

Key Findings for Public Space

1 Civic Center is a powerful symbol of San Francisco

Striking architecture makes Civic Center a successful San Francisco Icon

Civic Center, like the Ferry Building, Twin Peaks, Lombard Street, Golden Gate Bridge, and other destinations, are central associations with the image of San Francisco.



Among the iconic Civic Centers and major squares of the world

Civic Center is among the great squares and civic spaces of the world, including: the Campo de Sienna in Italy, Trafalgar Square in London, Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, Place de la République and Place des Voges in Paris, Copenhagen's City Hall Plaza, Bryant Park in New York, and the Zócalo in Mexico City. Our Civic Center's iconic buildings deserve an iconic public realm.

Trafalgar Square, London



Zócalo, Mexico City



Bryant Park, NYC



Rådhuspladsen, Copenhagen City Hall



Place de la République, Paris



With a public life profile centered around the seasons of life

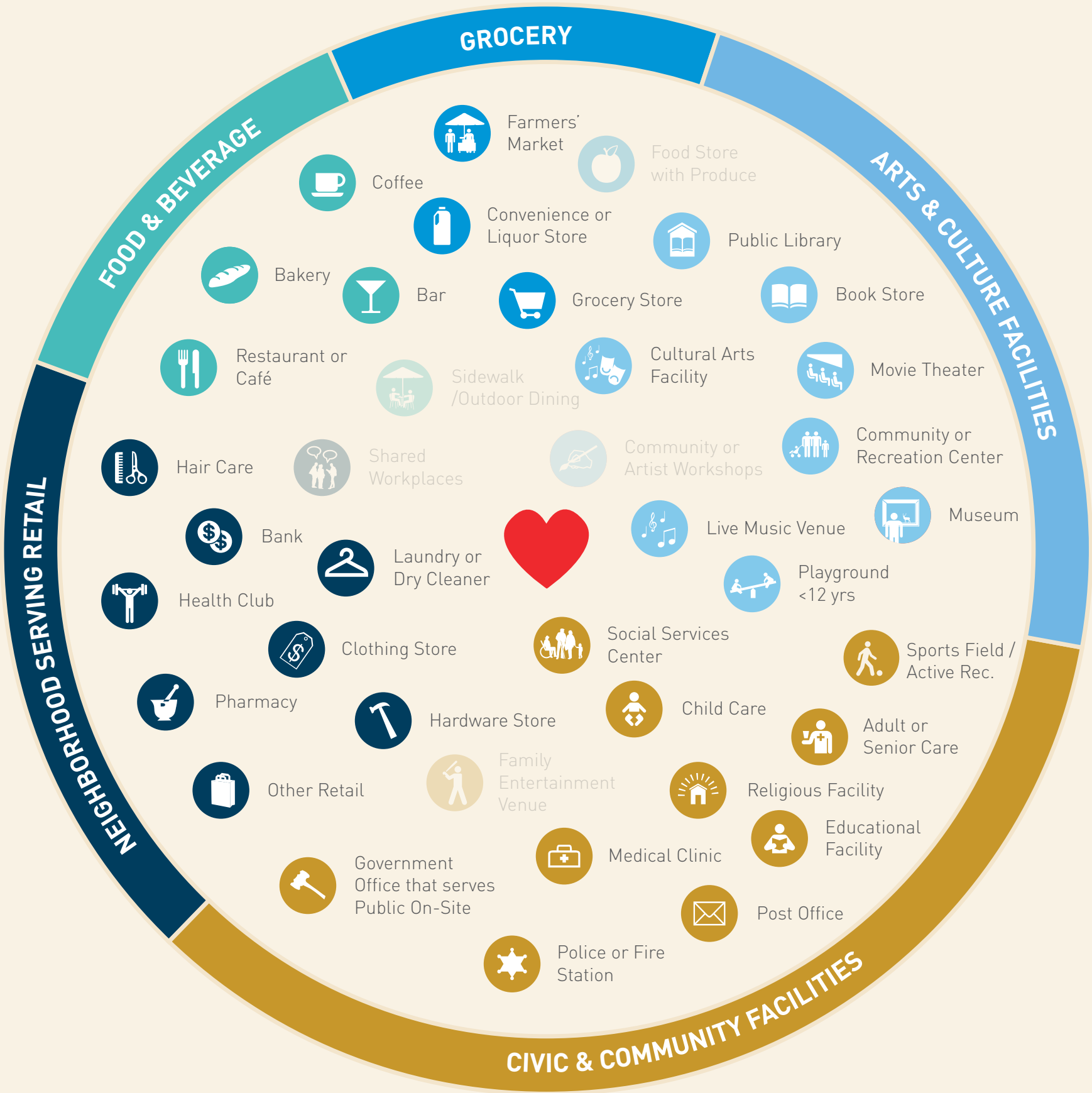
Civic Center hosts all rhythms of civic, public, and private life: weddings, war memorial, world-class arts, daily civic and neighborhood business, moments of civic togetherness and civic unrest. People move to San Francisco to celebrate the dignity and diversity of human life. It is the place where the passions of our city are manifested in public space.



2 There's no Center in Civic Center

Civic Center has many elements of a complete neighborhood...

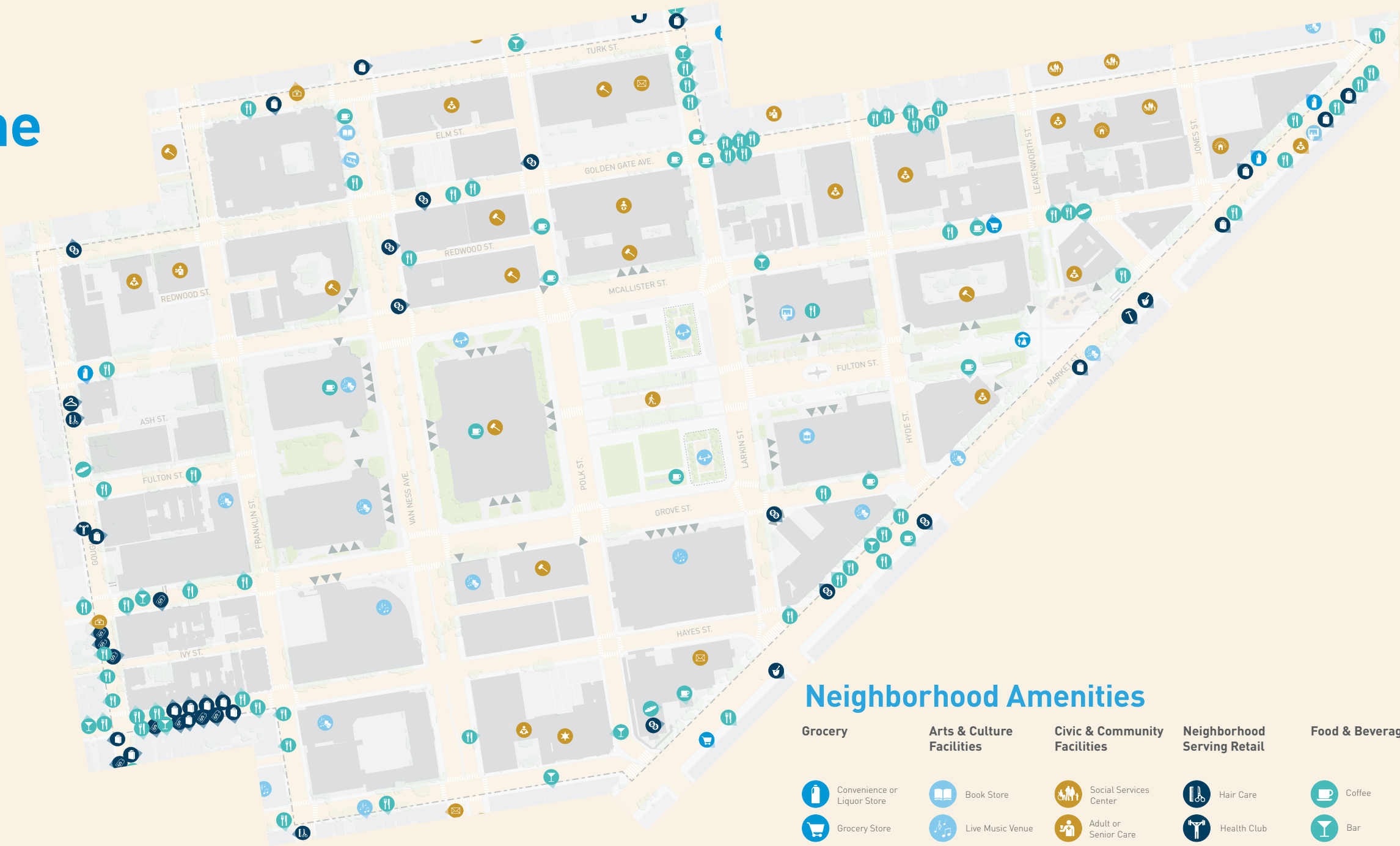
Ephemeral events and programming add life intermittently, but are the everyday activities of a neighborhood district supported by permanent amenities?



...But they are clustered on the periphery

Civic Center has most of the amenities of a complete neighborhood - but they are clustered on the periphery.

Many of the opening hours of these amenities cater strictly to office workers, not neighborhood patrons or visitors.

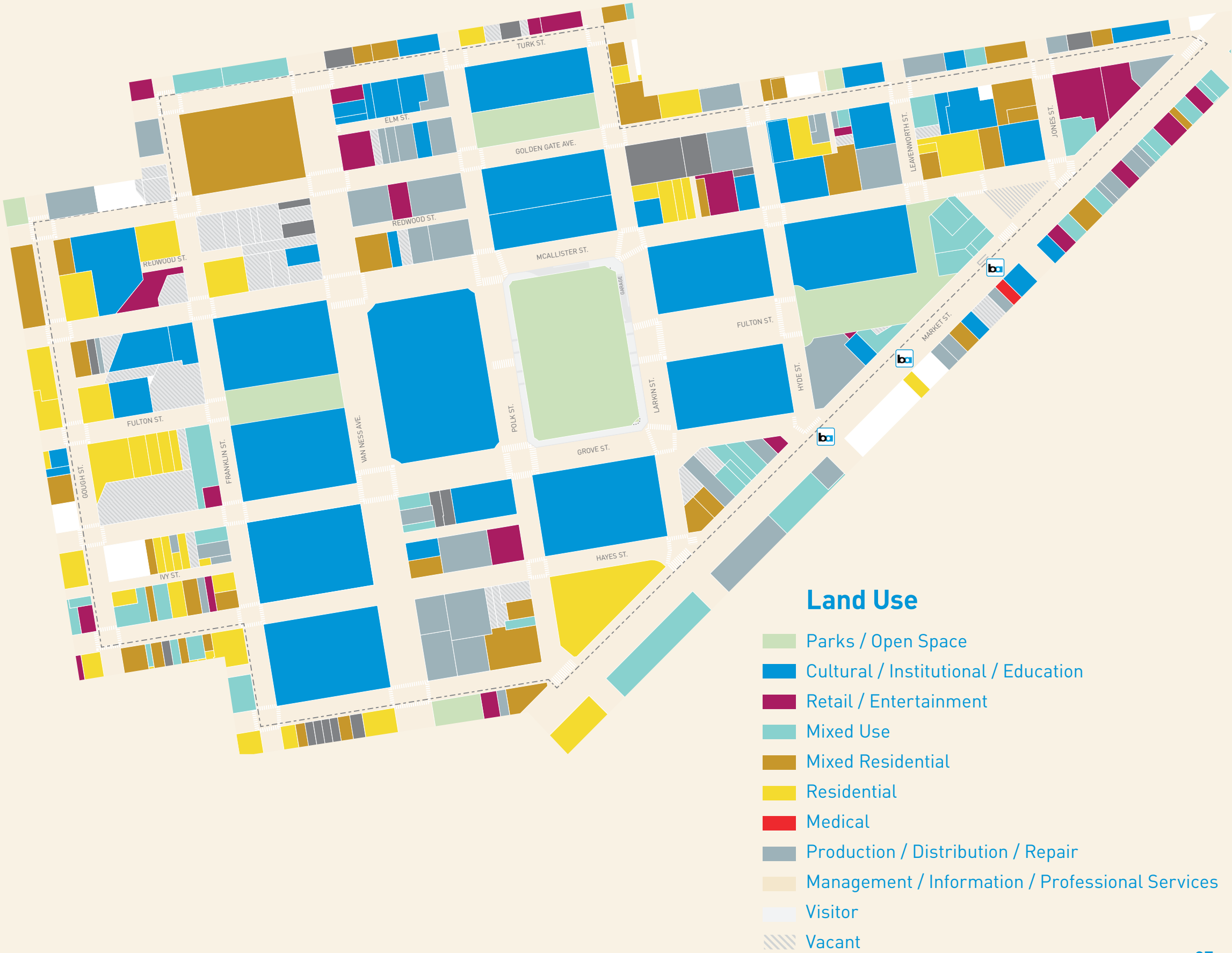


Neighborhood Amenities

Grocery	Arts & Culture Facilities	Civic & Community Facilities	Neighborhood Serving Retail	Food & Beverage
Convenience or Liquor Store	Book Store	Social Services Center	Hair Care	Coffee
Grocery Store	Live Music Venue	Adult or Senior Care	Health Club	Bar
	Movie Theater	Child Care	Bank	Bakery
	Cultural Arts Facility	Educational Facility	Laundry or Dry Cleaner	Restaurant or Café
	Museum	Religious Facility	Clothing Store	
		Government Office that serves Public On-Site	Pharmacy	
		Post Office	Hardware Store	
		Police or Fire Station	Other Retail	
		Medical Clinic		
		Sports		

Large Institutions at the core of Civic Center.

Civic Center is dominated by institutional uses



Mono-function buildings create a dull core

The pedestrian experience in Civic Center is defined by long, inactive façades with few openings and very little transparency. Vibrant and active façades are only experienced at the periphery.



● Vibrant

- Small units with many doors
- High transparency
- No vacant or passive units
- Lots of character
- Good articulation, materials and details

● Active

- Relatively small units
- Some transparency
- Few passive units
- Some articulation and detail

● Dull

- Large units with few doors
- Low transparency
- Some Passive Units
- Few or no details

● Inactive

- Large units with few doors
- Very little or no transparency
- Uniform facades with no details or nothing to look at
- Parking or vacant lot

Ground floors within the Civic Center District

Facade Quality Ranking:



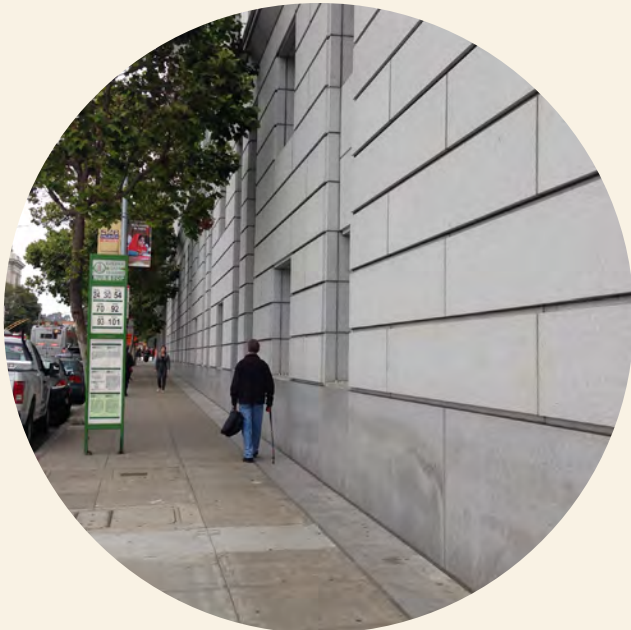
- **Vibrant**
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- **Active**
 - Relatively small units
 - Some transparency
 - Few passive units
 - Some articulation and detail



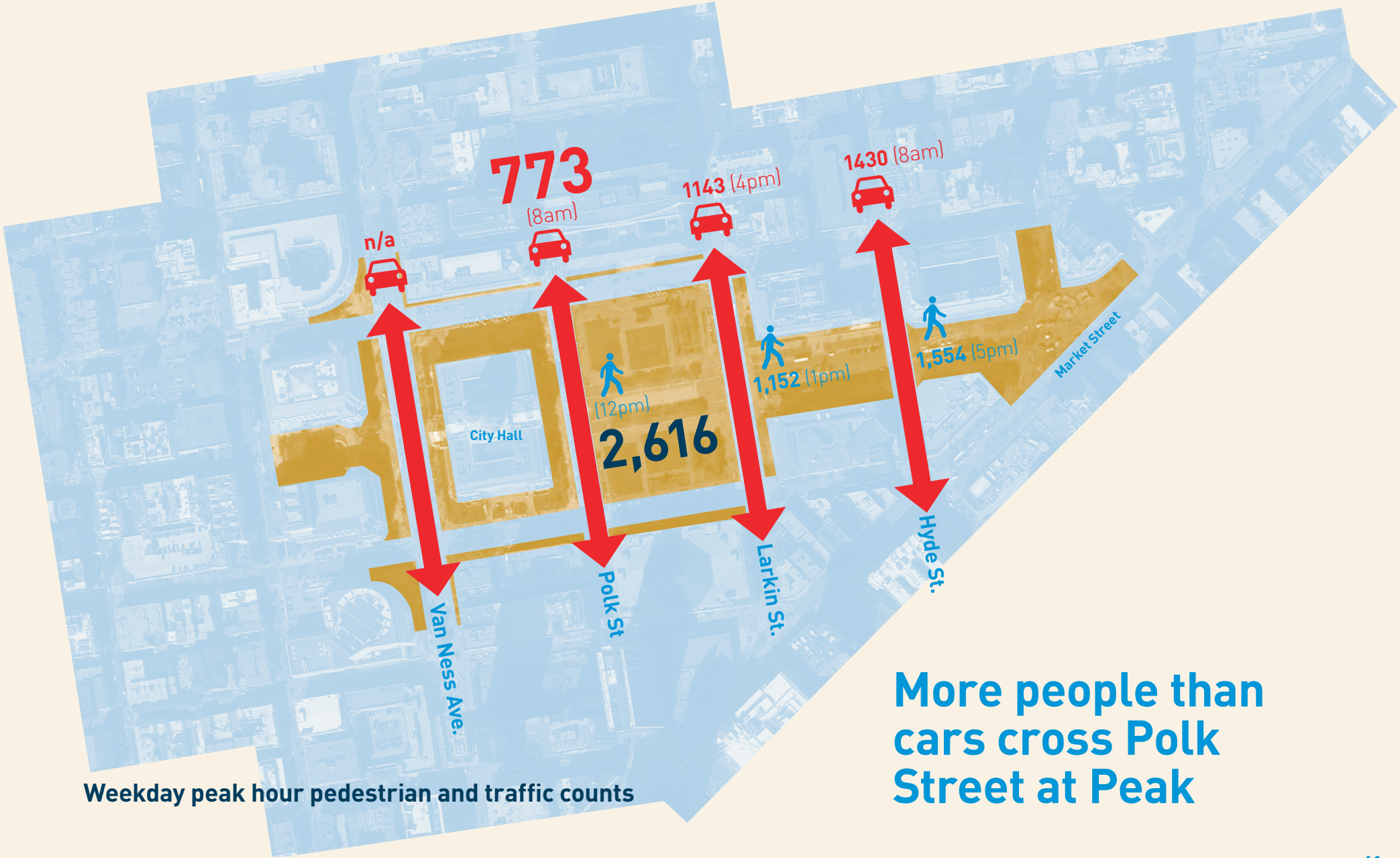
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- **Inactive**
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3 The civic axis is broken

The strong visual axis from Market Street to City Hall is disconnected by high-traffic streets and a dull public realm.



More people than cars cross Polk Street at Peak

4 Fragmented stewardship and governance

Disconnected public realm is mirrored in jurisdictional boundaries

Many jurisdictional boundaries overlap in Civic Center’s iconic public spaces. Split by two police districts, two business improvement districts, and other management and programming entities, the only entity that encompasses all of The Commons is the Downtown Streets Team.

Map of stewardship boundaries



5 Look but don't touch: the space is unfriendly to the human scale

Missing the basics

The 12 Urban Quality Criteria are a way to discuss a hierarchy of needs in a space. Without basic protection from cars, noise, rain, and wind, people will avoid spending time in a space. Without elements that make walking, standing, sitting, seeing, and conversing comfortable, a place won't invite people to spend time there. Finally, a great place distinguishes itself by including elements that invite people to be active and make use of the positive aspects of microclimate and human scale.

This assessment is a snapshot in time based on existing conditions. While improvements are on the way, some fundamental challenges exist.

Scale



12 Urban Quality Criteria in Civic Center

Protection

Protection against traffic & crashes — feeling safe

Protection against crime & violence — feeling secure

Protection against unpleasant sensory experiences

Comfort

Opportunities to walk/cycle

Opportunities to stop & stay

Opportunities to sit
movable tables + chairs not present during study

Opportunities to see

Opportunities to talk & listen

Opportunities for play & exercise
Playgrounds not open during study

Enjoyment

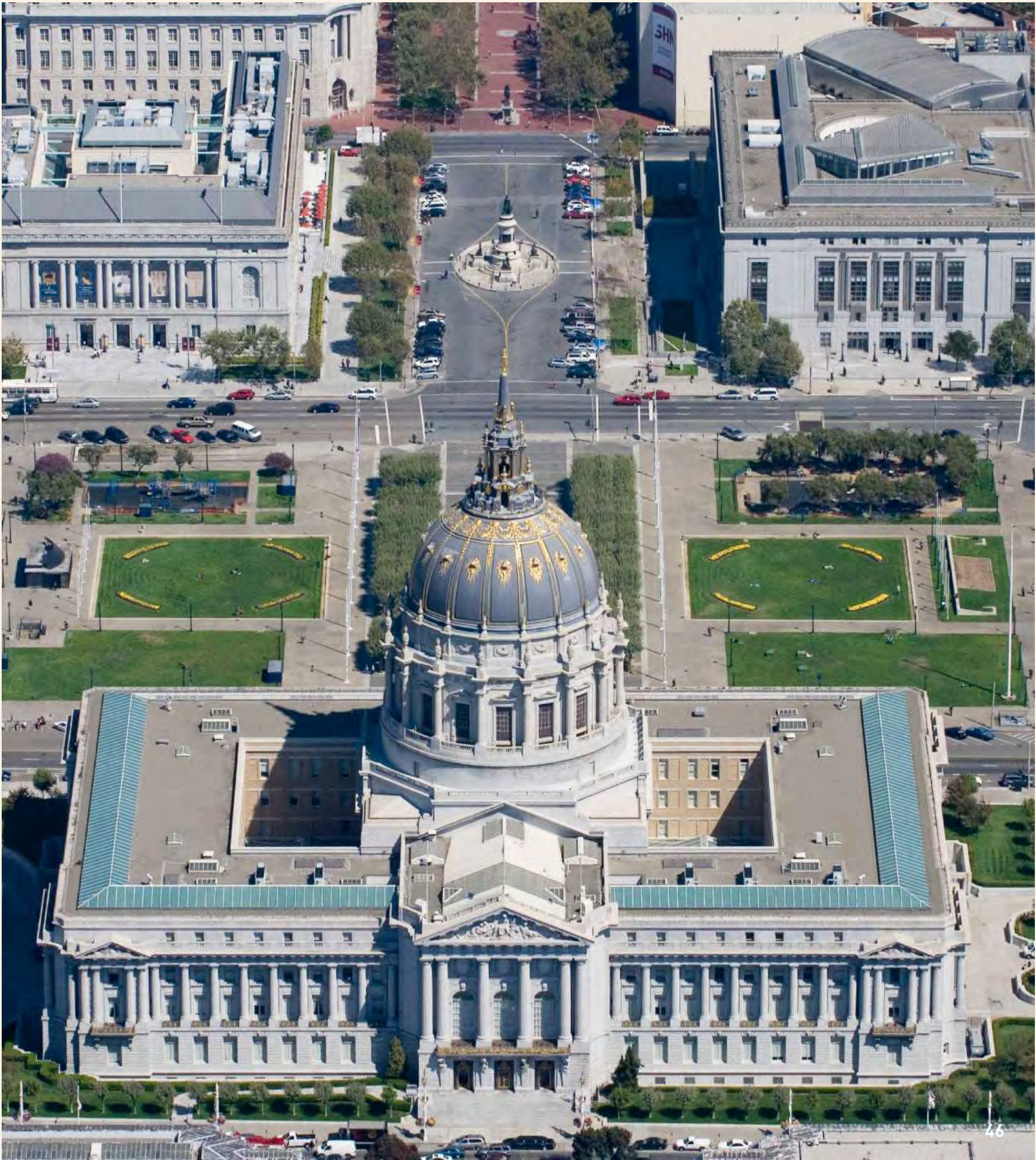
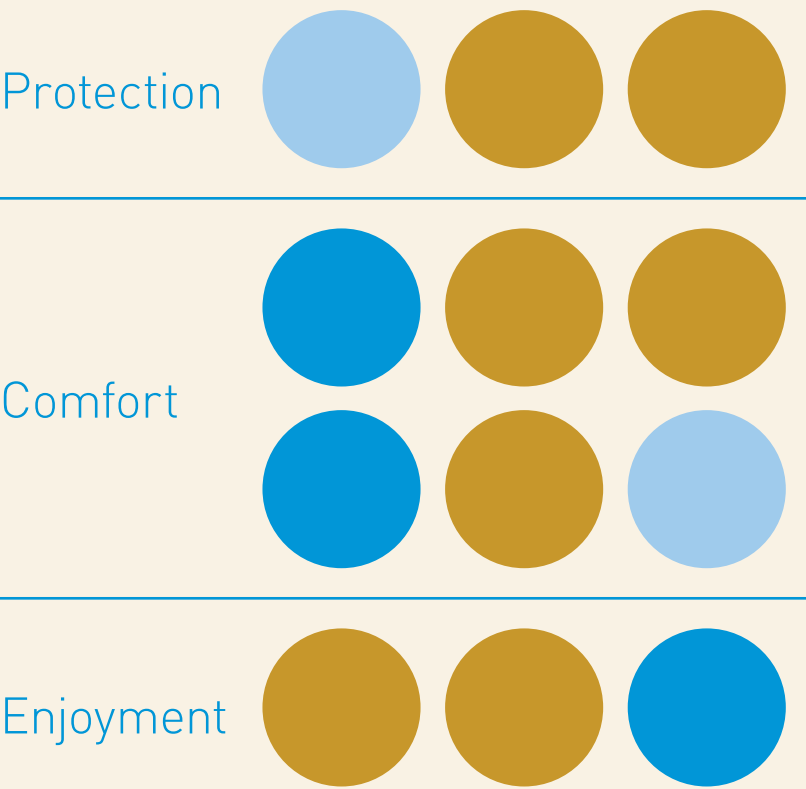
Dimensioned at human scale

Opportunities to enjoy the positive aspects of climate

Aesthetic qualities + positive sensory experience

Civic Center

We analyzed the Civic Center district as a whole according to the 12 Urban Quality Criteria. Qualities of seeing and looking are strong in Civic Center, as is aesthetic beauty. But it is falling short on fundamental qualities that make a space inviting for people.



Protection

Without basic protection from cars, noise, rain, and wind, people will avoid spending time in a space. Protection from these things is mandatory for a place to be used.



Great view, but not safe to stand in the street



Some places are very protected



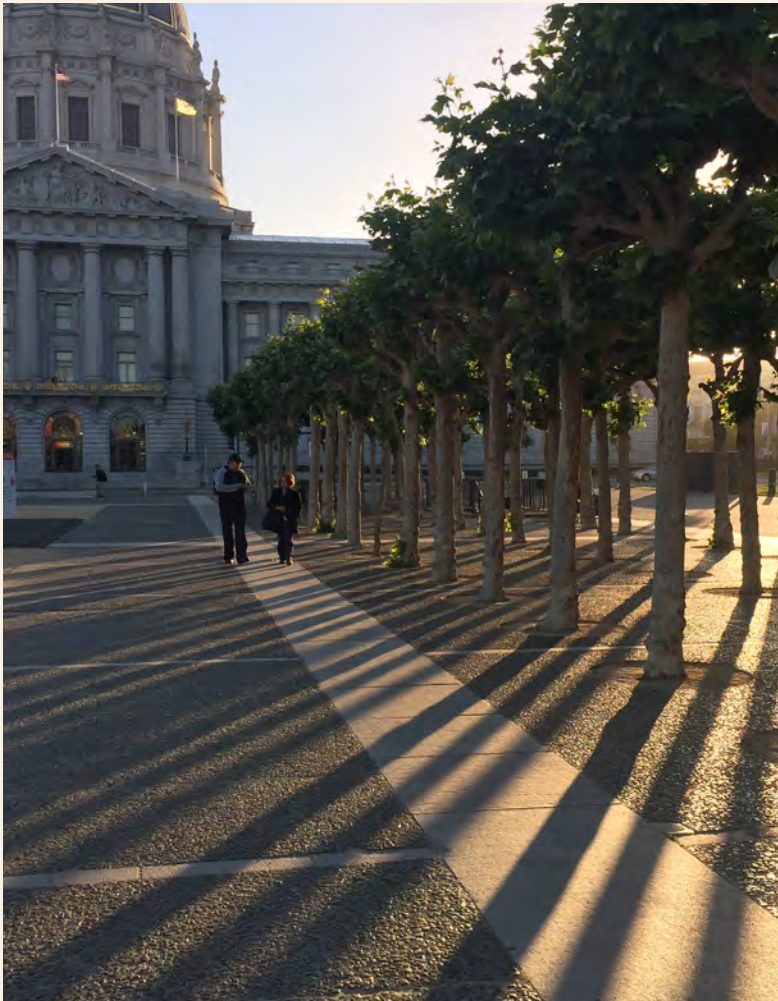
I've heard of a bulb-out but never a bulb-in...

Comfort

Without elements that make walking, standing, sitting, seeing, and conversing comfortable, a place does not invite people to spend time there.



Playgrounds were under construction during this study. Assessment based on interim design



Enjoyment

A great place distinguishes itself from a good place by including elements that invite people to be active and make use of the positive aspects of microclimate and human scale.



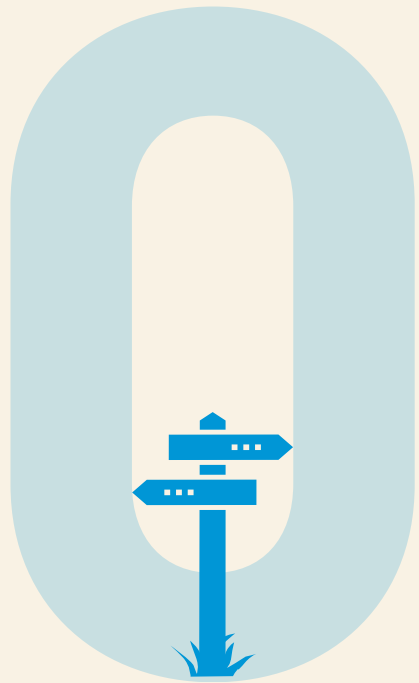
Little to delight the 5 senses

Successful public spaces appeal to all the senses - not only the delight of beautiful architecture, but also touch, smell, and taste.

At the time of this survey, there were few positive invitations to delight the senses in Civic Center’s 730,000 square feet of public open space. The Civic Center Commons Initiative is making things better. Movable tables and chairs, a permanent kiosk, and two new world-class playgrounds are a step in the right direction, but there is still much to do.



Drinking Fountains



Wayfinding



Chairs/benches

movable tables + chairs
not present during study



Restrooms



Play Areas

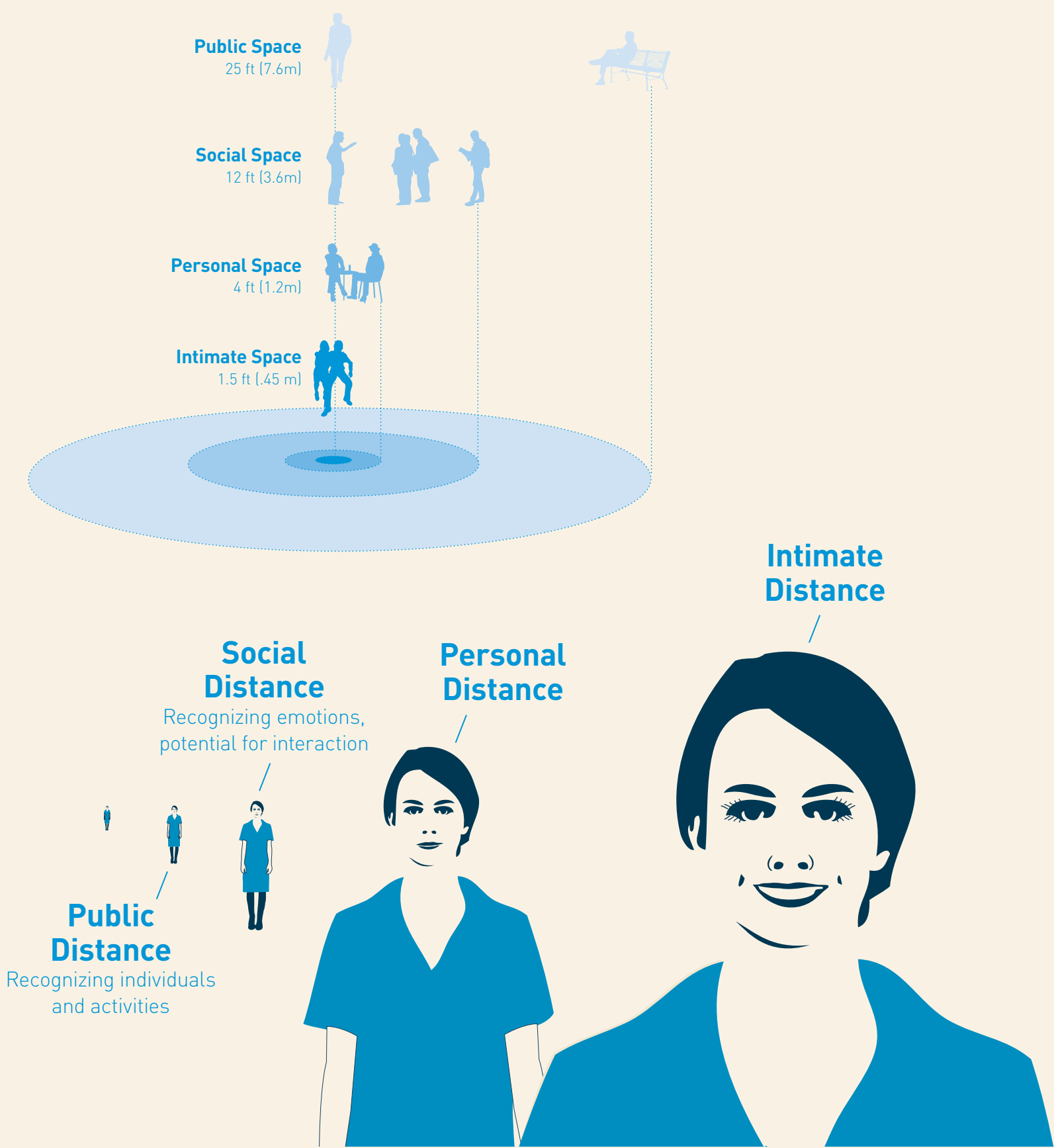


Public Art

Scale comparisons

Humans feel more safe when we can recognize other people and their emotions.

The following scale comparisons demonstrate public space designs that function both as a civic gathering place as well as a place that honors the human scale.

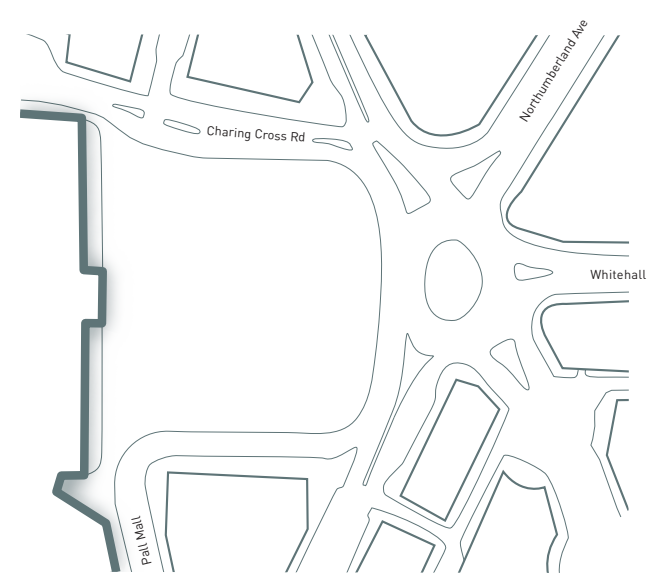


Civic Center

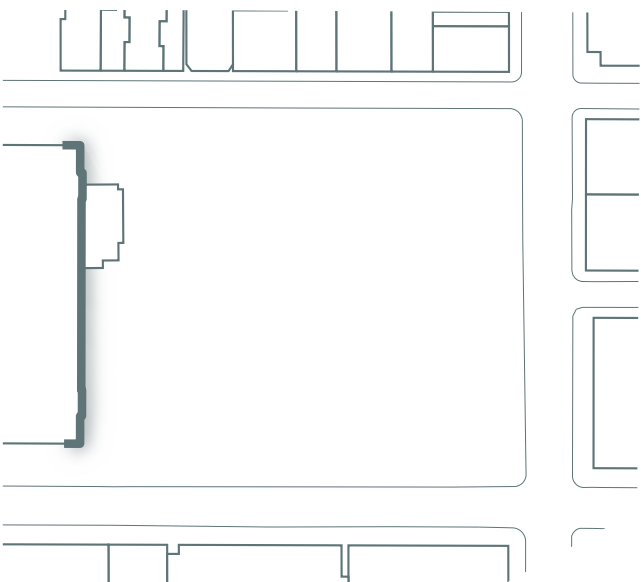


Civic Center Plaza is bigger than some of the world's most successful large public spaces

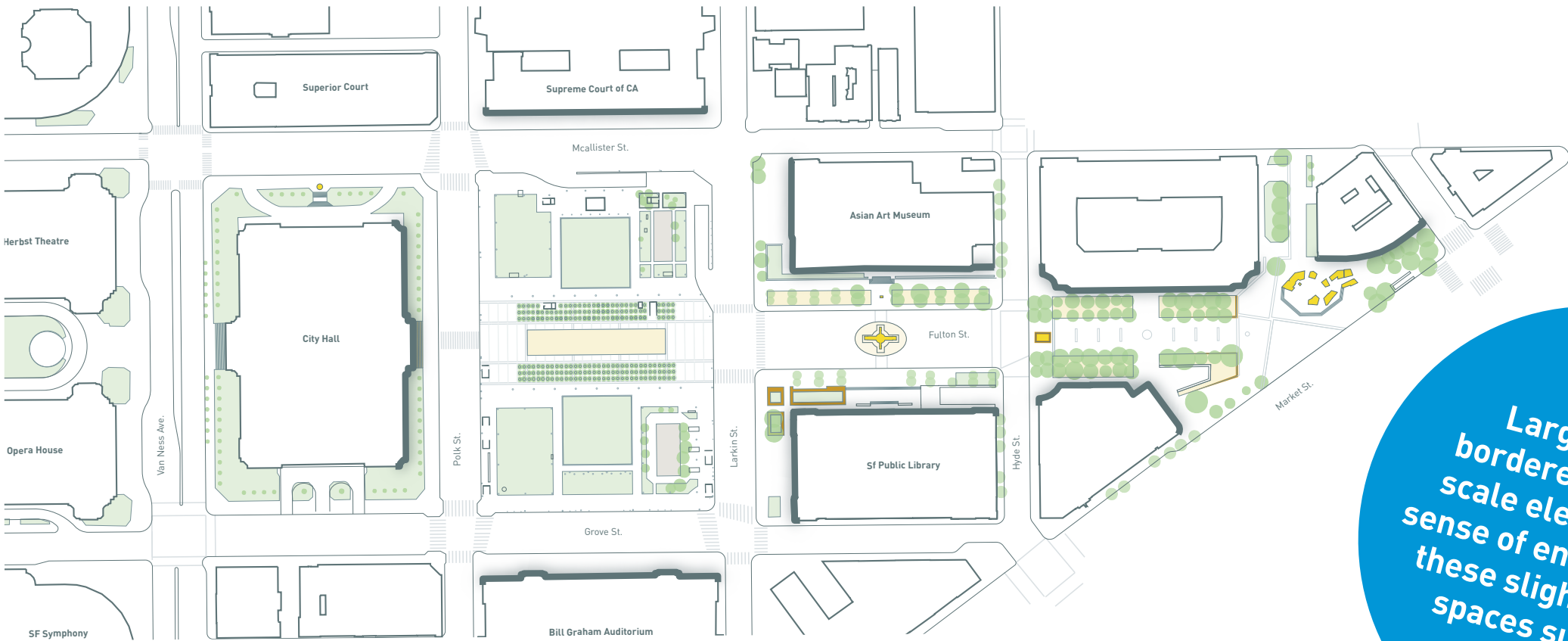
Trafalgar Square



Bryant Park

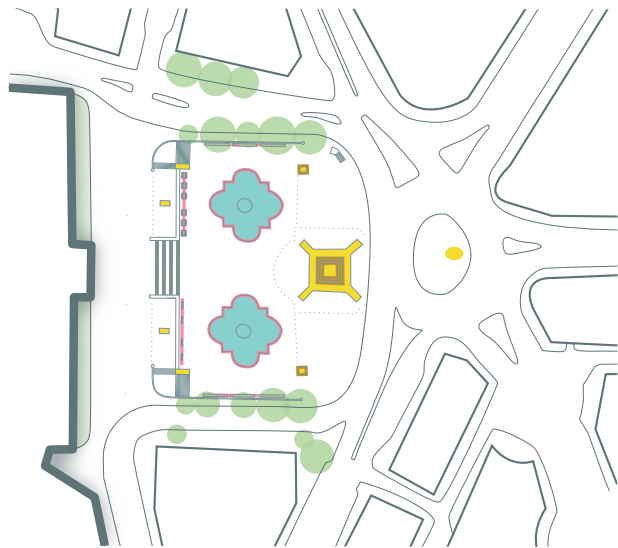


Civic Center

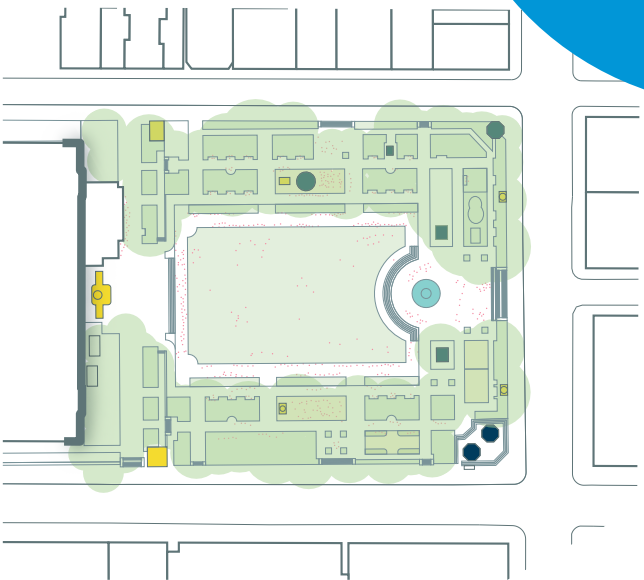


Large features bordered by human-scale elements and a sense of enclosure make these slightly smaller spaces successful

Trafalgar Square

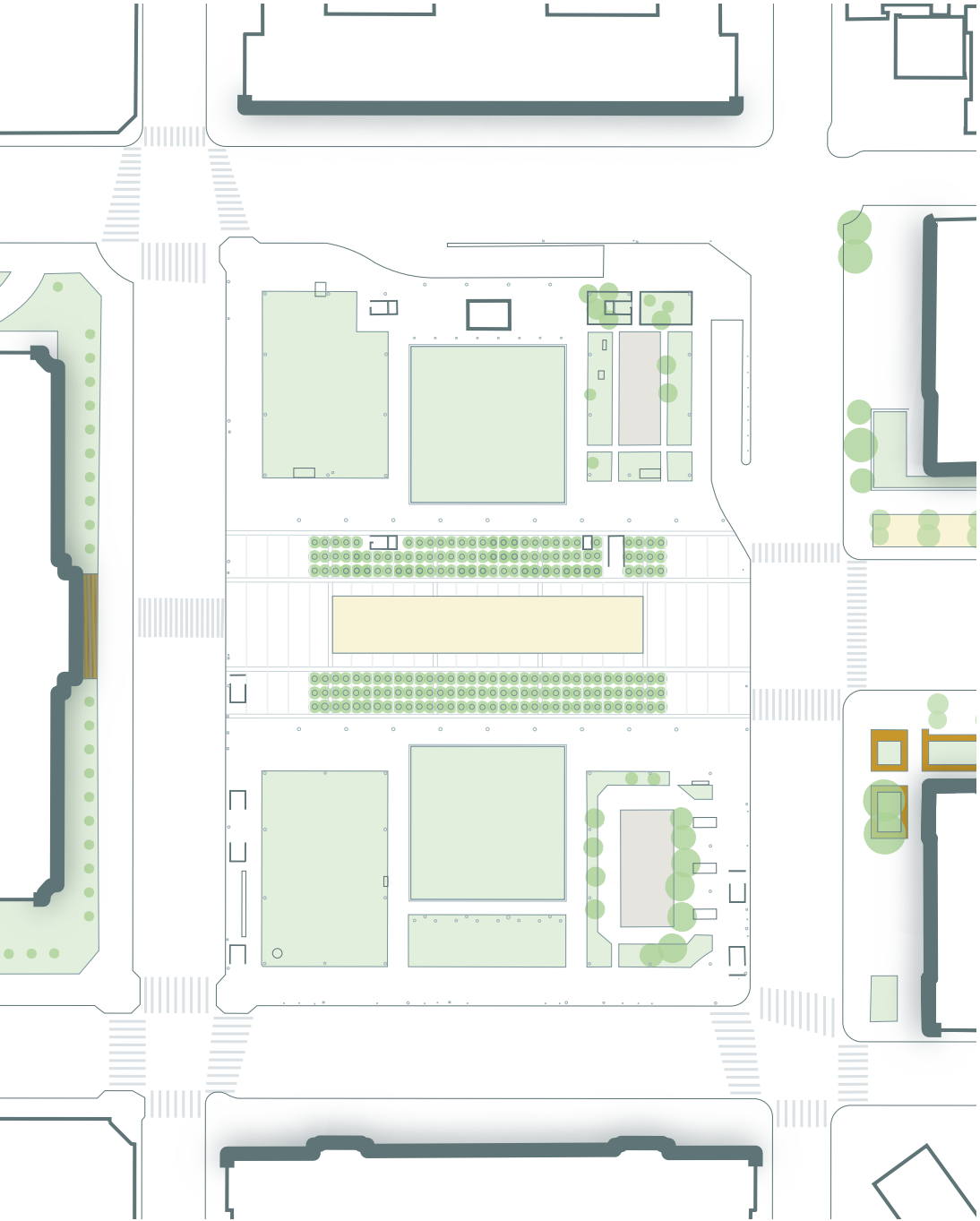


Bryant Park



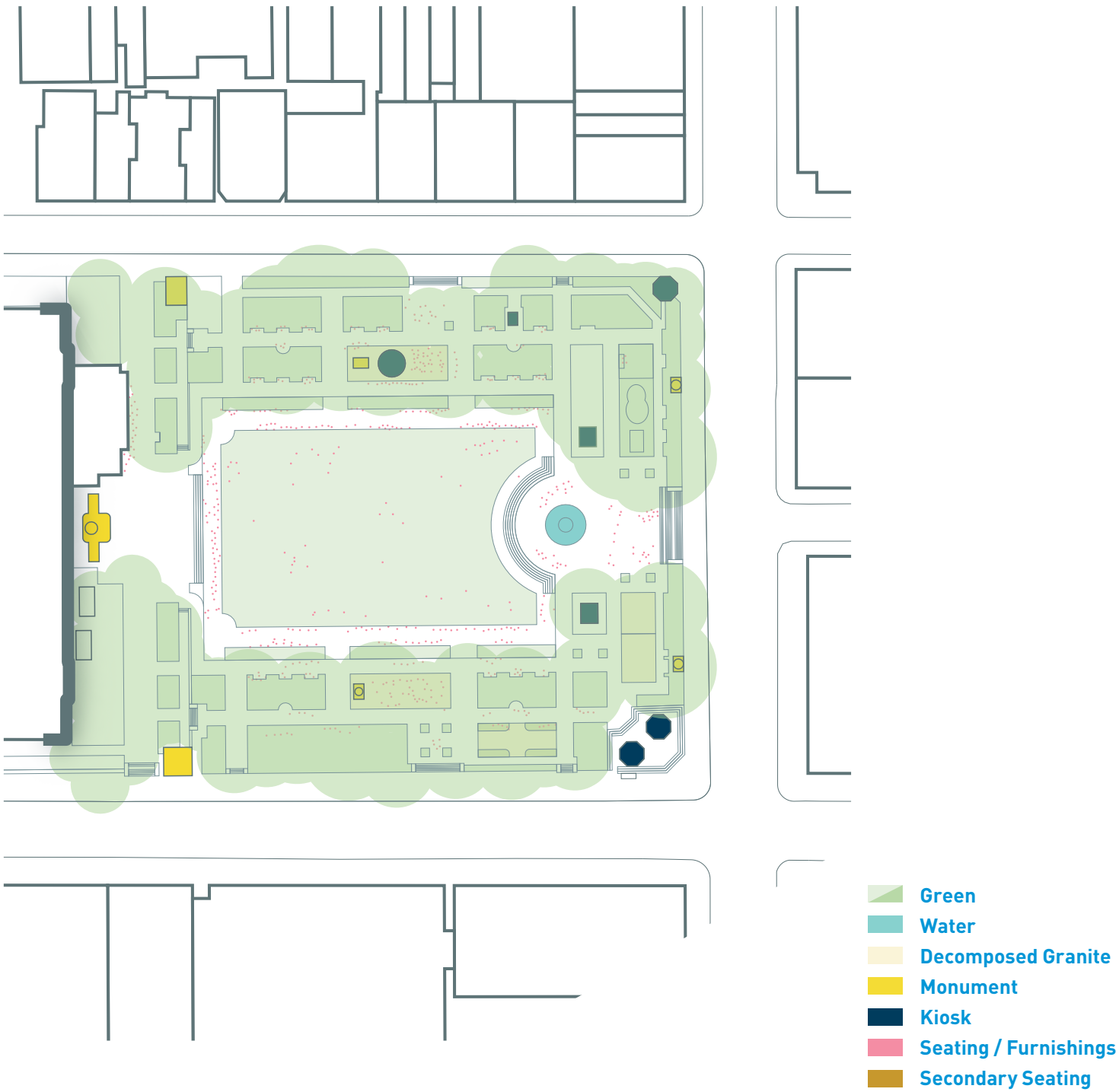
Civic Center Plaza

Vast open spaces that lack hierarchy and enclosure



Bryant Park

A primary open space framed by a strong axis and human-scale “rooms”



Bryant Park

This space struggled with issues like drug use that currently challenge Civic Center. Through design, programming, and a robust financing model, Bryant Park is now a beloved place.

It succeeds in hosting a wide variety of activities, from movie nights to a cafe to a lending library to games, by subdividing the exterior of the park into human-scale rooms, framing a central lawn.



6 The limited ability of the Beaux-Arts plan to support public life has been eroded over time

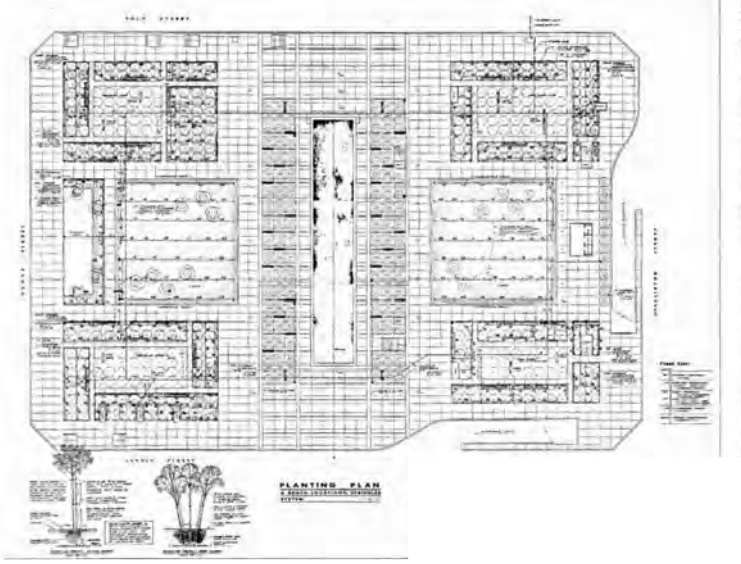
The Beaux-Arts plan is focused around grand architecture, large public spaces, and clustering institutional uses.

This squeezes out the life of the city by limiting active building edges, everyday retail and commerce, and informal cultural uses.

Over time, even human-scale elements of this design such as planting, seating, water features and monuments have been removed, creating a public realm that only invites people to pass through, except during large, infrequent events.



1942*



1960 plan*

*source: Civic Center Historic District Cultural Landscape Inventory, 2014



1938 aerial*



Today



Open space + building footprints in Civic Center highlights large public spaces

Public Space Key Findings

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