

Central SoMa Draft Policy Document

Ground Floors

March 2015

Introduction

The Streetscape and Circulation chapter (Chapter 4) of the draft Plan state that the Plan should “Provide a safe, convenient, and attractive walking environment on all streets of the Plan Area” (Principle 1). The discussion below seeks to convey how this could be provided through controls on land use, urban form, and street design.

Summary

The Plan will maintain existing strategies to enhance the interaction of the ground floor of buildings with the street, while additionally banning office within the first 25 feet of the building, requiring ground floor commercial uses on 4th Street and Folsom Street, and banning new curb cuts and driveways along many of the major streets in the Plan Area.

Background

The most important part of a building is the ground floor where it intersects with the street. Most people never actually go inside or aesthetically assess the vast majority of the buildings they encounter. But in walking the streets every day, they constantly judge (often subconsciously) how, collectively, the ground floors of buildings shape their experience. People will seek out streets that enable them engage with friends, to be entertained by other people and/or items in a shop window, and to safely avoid undesired encounters. By contrast, when buildings have long, blank walls or ground floors dominated by internally oriented or non-public uses like offices, pedestrians do not feel the ability to engage with their environment and feel socially disconnected and disinterested. When buildings are set back from the sidewalk – such as in a suburban strip mall environment – people on foot feel exposed on both sides and unable to avoid a dangerous encounter. When there are too many driveway entrances, people walking are endangered or inconvenienced by constant vehicular movement across the sidewalk. In all of these circumstances, people stay away if they have a choice

Recognizing this, the City has instituted several strategies to encourage active and safe ground floors. Much of this content is captured in Section 145.1 of the Planning Code, whose requirements in SoMa include that:

- All the buildings be lined with active uses,
- Uses like parking cannot be placed along the street, and back of house functions like utilities are encouraged to go underground or off the street,

- Any residential uses at the ground level must be primarily accessible from the sidewalk (such as walk-up units),
- Parking and loading entrances must be narrow and, wherever possible, consolidated,
- Parking and loading entrances should be placed where there is conflict with with as few people walking as possible, and away from transit and bicycle routes – such as less-traveled alleys,
- Non-residential spaces should be largely fenestrated with transparent windows, and doorways, and
- Ground floor spaces should be at least 14 feet high to create gracious and inviting retail spaces.

There are additional provisions in the Planning Code and design guidelines that apply to particular important pedestrian corridors. For example, building setbacks are not required, and are generally discouraged, to ensure that buildings directly interface with the street. Additionally, within the Plan Area, there is a requirement that ground floor spaces contain active commercial and community-serving uses (e.g., retail and restaurants) along 4th Street between Bryant and Townsend Streets (Planning Code Section 145.4), whereas new driveways and garage entries are prohibited on all of Market Street, all of Mission Street, 6th Street from Market to Folsom Streets, 2nd Street from Market to Folsom Streets, and 4th Street between Bryant and Townsend Streets (Planning Code Section 155(r)).

The result of these proposals is that recently constructed buildings tend to have a net positive benefit on street life, increasing both the safety and dynamism of the pedestrian environment. However, there are still instances in which the requirement for “active” uses does not translate into a successful pedestrian experience. The most obvious example is new office development, which is considered an “active” use, but whose limited engagement with the street can create a very poor pedestrian environment.

Proposal

The Central SoMa Plan proposes to, at a minimum, maintain all of the existing policies around ground floor uses, as these have proven very successful. In addition, the Plan proposes the following enhancements:

- Office uses shall not be considered an active use for the ground floor. As such, they would not be permitted at the street level within the 25 feet of any public street wider than 30 feet, and within 15 feet of streets less than 30 feet. Building lobbies would still be considered active uses, so long as they do not exceed 40 feet or 25% of building frontage, whichever is larger.
- As discussed in the draft Plan (page 25), the requirement for active commercial and/or community-serving uses shall be extended on 4th Street from Bryant north to Folsom Street, and from Folsom Street west to 6th Street.

- The new privately-owned public open spaces (**POPOS**) required by the Plan would also need to be lined with active commercial and/or community serving uses.
- The Plan will help maintain a diversity of ground floor uses by requiring that commercial development on lots of 10,000 square feet or greater will be required to contain 0.5 FAR of PDR, arts, and or community facilities.
- To enable some of these PDR and arts uses can line important streets and POPOS, the definition of active commercial uses (as defined in Planning Code Section 145.4) shall be expanded to include “Arts Activities”, “Business Goods and Equipment Sales and Repair Service” and “Light Manufacturing” (as defined in Planning Code Sections 102.2, 890.23 and 890.54, respectively), as long as these uses meet the transparency and fenestration requirements of non-PDR uses, as described in Planning Code Section 145.1(c)(6).
- As discussed in the draft Plan (page 56), the ban on new curb cuts to access off-street parking shall be extended to cover all of Folsom, Brannan, Townsend, Second, 3rd, 4th, and 6th Streets within the Plan Area (as well as the south side of Howard Street if it continues to be a one-way street). Additionally, a Conditional Use Permit would be required for new curb cuts along Harrison, Bryant, and Fifth Streets, as well as Howard if it becomes a two-way Street.

In addition, the Plan proposes myriad improvements to pedestrian conditions, including widening all of the sidewalks to meet the criteria of the Better Streets Plan, adding mid-block crossings along most of the major streets, adding new alleys through major development sites, and adding a substantial amount of open space. Cumulatively, all of these improvements will greatly enhance the pedestrian experience throughout the Central SoMa Plan Area.