

GATEWAY TO THE CIVIC CENTER

# United Nations Plaza Renovation

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PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

*Prepared for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors' UN Plaza Working Group  
by ROMA Design Group and the San Francisco Department of Public Works*

MARCH 17, 2003

City and County of San Francisco



United Nations Plaza  
Working Group

Willie Lewis Brown, Jr., Mayor

March 18, 2003

The Honorable Matt Gonzalez  
President  
San Francisco Board of Supervisors  
City Hall Room 244  
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place  
San Francisco, CA 94102-4689

Dear President Matt Gonzalez and Honorable Board Members:

I am enclosing a report entitled "Gateway to the Civic Center: United Nations Plaza Renovation", a presentation of findings, on behalf of the United Nations Plaza Working Group that was formed at your behest.

As you know, the Working Group is comprised of fifteen individuals who represent city agencies, neighborhood associations, advocacy groups, tenants and City agencies. I have acted as Chair of the Working Group, with Richard Allman of the Tenderloin Sidewalk Improvement Program as Vice-Chair. Input on design matters was provided by ROMA Design Group, working in collaboration with landscape architects from the Department of Public Works (DPW).

With your endorsement, Judi Mosqueda, Project Manager with DPW, will take the plans that formed the basis for this report for review by the Planning and Art Commissions, and funding agencies. Construction documents will then be prepared based on the design concepts, with the expectation that bidding and construction will take place by or in early 2004, with completion likely by Fall 2004. Upon completion of Phase 1, DPW will pursue potential funding sources to implement Phase 2 improvements.

The Working Group members and I are available to meet with you to address any of your questions or concerns. I can be contacted by phone at 362-2500 or by email at: [msadv@pacbell.net](mailto:msadv@pacbell.net). Judi Mosqueda can be contacted by phone at 558-4039 or by email at: [judi\\_mosqueda@ci.sf.ca.us](mailto:judi_mosqueda@ci.sf.ca.us).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lynn Valente".

Lynn Valente  
Chair

Enclosure: as noted

c: Edwin M. Lee / Harlan L. Kelly, Jr. / James Chia / UN Plaza Working Group Members

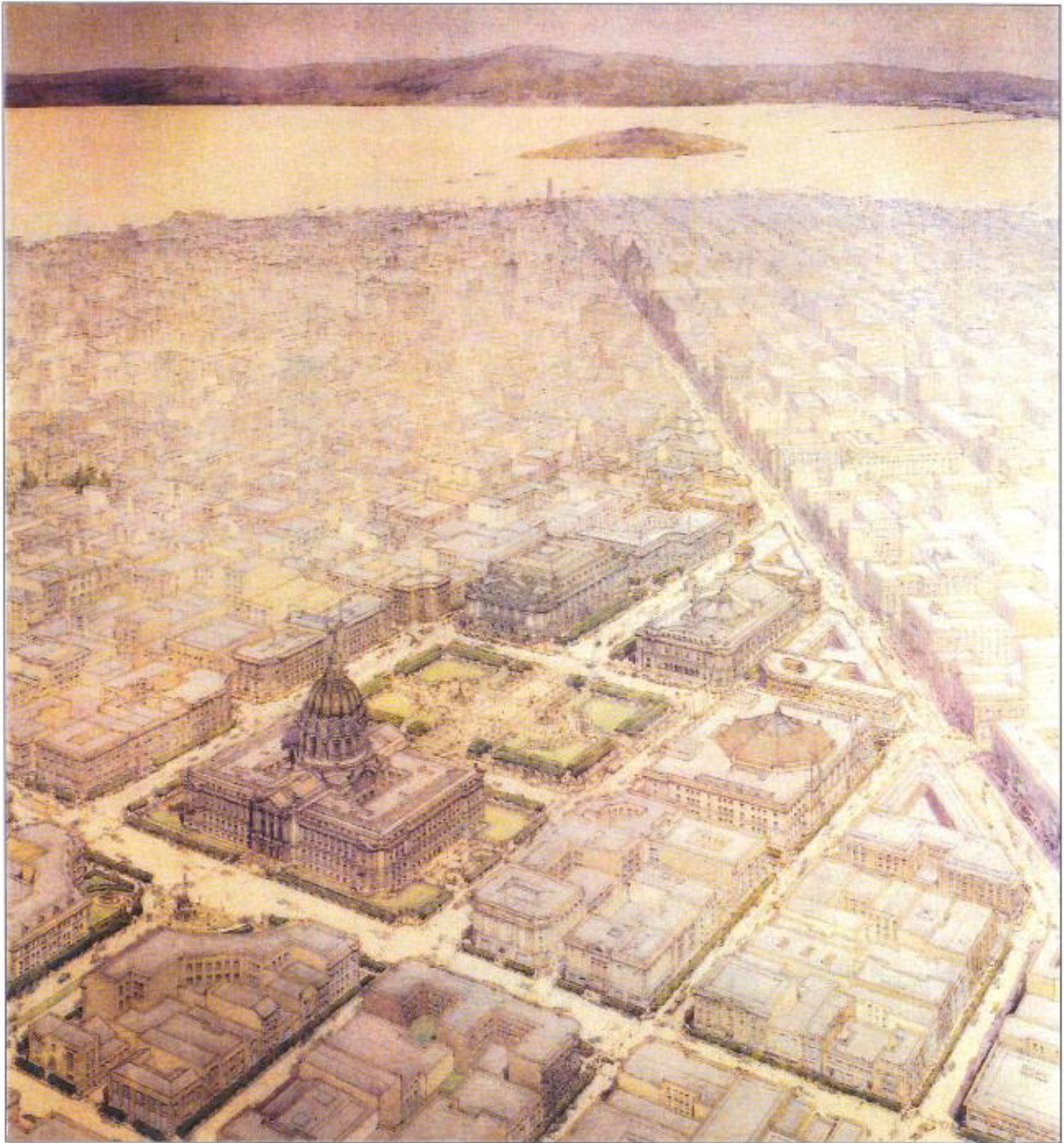
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*The aerial perspective from the southwest by Jules Guerin depicting the 1912 Civic Center plan illustrates the Beaux Arts concept of linking City Hall along Fulton Street and Market Street to the Ferry Building and waterfront beyond.*

## DESIGN APPROACH

The ability to create sustainable public space is a significant issue of concern to cities throughout the United States. While successful public space is an essential element to achieving the quality of life which makes cities great, negative public space is detrimental to their livability and appeal. If the only way a public space can be attractive to a community is through ever-increasing levels of maintenance, surveillance and programming, then some reconsideration of its physical characteristics must be undertaken. Successful public spaces create a dynamic balance with the activities they support, are attractive to a broad segment of the population and are ultimately self-regulating, instilling a pride of place and meaning for neighborhood and citywide residents and visitors.

The Civic Center was established after the 1906 earthquake as part of the effort to rebuild San Francisco. The new City Hall, which was destroyed during the earthquake, was rebuilt with grandeur and civic pride on axis with Fulton Street. Fulton Street was envisioned as a boulevard which, along with Market Street, would link City Hall to the Ferry Building, heightening the relationship between the City's two most significant landmarks. With the relocation of City Hall to Van Ness Avenue, Leavenworth and Hyde Streets could be and were extended to connect with Market Street.

Typical of Beaux-Arts design intentions, the monumental scale of the Civic Center public spaces established visual prominence and lent symbolic meaning to the role of local government in the city. However, even with the later addition of a significant component of cultural facilities, a pattern of meaningful activities on a daily basis were not established in Civic Center Plaza nor in the adjacent public spaces. Furthermore, the redesign of Civic Center Plaza in the 1960's diminished the role of Fulton Street as a ceremonial movement corridor from Market Street to City Hall.

The Market Street improvements in the 1970's added large areas to the already over-abundant supply of open space in the Civic Center area. Fulton Street and Leavenworth Street were closed to automobile traffic to create a 2.6-acre plaza. The plaza was paved in brick to match the adjacent Market Street and included a large fountain, lighting pylons, and lawn areas planted with London Plane trees and Lombardy Poplars. In 1995, symbolic elements were provided to commemorate the United Nations but, to the greatest extent, the open space did not contribute to the creation of meaningful activities. Over the years, the plaza has not achieved its full potential as a vibrant open space and destination for residents and visitors.

In United Nations Plaza today, due to the dedicated effort of a number of individuals, there are a number of programmed activities that take place on a periodic basis and which enliven the public



spaces. The most successful of these is the "Heart of the City" farmer's market on Wednesdays and Sundays; the Thursday Showcase and the "People in Plazas" lunchtime concert series during summer months. However, the daily life of the plaza, when events are not scheduled, is woefully lacking due in part to the overwhelming presence of drug dealers, drug users and gangs. The day and nighttime environment does not instill a sense of security and comfort. Drug paraphernalia and human waste can be found throughout the plaza, posing safety and health concerns. Today, the continual presence of police cars and maintenance vehicles is required to maintain civility during significant portions of the day and night. The quality of the environment has deteriorated to the point where transit patrons avoid the use of the adjacent BART station, and people moving through the area go out of their way not to walk through the plaza. Although physical commemorative elements exist, the life of the plaza does not reflect the values of peaceful coexistence and human rights that are the cornerstone of the United Nations, for which it was named.

The city's specific concerns about the sustainability of United Nations Plaza and the need to enhance its role as a public open space made it the focus of concern to City departments and the target for change and improvement. The evaluation of UN Plaza began in 1994 when it was included in the Civic Center Study, Draft for Citizen Review by the Department of City Planning. In 1999, DPW prepared a site assessment of the plaza, concluding that its vitality and physical form should be improved significantly. In 2000, a large (\$936,000) grant was secured from FHWA's Transportation and Communities and Systems Planning grant program to undertake transit-related pedestrian improvements to the plaza. The intent was not to utilize these funds to wholly redesign the plaza, but rather to evaluate how strategic improvements could be made which would enhance its sustainability and viability as well as its commemorative role. Towards this end, a Working Group was established by the Board of Supervisors comprised of fifteen individuals, representing city agencies, neighborhood associations, advocacy groups, tenants and city agencies, to ensure that consideration is given both to neighborhood and citywide interests. Professional input on design matters was provided by ROMA Design Group assisted by the Department of Public Works landscape architecture section.

In discussions with the Working Group and the designers, several physical characteristics of the existing environment were identified as problematic and not contributing to the viability of the plaza as a public gathering space. The principal issue is that a number of the physical changes which were implemented as part of the original design of the United Nations Plaza are not appropriate and do not contribute in a positive manner to its viability. In fact, some are detrimental to its health and well-being. From the broadest point of view, it is questionable whether it was appropriate to locate a plaza of this size and scale in the area. However, a comprehensive reevaluation of the plaza is not a part of this current design effort. Rather, the primary focus is on strategic improvements that address the lack of a human scale and the discontinuity and fragmentation that exists in the urban pattern.



*Fulton Street, 1935.*

The major problem is that the plaza is too big, is isolated from surrounding areas, and does not have surrounding activities which add to the daily pulse of life. From a human scale and activity point of view, the size of United Nations Plaza is not fitted with the level of activities that can be supported there on a regular basis. Fulton Street, at 160 feet, is wider than Market Street, and has none of its vehicular or transit functions nor its adjacent retail uses. The 2.6 acre plaza is larger than Union Square, but does not have the surrounding concentration of retail activity which might warrant its size. Adjacent buildings don't contribute to the life of the plaza. Blank walls and the lack of building entries and ground floor uses do little to generate activity and therefore put a much greater burden on the physical structure of the space itself and the elements within it. Common daily flows of activity, such as the movement of people, the transfer from one transportation mode to another, stopping for goods and services, buying a newspaper, getting shoes shined, picking up groceries, all energize a city and contribute to numerous social interactions that make people feel a part of a place.





*Existing Conditions*



More specifically, the following physical characteristics were identified as having detrimental effects on the viability of United Nations Plaza as a public space:

- Rather than enhancing the role of Fulton Street, the creation of a plaza at the intersection with Market Street actually diminished the Beaux Arts intentions to connect the Civic Center with Market Street and by extension to the Ferry Building. Further it tended to isolate the programmed events within Fulton Street from Market Street. The closure of Fulton Street undermined its role as a gateway and arrival into the Civic Center.
- The large pedestrian areas, particularly adjacent to the BART entrances eliminated opportunities for drop-off and pick-up by transit, taxis and other modes which would enhance the viability of transit to serve a broader market. In this manner, they further diminished the opportunity for the common everyday activities that serve to enliven a place and make the station areas feel more secure.
- The placement of the fountain adjacent to the Leavenworth corridor created a “backside” to the plaza and eliminated an essential connection for the neighborhood. The walls of the adjacent buildings further diminished the role of Leavenworth as a connection to the adjacent neighborhood, and exacerbated the accumulation of trash and garbage in and around the fountain area.
- The use of the terminus of Leavenworth Street as a service corridor providing vehicular access only to the federal building without a designated pedestrian pathway diminishes the role of the street as a linking element and contributes to the sense of isolation between the neighborhoods to the north and the plaza.
- The placement of the Simon Bolivar statue in the center of Fulton Street does not contribute to the visual and physical linkage to City Hall.
- The high light levels on the illuminated pylons along Fulton Street create glare and contrast and the implicit message that this is not a safe area to be in at night.
- The parterres of green grass interrupt flows of pedestrian movement and limit the space for markets and other events.
- The grassy berm and chasm-like quality of the central BART station entrance does not create an attractive appearance. Rather than providing continuity to activity, the grassy berm creates buffers to the BART entrance and further isolate it from the surrounding plaza.