

**SFGate.com****Place: In S.F., Jessie St. is looking good**

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At a time when economic tumult throws the future into doubt, the first block of Jessie Street in San Francisco looks better than ever.

Its workaday structures have shrugged off more than a ricocheting Dow; its young towers offer handsome plazas that serve as soothing retreats. The accumulated layers of history - some obvious, some not - remind us that cities have a life of their own beyond the spin of daily news or the edicts of city planners.

I mention planners because this block of Jessie between First and Second streets is being studied as part of the larger effort to build a new Transbay Terminal nearby and, oh yes, make room around it for another 8 million square feet of office space.

The skyline was the news when initial recommendations were released this spring - no surprise, since the terminal might be accompanied by a 1,000-foot-high office tower, with room in the 'hood for other towers in the 700-foot range. Such heights haven't been floated here since the 853-foot Transamerica Pyramid opened in 1972.

But the focus isn't all about "sculpting the skyline," as some planners like to say. Nor is it confined to the search for ways to bring in additional fees and revenues that might help fund the terminal (and the commuter rail tunnel into its basement).

"We're concerned with how it will feel to walk through the district," Joshua Switzky of the city's planning department told a crowd of 75 or so Wednesday at Golden Gate University. "These are important issues to us."

Switzky is the lead planner for what is being called the Transit Center District, a 16-block area roughly bounded by Market, Folsom, Fremont and Third streets. When he unveiled the recommended height limits in April, his venue at the university was an auditorium instead of a lecture hall. The audience numbered about 250.

In the long run, though, the issues kicked around Wednesday are more important to the essence of what the district will become. The challenge is this: to couple vertical growth with a ground-level world that feels urbane, that is attractive and safe and filled with reasons to come back.

Much of what's likely to be in the draft plan later this year will glaze the eyes of everyone but planning wonks.

Office lobbies would be restricted to a street width of no more than 40 feet, for instance, and retail spaces can only stretch 50 feet - two stabs at ensuring a variety of activities on each block.

With an eye to pedestrian ambiance, garage entrances and loading docks would be discouraged on major streets while trees would be planted *en masse* ("it's a pretty barren place right now," Switzky said). Towers of more than 500 feet would taper as they rise to guard against an "inhuman scale" and a "neck-craning, more canyon type of feel."

His words, not mine.

The presentation at times had a surrealistic tinge; it's strange to hear methodical discussion about the floor plates of super-tall office towers during a week when the stock market gyrated in all directions and the U.S. Treasury secretary warned against an economic crisis not seen since 1929. Banks aren't looking to finance construction projects, they're scrambling to stay afloat.

Yet isn't this how cities work? The transformation of Mission Street into a zone lined by crisp glass towers didn't happen overnight: the zoning that allows these high rises came out of 1985's ambitious Downtown Plan. We've had recessions and wars and panics since then, plus a good-size earthquake in 1989.

Which brings us back to first block of Jessie Street.

It sits behind the main building of Golden Gate University, narrow and too often in shade. Towers bump against it, but the mood is set by the half-dozen surviving warehouses erected in the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake.

They aren't warehouses now, though.

Across from the university's backside, at the corner of Jessie and pedestrian-only Ecker Place, sits a concrete warehouse from 1913 that spent much of its life as home to an engineering firm that stored boilers.

Now, it serves as the university's Student Services Center; the architecture firm Ratcliff did a nice seismic upgrade that added two stories while restoring the structure in a way that celebrates the blue-collar past. The enormous warehouse doors remain, accented with robust red paint; billboard-size names of long-gone tenants have been repainted in their original location above the second floor.

The building across the way, One Ecker, is a four-story brick warehouse that would look at home

amid the venerable landmarks of Jackson Square, north of the financial district. In 1972, it was converted from a warehouse to funky office space . Now, it has a third life; Heller Manus Architects retooled it as residential space for 51 condominiums. Starting prices: \$450,000 for a studio, sans parking.

A big reason these buildings survive is that government stepped in, marking them as historic resources and off-limits even while allowing towers to sprout elsewhere on the block. But no planner foresaw Jessie becoming home to a lounge for college students, or the home of people with disposable incomes.

Next month, next year, next decade, the economy will right itself and move on. And at an entirely different pace, the Transit District will emerge - with twists and turns along the way that no one can predict.

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