

Central SoMa Draft Policy Document

Open Spaces on the Public Right-of-Way

January 2014

Summary

Overview of the opportunities to provide open space and amenities in Central SoMa's public rights-of-way.

Background

As a historically dense and industrial neighborhood, SoMa has few parks, community gardens, playgrounds, or plazas - "open space" for recreation and socializing. The Central SoMa Plan proposes to increase the amount of open space in the area in a number of ways, including the creation of a new public park and creation of smaller privately-owned public open spaces ("POPOS") built by new development (each of these strategies has/will be a separate topic heading). Another important strategy, and the focus of this topic, is redesigning the public right-of-way (i.e. streets and alleys, from property line to property line) to provide many of the functions and amenities of more traditional open space. Streets and alleys are the largest piece of public property in the city, and in SoMa comprise about one-third of the total land area. Given the difficulty and expense of acquiring new property for parks, it is sensible to reconsider the use of this huge amount of land already owned by the public.

SoMa's network of smaller streets and alleys already functions as a "front yard" and social space for residents, providing light, air and, under the right conditions, a calm place to enjoy alone or with neighbors. These important functions can be enhanced if traffic volumes and speeds are kept low through various traffic-calming designs, including generous landscaping, special paving, public art, speed humps, traffic diverters, and wiggles in the road known as chicanes. The recent streetscape project at Natoma and Russ Streets is an example of this design strategy. Once traffic is calmed, the right-of-way can be made greener and more accommodating to various activities, for example small gardens, play areas, seating or dog runs.

In addition to the alleys, SoMa's main thoroughfares could provide an opportunity for public amenities, social space and greening – the Plan calls for redesigning most of the major streets to increase pedestrian space and reduce the dominance of vehicles in the landscape. Additionally, the Plan identifies the potential to repurpose the underutilized areas under the freeway that bisects the neighborhood.

Proposal

City planners and SoMa residents have been thinking about calming and greening streets for many decades, and numerous small streets in the city have already been redesigned with this in mind. Two neighborhood groups, TODCO and the Yerba Buena

Community Benefit District (YCBCD), have developed comprehensive plans which contain many ideas for reconfiguring small streets and alleys into inviting open spaces. The Central SoMa Plan acknowledges these community and city efforts, many of which have their own processes and timelines and are expected to continue independent of the Plan. The Plan takes a more active role in promoting the ideas that require more systematic environmental review, legislation or proactive involvement from City government to implement. These include:

- ***Conversion of streets into open spaces:*** YCBCD and TODCO have identified segments of Annie and Lapu-Lapu Streets, both minor streets or alleys, as candidates for car-free public spaces. Since this would potentially change existing traffic patterns, Annie and Lapu-Lapu require more study than traffic-calming and greening projects which do not change vehicle access. The Central SoMa EIR will study closing segments of Annie and Lapu-Lapu to traffic, allowing these community groups to concentrate on questions of design and programing in collaboration with city implementation agencies such as the Department of Public Works and the Planning Department, through our Pavements to Parks program.
- ***Shared public ways:*** Shared public ways are public right-of-ways designed for pedestrian use which permit vehicles and bicycles to share the open space (see definition in the Better Streets Plan <http://www.sfbetterstreets.org/design-guidelines/street-types/shared-public-ways/>). Many small streets and alleys in SoMa are candidates for shared public way treatments. The Central SoMa plan identifies the highest priority candidates based on YCBCD and TODCO input, including portions of Annie, Shipley, Jessie East, Welsh and Freelon Streets and Ambrose Bierce Alley (all of these are shown on the map on page 68 of the Draft Plan). Following the “front yard” metaphor, questions of design and programing are best addressed by local residents, businesses and organizations working in collaboration with city implementation agencies (DPW and Planning) at the time implementation proceeds for these streets.
- ***Using excess right-of-way for open space:*** This is proposed for Bluxome Street, a low-traffic alley whose atypical 70-foot width provides substantial opportunity for open space. A specific discussion of Bluxome Street is included in a separate post on that topic.
- ***Use of the areas under the freeway:*** The walking environment on the streets that pass under the freeway is unpleasant today and the pieces of land adjacent are used for parking, storage, or nothing at all. These spaces could potentially be an exciting part of the public realm with the right investment. Potential uses for parcels under the freeway include recreational facilities such as skate parks and dog runs (similar facilities are under construction along Valencia Street under the Central Freeway), and facilities performing ecological functions (e.g. stormwater purification) which may be developed as part of the Eco-district under consideration for the area. Streets crossing under the freeway can be enlivened by allowing fees from private development to be pooled and used for large-scale art installations (Powell Street under the I-880 freeway in Emeryville is an example), and where space permits, encouraging the creation of small retail structures that can be accessed directly from the sidewalk (similar to the Proxy installation that uses

shipping containers adjacent to Patricia's Green in Hayes Valley). These ideas are in preliminary stages, and will require considerable coordination with Caltrans, which owns the area under the freeway.