

San Francisco 2018

# Public Space + Public Life in Civic Center

Gehl + San Francisco  
Planning

Public Space Public Life Survey  
Key Findings and a  
Framework for Public Life

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Gehl in collaboration with San Francisco Planning conducted a Public Space + Public Life Study of Civic Center in Summer 2017.

The Study sets a baseline for life and space in the Civic Center district. This baseline allows the City to identify challenges and opportunities to amplify public life in Civic Center.

It also allows the City to measure progress towards target public life outcomes during interim activation events and future phases of physical improvements.

A strategic framework for amplifying public life in Civic Center also accompanies this document.

You can find more information about the Civic Center Public Space design here [civiccentersf.org](http://civiccentersf.org)

You can find this document, and other Gehl projects here [issuu.com/gehlarchitects/](http://issuu.com/gehlarchitects/)



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# Executive Summary

Public Life in Civic Center isn't living up to its potential. The District's grand architecture and ceremonial public spaces were designed to inspire awe and serve as ceremonial gathering spaces, not meet the needs of people who live or work nearby. Over decades, the few human-scale elements have been removed. There is too much empty public space in Civic Center, and too few invitations to be there.

Today, many of the people spending time in Civic Center's public spaces have nowhere else to go. The effects of larger social issues like homelessness and drug use have become synonymous with the space. We can't wait for these complex issues to be solved before we do something to improve public life.

Design alone cannot solve the challenges in Civic Center - but it can help. Civic Center's public spaces deserve unique, compelling invitations that give more people a reason to be there. Programming, food, appealing landscape elements, and recreation facilities encourage people to come, and make people passing through feel welcome to stay.

Progress is only possible through a coordinated effort towards a common vision. Design, programming, social services, stewardship, and communications must work together for the kind of life we want to see in Civic Center.

It starts with a Framework for Public Life.



Is Civic Center living up to its name?

# Civic Center

\ 'si-vik \

*Adjective*

- 1. Relating to a city or town, especially its administration; municipal.**
- 2. Relating to the duties or activities of people in relation to their town, city, or local area.**

**Origin:** Mid 16th century: from French civique or Latin civicus, from civis 'citizen'. The original use was in civic garland, crown, etc., translating Latin corona civica, denoting a garland of oak leaves and acorns given in ancient Rome to a person who saved a fellow citizen's life.

Is Civic Center living up to its name?

# Civic Center

***/ˈsen-ter/***

*Noun*

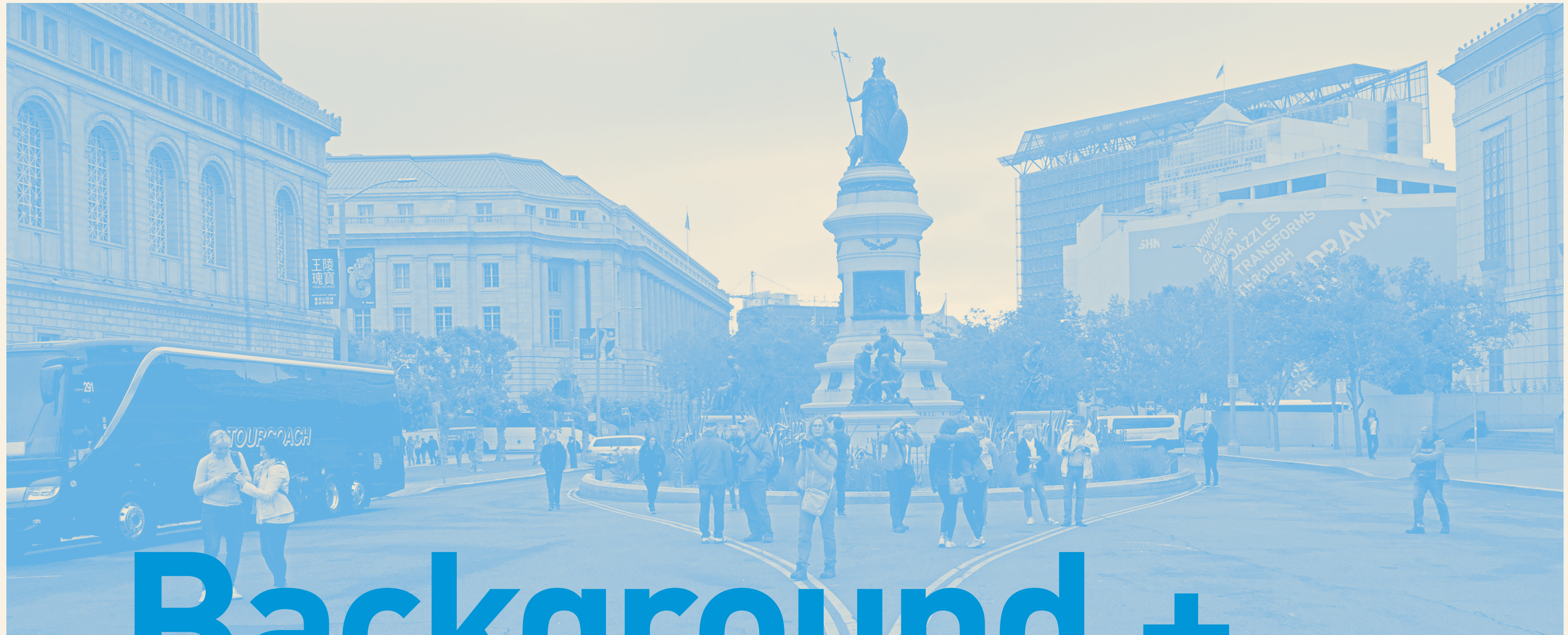
- 1. The point that is equally distant from every point on the circumference of a circle or sphere.**
- 2. The point from which an activity or process is directed, or on which it is focused.**
- 3. A place or group of buildings where a specified activity is concentrated.**

**Origin:** Late Middle English: from Old French, or from Latin *centrum*, from Greek *kentron* 'sharp point, stationary point of a pair of compasses', related to *kentein* 'to prick'.



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# Background + Context



# Civic Center is ready for a change

The Civic Center district's public realm is overdue for an update.

Adjacent neighborhoods like the Tenderloin lack public space. The existing neighborhood's need for high quality public space will only grow as people continue to move to the district, and as the area continues to grow as an arts and culture hub. The City has identified the transit-rich Hub district near Civic Center as a strategic area for more people to live in San Francisco.

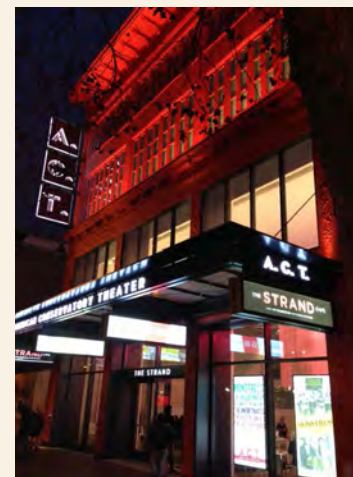
These forces, past and present, have changed and will continue to change the demands people have on the public realm.

**The most recent plan for the Civic Center's public realm is nearly 20 years old.**

Public Works-led "Civic Center Historic District Improvement Project" by SMWM and Olin Partnership.



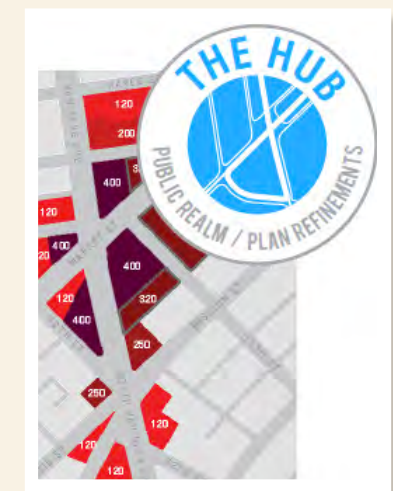
**Since the 1990s, the area has grown as both an arts and culture district and a residential neighborhood.**



ACT Strand Theater



New construction



New growth at Market/  
VanNess

# Civic Center Public Realm Plan Components

The Civic Center Public Realm Plan will create a unified vision for long-term improvements to Civic Center’s plazas, streets, and other public spaces.

The Plan is an inter-agency effort managed by San Francisco Planning and is part of the City’s ongoing efforts to improve the area as both a neighborhood gathering space and common area for everyone who lives in, works in and visits San Francisco.

More information about the plan can be found at [www.civiccentersf.org](http://www.civiccentersf.org)



## Public Life Study

Analyses of how people currently use Civic Center’s public realm throughout the day. Findings will serve as the basis for developing and testing preliminary ideas for improvements through temporary, physical installations.



## Streetscape Design Standards

Guidelines for contextually-appropriate locations and design palettes for streetscape amenities such as lighting, trees, and paving.



## Transportation Infrastructure Plan

Upgrades to the transportation infrastructure throughout the plan area including parking, streetscape paving, street design, transit improvements, and pedestrian and bicycle facilities.



## Focus Area Designs

Conceptual designs for key public spaces and streets within the area.



## Activation Strategy

Methods for activating and stewarding public spaces, focused on long-term changes that will increase public use and enjoyment of Civic Center (e.g. reuse of Brooks Hall).



## Implementation Strategy

Funding and phasing strategy for implementation of proposed improvements.



## **Guiding Question:**

How can Civic Center continue to serve as one of the city's primary civic and ceremonial gathering places while also providing a safe, comfortable and welcoming environment for everyday users?

# Public Life Study: Putting people at the center of urban change

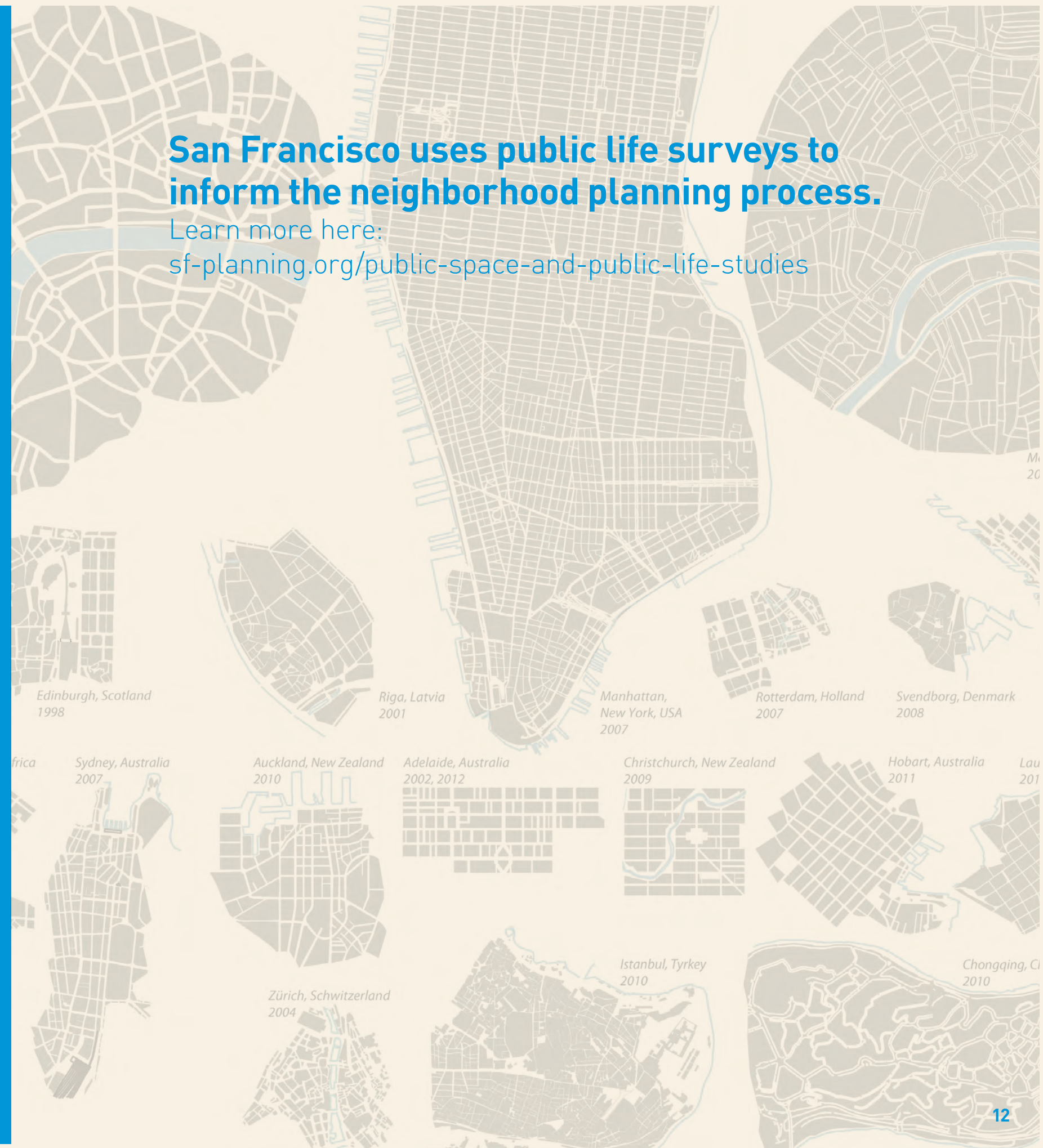
Public Life surveys have been performed around the globe by Gehl and partner cities. In some places, like Sydney and Copenhagen, Public Life data is an integrated part of the city planning process and is used to gauge success according to public life benchmarks. It is no coincidence that these cities are ranked as some of the world's most liveable places. When cities use public life data to guide their design and policies, the outcome is better for people.

Download the Public Life Data Protocol:  
[www.gehl.institute.com](http://www.gehl.institute.com)

**San Francisco uses public life surveys to  
inform the neighborhood planning process.**

Learn more here:

[sf-planning.org/public-space-and-public-life-studies](http://sf-planning.org/public-space-and-public-life-studies)





# Decode the Everyday

## Why a Public Space Public Life (PSPL) study?

To find **human stories**

To inform **strategy and design**

To provide **evidence** on which to base **objective choices**

To **benchmark** progress

To discover **new opportunities**

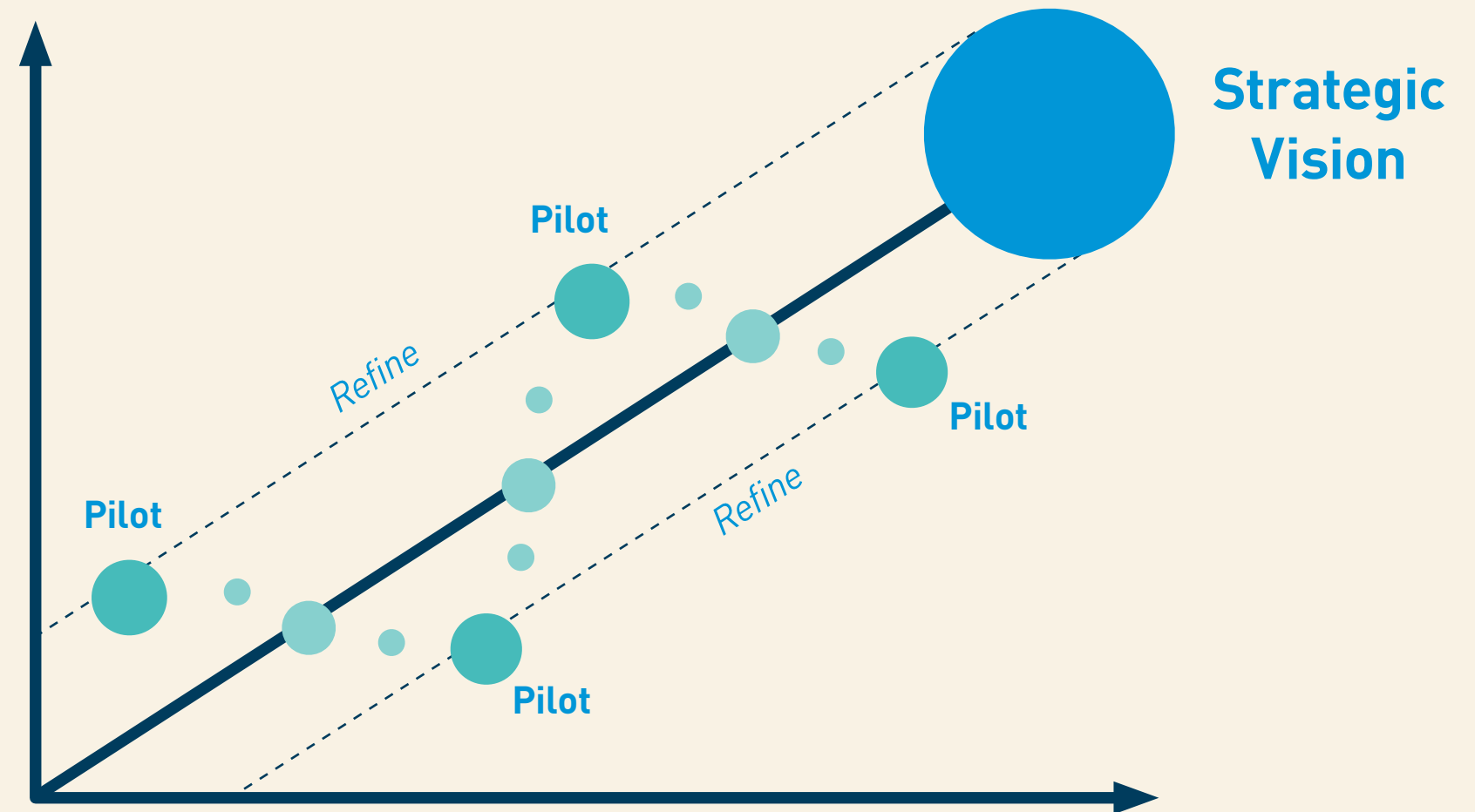
To create **urgency for change**



# How and when to measure

A data-driven approach to amplifying public life in Civic Center

- The Public Space Public Life study of Civic Center informs an Evaluation Matrix that benchmarks key public life indicators (see part 4)
- Evaluate indicators during interim activation events, compare against baseline, and use to adjust strategic vision
- Perform spot-counts every 2-3 years
- Perform full public life study every 3-5 years



The measure-test-refine approach to Civic Center's design



# The Civic Center Commons Initiative can pilot concepts from the Public Realm Plan

Civic Center Commons has been bringing life to Civic Center's key public spaces with free music, art, and activities. This study did not occur during a planned event, but these interim activations can test concepts from the Public Realm Plan, evaluate outcomes, and make recommendations for the long-term vision.

More information about Civic Center Commons at:  
[www.civiccentercommons.org](http://www.civiccentercommons.org)



Photos c/o Civic Center Commons + Groundplay SF



# A city observes itself

Nearly 100 volunteers collected the data that makes up this report.

Numerous city agencies, budding urbanists, interested citizens, the Department of Public Health, Another Planet Entertainment, volunteers from the Opera, Stanford, Berkeley, and other educational institutions all participated. It was a citywide affair!





# 4 Snapshot Days + 2 spot-counts

There is no typical day at Civic Center. We selected four days that represented different common activity profiles and supplemented these counts with two spot-counts to capture specific conditions.

The survey ran from 8:00am to 8:00pm on each day unless noted.



**Playgrounds**  
Pre-construction

Saturday, February 11  
Tuesday, February 13



**Night-time Counts**  
7pm-11pm

Friday, September 22



## “Quiet” Weekday

Thursday, May 25

Cloudy until around noon  
Min 54°F Max 61°F Wind 2m/s



## “Quiet” Weekend

Saturday, June 10

Min 54°F Max 63°F Wind 4m/s



## “Busy” Weekday

Thursday, June 7

Farmers’ Market @ UN Plaza,  
Warriors game at Civic Center  
Min 52°F Max 59°F Wind 4m/s



## “Busy” Weekend

Saturday, May 27

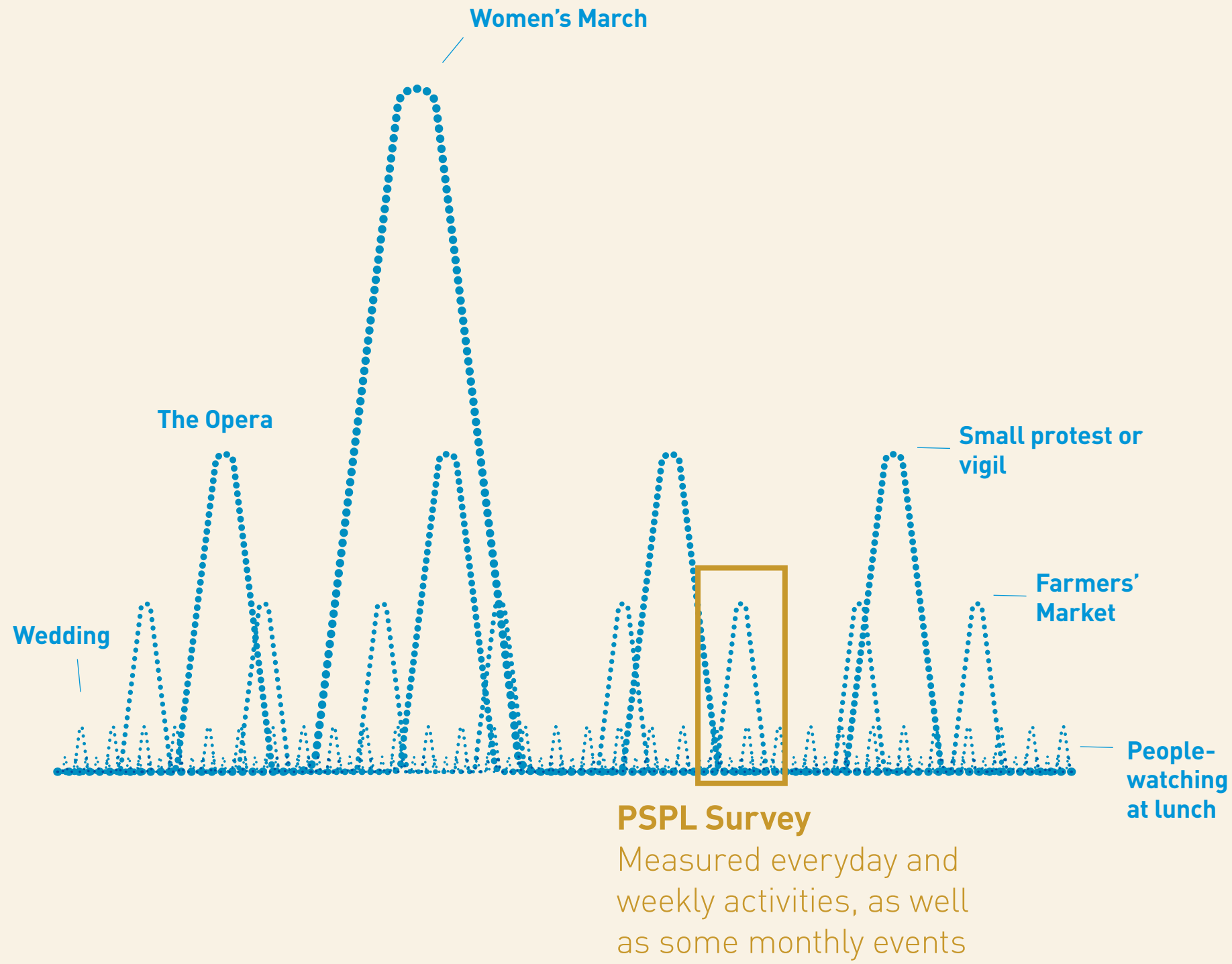
Concert @ Bill Graham + Prom  
Min 54°F Max 61°F Wind 2m/s

# There is no typical day in Civic Center

From daily weddings and civic business to weekly farmer’s markets to annual regional gatherings like Pride and protests, Civic Center has many facets of its public life, impacted by events with varying character, size, and frequency.

The Public Life Study focused on events that happen in the daily and weekly rhythm.

The Civic Center Commons initiative activates Civic Center’s public realm with free music, art, and activities. This study did not occur during a planned event.

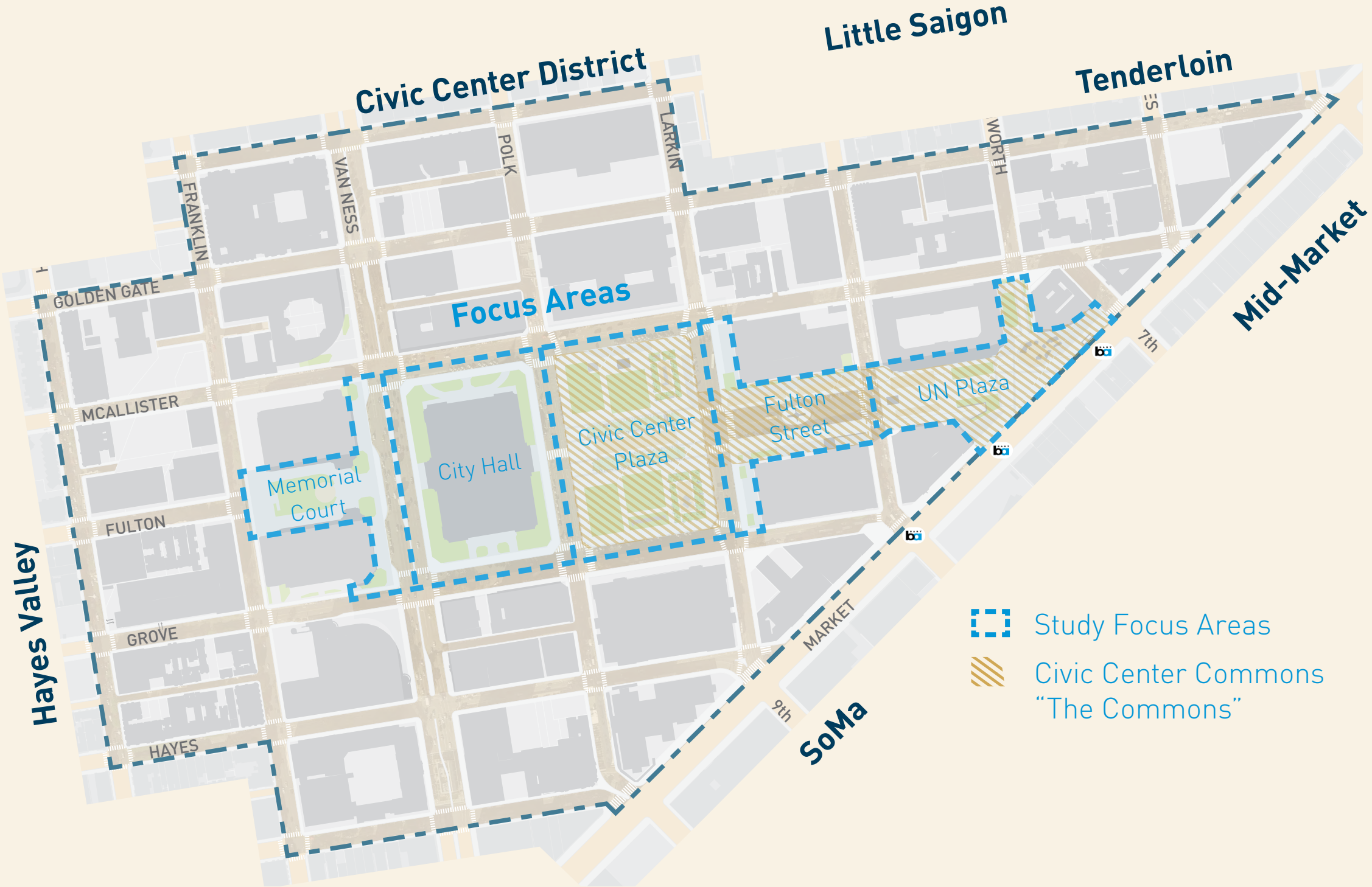




# Defining Civic Center

The Public Space and Public Life survey looked at the entire Civic Center District, which borders neighboring Hayes Valley, SoMa, Mid-market, Tenderloin, and Little Saigon neighborhoods. Findings and recommendations focus on five areas and the streets that connect them.

“The Commons” is used throughout this document to refer to the three public spaces that make up Civic Center’s grand axis.





# Survey Locations

The Public Life survey count locations were selected to capture the ebb and flow of the public life of Civic Center, focused around its central public spaces.





# Survey Methods

## Age and Gender

Measuring people moving  
+ spending time

**Age & Gender (Pedestrians, 10 minutes)**  
Surveyor #7

HOOR 4

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	Total
0-4 strollers			Total
4-14 kids			Total
15-19 teens high schoolers	Total	Total	Total
20-29 college young adults	Total	Total	Total
30-64 adults	Total	Total	Total
65+ seniors	Total	Total	Total

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

LOCATION: \_\_\_\_\_ TIME: \_\_\_\_\_

PROCEDURE: Count pedestrians moving across the indicated line, noting age and gender for 100 people or 10 minutes, whichever comes first.





# Survey Methods

## People Moving

Volumes of people walking and cycling

**Pedestrian and Cyclist Counts** (10 min each)

LOCATION C	HOUR 1		HOUR 2	
PEDESTRIANS		Total		Total
CYCLISTS		Total		Total
	Wheelchair	Stroller	Wheelchair	Stroller

HOUR 3		HOUR 4		
PEDESTRIANS		Total		Total
CYCLISTS		Total		Total
	Wheelchair	Stroller	Wheelchair	Stroller

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

TIME: \_\_\_\_\_

**PROCEDURE:** Count pedestrians and cyclists moving across the indicated line for 10 minutes each. Mark jaywalkers with a line on the map. If there are obstructions, adjust the location of your line as necessary to maintain a clear sightline from end to end.

**Gehl**





# Survey Methods


## People Spending Time

Body posture, activity, age, gender of people spending time

Stationary Activity and Age and Gender Mapping

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

TIME: \_\_\_\_\_



PERSON ID	AGE	POSTURE	ACTIVITY	OTHER ACTIVITIES	NOTES
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					
17					
18					
19					
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22					
23					
24					
25					
26					
27					
28					
29					
30					
TOTALS:					

PROCEDURE:

Walk through the area indicated in red above to capture a snapshot of the stationary activities and age / gender of the people present in the public space.

Mark exact locations of people on the map using a number for each, starting with 1.

For each person, quickly "X" the box that fits best in each category (age, gender, posture, activity).

If you reach 30, continue on to a new sheet and begin where you left off, starting with 1 again.

Gehl

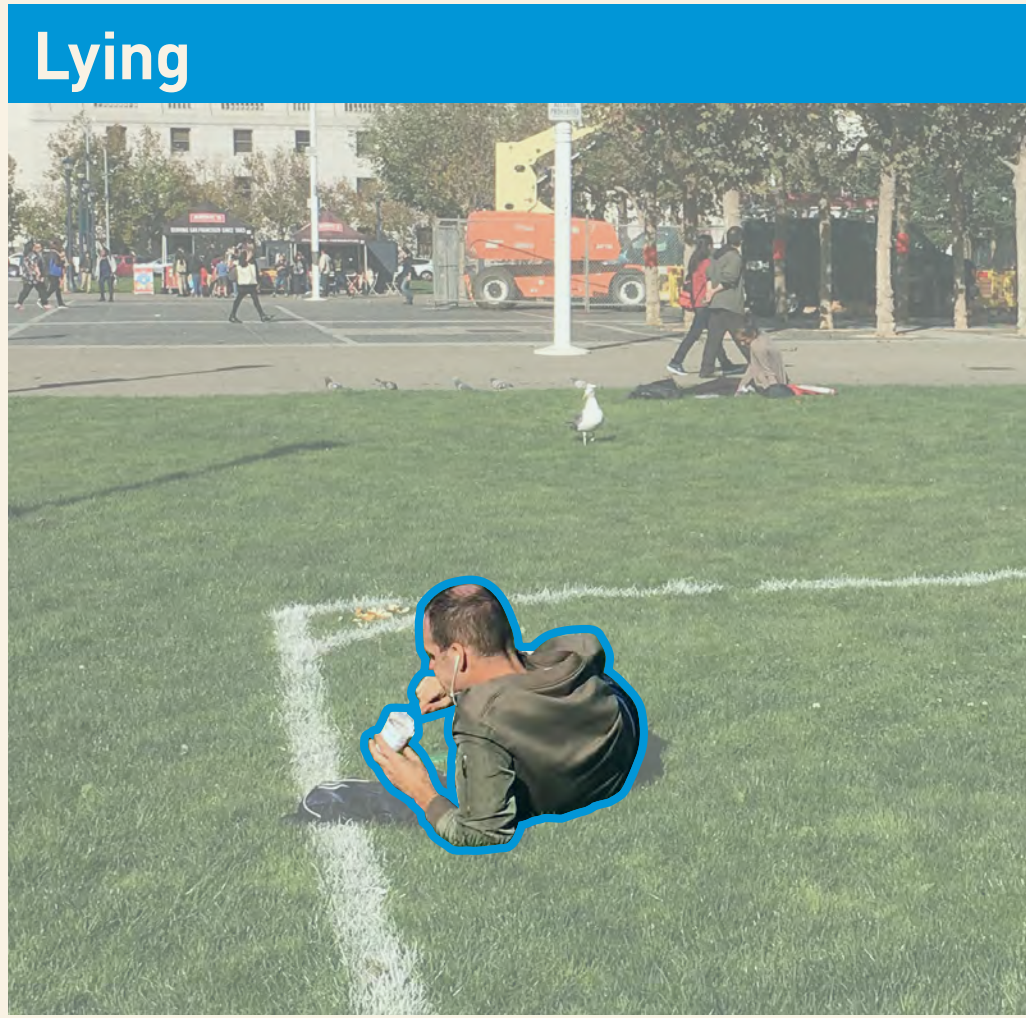




# Survey Methods

## People Spending Time

Measuring how the space invites different body postures

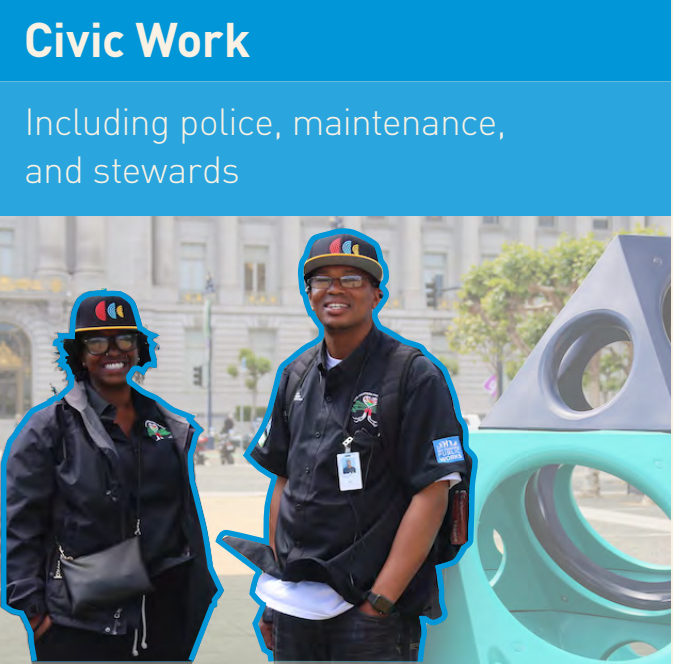
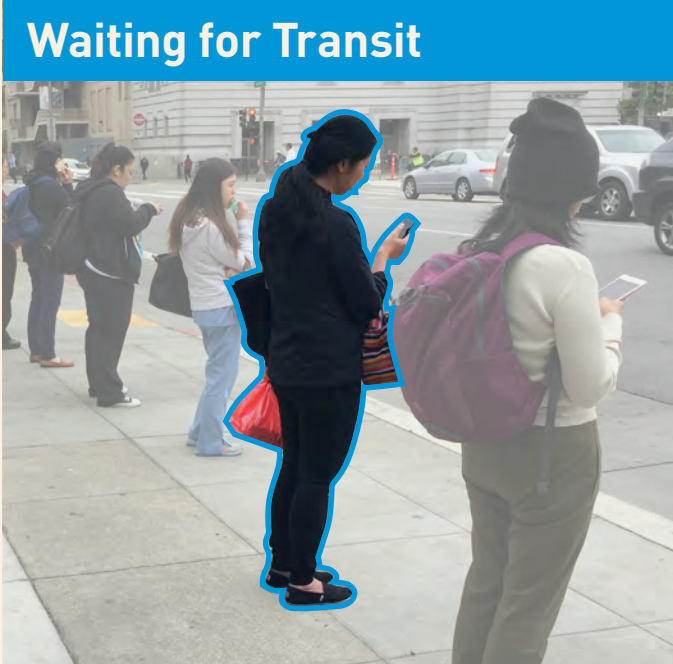
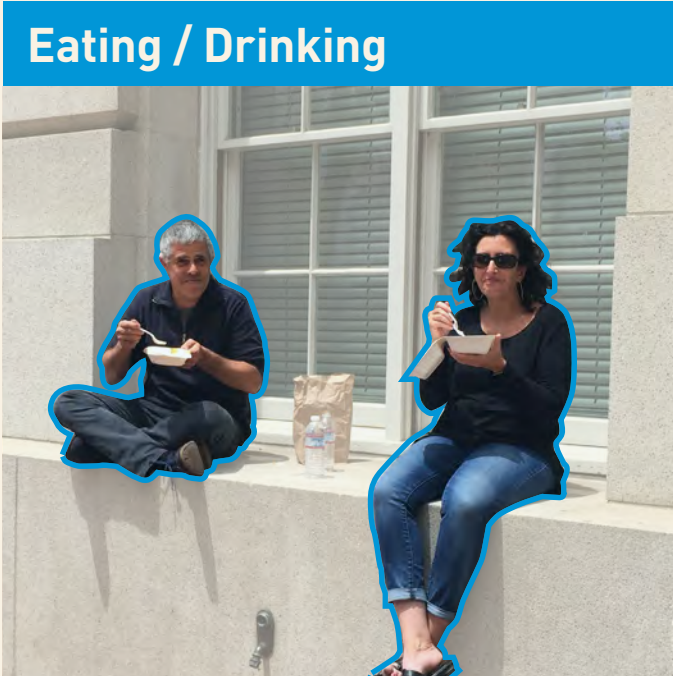




# Survey Methods

## People Spending Time

Measuring how the space invites different activities





# Measuring how the space invites activities like **sleeping, drug use, and encampments**


Working with SF Planning, Gehl created activity categories to capture less socially acceptable and illicit behaviors that are part of the area’s public life profile.

These activities were measured as a way of creating a common understanding of where, when, and how often these activities take place in the space.

Activity categories were standardized for ease of comparison, but do not capture all nuanced behavior observed in the spaces.

**Sleeping**

Sleeping can be positive, but it can also be a manifestation of larger societal issues.

A photograph of a person lying on their side on a concrete ledge outdoors. They are wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. A small blue outline highlights the person. The number 26 is in the bottom right corner.

**Aggressive**

Shouting, confrontation, or other aggressive behavior

**Panhandling**

Asking for money or donations

**Encamped**

Accompanied by numerous personal belongings

A photograph of a group of people on a city street. One person is sitting on the ground, and another is standing. There are many personal belongings, including a shopping cart, bags, and a bicycle, scattered around them. A small blue outline highlights the group. The number 26 is in the bottom right corner.

**Hard Drugs / Intoxicated**

Actively using drugs, or clearly incapacitated by them

A photograph of a person lying on their side on a concrete ledge outdoors. They are wearing a brown jacket and dark pants. A small blue outline highlights the person. The number 26 is in the bottom right corner.



# Survey Methods

## Intercept Survey

Asking questions about sentiment, habits of use, demographics, and other elements not captured with observation.

The Intercept Survey was taken by 419 people, from a total of 966 people who were approached.





# Survey Methods

## Public Space Analysis

To understand the relationship between public life and public space we performed the following analysis:

- 12 Urban Quality Criteria analysis
- Facade Quality Analysis
- Land use Analysis
- Neighborhood Amenity Mapping
- Public Space Amenity Mapping
- Test walks

