



The Cost of Good Intentions: Planning Gridlock in San Francisco

David Prowler

The culture of protest that marked development and planning in San Francisco during the 1970s and 1980s was a response to the trauma of urban renewal. But this culture has left an ambiguous legacy for the present, argues author David Prowler.

In San Francisco, diffusion of decision-making and a restrictive and bureaucratic planning culture have impeded the planning of the city and focused resources on procedural battles that fail to manage its recent growth boom. Indeed, gridlock is the *goal* of planning in San Francisco, not simply an unfortunate impediment to effective decision-making. Shock over the land-use blunders of a generation ago echo today in the methods of electing and appointing leaders, the widespread use of ballot initiatives for planning decisions, an obsession with consensus, and the triumph of bureaucratic form over function.

The well-intentioned measures adopted in response to events of 30 years ago led to the long-term diffusion of decision-making today. To better represent neighborhoods, the city went from an at-large system of electing members of the Board of Supervisors to an 11-member Board elected by numbered districts. As a result, each supervisor has *de facto* veto power over developments or plans in his or her district. Previous Planning Commissions were composed of five mayoral appointees and two representing city departments. Now, the Commission is made up of a handful of appointments from the Board and a handful of mayoral nominees, whom the Board must also confirm, giving the Board's members significant influence over departmental practices.

Further, dissatisfaction with decisions made through the legislative process has led to the proliferation of ballot-box planning. In recent years, propositions have been put on the ballot to regulate affordable-housing percentages, to modify the disposition of surplus city properties, to control Airbnb rentals, to restrict building heights, to place moratoriums on market-rate housing, to protect "legacy businesses," to increase voter control over waterfront planning, to mandate inclusionary housing, and to thwart individual projects.

Developers, too, including Lennar, the San Francisco Giants, Forest City, and Pacific Waterfront Partners, have also brought their cases to the voters.

To understand San Francisco's planning culture, one must look back at the 1970s and 1980s, when concern over urban renewal, affordable housing, and historic preservation, and fear of "Manhattanization", were central to city politics, as well described in the work of Chester Hartman, John Mollenkopf, and Richard deLeon.¹

¹ Chester Hartman. 2002. *City for Sale: The Transformation of San Francisco*, Berkeley: University of California Press; John Mollenkopf. 1983. *Contested City*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Richard DeLeon. 1992. *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975–1991*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Redevelopment and its legacy

The history of planning in San Francisco is punctuated by land-use traumas. The earliest was the city's Redevelopment Agency's destruction of the Fillmore and South of Market neighborhoods through the urban renewal programs of the 1960s. These moves left acres of empty lots through the 1970s. To some observers, the results looked like European cities after World War II. Indeed, American planners were envious of the blank slates left in many European cities after the war. So they "bombed" their own cities, particularly those neighborhoods populated by minority, low-income, and elderly residents and the businesses that served them. The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency leveled 60 blocks in the mostly African-American Fillmore, taking out not just housing but also thriving businesses and an entire local culture of extended families, churches, shops, and nightclubs.

Redevelopment later wiped out a South of Market community to make room for the Moscone Convention Center, Yerba Buena Gardens, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and, after years of lawsuits, both market-rate and low-income housing. Well-intentioned Democrats carried out these sweeping interventions in an effort to address "blight." But they did not just remove decrepit buildings; they destroyed communities.

Figure 1. International Hotel tenants



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These people lived in the International Hotel, on the edge of the Financial District in what was left of Manilatown.

Figure 2. The International Hotel in Manilatown before its demolition



© Jerry Jew.

The hotel was the heart of a community, containing restaurants, a barbershop, and a nightclub. A Thai whiskey magnate named Supasit Mahaguna bought the hotel to demolish and replace with a high-rise. The campaign to save the hotel was the largest land-use struggle of the 1970s in San Francisco, with regular demonstrations that circled the block. Defying a court order to clear the building, the sheriff himself went to jail.

On August 4th, 1977, the police cleared the street of demonstrators and the sheriff emptied the building.

The replacements for historic buildings were International Style behemoths.

Here's what replaced the International Hotel:

Figure 3. The hotel's second incarnation



© Chinatown Community Development Center.

Not all of these interventions were undertaken by public action and not all were downtown. The Richmond and Sunset neighborhoods flanking Golden Gate Park were seeing new Chinese neighbors—and the Asian residents of the city grew from 8.2% in 1970 to 22% in 1980. They were often housed in boxy multifamily buildings that replaced Victorians.

Figure 4. Some of the “Richmond Specials” that replaced Victorian single-family homes



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These “Richmond Specials” triggered a backlash from neighborhood activists that led in 1986 to the adoption of a planning-code “priority policy” (one of eight, along with earthquake preparedness): “Conserve and protect neighborhood character.”

Corporate growth and commercial development also contributed to backlash. The square-footage of downtown office space more than doubled from 26 million to 55 million between 1965 and 1981. This growth fed a campaign to pass Proposition M, a cap on high-rise growth, in 1986.

Critics of downtown development made many arguments against high-rises: they don’t pay enough taxes to cover the public burden; they create shadowed canyons and block views; they spread into the low-income Chinatown, South of Market, and Tenderloin neighborhoods. Many of these objections were lumped together as “Manhattanization,” code for densification and for a city that catered to office workers.

Two competing narratives framed the high-rise battles, offering different visions of whom the city should serve and how its future should be determined. On one side, developers, mayors, and planners envisioned a regional job center for corporate office workers built in the International Style. On the other, neighborhood groups, the *Bay Guardian* newspaper, and the group San Francisco Tomorrow were keen on a city that primarily served households who had been drawn to San Francisco for its anarchism and creativity, as well as minority and immigrant communities.

These battles of the 1970s and 1980s shaped the decisions San Francisco makes today and how these decisions are made. These events had traumatic emotional impacts that led voters to respond by taking planning authority away from officials whom they did not trust to make decisions that were good for neighborhood residents.

In the medium term, the resulting legislative measures did address the problems that neighborhood activists had identified and fought against. Tenants are now well protected, and so are historic buildings. Another International Hotel eviction could not happen today. New buildings contribute funds devoted to offsetting their negative impacts. Residential hotels are preserved, affordable housing is mandated, and community-developed plans protect downtown neighborhoods.

At the same time, the cumulative effect of these responses is now to stymie coherent efforts to plan and develop the city. Well-intentioned measures have ended up creating a unique and conservative planning culture that paradoxically impedes planning.

Rather than providing leadership and skill, planning has become an exercise in consensus-seeking.

- Preservation of “neighborhood character” in the form of individual, often nondescript, older buildings, has assumed a higher value than responding to the need for more housing, jobs, and other social goods.
- The prior animus toward office growth has been refocused on residential development, contributing to higher housing costs, longer and more congested commutes, and gentrification. People who generally agree on planning values nevertheless engage in vicious infighting. For example, activists so opposed the 5M project, a proposal for 40% permanently affordable housing units, that they shut down the Planning Commission debate, calling the proposal “genocide.”
- Planning energies have turned inward on the procedural bulletproofing of proposals in fear of environmental critics, discretionary review of small projects, and design second-guessing. Ironically, this serves no one but the industry of lobbyists and land-use lawyers. Effective planning could manage growth and encourage community-serving projects while tamping displacement.
- No serious planning takes place regarding real issues—like the changing role of the city in the regional economy, changing transportation patterns, and the regional housing crisis. While the city courted tech jobs, it gave little thought to where new workers would live or how they would get around.
- There is no real constituency for effective planning. The sheer inefficiency of the planning process, with its multiple redundant reviews, easy appeals of even fully code-compliant projects, and CEQA² review of modest infill projects, serves as a *de facto* drag on change. It is like driving with the parking brakes on.

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² CEQA: California Environmental Quality Act.