1988). South Park still exists today although most of the houses are not original. With the new wealth in the area, it is possible that the day will come when the entire project will be restored to its original glory.

Foreign-Born Population. International residents are not new to San Francisco. In the first year that South Park was completed, 2,000 enthusiastic men from England, France, and Italy gathered in the area to celebrate the end of the Crimean War. The fact that this was such a major event speaks for the number of foreigners living in San Francisco at the time.

Economic Factors. High prices with great volatility are nothing new to the San Francisco area. During the



Fig. 2. A Home at Rincon Hill
(Courtesy: California Historical Society)



Fig. 3. The Second Street Cut
(Courtesy: California Historical Society)

Gold Rush years, poorly constructed houses were renting for \$800 per month; a dozen eggs were \$12.00; a loaf of bread was fifty cents (in the rest of the country, six cents). The cost of doing laundry was so expensive that it was not uncommon for it to be shipped overseas for cleaning or to be merely thrown away. Luxuries were in great demand and no price seemed too exorbitant for the newly rich. There was an immediate influx of merchandise from all over the world in response to the high demand for goods. Everyone became an instant businessman. Ships found their way to San Francisco and goods were stacked on the beaches or on streets while warehouses and wharves were being constructed at lightning speed (Muscatine, 1975).

The Gold Rush occurred officially between 1849 and 1853 when it peaked. In 1854, the first of many subsequent depressions occurred. Some of the depressions were caused by a high influx of foreign labor willing to work for a small fraction of the normal wage scales.

Social Factors

Women were in short supply for the first several years of the Gold Rush. Only about eight per cent of the inhabitants were female in this period. Today male employees far outnumber women in the computer industry. A recent article in *The International Herald Tribune* (April 11, 2000, p.11), for example, points out that 36% more males than females live in the Silicon Valley town of Palo Alto. It also mentions that males involved in the computer industry are usually occupied in their own world of cyberspace and do not have much time for social activities.

Architectural Aspects of Avalon Towers

Avalon Towers (Figs. 4,5) is a development of AvalonBay Communities, Inc. The 20-story, twin-towered, 227-unit luxury apartment complex contains over 500,000 square feet. It is a state-of-the-art apartment building featuring a multi-purpose activity room, a spa and health club, parking for 230 cars, computer hook-ups for all units, and a landscaped plaza area for tenants' enjoyment.

Avalon Towers is the first high-rise, rental-only apartment building constructed in San Francisco in 20 years and designed to the 1997 seismic structural code. This project incorporated the Mayor's Office of Housing and the Planning Commission's policy for affordable housing by providing 23 affordable housing units on-site.

With easy access to the Waterfront Promenade along the Embarcadero on the southeastern waterfront and to downtown San Francisco, the location of Avalon Towers encourages journey-to-work trips by foot, bicycle or short local transit. The location also provides easy vehicular access to regional freeways.

The project exceeds the amount of open space required by the San Francisco Planning codes. It includes an access stair and ramp from Harrison Street to Beale Street via a pedestrian walkway (mid-block, open-air) as per the Rincon Hill Plan. This pedestrian street has the feel of a plaza/urban park with extensive landscaping, fountains, decorative paving and seating. The open space enhances the project site and contributes to making this area a desirable residential neighborhood.

The architects, Theodore Brown & Partners, Inc., have



Fig. 4. A View of Avalon Towers
(Courtesy: Alexander Georges)

designed a visually interesting building structure using an exterior exposed concrete moment frame that soars, cantilevers, and steps skyward to a height of twenty stories. The stepped profile of the towers allow balconies and terraces for each unit. Most of the units are corner plans designed for panoramic views. The main building entrance is centered in a four-story curved, "Calcutta Gold" marble wall that connects the two towers. Penthouse units on the top three floors will have grand terraces, high ceilings, wood burning fireplaces, and granite countertops. Full-height glass fills in the void between the concrete frame and floor slabs. Dramatic triangular balconies cantilever from the structure. All of these features allow the residents to enjoy the views and fantastic skyline of the Bay, the Bay Bridge, and panoramic views of San Francisco.

Form and Space. The building was designed as an elongated hexagon shape with six units per floor. This design strategy provides each tenant with a corner unit with views in two directions. The building and apartments are organized to maximize the number of units that have views of the city and the San Francisco Bay. Corner apartments are highly desired by tenants because light and views come from two sides - and San Franciscans love their views.



Fig. 5. Entrance to Avalon Towers
(Courtesy: Alexander Georges)

The bedrooms are large (13'-6" x 13'-6") which allows for a computer desk or other working area in the bedroom. A bedroom of this size allows enough space so that this room can be multi-functional instead of just being occupied and filled by only a bed.

The building has special sound-insulating double-glazed windows to keep out the noise of the city. Each room has a balcony door or a window that can be opened to let in fresh air. The white window frames compliment the gray concrete of the building.

Contemporary architecture has often denied the quality of ritual and ceremony that has always been a part of religious and cultural life. In 388 Beale Street the curved entry form, the tall entry pavilion, the plaza, and the sequence of garden, fountain, and grand ramped stairs and promenade establish a sense of ceremony and serenity for the residential site.

Having one's own outdoor space is very important so that each tenant can step out of the door and get fresh air, grow outdoor plants, or barbecue on the balcony. The triangular balconies cantilever 6 ft. from the building at their furthest point. The balconies are designed to give the same feeling as riding in the bow of a ship.

Where people enter the building on the Beale Street side,

a curved form intercepts the box to soften it and welcome pedestrians and cars. The building lobby is a 5-story vertical tower that immediately lets people know that they will be transported up to the plaza level. A 40 ft. glass art piece by Dan Winterich is installed on the glazed wall facing the street to filter out the direct view of the mundane 8-story post office building across the street.

Structure. One of the greatest pleasures people can derive from experiencing architecture is the appreciation and comprehension of how a building comes together with real materials; the comprehension of the building process.

The building is a concrete moment frame with the concrete frame exposed and expressed on the exterior of all sides of each tower. Everything that is not structural is infilled with white, aluminum-framed glass. There are no false or infill partitions on the exterior. The concrete is naturally colored and exposed and, in this state, expresses strength and durability. It soars, cantilevers, and steps upwards to twenty stories. The Towers step at various levels creating balconies and terraces for the units. Daring triangular balconies cantilever from the structure. These terraces provide the residents fresh air and fantastic views of San Francisco, the Bay Bridge and the Bay.

Many of the tenants work for Internet companies, and they have started a new wave in the city by insisting that their offices in existing buildings have exposed concrete walls, ceilings, etc. The building, designed to appeal to young tenants, incorporates natural materials throughout.

Conclusions

By 1919 the days of sailing ships were changing the character of the San Francisco waterfront and the heavy industry continued to ebb over the bay to Oakland. The area that seemed seedy in 1919 looked even more so in 1940. With the construction of the Embarcadero Freeway that was built as an overpass into the city of San Francisco in the 1960s, the area continued to remain an unattractive place. The earthquake of 1989 was the demise of the freeway, and perhaps this was the true beginning of rebirth. The accessibility of the freeways remained, but the visual aspects that were unattractive were removed and the neighborhood seemed free to breathe once again.

Few poets ever wrote about the glories of the South of Market Area – although one well-known author, Jack London, was born in the neighborhood. He wrote an essay entitled "South of the Slot" in 1909 in his book *The Strength of the Strong*. He describes the slot as a physical and social barrier between the working class and upper class neighborhoods:

"Old San Francisco was divided midway by the Slot. The Slot was an iron crack that ran along the center of Market Street and from the burr of the ceaseless, endless cable that was hitched to the cars, it dragged up and down. North of the Slot were the theaters, hotels and shopping district, the banks and the staid respectable business houses. South of the Slot were the factories, slums, laundries, machine shops, boiler works and the abodes of the working class. The Slot was the metaphor that expressed the class cleavage of society."

The computer industry has redefined the South of Market Area as new development has taken place in the 1990s. In a sense, the cleavage is just as great as it was in the nineteenth century.

Henry George in the periodical *The Overland Monthly* (1869), gave this succinct account of California, and certainly the San Francisco area was included (Olmsted, Roger R. and Nancy L., 1979):

"What constitutes the peculiar charm of California which all who have lived here long enough feels? Not just the climate alone...in California there may have been a certain cosmopolitanism, a certain freedom and breadth of

common thought and feeling natural to a community made up from so many different sources in which every man and woman has been transplanted with the native angularities of prejudices and habit more or less worn off."

It would seem that this spirit continues, and this makes the urban landscape of change attractive for those who seek its refuge.

References

Muscatine, Doris, 1975. *Old San Francisco, The Biography of a City*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, pp. 105–115.

Olmsted, Roger R. and Nancy L., 1979. *San Francisco Waterfront*, Prepared for the San Francisco Waterfront Management Program, pp. 178–183.

The Yerba Buena Center Report on Historical Cultural Resources, Prepared for the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, pp. 119–121.

Shumate, Albert, 1988. *Rincon Hill and South Park*, Windgate Press, Sausalito, California, pp. 30–33.