In 1776 the de Anza Expedition brought the first European colonial settlers to the peninsula that would become San Francisco. As with all Spanish colonial settlements, the land was to be governed by the 1573 “Laws of the Indies.” These were the first written city planning laws that shaped the future City’s development. Unlike Los Angeles, Santa Fe, and many other places in New Spain, San Francisco was not laid-out on the classical, roman-influenced, city plan that these laws dictated. That said, the City’s two monuments of colonial Spain, the Presidio and the Mission, reflect the laws’ clear goal that colonial settlements’ physical organization would enforce a rigid three-part social structure, divided between the military, the church, and the people.

Spanish colonists did not lay their plans on a blank canvas, as the natural landscape dictated the placement of both the Presidio and the Mission. Both were situated near sources of drinking water, and both avoided the vast fields of sand dunes. Because it was meant to protect the Bay, the Presidio overlooked the Golden Gate. Because it was supposed to produce food, the Mission overlooked sunny grasslands.

Spanish colonists also built on the settlement patterns of those they sought to colonize. As with all of the Americas, this land had been the home of indigenous peoples for millennia. When Juan Bautista de Anza arrived, this was the home of the Yelamu, members of the larger Chilone language group, and the Spanish placed their settlements near their three semi-sedentary village sites. The Presidio was placed nearly atop the bay-side village of Petlenuc, and the Mission was built near the villages of Chtchui and Sitlintac, both of which bordered the body of water that came to be called Mission Creek. Through the lens of the violence of settler colonialism, these echoes of indigenous patterns on the land are still visible in today’s City.

The Land, the Yelamu, and Colonial Spain set the City’s earliest patterns
In 1847, Mexican Yerba Buena became American San Francisco. The City needed a plan that could anticipate platting new lots, both inland from the water, and out into the mud flats of the bay. Under the authorization of Washington Allin Bartlett, the first American Alcalde of Yerba Buena, Jasper O’Farrell drew up a new survey that further regularized Vioget’s grid and extended up and over the City’s hills. To the south, he laid out a separate grid aligned with the curve of the shoreline and the general course of the road to the Mission. Where these two grids met, he projected the wide boulevard of Market Street.

O’Farrell translated the Vioget lots into a standard width of about 46 yards, while he plotted the grid south of market with wider lots of about 92 yards. Other than these slight concessions, the plan paid little deference to the lay of the land, by focusing on the regular division of land into lots for public sale, the O’Farrell Plan reflected the rapid growth of San Francisco as it expanded into an instant-city.

So phenomenal was the City’s growth, especially following the discovery of gold, that all of the new lots surveyed in 1847 sold within only two years. In response, the City hired William Eddy to draw up a new survey in 1849, expanding the grid further west as today’s Leavenworth and 8th Streets.

The Spanish transfer of control of California to the new government of Mexico brought greater possibilities of private land ownership in the area that would become San Francisco. In 1834, all of Mission Dolores’ land was removed from church control through secularization. Over the course of the following year, the government established the secular trading town of Yerba Buena, formalizing its use as a commercial port in the coastal tallow trade. By 1839, the city town had enough structures that Alcalde Francisco de Haro ordered the Swedish sea captain, Jean Jacques Vioget, to develop a plan to regularize existing land claims and prepare for the addition of future lots. Vioget’s map proposed a modest street grid of 12 blocks and laid out the initial paths of the streets that would later be named Kearny, Grant, Jackson, Washington, Clay, and Sacramento.
1853–1868 Slaughterhouses and San Francisco’s first Zoning Ordinance

One of the earliest land use dilemmas in San Francisco was the location of slaughterhouses. In 1853, an ordinance creating a system of business licenses forced them south of Harrison, where they could dump offal into the waters of Mission Bay. In 1864, the City passed another ordinance to add restrictions to hog farms, requiring their complete relocation to a new Butchertown further south on Islais Creek. However, the law remained unenforced through the granting of several extensions, delays, and civic inaction that lasted throughout the decade. Finally, with the assistance of the state legislature, a mayoral veto of further postponements, and increased enforcement, Butchertown finally moved south to the shores of Islais Creek in present-day Bayview. Though broader questions of zoning the City as a whole were not yet addressed, the City had at least shown that, given enough political will, it could exert meaningful influence on the pattern of private development after the initial platting of land. The American Planning Association designated the slaughterhouse and hog yards ordinance as a national planning landmark in 1990. As “one of the earliest applications of city land-use zoning powers in the country,” the award claimed, it “laid the foundations for zoning controls… in the U.S.”

1870 Cubic Air Ordinance and 1880 Laundry Ordinance

The 1870 Cubic Air ordinance required 500 cubic feet of air for every occupant of a room used for lodging. On its face, such a law sounds like it would be aimed at helping the living conditions of the poor. However, the law was created and employed in order to criminalize the city’s Chinese population. Like the Laundry ordinance that followed it in 1880, the ordinance was created by populist, nativist politicians who consistently scapegoated the City’s already disenchanted Chinese laborers in the name of concerns for white working class laborers. Both ordinances used appeals to public safety in order to single out Chinatown as a supposedly uniquely unsafe and in need of legal retribution.
The City Beautiful was an architectural movement which sought to impose a new moral order on American society through the creation of orderly, unified, and aesthetically pleasing urban spaces.

In 1904, Mayor James Phelan organized a private group, called the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco. This group invited Daniel Burnham, the former Director of Works for the Chicago Exposition, one of the main proponents of the City Beautiful vision and the most famous urban planner in America, to create a unified plan for the city's development.

Burnham proposed a grandiose re-thinking of San Francisco, much like Georges-Eugène Haussmann's system for Napoleonic Paris. The Burnham plan envisioned a new pattern of grand boulevards cutting through the City's existing grid, expediting the flow of traffic, and terminating the most important civic spaces. Drawing on the styles of classical Greece and Rome, he envisioned the City's hilltops as key visual markers, breaking the City's topographically-blind street grid with a mixture of open spaces, terraced streets, and public monuments.

Less than a year after the plan was presented to the public, much of San Francisco was leveled by the catastrophic earthquake and fire of 1906. Though Burnham and the Reconstruction Committee saw the City's destruction as the ideal opportunity to realize the plan, it was not to be. Political instability, the lack of strong government authority over private development, and the overwhelming civic desire to rebuild quickly all meant that the City was rebuilt on an essentially unchanged grid.

However, one key aspect of Burnham's plan did become reality. In 1909, Burnham took up the cause of a City Beautiful Civic Center at the site he had initially proposed at the intersection of Van Ness and Market. Though the public initially voted down a bond issue to cover the project, the idea was successfully revived in 1912, connecting the need for a grand civic center with the City's upcoming plans to host a World's Fair. Today, Civic Center represents the City's most ambitious foray into City Beautiful urban planning.
1912 Board of Supervisors Empowered to Create a Planning Commission

In 1912, San Francisco voters approved an amendment giving the Board of Supervisors the power to create a Planning Commission as an unpaid advisory body to the Board, which maintained all ultimate authority. The only direction given was that it would “devise plans for the improvement and beautification of San Francisco.” In the Board of Supervisors’ clarifying statement, this was simply shortened as “to suggest and devise plans for a City Beautiful.” The charter amendment passed, but with an incredibly slim margin of only 523 votes. Though the Board of Supervisors now had the power to create a Planning Commission, the low margin of victory at the polls translated into low political will, so the power lay unexercised.

1917 Appointing a Planning Commission

In 1913, San Francisco’s business and real estate interests played a significant role in passing the California State City Planning Enabling Act on May 21, 1915, formally empowering cities to create city planning commissions. Under this legislation, such commissions were authorized to make recommendations on a wide range of subjects affecting their city’s physical development. Included among these potential powers was the ability to divide “the city into zones or districts for the purposes of conserving and protecting the public health, comfort and convenience.”

Following the California State City Planning Enabling Act, the Board of Supervisors finally exercised their right to authorize a Planning Commission. However, facing opposition from the City’s engineer, Michael O’Shaughnessy, and with a likely unwillingness to give up any political power, Mayor James Rolph left the commission seats empty.

In 1917, city planning advocates were able to come to a compromise with the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors, and a City Planning Commission was finally appointed on December 28, 1917, comprised of four mayoral citizen appointees: Judge Matt I. Sullivan, Mrs. Abbie Krebs Wilkins, R. B. Hale, and Paul Scharrenberg.

This new arrangement largely maintained many of the existing power centers by giving the Commission little autonomy, no budget or staff, and extremely curtailed authority. As created, the Commission was primarily tasked with promoting land-use division and property setback lines by drafting a zoning regulation and drawing up an accompanying zoning map.

Even given these limitations, San Francisco had finally established a planning body within city government...
1921 First Zoning Ordinance

Following its creation in 1917, the Commission had a draft zoning ordinance by 1920. It laid out six divisions: 1st and 2nd Residential, Light and Heavy Industrial, one uniform Commercial, and a blanket Unrestricted District.

The City’s first zoning code finally passed in September 1921. Unsurprisingly, given the limited political will to create the Commission in the first place, the new code largely reproduced the City’s existing development patterns. The zoning ordinance contained no height limits and only limited residential density in the 1st Residential District while most of the City’s neighborhoods were designated 2nd Residential. The most noxious land uses were limited to the Industrial zones along the waterfront.

The Commercial zone included both the downtown and neighborhood areas and did not impose use size limits. The Unrestricted district, which is hard to imagine today, was located south of Islais Creek. Though it underwent modest changes over the years, the 1921 zoning code governed the San Francisco’s development until a new ordinance was passed in 1960.
Planning through the ’20s

Shortly on the heels of the first zoning law, the Commission also got a uniform set-back ordinance passed as law in 1922, thus completing the main points of its initial mandate. However, it continued to struggle with the limitations placed at its formation. At its core, the Commission was entirely beholden to the authority of the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors, as evidenced by its two-year-long fight for 40-foot height limits in portions of the Marina, Pacific Heights, and Presidio Heights, finally passed in 1928. Another public and prolonged planning fight raged from 1925 to 1928 over whether Judah or Lincoln should be the Sunset’s main commercial street, raising further questions about financial influences over the Board of Supervisors’ land-use decisions.

Once again, a similar coalition of real estate and business interests joined forces to call for planning reform, and passed a charter amendment in November of 1928 that finally granted the Planning Commission political power over land-use decisions. It widened the Commission’s reach beyond zoning and setbacks and tasked it with creating a general plan. Also included were some of the first neighborhood notification requirements and provisions for hiring professional planning staff, including a City Planner Engineer.

For the first time since it was first proposed in 1912, the Planning Commission’s power finally had teeth.

1932–1938 Developing the power of Conditional Use Authorizations

In the early 1930s, the powers of the Planning Commission and of zoning in general were challenged by the question of the placement of gas stations in the city’s new residential district, the Sunset. In order to be built, such structures required a rezoning from the neighborhood’s blanket residential zoning to commercial. Yet in the eyes of local property owners, this threatened the neighborhood’s suburban appeal and potentially opened the property to future possibly noxious uses.

As it stood, the Commission had no power to dictate specific building types or to approve a zoning change contingent on the building’s use. In 1932 this question prompted the Board of Supervisors to grant the Commission the power to approve re-zonings with stipulations on the “character of the improvements which will be placed on said property.”

Finally, in 1938, the Commission gained the power to approve certain non-conforming uses in residential districts through conditional use authorizations rather than zone changes.
1940
Telesis / San Francisco Housing and Planning Association (SPUR)

The Depression and the New Deal began the long process of reinventing the City’s political culture from its older, pro-business Republican leaning toward a Democratic coalition of labor, business, and government. This new wave of elected officials and civil servants increasingly shared a belief that government should play a larger role in guiding the City’s development.

This political philosophy of liberalism was paired with a new urban vision called Modernism. Modernism proposed monumental-scale transformations of the City, scientifically engineered for efficiency and aimed at alleviating all social ills. This faith in modernist urban planning was most successfully promoted locally by a group of architects, planners, and former New Dealers that called itself “Telesis.”

Through a series of exhibitions, lectures, and publications, Telesis functioned as a think tank and lobbied for more aggressive forms of urban planning. Telesis members helped found the Department of City and Regional Planning at Berkeley, transformed the San Francisco Housing Association into the San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal Association (SPUR), and led the redevelopment of the Western Addition. Through their work and larger national trends, this liberal, modernist vision became the planning orthodoxy in the post-war years. Telesis members helped found the Department of Urban Planning, which envisioned the City in uniform aesthetics.

1945
First General Plan: Intertwined with Passage of Community Redevelopment Act

The Master Plan was envisioned as the primary tool for thinking holistically about the organization of the City and its many functions. Unfortunately, in 1941, the Planning Commission reported that its three employees did not constitute “even a nucleus of a planning staff to properly undertake the preparation of any Master Plan.” In 1941, the Commission secured the funds to hire its first professional planning consultant, Ernest P. Goodrich, however, he never relocated from the East Coast and was only hired to work five days out of every two months. As a result, the plan languished. With a political showdown between the Board and the Mayor over traffic congestion and increasing pressure from Telesis-related groups, the Commission formally established the Planning Department in 1942 and hired its first Director, L. Deming Tilton. Before coming to San Francisco, Tilton had led several important planning efforts in Southern California, that work paid special attention to suburban development, planning for car traffic, and creating uniform aesthetics.

Tilton’s Planning Department produced the City’s first General Plan, adopted by the Commission in December of 1945. Rather than a fixed vision of the City’s future, the Plan was intended to serve as a living document and as “the first step in the continuous process of planning.” The plan was firmly rooted in contemporary modernist planning, speaking of the City as “a gigantic machine… engineered for efficiency and aimed at alleviating all social ills.” This faith in the power of modernist urban planning, speaking of the City as “a gigantic machine… engineered for efficiency and aimed at alleviating all social ills,” was indicative of blight which stood in the way of progress, that it could spread, and that it needed to be removed before it killed the City. It was a deeply political term firmly rooted in structural racism, which relied on fears of white flight and urban disinvestment to justify the wholesale removal of communities of color. The plan consisted of three sections. The “Transportation and Utilities Plan” aimed to coordinate the City’s large public works project, including the state’s proposed network of freeways. The “Land Use Plan” built on the 1945 Community Redevelopment Act, which allowed cities to create redevelopment agencies that could establish “project areas” to decrease blight. In fulfillment, the 1945 General Plan identified the Western Addition, South of Market, Chinatown, the Mission, and Bayview/Hunter’s Point as “general areas in which conditions indicative of blight are found.”

“Blight” is a botanical reference to a fungal disease that spreads from plant to plant. In urban planning, it was used to describe impoverished neighborhoods that planners believed needed to be completely rebuilt. The implications were that “blight” stood in the way of progress, that it could spread, and that it needed to be removed before it killed the City. It was a deeply political term firmly rooted in structural racism, which relied on fears of white flight and urban disinvestment to justify the wholesale removal of communities of color.
By the late 1960s, these two government bodies were in growing conflict with one another, with the Planning Department struggling to gain an upper hand on the Redevelopment Agency’s politically powerful director, Justin Herman, while also avoiding the growing public backlash aimed at the Agency’s destructive work program.

The unified face of city planning began to show fissures within city government in the late 1940s and early 1950s. During these years the Mayor, the Planning Commission, and the Planning Director all found themselves in open conflict at one time or another. The core question in many of these disputes was how, and indeed if, San Francisco would accommodate its growing postwar population. The war years had proved that there was a growing mismatch between the City’s housing supply and demand. Under the Directorship of Paul Opperman, the Planning Department pressed the City to focus on suburban style development. This was aimed at keeping pace with the new housing tracts ringing the Bay, and took it larger Cold War defense strategies which saw dense cities as potential enemy targets and sources of social dissent. Opperman championed enlarged minimum lot sizes and offstreet parking requirements, both of which resulted in less-dense, more middle-class neighborhoods. The power struggles became so intense that at one point a grand jury even suggested that the Mayor eliminate the Planning Department, citing “dissension” and “lack of cooperation” between Opperman, the Commissioner, and other City departments.

One of the biggest symbols of this lack of civic consensus was the effort to update the City’s zoning code. In 1951 the Chronicle reported that “because of the inflexibility of the present ordinance, which had 1,776 changes made in it by the Planning Commission and the Supervisors since 1921” A new ordinance was anticipated as early as 1947, when a state's passed yet another charter amendment aimed at strengthening the city’s planning powers. Besides formalizing the creation of the Planning Department and the position of Planning Director, this amendment proposed a new Zoning Administrator position to take on the growing task of issuing variances. It made the creation of this new position contingent on major updates to the code.

The Planning Commission was reluctant to give up power to a new administrator and delayed the code’s approval. Furthermore, proposed restrictions on large scale development, including height limits and stricter floor-to-area ratios, were staunchly opposed by the City’s development interests. Though a draft ordinance was ready by 1949, its approval dragged on for an additional ten years.

The 1940s began with the passage of the long-delayed zoning code. The new ordinance gave the City’s fractured zoning tools that the 1921 ordinance contained. The Code largely reaffirmed planners’ liberal modernist visions, setting no meaningful limits on Downtown development, dictating suburban-style lot coverage rules for some residential areas, and permitting high rise apartment towers in others. As the city that post-war planners had reaffirmed planners’ liberal modernist visions, setting no meaningful limits on Downtown development, dictating suburban-style lot coverage rules for some residential areas, and permitting high rise apartment towers in others. As the city that post-war planners had kept pace with the new housing tracts ringing the Bay, and fit larger Cold War defense strategies which saw dense cities as potential enemy targets and sources of social dissent. Opperman championed enlarged minimum lot sizes and offstreet parking requirements, both of which resulted in less-dense, more middle-class neighborhoods. The power struggles became so intense that at one point a grand jury even suggested that the Mayor eliminate the Planning Department, citing “dissension” and “lack of cooperation” between Opperman, the Commissioner, and other City departments.

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In 1954, a developer sought to build a motel at 19th and Lawton across the street from Shriners Hospital. The Hospital objected that while the Sunset's R2 zoning allowed hotels, motels were a type of use not anticipated in the 1920s zoning ordinance. The Commission sought the City Attorney’s advice who affirmed that the City had “supreme control” over the issuance of building permits under the authority of its so-called “police power,” and that the laws invest the Planning Commission with the power to exercise its sound discretion in determining compliance with the code.

Though the City Attorney said that this power was “a sensitive discretion and one which must be exercised with the utmost restraint,” it greatly enlarged the Commission’s authority. It also expanded the public’s ability to participate in the planning process, creating the authority by which individuals may request a project undergo a discretionary review hearing. Sensing the significance of this change, a Commissioner opposed the decision said, “If we are going to start reviewing every building application with a protest against it, all anyone will have to do is dredge up some feeble-minded citizen to oppose and we will sit for a full-dress hearing.”

This decision continues to set San Francisco’s planning processes apart from most other jurisdictions where most projects are approved “by right” of applicable planning and zoning laws without the need for discretionary decisions.

By the late 1950s, the city that modernist planners had been envisioning since the Second World War was finally coming into being, complete with freeways, high-rise apartment towers, and massive redevelopment areas. But these successes of the post-war planning consensus backfired as citizens increasingly resisted. Though this opposition took many forms, one of its most famous demonstrations was the so-called “Freeway Revolt.”

Between 1959 and 1969, a new coalition of neighborhood, environmental, and preservation activists successfully pressured the Board of Supervisors to reject several important pieces of the state’s proposed freeway network in the City. Had this not happened and had earlier plans been followed, San Francisco’s cityscape may well have included a freeway through the Sunset, an additional freeway through the Mission, a freeway through the Panhandle and Golden Gate Park, bridges to Alameda and Angel Island, and a continuous stretch of freeway along the entire northwest waterfront from the Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate.
In 1962, the Commission passed an ordinance governing large signs, intended “to improve the appearance of the City and County and preserve its inherent attractive features.” The same aesthetic concerns in part motivated the supporters of the contemporary freeway revolt who, the following year, succeeded in getting the Board of Supervisors to require that future freeway plans protect “land values, human values, and the preservation of the City’s treasured appearance.” In this context, the sign ordinance marked an important shift away from the modernist/functionalist planning thinking of the 1940s and 1950s, and towards the concerns of neighborhood activists and the emerging environmentalist movement which would dominate planning in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1966, San Francisco received federal funding to prepare a computer simulation of the City’s housing demand, marking the City’s first serious effort to integrate computing into urban planning. The project was notoriously complex and required scheduling time on large institutional research computers in order to run the desired simulation. Even then, the program took several hours to set up and several more hours to run. Despite the sizeable government funds spent on the project, and the promises of consultants and officials alike, the model failed to produce meaningful or useful results. The project was not a complete wash, however; in 1967 the Planning Department used data compiled for the project in order to produce a Housing Inventory Report. This annual Housing Inventory Reports continues to be the longest-running, continuous publication of the department.
More recently, voters passed Proposition J in 2008, replacing the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board with a new Historic Preservation Committee. This new body reports directly to the Board of Supervisors and is made up of seven members, six of whom are required to be preservation professionals.

ENDANGERED

The Humphreys House, once at the northeast corner of Hyde and Chestnut Streets, a fine house designed in the Victorian Gothic mode, was demolished in 1982 from material salvaged from Hom. The building, at the crest of Russian Hill with its huge eucalyptus tree at the street corner, was a favorite San Francisco landmark. It was demolished in 1947 for a lack of established procedures to channel belated community concern over its destruction.

Diagram of "Community Noise Exposure Levels (CNEL) San Francisco International Airport, 1972 Operations" from the draft EIR for the SFO expansion project, published August 1973. This was one of the Department's first major EIRs.

Lost

The roots of this effort trace back to the work of the Junior League, whose earlier survey of historic structures, Here Today, directly informed Article 10. That title reflected the belief of many contemporary neighborhood and environmentalists that without fast, proactive action, much of the City's historic fabric would soon be lost. The plight of specific endangered buildings and districts often provided the energy behind much of early preservation movement, especially the loss of the Fox Theater, the Fontana Warehouse, and many Victorians in the Western Addition.

In 1970, the California Legislature passed the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). It was among the first environmental protection laws in the nation, and just months after the enactment of the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Among CEQA's most important elements was the requirement of local agencies to produce Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs) for public review.

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Initially, the law was interpreted as applying only to government projects, however the 1972 California Supreme Court ruling in Friends of Mammoth vs Board of Supervisors of Mono County interpreted CEQA to cover projects, public or private, approved by a government agency's discretionary decision. Initially the City scrambled to provide CEQA review for all of the projects implicated by this court decision. In 1973, the Board of Supervisors adopted Chapter 31 of the Administrative Code which established local procedures for implementing this state law.

This dramatically reshaped planning processes and politics across the state, especially in San Francisco, where a 1954 City Attorney's decision meant that nearly every action taken by the Planning Commission amounted to a discretionary decision. Though CEQA only required study and documentation of environmental impacts - not their elimination - the public input requirements for that process created an immensely powerful point of leverage for a broad set of public activists. In 1988 the California Supreme Court resolved a local case brought by the Laurel Heights Community Improvement Association vs the UCSF that established that CEQA review must "afford the fullest possible protection" bound by what is "reasonable foreseeable". As a result, the Planning Department's Environmental Review workload broadened, members of the public gained a much larger seat at the table in planning decision making, and the City's already boisterous planning process became even more so.

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1971 Urban Design Plan

Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Planning Department rewrote the City’s General Plan. In these new plans, the Department squarely moved away from the Downtown-focused, modernist, functional thinking that had dominated the planning establishment during the post-war decades. This followed the path that many in the public had already taken through the 1960s, halting the spread of freeways, fighting the wholesale destruction of redevelopment, and increasingly souring on the rising skyline of certain high-rise buildings such as the Fontana Towers and the Bank of America Building.

Among the most groundbreaking of the new plan elements was the Urban Design Plan, which directly reflected the concerns of the Department’s new director, Allan Jacobs. Rather than drastically remake the city, the Urban Design Plan sought to protect its existing fabric and essential physical characteristics at the level of both the broad cityscape and the individual building. To cultivate human-scale amenities, and to provide landscaping along streets for livability. Created at a time when most American cities sought to fight deindustrialization by tearing out the old and emulating the suburbs, it proposed radical reinvestment in the urban fabric and a reimagining urban livability. This marked the first time that a major American city had passed such comprehensive urban design rules backed with specific zoning controls around issues such as preservation, height, and bulk.

Residential Rezoning

During the mid-1970s, political activists drew alliances between neighborhood preservationists, affordable housing activists, and environmentalists. Galvanized by earlier victories stopping redevelopment and freeway expansion, they turned their energy towards residential zoning controls. Mayor George Moscone appointed Sue Bierman to the Planning Commission, as Director Rai Yukio Okamoto led the work for the Commission’s 1978 Residential Rezoning. This rezoning effort resulted in tighter controls on residential density through the use of a 40’ height limit, rear-yard and front-setback requirements. This rezoning also established the first residential design guidelines.
Managing Change

Dianne Feinstein, Mayor 1978–1988
Ann B.孕, Mayor 1994–1996
Mike A. Clothier, Mayor 1996–2004

The Downtown Plan and the Neighborhood Rezonings

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, San Francisco was experiencing a boom in commercial office development and public discontent with the continuing construction of modern high-rises that had been increasing since the 1960s. The 1970s had seen a distinct escalation in citizen participation in planning decision-making, aided by CEQA, district elections, and the election of George Moscone as Mayor in 1976. The result was a new down-growth movement that increasingly demanded the City account for the cumulative impacts of high-rise development, contain the spread of “downtown,” and improve the quality of the “refrigerator boxes” popping up on the skyline. As large skyscrapers continued to appear, many voices replaced significant cherished historic buildings, public pressure to stop what they considered a threat to the essential character of their city. Similar to the freeway revolt decades earlier, the “skyscraper revolt” led to the City commanding the strictest planning restrictions of any city in the nation.

In response, the Planning Department, led by Planning Director Dean Macris, initiated a major planning process aimed at limiting and sculpting the growing business district while keeping high-rises out of Chinatown, North Beach, and the Tenderloin. The key to the Downtown Plan’s many innovations was a move away from an older mindset within the planning field that cities should work to attract development at any cost. Instead, it proposed that the planners could leverage the developer’s interest to build in San Francisco to get them to provide public benefits including open space, transit, and other items as well as public amenities such as public art and privately-owned public open spaces. The Plan, the Planning Department argued, had to complement the existing Downtown, not dominate it. The Downtown Plan was a watershed victory of historic preservation movement in the City, with the Plan designating over 20,000 buildings for preservation, and creating the City’s first enforceable Development Right program. The Downtown Plan sought to allow growth within limits that preserved sunlight and conserved important buildings. With a very powerful force to play, adoption of the Plan was highly contested. The City Attorney, George Agnost, initially argued that preservation was unconstitutional. Mayor Dianne Feinstein redrew the development and became a firm supporter of the Plan. Prior to finalizing the draft, the Board of Supervisors issued an executive order to prevent over-construction during the first three years.

Predictably, the Downtown Plan did not end the high-rise debate, but it added to public confidence that rules were in place to modify rampant, indiscriminate construction; City Hall had joined the upper hand and developers were required to meet high standards. More, as seen from the national perspective in a front-page article of New York Times put it in 1984, “In brief, the plan – no radical in its restrictions on skyscraper development that it is impossible to imagine it even being proposed in any other major city – was reviewed by many San Francisco politicians as being too weak.” Soon thereafter, the voters passed Proposition M in 1985, which made the temporary limits on office development permanent law.

Preserving the Neighborhoods

As the Downtown Plan was being developed, so too were plans underway to manage growth in the adjacent neighborhoods. The Planning Commission also oversaw efforts that resulted in area plans for Chinatown, the Tenderloin, South of Market and Van Ness Avenue in the early and mid-1980s. While the Department also prepared never-realized plans for Mission Bay, that effort was ultimately completed by the Redevelopment Agency. In Chinatown, however, it was concern over the Redevelopment Agency declaring the neighborhood blighted combined with the restrictions placed by the Downtown Plan that led to Planning Department involvement. Quickly twin efforts led by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (the Six Companies) on one hand, and on the other, Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center and Asian Neighborhood Design led to competing plans. In 1995, with Lucian Blazes as Planning Director, the Commission adopted a plan that balanced the two alternatives to preserve the unique physical and cultural character while stabilizing the housing supply and affordability.

Similarly, many neighborhood residents felt that the character of their neighborhood shopping districts was changing. Many properties that had formerly housed a more diverse mix of ground floor neighborhood-serving retail and second floor residences were increasingly being converted into restaurants, bars, bank branches, fast food chains, boutiques, and professional offices. Starting in 1980, the Board of Supervisors, the Planning Commission, and the Planning Department faced these challenges by establishing and refining a set of new guidelines that made sure of a balance between commercial retail, food, and entertainment; a diverse mix of uses; and the preservation of the essential character of the neighborhoods. In the early and mid-1980s, the Department also prepared never-realized plans for Mission Bay, that effort was ultimately completed by the Redevelopment Agency. In Chinatown, however, it was concern over the Redevelopment Agency declaring the neighborhood blighted that led to Planning Department involvement. Quickly twin efforts led by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (the Six Companies) on one hand, and on the other, Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center and Asian Neighborhood Design led to competing plans. In 1995, with Lucian Blazes as Planning Director, the Commission adopted a plan that balanced the two alternatives to preserve the unique physical and cultural character while stabilizing the housing supply and affordability.

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A New Millennium

2000

The late 1990s dot-com boom created a resurgence of growth management issues that the City had been grappling with in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This time, the focus turned away from downtown and toward the more industrial parts of the City, largely in the City’s Southeast sector. Liberal zoning controls in industrial neighborhoods, exploitation of allowances for live-work buildings, and much unpermitted conversion of industrial buildings to office use created a general concern around scattershot and unplanned growth, preservation of industrial lands, and gentrification and displacement of adjacent lower income communities and communities of color. These trends were exacerbated by a general resurgence in urban living and the dramatic price spike in both housing and commercial real estate regionally due to rapid job and wage growth of the dot-com boom.

In March of 1998, the Commission adopted interim Industrial Protection Zones, sparking a dialogue asking how much of this land would be needed for industrial uses in the future – as opposed to what could be transitioned into full-service residential neighborhoods. As the study of the industrial lands heated up, it became clear the San Francisco should continue to ensure a future for “industry” in the City, but not the smokestack industry of past eras. Instead, policy debate focused on the role of these businesses in functionally supporting the City’s residents and primary economic activities, as well as enhancing job diversity. This sector was given the new title of PDR for production, distribution and repair.

The Eastern Neighborhoods program grew out of the successive layer of interim controls both by the Commission and the Board to protect these businesses. While the Eastern Neighborhoods process was originally envisioned as merely a zoning exercise to resolve this issue, affected communities demanded that the effort be expanded to also comprehensively plan for improving quality of life and address the needs. Eventually, the effort would produce area plans and rezoning for the Mission, Potrero Hill / Showplace Square, East SoMa, and the Central Waterfront, and were adopted in December 2008.

1996 New City Charter

On November 7, 1995, San Franciscans passed Proposition E, adopting a comprehensive update to the City’s charter. The previous charter had been written in 1932, largely in order to place checks on the powers of the mayor. Several groups had attempted to amend the charter over the subsequent 60 years to no avail, most notably with Proposition E in 1968 and Proposition A in 1980. Despite it failing at the polls, the 1980 proposal greatly informed the ultimately successful efforts undertaken in 1994 and 1995.

The 1996 Charter made several notable changes to the City’s planning processes. The 1932 Charter gave the Commission complete control of the “Master Plan.” The 1996 version changed the name to the “General Plan” and broadened involvement of the Board of Supervisors, requiring changes to be approved by Ordinance for the first time. Concerning mayoral appointees, it gave the Board of Supervisors the power to reject an appointee to the Planning Commission with a supermajority vote, and it gave the Planning Commission much greater power over whom the mayor appoints as Planning Director. Additionally, it updated the language for how the Zoning Administrator grants variances.

The changes within the 1996 Charter foreshadowed further changes to the Commission. In 2002, the voters passed Proposition D which, for the first time, split the Commission’s appointments between the Mayor and the President of the Board of Supervisors.

1999–2009 Dot Com Boom and Industrial Protection: Eastern Neighborhoods

Changes to the General Plan Process

Willy E. Brown, Mayor 1996–2004
Gavin Newsom, Mayor 2004–2011
Gerald Green, Planning Director 1996–2004
Lawrence “Larry” Badiner August 2003 –2004 (Acting)
Dean Macris, Planning Director 2004–2008
John Falues, Planning Director 2008–Present

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At the same time, building on the national trend to returning to urban living, the Department sought funds to do comprehensive neighborhood planning for neighborhoods that were well-served by transit and that afforded significant opportunities for new housing. The Better Neighborhoods Program, launched in 1999, attempted to respond to these increasing pressures through comprehensive, localized plans in three areas surrounding transit: Balboa Park, Market-Octavia, and the Central Waterfront. Market and Octavia further capitalized on the soon-to-be-removed Central Freeway, which had been damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, to re-knit the neighborhood together and create new housing opportunities.

Broadly speaking, most planning efforts from the late 1960s through the early 1990s had focused on strengthening the City’s Downtown core and preserving the neighborhoods by limiting opportunity for growth. Better Neighborhoods shifted the focus to finding more space for housing in new midrise, transit-oriented mixed-use neighborhoods, recognizing the need to accommodate housing demand in a thoughtful, sustainable way. Better Neighborhoods rested on a belief that great neighborhoods shared eight common elements: the ability to walk to shops, safe streets, the ability to get around easily, a variety of housing choices, places for people to gather, a full range of services, a special neighborhood character, and a role to play within the larger city as a whole.

These plans focused as much on envisioning redesigned streets and new open spaces and improved zoning controls and urban design guidelines to reinforce pedestrian-oriented buildings as they did on planning for housing growth. The first of these plans to see adoption would be the Market & Octavia Plan under the new leadership of Director John Rahaim in 2008, followed shortly thereafter by the Balboa Park Station Area Plan.

2003–2012 New High-Density Neighborhoods Adjacent to Downtown (Downtown Neighborhoods: Rincon Hill and Transit Center District Plans)

Capitalizing on the demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway and significant new public investment at the Transbay Transit Center, a new Rincon Hill Plan and strategy for the adjacent Transbay district looked to re-envision the southern side of downtown, building on the ideas of the Downtown Plan, with high-density housing located in tall, slender towers, with active uses at the ground floor. Together with the Redevelopment Agency, Planning created the Rincon Hill and Transbay Redevelopment plans, both adopted in 2005, to create a dense, but green, downtown residential neighborhood centered on Folsom Street (site of the former elevated Embarcadero Freeway). The Plan accomplished a few significant firsts, including parking maximums instead of parking minimums, removal of residential density controls, and a minimum housing to commercial use ratio.

Following on the heels of these Plans, the Planning Department led an effort to revisit the plans and zoning around the Transbay Transit Center itself, the area envisioned by the Downtown Plan as the densest center of the evolving downtown. The Transit Center District Plan, adopted in 2012, re-focused the downtown skyline on its geographic and transit epicenter, refined the Downtown Plan’s goals for quality of place in this dense hub, and established new “value capture” benchmarks for generating substantial revenues for public infrastructure, including the Transbay Transit Center and a future Downtown Rail Extension.
San Francisco continues to grapple with a number of crucial issues and challenges facing the City. Housing affordability remains the most pressing concern of our times, while ongoing gentrification of neighborhoods and displacement of long-term residents and communities forces us to ask who the City is for.

Looking Ahead

Providing Housing for All

With over 65,000 units of new housing approved over the last several years, many are in several large master-planned developments that will remake underused areas of the City, such as the Hunters Point Shipyard, Treasure Island, and Pier 70. Home SF, adopted in 2017, incentivizes the building of more affordable and family-friendly housing in neighborhood commercial and transit corridors through zoning modifications. The City has recently completed a year-long process to adopt new regulations requiring market-rate developments to include affordable units and has enabled the construction of thousands of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) to help provide more affordable housing.

Safeguarding Cultural Heritage

San Francisco’s cultural heritage is a valuable historical, social, and economic resource that requires thoughtful management to safeguard the City’s unique identity and to ensure a high quality of life for its future inhabitants. Sustaining the traditions, businesses, arts, and practices that compose San Francisco’s social and economic fabric preserves experiences that can be shared across generations. Safeguarding the City’s heritage contributes to maintaining resilient and distinctive neighborhoods, an exceptional quality of life for residents and enriching experience for visitors. Conserving both the tangible and intangible elements of our cultural heritage encourages a deeper awareness of our shared and multi-faceted history while facilitating sustainable economic development.

In recent years, the City’s Board of Supervisors has recognized several cultural heritage districts that are distinguished by unique social and historical associations and living traditions, including the Japantown Cultural Heritage and Economic Sustainability Strategy (2013), the first formally designated cultural heritage district, Calle 24 (Veinticuatro) Latino Cultural District in the Mission neighborhood (2014), and the formal designation the SoMa-Pilipinas – Filipino Cultural Heritage District (2016).

In 2015, the Board of Supervisors approved Ordinance No. 29-15 to establish a Legacy Business Registry, recognizing that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets to the City and encouraging their continued viability and success. In the same year, local Measure J established the Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund to include those that have operated in San Francisco for more than 20 years, are at risk of displacement, and meet all other requirements of the Registry.

Resilient and Sustainable Waterfront

Over the coming decades, the impacts of sea level rise and the increasing frequency and intensity of storms mean that areas currently unaffected could begin to experience periodic coastal and/or urban flooding. In the face of natural hazards such as sea level rise and seismic vulnerability, the Sea Level Rise Action Plan is the first step toward developing a citywide Sea Level Rise Adaptation Plan by 2018 to address immediate and long-term threats of sea level rise.

The Plan defines an overarching vision and set of objectives for future sea level rise and coastal flooding planning and mitigation in San Francisco, providing direction for City departments to understand and adapt to the impacts of sea level rise, and identifies what long-term sea level rise means for San Francisco’s residents, visitors, economy and waterfront.

Advancing Community Equity and Opportunity

Endorsed by the Planning Commission in 2017, the Mission Action Plan 2020 (MAP2020) aims to retain low to moderate-income residents and community-serving businesses, artists, and nonprofits in order to strengthen and preserve the socioeconomic diversity of the Mission neighborhood. The Plan came out of a two-year community-initiated process which deeply engaged community partners in a conversation of what is most needed for the neighborhood. Moving forward, the Department will seek to understand where gentrification and displacement are most acute, and learn from the MAP2020 model to bring strategies to prevent displacement to other communities, and to implement these strategies.

Keeping People Moving As the City Grows

The Transportation Sustainability Program was developed to improve and expand upon San Francisco’s transportation system to help accommodate the City’s growth. The Transportation Sustainability Program is comprised of the following three components: Enhance Transportation to Support Growth (Invest), Modernize Environmental Review (Align), and Encourage Sustainable Travel (Shift).

Adopted in 2015, the Transportation Sustainability Fee requires new development to invest more in our transportation system to help address the impacts of growth. In 2016, the San Francisco Planning Commission adopted a resolution making San Francisco the first city in California to move forward with state-proposed guidelines that modernize the way City officials measure the transportation impacts of new development, allowing San Francisco to immediately implement changes to how it analyzes environmental impacts of development and transportation projects rather than wait for state adoption.

Signed into law in 2017, the Transportation Demand Management Program (TDM) requires developments to provide on-site amenities that support sustainable modes of transportation and reduce single-occupancy driving trips associated with new development.