

Embarcadero Boulevard

A City Reunited with its Waterfront
San Francisco, California, United States
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Above: PreserveNet
Below: kateandderek.com



History of the Embarcadero Freeway

In the name of modernization and post-war progress, the Embarcadero Freeway—formerly known as Route 480—was a part of a larger transportation plan to crisscross San Francisco with a network of freeways. Construction of the Embarcadero Freeway began in 1953, and was originally intended to directly connect the Golden Gate Bridge to the Bay Bridge. Reacting to the unsightly intrusion of freeways into their neighborhoods and fragmentation of the urban fabric these structures were causing, residents of San Francisco protested during what is now referred to as the “Freeway Revolts” (PreserveNet, n.d.). Demonstrations and petitions eventually gathered enough momentum to convince the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to cancel the network and curtail the highway projects already underway, which included the Embarcadero Freeway. The sudden halt was evident in the “stub” road west of the structure’s Broadway off-ramp, and at a total length of 1.2 miles, the freeway never came close to connecting the Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge, as originally planned.

“[The Embarcadero Freeway] cut off the downtown from the water that gave birth to it, and it left the iconic Ferry Building -- a statuesque survivor of the 1906 earthquake -- stranded behind a dark wall of car exhaust and noise.”

– John King

A waterfront, cloaked in concrete...



Chronicle File



Chronicle File



Chronicle / Deanne Fitzmaurice

Photo: SF Chronicle

The Embarcadero Freeway Structure

Detested by the people, the Embarcadero Freeway physically cut the city's northern waterfront off from the rest of the city, and subsequent architecture followed suit: buildings "turned their backs" (Eckerson, 2006) to the freeway and the waterfront beyond. The structure itself stood a massive 70 feet high and 52 feet wide, and almost incomprehensibly close to the front of the Ferry Building.

Dealing with the Embarcadero Freeway

Ironically, proposals to remove the Embarcadero Freeway structure—including one proposal in 1986 to replace the structure with bicycle and pedestrian paths, a streetcar line and open space—were put before and rejected by San Francisco voters three times. In addition to well-publicized fears over surface street gridlock, the people had become so wary of government ideas as a result of the Embarcadero Freeway structure in the first place, that they chose to support the devil they knew, rather than give the government a chance to make a bad situation even worse.



Street map: Google maps

Loma Prieta Earthquake

On October 17, 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake rocked the Bay Area, and the Embarcadero Freeway structure was critically damaged. The magnitude 7.1 temblor caused extensive damage to other raised highway structures as well, most famously the Cypress Street Viaduct in Oakland, which collapsed entirely, killing 42 people. Following the earthquake, the Embarcadero Freeway was permanently closed to traffic, essentially prompting a simulation of the structure's removal. As traffic patterns appeared to self-correct, the argument to remove the freeway and replace it with an elegant waterfront road and paths gained traction politically. The most vocal opponent were Chinatown merchants who, fearing loss of business, supported a proposal to rebuild the freeway. A long-time supporter of tearing the structure down, Mayor Art Agnos pushed the removal plan through, and in 1991 demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway was underway.



Chronicle / Vince Maggiora

After the Earthquake

In 1997, the Port of San Francisco adopted the Waterfront Land Use Plan, defining and guiding development for the Embarcadero waterfront area including subareas around Fisherman's Wharf, the Ferry Building, and South Beach/China Basin (ballpark area). In 1998, there was brief discussion of constructing a cut-and-cover tunnel where the structure had stood, but the plan was shelved due to lack of funding.

ROMA Design Group, headed by Boris Dramov, had already been working for the City and County of San Francisco's Northeastern Waterfront Plan and was selected to design the Embarcadero Plaza and the Ferry Terminal renovation.

"The earthquake not only damaged the overhead Embarcadero Freeway and made its removal necessary, but it also facilitated a **greatly enhanced ferry service** because of the damaged Bay Bridge. It soon became evident that we could actually transfer some trips from cars to ferries, and the idea of transforming the Ferry Building into a transportation terminal took on new meaning, leading to the Embarcadero Plaza and the Ferry Terminal projects.

"While these projects focus on the functional aspects of ferry operation and passenger transfer to other modes of transportation, it was equally important to create an environment where people choose to ride the ferry. I would like to emphasize that, **'Transit must be the system of choice, not the system of last resort.'**" (emphasis added)

-- Boris Dramov,
ROMA Design Group

Photo: SF Chronicle

Take a walk today on the 2 1/2-mile promenade between Fisherman's Wharf on believe that an elevated freeway ever scarred the open air. - John King

The Embarcadero Comes to Life

The Waterfront Landuse Plan

As mentioned, the Waterfront Plan was a product of a lengthy, public and multi-stake holder planning process. The Plan provides policy and guidance for public and private investment along the waterfront including public access and open space, Port maritime industries, and opportunities for public/private investment. It also provides detailed guidance through the Waterfront Design and Access Element taking into account the historic character, diverse user group access, etc.

Under the main vision of "Reuniting the City with its Waterfront," the seven major goals of the plan are to provide:

A working waterfront

A revitalized port

A diversity of activities and people

Access to and along the waterfront

An evolving waterfront, mindful of its past and present

Urban design worthy of the waterfront setting

Economic access that reflects the diversity of san Francisco

Only ten years later, the Embarcadero is thriving local and tourist destination with key developments completed and many in the works despite the economic downfall.

Major Design and Development Features

The major design feature of the waterfront is a multi-use boulevard lined with palm trees and a 25-foot-wide pedestrian promenade. The boulevard connects the south waterfront, historically with only maritime and industrial uses, to the northeast which was long populated with disconnected tourist (only) attractions. Historic trolleys now run between major sites. Key new anchor points along the boulevard, south to north, include:

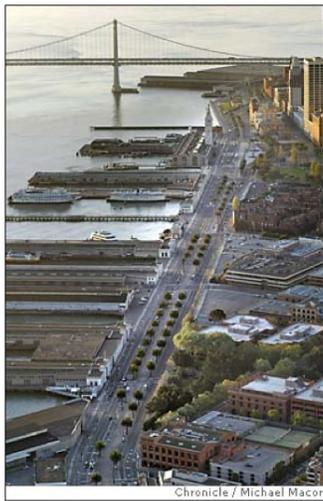
South Beach - developed as an entire new neighborhood, with housing, retail, and a new baseball field for the San Francisco Giants

Rincon Hill - a new neighborhood (SOMA – South of Market), with a major public art feature along the waterfront

The Gap Headquarters - an international retail business with strong San Francisco home identity

The Ferry Building - a revitalized commuter ferry port and center for gourmet and local food and a major farmer's market.

Historic Piers 1, 11/2, 3, and 5 - Refurbished and developed for office and retail use.



Above: Aerial view looking south of connecting boulevard lined with palm trees.

Below: The Ferry Market tower framed by one of the large public art works along the waterfront.

Photos: Michael Macor, San Francisco Chronicle

the north and China Basin on the south, and it's hard to

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While the status map to the left is from 2004, the key features along the site are well marked and described. Since then, Piers 1 1/2, 3 and 5 have been completed (see photo below) and movement has been made on some of those on the drawing boards.

Graphic: San Francisco Chronicle

FINISHED PROJECTS

1 SBC PARK: The \$357 million home of the San Francisco Giants opened in 2000 with a new sort of public amenity: a walkway along McCovey Cove that allows glimpses of the action through part of the right-field fence.

2 GAP TOWER: This 15-story tower clad in brick and limestone opened in 2001 as headquarters for the Gap clothing chain. A portion of the site was once covered by ramps leading to the Embarcadero Freeway.

3 RINCON PARK: A two-acre open space built in conjunction with Gap headquarters across the street opened last year. It includes one of city's largest sculptures, a fiberglass bow-and-arrow, and two restaurant sites.

4 HOTEL VITALE: Joie de Vivre Hospitality, a local boutique hotel operator, will manage this new eight-story, 199-room hotel when it opens next spring on what formerly was a bus storage yard.

5 FERRY BUILDING: The venerable landmark reopened last year after a \$100 million makeover that placed food-oriented shops at ground level, offices above and a public walkway along the bay.

6 PIER 1: A \$40 million renovation completed in 2001 turned this former warehouse into office space. The lobby includes a historic display about the waterfront.

7 PIER 45: The Port of San Francisco in 1994 used \$7.6 million in earthquake repair funds as the basis for a \$13.6 million upgrade for the two waterside sheds that house the city's main fish processing facilities.

2 BRANNAN STREET WHARF: Construction is set to begin next fall on a \$15 million, two-acre grassy area that will protrude into the bay. Part of the funding will come from the sales of the Pier 30-32 condominiums.

4 INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF WOMEN: A historic pier underneath Bay Bridge has been reserved for a nonprofit organization that hopes to open a museum in 2008 — but first must raise \$120 million.

11 HOTEL: Inland lots on Broadway at the Embarcadero are the site of a proposed six-story hotel with roughly 260 rooms and a three-story parking garage. The developer is Stanford Hospitality. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2006.

12 PIERS 27-31: The port in 2001 selected developer Mills Corp. to turn a 19-acre site into a recreation-focused project with three acres of public open space, but Mills' emphasis on office and retail space has brought neighborhood opposition.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

3 Pier 30-32: The 22-story residential tower inland should open by the spring of 2006. The largest piece of the project sits across the street, where plans call for the 13-acre pier to be transformed into a cruise terminal accompanied by commercial space. Construction on the terminal isn't likely to start before 2007, however.

10 PIERS 1 1/2, 3 and 5: Three historic bulkhead buildings are being renovated for office space and restaurants, with public walkways and a boat dock. The target opening date is spring 2006.

The historic piers, below, are examples of the striking architecture that line the waterside of the grand boulevard. The Farmer's Market at the Ferry Market building on Saturdays is now considered a gourmand's paradise, attracting locals from the entire Bay Area.



Image: Center of Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture



Photo: San Francisco Waterfront Partners LLC

*"The freeway that brooded over the Embarcadero with
In its place is a sweep of air, f*

Success and Critique

If economics alone are an indicator of success, data demonstrates something to celebrate. Housing in the area has increased by 51%, jobs have increased by 23% (Congress for New Urbanism), and property values adjacent to the area have risen by 300% (The Preservation Institute).

As someone who lived in the Bay Area for six years, one of the authors of this study (Ginger Daniel) can attest to the vibrancy, multi-use functioning and diverse sets of users the area attracts. All day long the area, particularly around the Ferry Market building, is teeming with locals and tourists alike, taking in the views, using the commuter ferries, and shopping and eating with friends and co-workers. On game days, the southern end is inundated with sports fans and ticket scalpers. The stretch north of the Ferry Market towards Fisherman's Wharf is still less developed, but on temperate and sunny days, tourists and local exercisers still walk the divide and enjoy the dramatic views. Many of the renovated terminals between these two points are being filled with local businesses, vendors, cafes and restaurants, although the recession has slowed some of this development slightly.

Mark Hinsaw, the director of urban design of LMN architects in Seattle, critiqued the space in 2003 with an eye to the extreme width of the boulevard and the backwards facing buildings particularly in the less developed stretch mentioned above, making it feel almost suburban in its expression. Arguably some of this disconnect has been bridged by additional development since the writing of his critique. However, acknowledging the challenge of needing to "turn a building around" and to attempt to activate the backsides of these buildings is critical to making the waterfront a coherent and connecting space, both to the waterfront and to the neighborhoods it has the potential to knit.

A Tale of Two Cities and Their Double D

SEATTLE

1953: Alaskan Way Viaduct is completed.

SAN FRANCISCO

1948: San Francisco's "Trafficways Plan" proposes a network of freeways throughout the city.

1959: Embarcadero Freeway opens. The SF Board of Supervisors cancels seven of the remaining ten freeways put forth by the "Trafficways Plan".

1958: Embarcadero Freeway under construction, citizens revolt against future freeway expansion.

1986
plan
Emb

In all the grace of a double decked prison wall is finally gone. Fog, October sunlight, piers ships and the silver Bay Bridge.”
 - Carl Nolte

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Reflections for Seattle

The timeline and photo below demonstrate the striking similarities of the politics, timelines, and geoseismic realities of the Seattle and San Francisco waterfronts.



The Viaduct chokes the Seattle waterfront.
 Photo: People’s Waterfront Coalition

While Seattle’s topography presents additional challenges to connecting adjacent neighborhoods, the removal of the viaduct alone will enable the sweeping views and visual access to an equally stunning waterfront. Inviting locals to use the space will be critical to the success of the waterfront, requiring thoughtful programming and perhaps reconsidering development zoning to ensure sufficient services and amenities to attract a diversity of users throughout the day and night.

Double Decked Freeways

October 17, 1989: The Loma Prieta Earthquake hits the Bay Area. The Embarcadero Freeway is damaged and permanently closed.

1991: Demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway Begins.

February 28, 2001: The Nisqually Earthquake damages the Alaskan Way Viaduct, prompting DOT to close the structure every six months for inspection and repairs.

2001: Embarcadero Boulevard and Ferry Building projects are completed.

2009: Alaskan Way Viaduct to be demolished and replaced with a deep-bore tunnel, topped with a revitalized waterfront park.

...: Voters reject a ... to demolish the ... arcadero Freeway.

“What sets San Francisco apart from suburbs and other cities is that it invites people to live in the moment. The Embarcadero captures that openness, the sense of possibility -- whether it’s the possibility of changing your life or catching a ferry, indulging in an extravagant meal or killing an hour gazing out at the water.” - John King

What sets Seattle apart and what will the Seattle waterfront capture?

Resources

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