

Civic Center Landscape Features

Significant Trees

Since the first design of Civic Center was proposed before the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, trees have been an essential element in the vibrancy and iconic nature of Civic Center.

London Plane trees, a tree recognized for its gray bark and large leaves, is the most prevalent species in Civic Center, having first been planted in the 1910s. As with most trees in Civic Center, London Plane trees are pollarded – their upper branches are trimmed to achieve a denser bulb of green.

In 1950, Silver Dollar and Red Flowering Gum trees replaced the H Trolley Line in the Van Ness Avenue median, beautifying Civic Center in summer with white and red blooms.

At over 100 years of age, the oldest living tree in Civic Center is a Canary Island Date Palm that dates to 1912 and grows within the private courtyard on McAllister and Franklin.



MIG, Inc.

London plane in the turf outside of City Hall. Dates to 1957.



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London plane allée, or tree lined path, along the turf area of the Fulton Mall where the Pioneer Monument sits. Dates to 1936.



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Boxwood hedge and London plane trees at the War Memorial Court with City Hall in the background. Dates to 1936.



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Canary Island Date Palm, oldest living tree in Civic Center, at residential courtyard on McAllister and Franklin. Dates to 1912.

Civic Center Landscape Features

Significant Sculptures

The Pioneer Monument is the earliest known feature in the Civic Center Historic District, predating the loss and destruction of much of the district during the Great 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire. With the building of the new San Francisco Public Library in 1995, the Pioneer Monument was moved from Marshall Square to its current location in the Fulton Mall between Civic Center Plaza and United Nations Plaza.

Civic Center also hosts two historic sculptures that date back to the period of significance (1896-1951) of the district. On the north side of City Hall sits a 1915 statue of Judge Hall McAllister who served on the US Circuit Court for the Districts of California in the 1850s and 60s. A statue of President Lincoln is located at the southeast corner of City Hall, overlooking Civic Center Plaza. This statue was reconstructed in 1927 after having been destroyed in the 1906 Earthquake and Fire.



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President Lincoln Statue sits at the southwest corner of City Hall facing Civic Center Plaza. Dates to 1927.



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The Pioneer Monument is placed in the Fulton Mall between the Asian Art Museum and the Public Library. Dates to 1894.



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Judge Hall McAllister stands before the north entrance of City Hall facing the Superior Court of California. Dates to 1915.

Civic Center Landscape Features

Significant Pathways

Brick paving and designed walkways from the period of significance (1896-1951) beautify pedestrian pathways throughout Civic Center, providing foot access to and through the plazas, streetscapes, and open spaces throughout the historic district. Below is a selection of some of the more striking pathways that contribute to the character of the Historic District.



MIG, Inc.

Brick and aggregate path and lawn area at War Memorial Court. Dates to 1936.



MIG, Inc.

Brick paving on a sunken path at the War Memorial Court, lined with pollarded London plane trees. The pathway connects pedestrians between Franklin St and Van Ness Ave. Dates to 1936.



MIG, Inc.

Brick paving in front of the San Francisco United School District (High School of Commerce) building. Dates to 1926.



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Steps at City Hall's northern entrance along McAllister. Dates to 1915.

Civic Center Landscape Features

Significant Utilities

Civic Center is dotted with fire boxes and fire hydrants that date back to the early 20th Century. In 1899, the citywide fire box system was established and a handful of boxes bearing a 1899 date, recognizable by their red posts with gold trim, remain in Civic Center.

In the wake of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire in which 80% of the City’s 28,000 buildings were destroyed, utilitarian features such as the Auxiliary Water Supply System hydrants – a gravity fed system – was installed throughout the City, including in Civic Center. The hydrants in Civic Center are short and painted white with a blue cap. Several are stamped: “1909: S.F., A.W.S.”

Both the fire boxes and the AWSS fire hydrants are usable today. According to a report by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the fireboxes are still used in over 1,000 emergencies a year. Likewise, a 2009 City of San Francisco study of the AWSS found 135 miles of underground piping to be in mostly usable condition. Repairs and optimizations have since been implemented.

Other utility features such as piping, traffic signals, and traffic control devices date to the period of significance (1896-1951).



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Fire and police box at War Memorial Complex. Using telegraph technology, the boxes remain active today. Dates to 1899.



MIG, Inc.

Auxiliary Water Supply System hydrant with a blue cap next to a low pressure hydrant near City Hall. Dates to 1909.



MIG, Inc.

Traffic control box with green metal post on the southwest corner of the Asian Art Museum. Dates to 1916.

Civic Center Landscape Features

Significant Lighting

The most prevalent lighting fixture in the Civic Center Historic District are the Van Ness single pendant luminaires mounted on trolley poles. The trolley poles on which the light fixtures sit were engineered in anticipation of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915, during which 60,000 people were expected to ride the trolley per hour on busy days. Each of the 259 trolley poles that were constructed were affixed with lighting, making Van Ness Avenue the “best lit thoroughfare in the city.” In 1936, the Public Utilities Commission replaced the small electric lights with the single tear-drop luminaires that don the trolley poles today.

Other historic lighting in Civic Center include the ornate light poles specifically designed for the War Memorial Court and City Hall as well as the trident street lights with globe luminaires on a cast iron post that line the entirety of Market Street.



MIG, Inc.

Ornate iron lamp post with globe at War Memorial Court. Dates to 1932.



MIG, Inc.

Market St Path of Gold street light with globe luminaires on cast iron post. Dates to 1915.



MIG, Inc.

Van Ness single pendant luminaire on a trolley pole at Symphony Hall. Dates to 1915 and 1936.



MIG, Inc.

Ornate metal light pole on the southeast corner of City Hall. Dates to 1915.

Civic Center Plazas

Civic Center Plaza

Civic Center Plaza was designed as a processional space for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. The original design included tree lined pathways, two sculpture-crowned fountains, and a perimeter of ornamental railings with decorative urns and sculptures at the openings. After the plaza was demolished in 1956 to allow for construction of the underground Brooks Hall and Civic Center Parking Garage, landscape architect Douglas Baylis unveiled a modern plan that included a long, rectangular pool and fountain down the center, pollarded London Plane trees lining central pathways, and olive trees in the corners. The plan was adopted and constructed in 1961, despite much controversy. In the 1990s, two children's playgrounds were added, olive trees were removed, the central pool was removed, and the decomposed granite pathway that today runs from Larkin Street to City Hall was added. Throughout its history, Civic Center Plaza has been an important public gathering space as the site of civic protests, celebrations, and casual gatherings.

An in depth historic resource evaluation of the Civic Center Plaza is currently underway as part of an upcoming San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department project involving the plaza.



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2013 photograph of trees near a children's playground at Civic Center Plaza



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2014 photograph of a lawn area at Civic Center Plaza



San Francisco History Center,
San Francisco Public Library

1973 photograph of Civic Center Plaza looking towards City Hall after the modernization of the 1960s.



San Francisco History Center,
San Francisco Public Library

1940s photo of Civic Center Plaza with the Civic Auditorium in the background

Civic Center Plazas

United Nations Plaza

Designed by master landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, United Nations Plaza commemorates the signing of the United Nations Charter at the War Memorial Complex in 1945. The plaza opened in 1975 in conjunction with the new Civic Center BART Station. The original design consisted of:

- 117,000 square feet of brick paving
- over 20,000 square feet of lawn area
- 16 light standards and 24 wood slate benches
- low granite walls bordering the promenade
- 192 London plane and Lombardy poplar trees

The “walk of great ideas” was added to the plaza in 1995 at the 50th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter. The walk includes the UN Charter Preamble, a list of member nations, and the preamble for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. New lighting was also added to UN Plaza at the 50th anniversary. Sixteen hooded luminaires mounted on granite columns now line the pedestrian approach to City Hall, linking UN Plaza to the rest of Civic Center.

UN Plaza will be studied in detail as part of the Better Market Street Plan environmental review.



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United Nations Plaza, a 1-acre pedestrian plaza between Civic Center Plaza and Market St, commemorates the founding of the United Nations in Civic Center in 1945. UN Plaza dates to 1975.



MIG, Inc.

United Nations Fountain, with associated lighting and paving treatments, anchors the eastern portion of UN Plaza. UN Fountain dates to 1975.



Jeffrey Tilman,
Arthur Brown, Jr.:
Progressive Classicist

Crowded with parking as early as the 1930s, Fulton between Hyde and Market became a pedestrian pathway in the late 1950s and eventually UN Plaza in 1975. Fulton between Hyde and Larkin still has passenger vehicle and tour bus parking. This photograph shows Fulton Street in 1936.



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1918 image of Fulton Street looking across Civic Center Plaza towards Market Street.