



DOWNTOWN 0.1

A DOWNTOWN FOR PEOPLE

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The purpose of this study

SF downtown has always been the centre of ideas, services and trade. Today, however, it faces a number of challenges which mainly derive from the pandemic effect.

This study is a roadmap to a revived downtown that retains its glorious character, remains active all day long, whilst reinventing itself into an inclusive place for stimulating experiences.

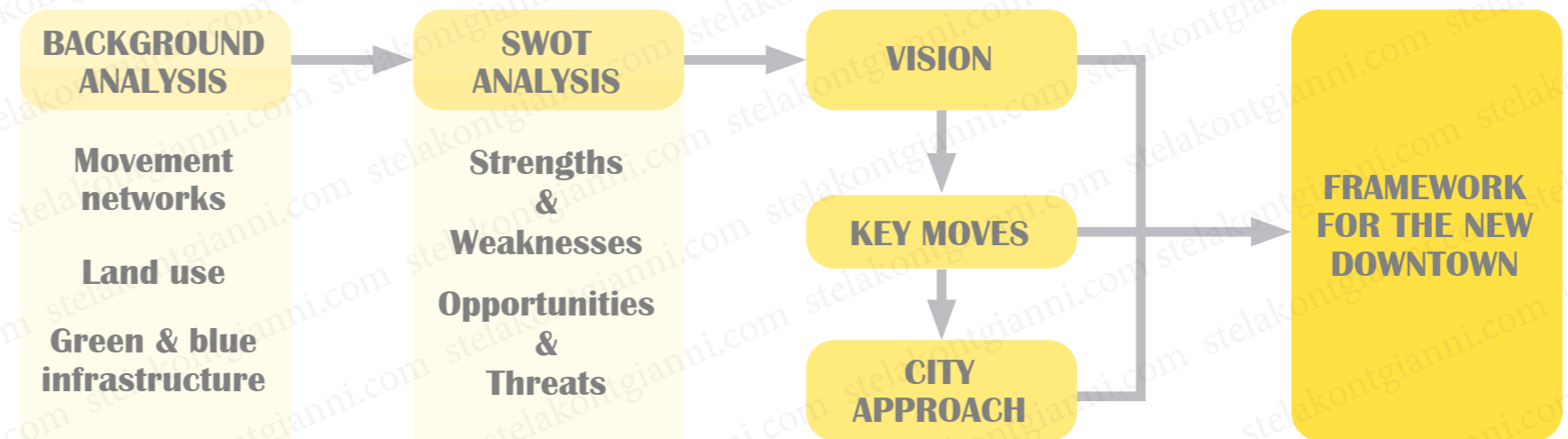
The new vision for the downtown celebrates resiliency and welcomes a diversity of land uses to include everything, under the notion that mixed use is better.

The pandemic hit San Francisco hard, affecting the downtown enormously. In fact, the city ranks last in the metrics for the most livelier North American cities¹. The decline is real and although this is a challenge that many American cities currently face, it seems like San Francisco struggles the most to bounce back. This unfortunate situation, however, also opens a window of opportunity for the downtown to reinvent itself and establish new visionary paths.

1. <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2023-opinion-how-livable-are-cities-three-years-after-start-of-covid/new-york-city.html>

Office-to-residential conversions seem to be an increasingly popular solution addressing both the housing shortages, as well as the office glut. However, conversions are not a panacea, but rather one of the tools in a much broader toolkit for downtown revitalisation. This study does not offer a solution to housing, but a resilient framework and coherent vision where a mix of uses co-exist to enhance the existing character of the downtown, celebrate its key qualities and encourage all-day activity.

PROCESS



THE SITE



DISCLAIMERS

- * Reference for the downtown boundary: Gensler's blog post 'From Vacancy to Vibrancy: Reimagining the Future of Downtown San Francisco'¹.
- * This study should be read in conjunction with my other two blog posts; 'A coherent vision for the city of San Francisco'² & 'The spatial dynamics, planning background and many contrasts of San Francisco'³.
- * Should this study be further developed, other important issues (economic, social, political and cultural) need to be further analysed.

1. <https://www.gensler.com/blog/reimagining-the-future-of-downtown-san-francisco>
2. <https://stelakontogianni.com/2023/08/13/a-coherent-vision-for-the-city-of-san-francisco/>
3. <https://stelakontogianni.com/2023/06/24/3180/>

The background

Movement networks: The city has a transit-first policy which continuously promotes aiming to decrease the use of cars in the downtown. This approach is enhanced with the ferry connections, the close proximity to Caltrain station, the new transit centre located in Salesforce park, the BART line crossing the downtown, the recently constructed T Line and the bus and light train services. Flat topography and wide pavements encourage walking, whilst footpaths and narrow alleys offer an interesting alternative. The location of the downtown offers good connections to the waterfront, Mission Bay, Chinatown, Fisherman's Wharf, Nob Hill and Castro.

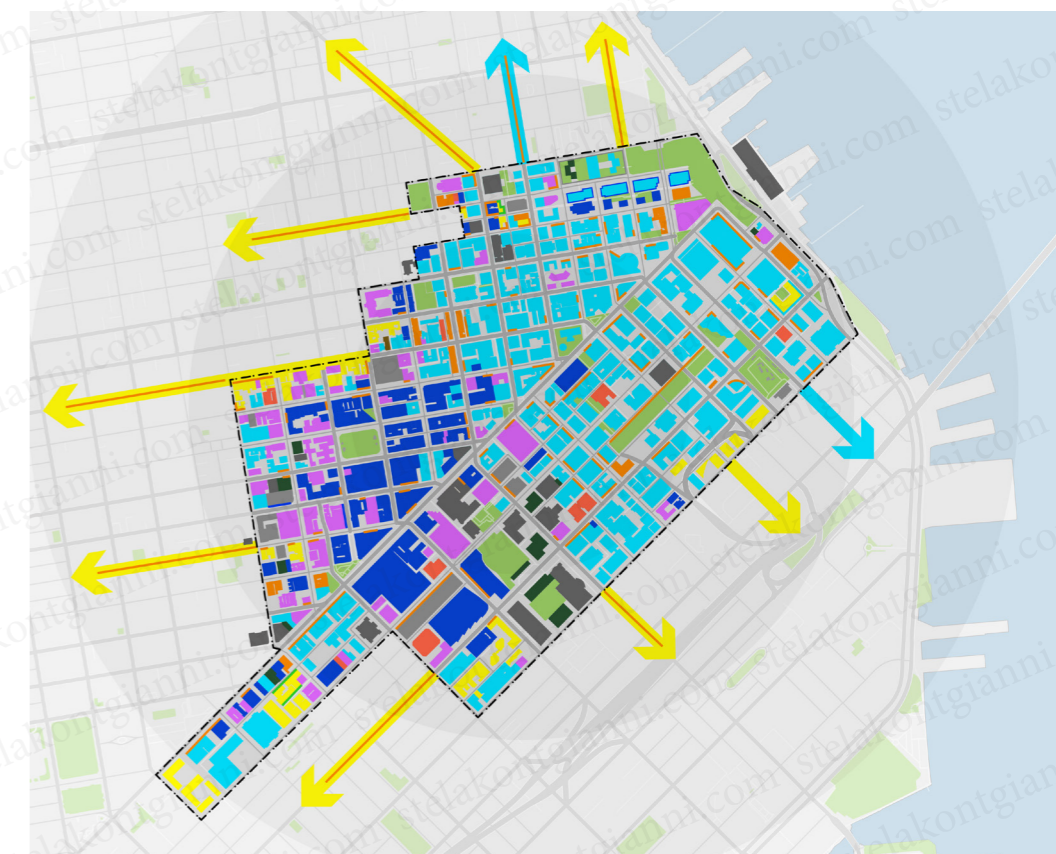
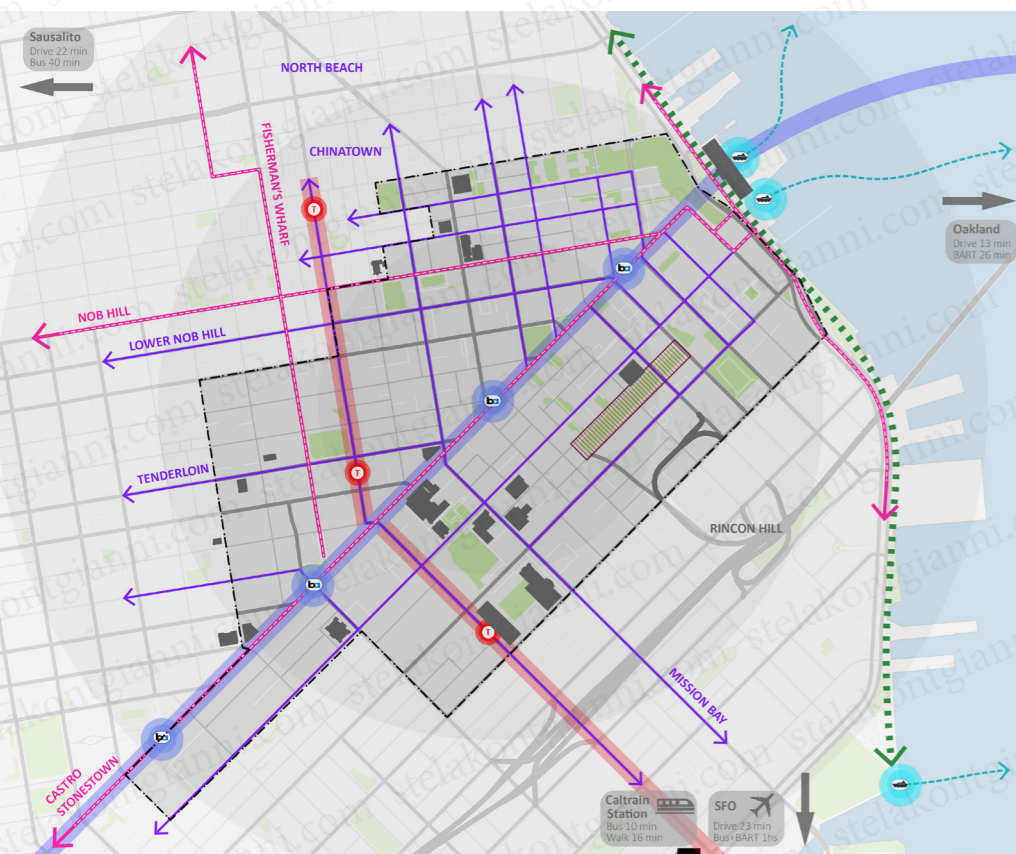
Green & blue infrastructure: The green coverage within the downtown is very limited. There are three main green spaces, whilst trees and planters decorate some streets. There are also a good number of squares and plazas. The grid maximises strong views towards the sea, the hills and historic landmark buildings.

Land uses: The financial core of banks and offices is mainly concentrated to the east of the downtown, whilst the retail and commercial hub is found around Union Square and Yerba Buena Gardens. Hotels, theatres, clubs are mainly found to the south-west, whilst there is a small amount of housing in the area.

MOVEMENT NETWORKS

GREEN & BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE

LAND USES



Challenges

Although the downtown is somewhat connected to the surrounding neighbourhoods, it still feels like there is a hard border separating it from them. Homelessness, the lack of permeability, desire lines and transport connections are some of the reasons that pedestrian flows from the neighbourhoods into the downtown are limited. The boundary of the downtown zone acts like a border clearly defining the different character areas instead of encouraging a peaceful co-existence.

The green deficit within the downtown makes the hard landscapes prevail, whilst biodiversity is hindered. Although there is a good number of squares and plazas, the lack of, or limited, green features in them decreases the positive impact that these spaces would normally have.

The long stretches of blank and unattractive façades create less interesting routes, do not improve the aesthetics of the area, whilst encouraging antisocial behaviours due to the lack of activity and lighting. This hinders pedestrian movement and generates issues of safety.

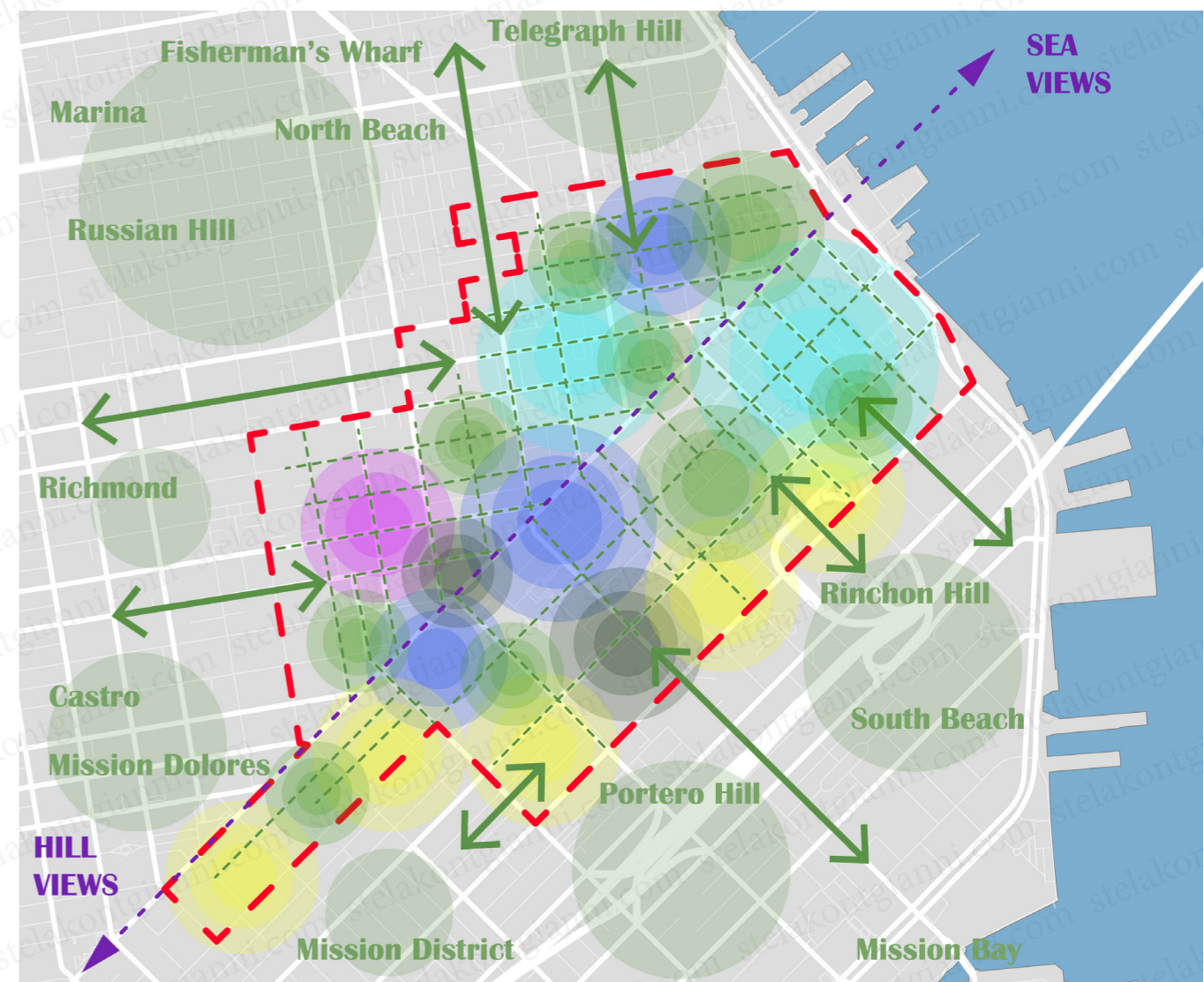


Opportunities

Opportunity to strengthen the character of each sub-neighbourhood and ultimately promote a new, enhanced, character for the downtown area. Diversifying the downtown will bring more activity throughout the day and extend movement outside the office hours. Mixed uses will be added in previously single-land use areas to attract life on the streets.

Opportunity to create desire lines through important streets and landmarks to improve legibility in the area and enhance pedestrian flows from every side. These lines will offer views to all assets like the waterfront, historic buildings, squares, parks and the hills. By establishing strong desire lines, movement patterns will be enhanced and pedestrians and cyclists will be prioritized.

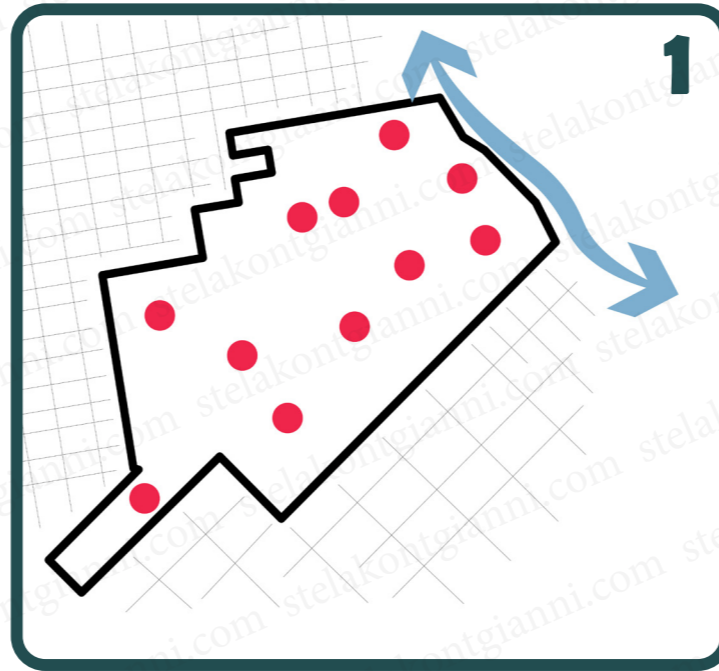
Opportunity to break the border and truly connect the downtown with the surrounding neighbourhoods. This new connection will be achieved through greening streets, enhancing the characters of sub-neighbourhoods and other spatial interventions.



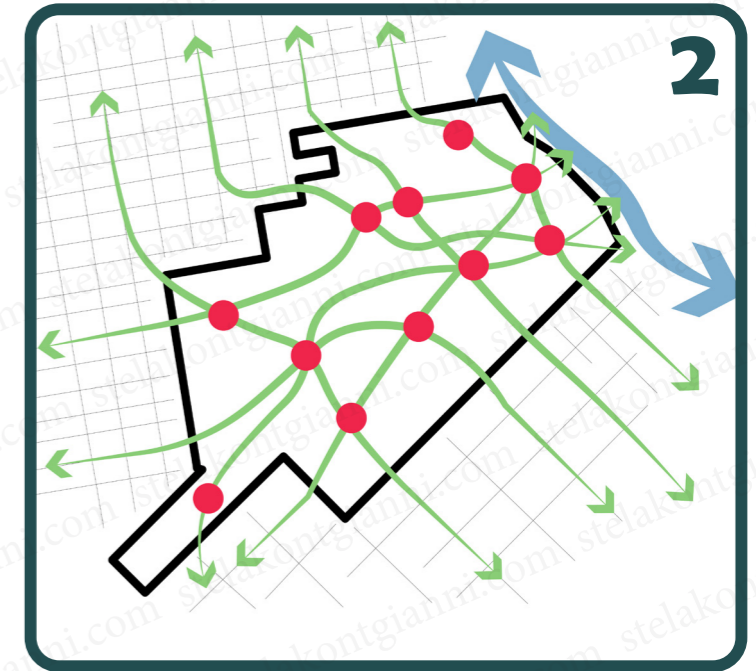
Key moves

The new approach for the downtown aims to retain the original character of the area and enhance it even more, whilst improving permeability in and out to encourage flows to every direction.

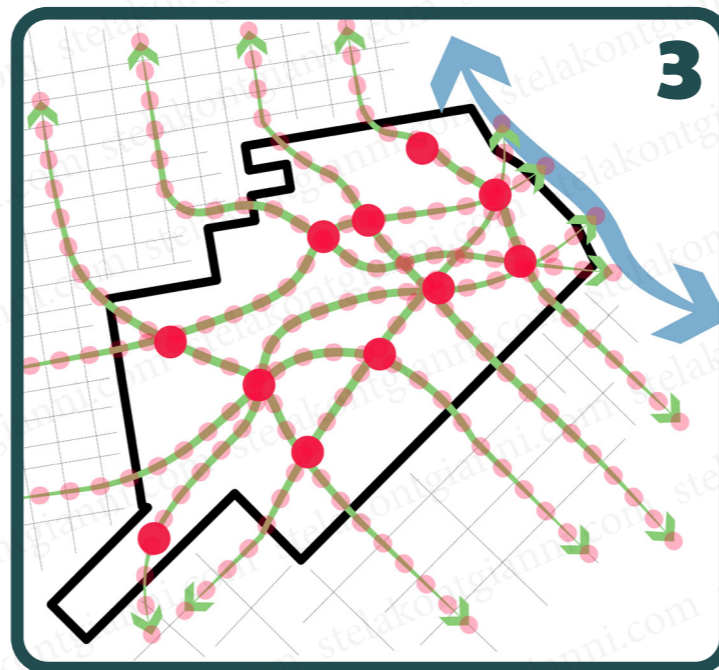
This new approach will create the 0.1 version of the downtown: A downtown for people.



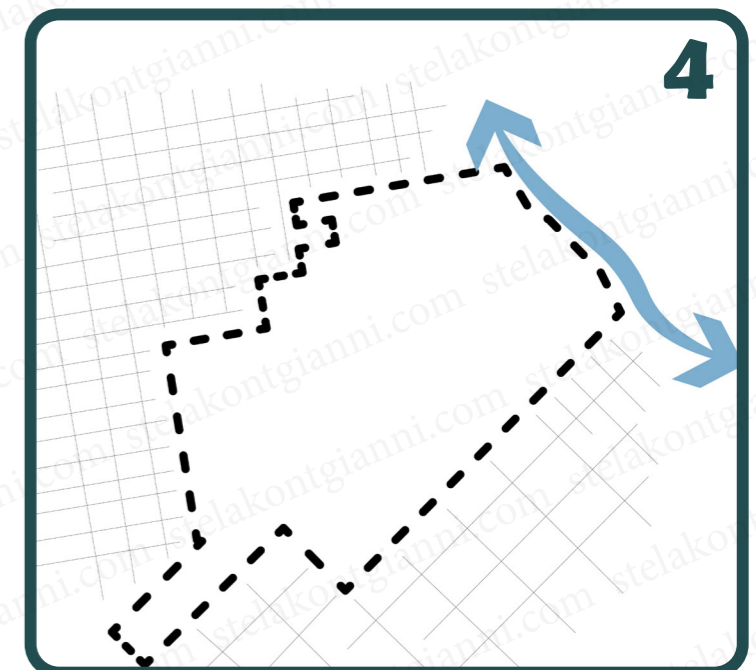
Identify and highlight key buildings and public spaces: These can be historic landmarks and/or any other feature of great importance for public life.



Identify routes through the key features: These strategic routes will connect to destinations within and outside the downtown area.



Activate the new routes: The key features and other interventions will act as activity nodes and focal points attracting movement along the way.



Break the borders: The enhanced and active flows will improve permeability and connectivity between the downtown and the surrounding neighbourhoods.

City approach



Paris

- * Transform La Défense into the first post carbon global business district. The goal is a carbon-free future halving the district's greenhouse emissions by 2030.
- * Extend operating hours of public transport.
- * Replace parking spots with bike lanes.
- * Convert housing stock in public domain into affordable housing.



Canary Wharf

- * Diversify the land use portfolio bringing more activity and life outside office hours. Mixed uses and residential have been increased within the financial district.
- * Welcome the largest advanced life science building aiming to attract similar businesses in the area to create a science cluster.
- * Improve transport connections to and from Canary Wharf to encourage people to live and work in the area.



Singapore

- * The government encouraged building owners to convert older offices into mixed-use developments such as hotels, housing and lifestyle amenities.
- * Focus on tourism.
- * Add mix uses into the downtown to encourage a more vibrant bar-and-restaurant scene.
- * Introduce a pedestrian-first approach implementing more cycle paths and pedestrianised zones into the centre.



New York

- * Focus on retail.
- * Introduce modular outdoor dining set-ups to encourage movement.
- * Presence of major universities, medical centres within the city centre.
- * Diverse range of tenant sectors contributing to the market's resilience and adaptability. New York is less reliant on a single sector and many firms are requiring employees to return to office.



Sydney

- * Focus on events and entertainment.
- * Offer residents vouchers for hotel stays and restaurants to encourage movement in the city centre.
- * Award grants for entertainment businesses and extend operating hours to encourage movement throughout the day.

From a no-place to a place

A downtown for people. The vision for the downtown includes a new framework for the growth, enhancement, and preservation of downtown as a place for all, balancing livability, safety, daylight, walkability, transit-first, climate change preparedness, access to open space and a dynamic mix of uses.

The new vision for the downtown:



More than a downtown -
A destination for all



A green place in the
heart of the city



A walkable and legible
environment



A place of breathtaking
viewpoints

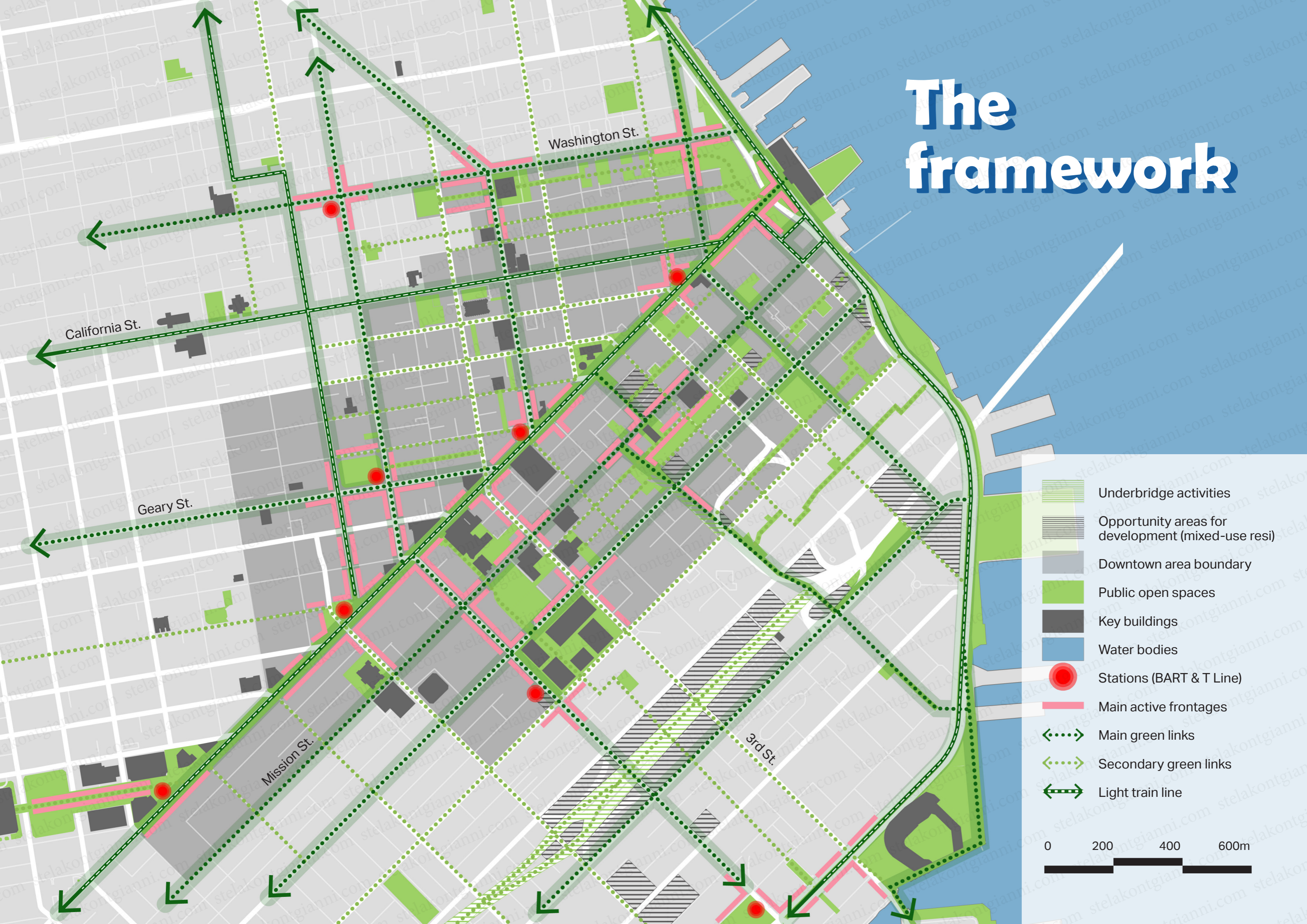


A smart place that is
well-connected

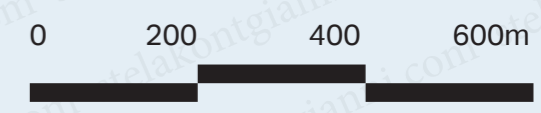


A resilient place that
anticipates the future

The framework



- Underbridge activities
- Opportunity areas for development (mixed-use resi)
- Downtown area boundary
- Public open spaces
- Key buildings
- Water bodies
- Stations (BART & T Line)
- Main active frontages
- Main green links
- Secondary green links
- Light train line





More than a downtown: A destination for all

- * Create a mixed use environment that welcomes a variety of uses and activities, whilst preserving the original character of each neighbourhood. Ground floor level should be active, especially, along the main streets to encourage movement.
- * Welcome opportunities for outdoor activities along the waterfront throughout the day; e.g. markets, outdoor sports facilities, art events, installations, playgrounds etc.
- * Take advantage of the blank façades and transform them into art pieces. Art walls will improve the aesthetics of the downtown and attract interest.
- * Intensify the commercial, as well as cultural, character of Yerba Buena Gardens by introducing more opportunities for entertainment and outdoor activities.



A walkable and legible environment

- * Implement a wayfinding and signage approach to improve legibility. Some techniques could be street colour coding, light installations to key buildings, signage (typical or interactive) etc.
- * Organise events or activities in and/or around key landmarks and buildings of historic importance.
- * Transform narrow alleys into hubs of social interaction by introducing activities during the day and night.
- * Highlight key destinations along the tram line route. For example, Guiraldelli Square is successfully promoted with the use of large promo posters on the trams at Union Square.
- * Include a bike hub facility in Salesforce Park to encourage cycling.
- * Propose underbridge activities to encourage movement along formerly underused areas and improve the feel of safety.



A place of breathtaking viewpoints

- * Preserve the existing road networks that offer clear vistas to the sea, hills and historic buildings.
- * Transform transport nodes into interesting landmarks. Similarly to the Salesforce Park, other stations (e.g. T-Line stations at Union Square and Yerba Gardens, or the train station to the south) could become art pieces and contribute to the aesthetics of public space.
- * Use large scale installations in the public realm as part of the place-branding. Ghiraldelli large sign is a good example of a public intervention that has become a landmark for the area and can be seen from distance.



A green place in the heart of the city

- * Green the main streets by adding tree planters or other green features. Examples of these streets are Market St, Washington St, Mission St, Howard St, 2nd and 4th St.
- * Establish a system of green spaces by either greening existing public spaces or proposing new ones and connect them via existing and/or proposed narrow alleys and footpaths.
- * Green the downtown via interventions of any scale. E.g. Gardens, forest parks, recreational parks, to pocket parks, tree-lined streets, green roofs etc.
- * Improve relationship with the water by enhancing walkways and green spaces, or proposing new projects e.g. pool or pavilion structure next to the water that offers opportunities for swimming, watersports, fishing etc.
- * Improve the existing highway and the surrounding area to the east of the downtown from a place-making perspective to offer opportunities for greening, housing and mixed uses. This will encourage a permeable movement through it into the downtown area.



A resilient place that anticipates the future

- * Achieve net zero carbon by reusing existing office buildings and converting them into hospitality, education as well as retail buildings; implementing green building standards, promoting public transport over vehicles within the downtown area; achieving carbon absorption by increasing green coverage.
- * Establish renewable energy sources on buildings and open spaces.
- * Enhance biodiversity through landscape interventions within the downtown and across the waterfront.
- * Improve health and well-being by offering mix of uses aiming to diversify the downtown area and create opportunities for social cohesion. Having a public transit-first policy provides opportunities for walking and cycling, hence a healthy lifestyle. This will additionally contribute to an improved air quality and encourage active mobility.
- * Enhance downtown's identity as a learning hub and a place for innovation to attract new investments and businesses. Establishing an efficient transport system will also allow residents to be flexible with home location. Also, the unlocking of sites in close proximity to the downtown will offer options for working and living in the same area.



A smart place that is well-connected

- * Propose meanwhile use interventions for social and community purposes. These can take many forms from temporary community and recreational activities, to arts, culture and commercial uses in empty plots.
- * Create a safe and resilient downtown by providing access to emergency services through digital technologies, improving response times and providing real-time information on emergency events.
- * Create a sustainable downtown by enhancing public transportation and non-motorized transport networks, establishing automated services for logistics and waste collection and monitoring air quality and pollution by providing real-time information on air quality and pollution levels (establishing a network of monitoring stations throughout the downtown area).
- * Create an efficient downtown by integrating monitoring systems and data centres, new technologies, infrastructure upgrades and repairs.
- * Create a digital downtown by implementing online government services, interactive signage system etc.

Yerba Buena Gardens will become a strong commercial hub with a variety of other uses too, including outdoor areas and green spaces. The surrounding cultural elements could enhance the character of the area.

An underbridge walkway would facilitate movement from east to west breaking any former 'barriers'.

Main office area could retain its existing character, but also welcome opportunities for mixed uses on the ground floor and co-working spaces.

Opportunity areas along the highway could be redeveloped into high density housing with mix of uses on the ground floor. These sites could also be used for meanwhile accommodations.

Narrow alleys could connect plazas, squares and open spaces and host activity where possible.

Pedestrian and cycle links could be integrated under the highway to improve permeability. The aim is to create new thriving communities next to the downtown, easily accessible from the surroundings.

The ground floor at the northern side could become an active shared street with shops, cafés and restaurants creating an interesting route from Yerba Buena Gardens.

Plaza that could host a variety of events, markets, as well as art installations.

Proposed landmark building along the waterfront to offer opportunities for watersports, public realm and relaxation.

Salesforce park will become a transport hub for the area promoting a transit-first policy, walking and cycling within the downtown. A cycle hub could be included.

Buildings that rated well for potential conversion (Ref. Gensler study, blog post Feb 23).

Public bikes could become available at strategic locations encouraging a healthy lifestyle.

Lighting schemes could elevate landmark buildings and also help create a legible environment.

'Green hub' next to the water: High concentration of green spaces of different character. E.g. Forest park, skate park, playground, squares with green features etc.

Area that offers opportunities for outdoor events, markets and mixed uses to activate the waterfront.

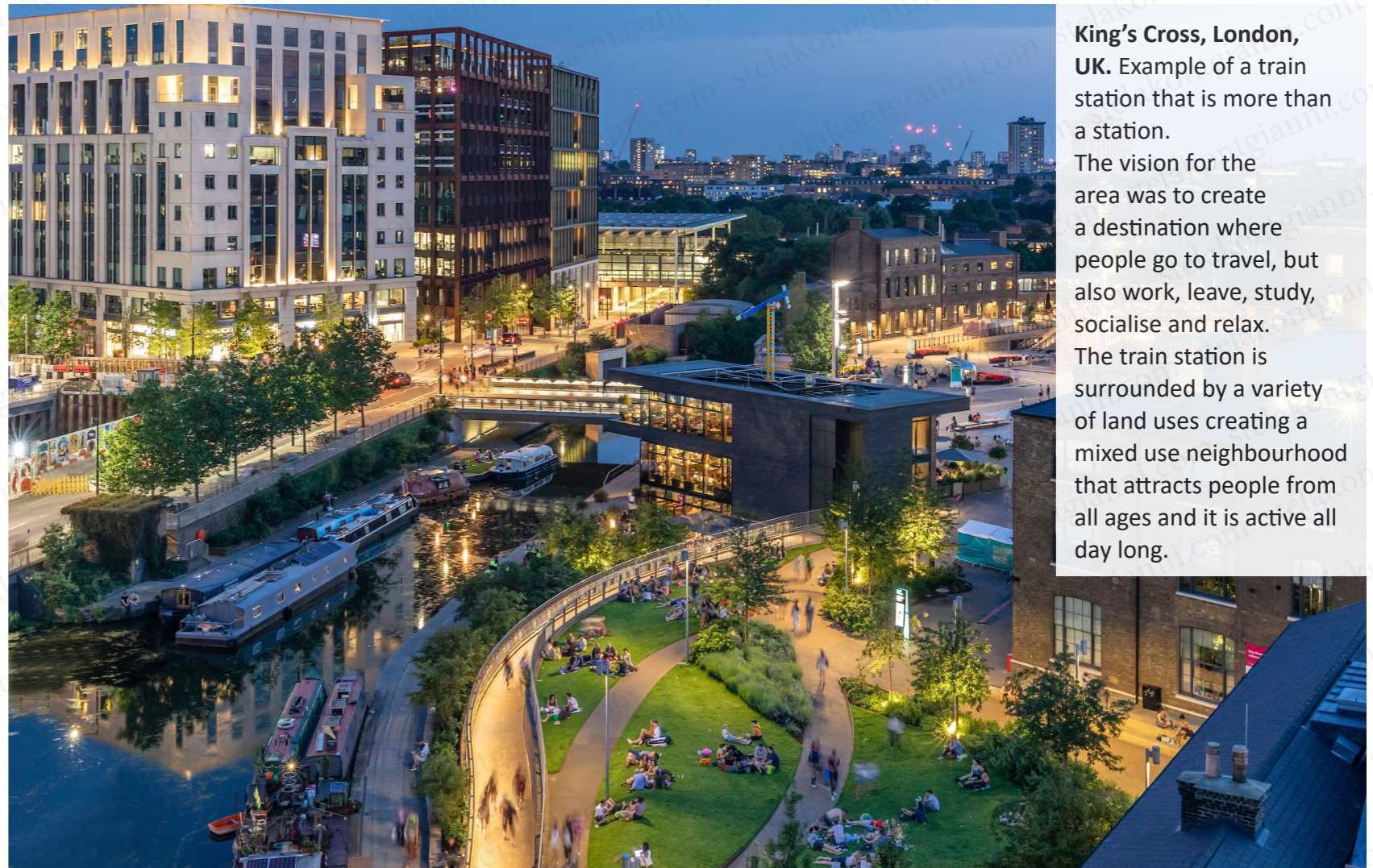




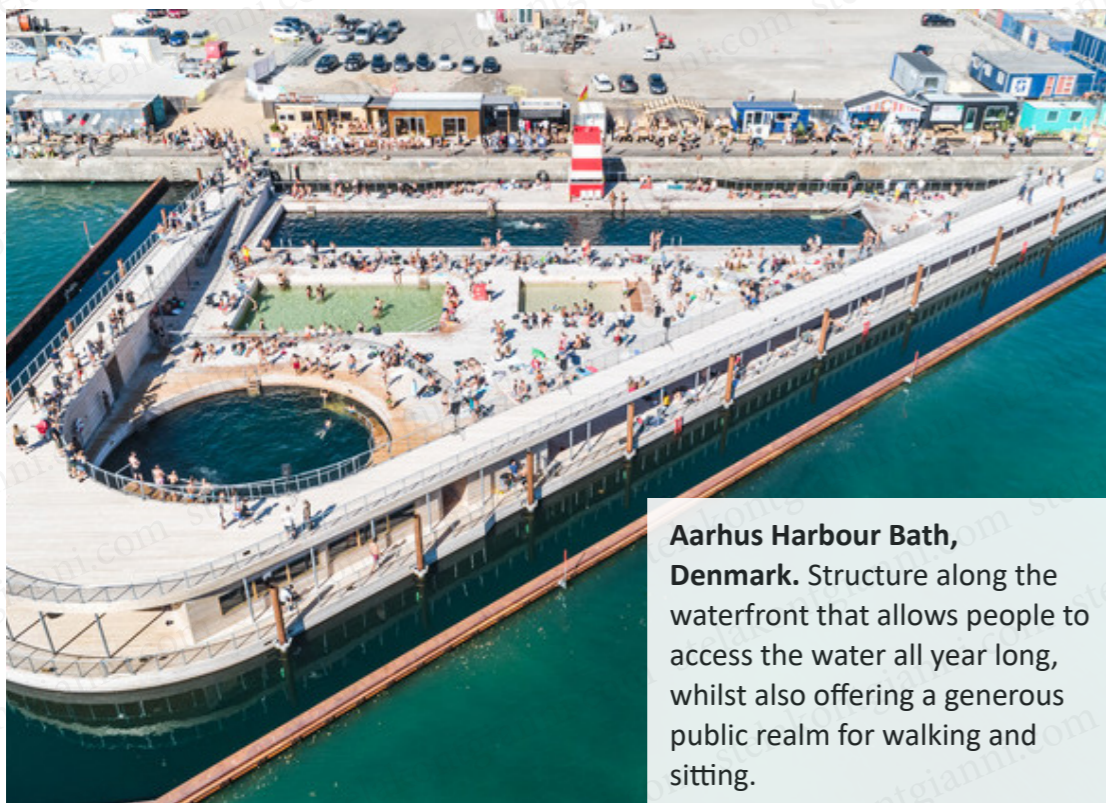
Examples from elsewhere



Street furniture and planting, U.S. Street planting placed on public place to improve green coverage, whilst also providing seating.



King's Cross, London, UK. Example of a train station that is more than a station. The vision for the area was to create a destination where people go to travel, but also work, leave, study, socialise and relax. The train station is surrounded by a variety of land uses creating a mixed use neighbourhood that attracts people from all ages and it is active all day long.



Aarhus Harbour Bath, Denmark. Structure along the waterfront that allows people to access the water all year long, whilst also offering a generous public realm for walking and sitting.



Skate park, Lemvig, Denmark. Reuse of an abandoned site along the waterfront aiming to activate the area and attract movement. Events and fairs also take place on a regular basis.



Examples from elsewhere

Brooklyn Plaza, NY. Pedestrianisation of existing street to create a public space in a central point of the city. Colour coding of the paving to introduce a playful vibe.



Narrow alleys, Melbourne. Activation of the narrow alleys by introducing mixed use frontages on the ground floor with spill out cafés, restaurants and shops.



WINTER LIGHTS Spectacular light installations and immersive art at Canary Wharf Wed 18 – Sat 28 January 2023 5–10pm Free

KEY

- TOILETS
- FOODMARKET
- ONE-WAY SYSTEM AT BUSY TIMES
- CANARY WHARF UNDERGROUND
- DLR
- PARKING
- WINTER LIGHTS INSTALLATIONS
- PERMANENT PUBLIC ART COLLECTION INSTALLATIONS

1 Bitfall Chancellor Passage	7 Captivated by Colour Adams Plaza Bridge (Level 0)	13 in[visible] Crossrail Place (Level -3)	19 Emergence Montgomery Square
2 The Clew Cubitt Steps	8 Intonoluci 'The Light Snails' Crossrail Place Roof Garden (Level 1)	14 Out of the Dark Crossrail Place (Level -1, Quayside)	20 Fluorescent Firs Jubilee Park
3 PING Westferry Circus	9 Fragmented Appearances Crossrail Place Roof Garden (Level 1)	15 Glories Water Street	21 Crystal Greenhouse Jubilee Park
4 Permafrost - Sleeping Giants Canary Riverside	10 We Could Meet Crossrail Place (Level -1, Quayside)	16 Anima Water Street	22 Floating Earth Middle Dock, best viewed from Bank Street
5 Continuum Cabot Square	11 Elantica 'The Boulder' Crossrail Place (Level -1, Quayside)	17 Toroid Union Square	
6 The Stars Come Out at Night When Landing	12 You exist, here, now Crossrail Place (Level -3)	18 Lightbenches 'Classic' Union Square	

Winter lights event, Canary Wharf, London. Annual event organised in London's financial district to attract people and bring activity in the area. Light installations are placed at strategic locations and maps are handed out to help visitors explore it.

Norreport train station, Copenhagen. Train station that also serves as a landmark improving the public realm and contributing to the placemaking of the area. Similar initiatives could be proposed for the BART and T-Line stations in SF downtown.





Examples from elsewhere

Activate underpasses.

Public realm along the underpass that encourages walking and cycling. Light installations and planting help create a pleasant and safe environment for the users.



Oasia Hotel Downtown, Singapore.

The entire 27-floor external facade is wrapped in a natural vine covered sunscreen, whilst it also has four lush sky terraces, 1,793 large planter boxes, and four large structural cores that allow for good cross ventilation reducing the overall energy cost.



Meanwhile uses for homeless people, UK. Meanwhile uses placed in a vacant site in London to house a number of homeless people, whilst also activating a vacant site.



Klyde Warren Park, Dallas. Green space in the middle of two highways brings benefits in noise and air pollution, as well as improving the area from a place-making viewpoint. Greening heavy infrastructure has a positive environmental impact and encourages a sustainable lifestyle.

Next steps

The current decline of the downtown is apparent and the numbers do not lie. San Francisco's recover is falling behind most of major American cities. However, this decline does not necessarily mean the death of the financial district. The location is too good, very central, too dense, with good infrastructure and connections, flat topography, great views and unique architecture.

The transformation that the pandemic caused is no more than an inevitable acceleration of trends already underway. One-dimensional land uses and work-only 9-5 attributes do not work anymore, and never really worked from a place-making and well-being perspective.

The new version of the downtown, and downtowns in general, should be focusing less on the buildings and more to what is offered around them. Mixed-use, outdoor activities, events, open spaces and play bring life throughout the day making the downtown a place for people.

The SF downtown will become one more urban neighbourhood integrated into the surrounding areas encouraging flows in and out. It will evolve and change in ways that reflect the changing needs of workers and the changing patterns of work. The new office era is likely to be less about a single building in a single location and more about an outgrowth of the urban fabric of the city.

