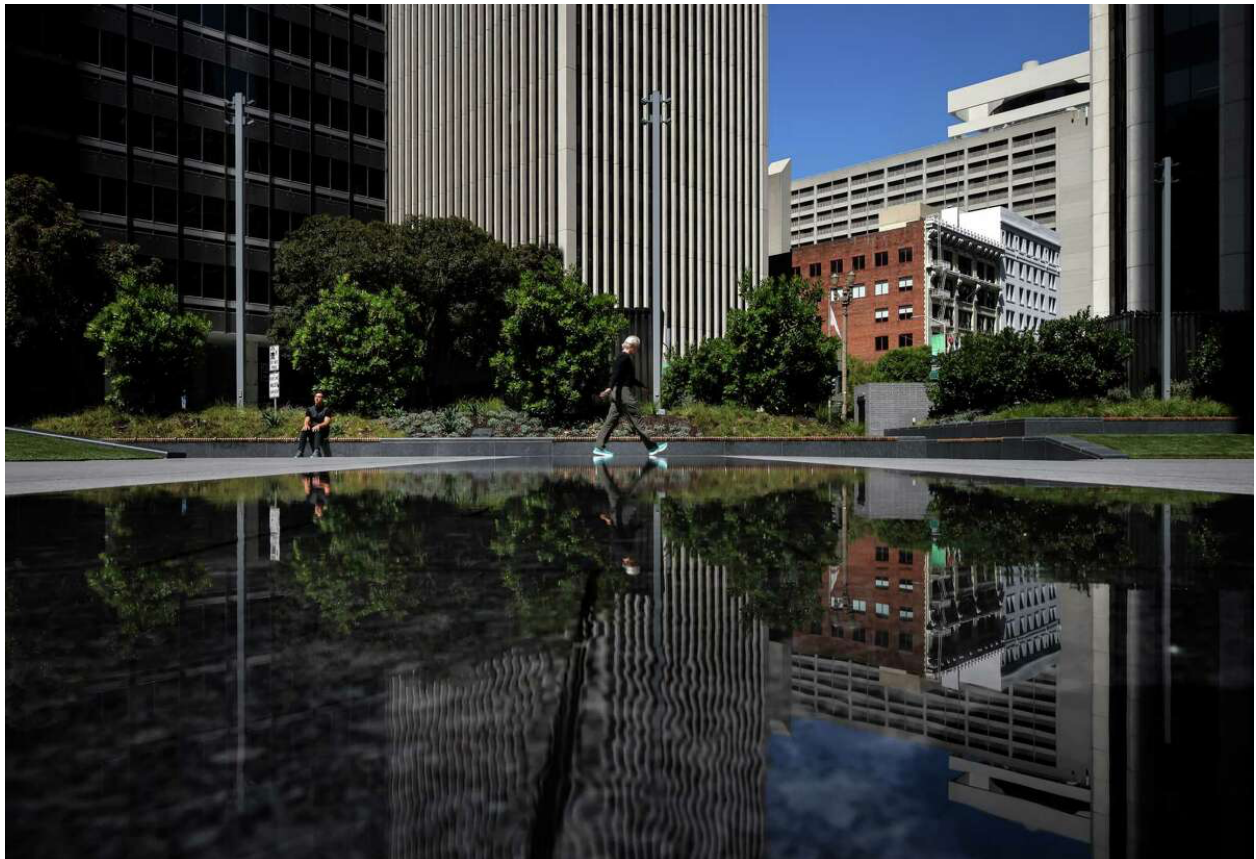


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# Downtown San Francisco has 3 surprising ‘new’ public spaces. Here’s where they are

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The reflecting pool in the public plaza at 101 California St. in San Francisco carries a gusto that adds allure to the public spot.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Urban public spaces can't be judged just by how they look. They're most important as acts of social engineering, sending messages in terms of who is welcome and who is not.

Which is why I have such conflicted feelings about the makeover of the large, triangular plaza outside the 48-story 101 California office tower — a redo that's a pale sequel of its predecessor in design terms, but excels as a comfortable and varied place to be.

That's crucial in a summer where the health of downtown San Francisco is being scrutinized by people and pundits around the world. The transformation of 101 California and two other newly renovated spaces in the Financial District offer three fresh attractions that give the area a needed spark, even though each of them has flaws.

In the case of 101 California, the intersection is a 1-acre space near Market Street that replaces the 1982 original. Two blocks to the west is the redone 15th-floor rooftop terrace at 343 Sansome, from 1990. Head three blocks south to the corner of Bush and Sansome streets and you'll encounter the marbled "conservatory" that fills the skylit shell of a 1910 banking temple now serving as the public space for One Sansome, a 42-story tower.

None of them are truly public: Each was built and is maintained by the owners of towers, as required by city planning rules that date to the 1980s. This leads to an inevitable tension — who is welcome and who isn't? — that is especially apparent at One Sansome.

The conservatory has radiated a posh but icy air since the adjacent tower opened in 1984, and the structural upgrade is an improvement. One example: Four of its seven classical, arched entries now have glass inserts that swing up and extend outward, like canopies signaling passersby that this is their space, too.

That sense of welcome dissipates once inside, as surely as if the two huge new ceiling fans below the skyline had blown it away.



The Conservatory at One Sansome in San Francisco was redone to include glass inserts into its archways that swing upward.

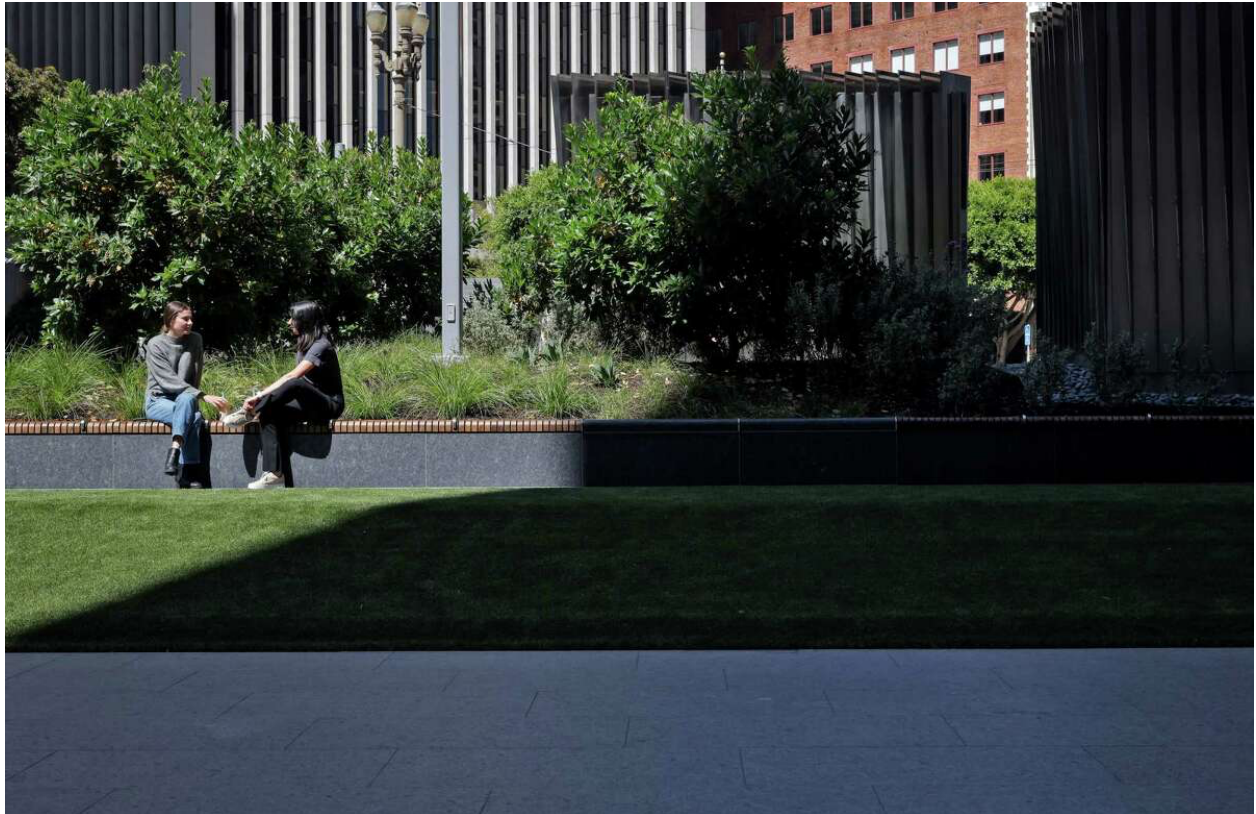
Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Forget about low-key tables and seats where you would feel comfortable eating a burrito: The furniture is a cross between French Baroque and lobby modern, including upholstered chairs that extend upward on three sides past even a tall person's chin (so much for armrests). Except for two high communal tables with backless stools — *de rigueur* in the tech world — the only horizontal surfaces are a few round glass tables, less than 16 inches wide.

“We’ve committed to the city to make it fully open to the public,” said Michael Barker of Barker Pacific Group, One Sansome’s owner. At the same time, “We want to make it feel like a private club that’s open to the public.”

They succeeded. This feels like a space for formal galas more than kicking back. And not by chance — Barker Pacific Group last month won Planning Commission approval to close off the space not only on the weekends, but also one day per month to hold private events. Nights and weekends, it’s being marketed as “a one-of-a-kind guest experience.”

The plaza at 101 California, by contrast, couldn't be closed off if you tried.



Two women chat in the sun in the public plaza at 101 California St. in San Francisco.  
Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

The ground level space opens onto California and Davis streets, with broad paths past raised planters topped by already large strawberry trees. The retaining walls for the planter beds provide seating, as do two snug “lawns” of artificial turf that face the atrium of the saw-toothed barrel-like tower.

The plaza design bears no resemblance to the original one by local firm SWA — a sculptural landscape anchored by three stepped pyramids that hid mechanical systems while offering room to sit amid fat planters. Everything was overscale, a deliberate match to the jagged oomph of the tower designed by Philip Johnson. They even shared the same pink granite skin that helps the high-rise retain a powerful presence on our ever-more-crowded skyline.

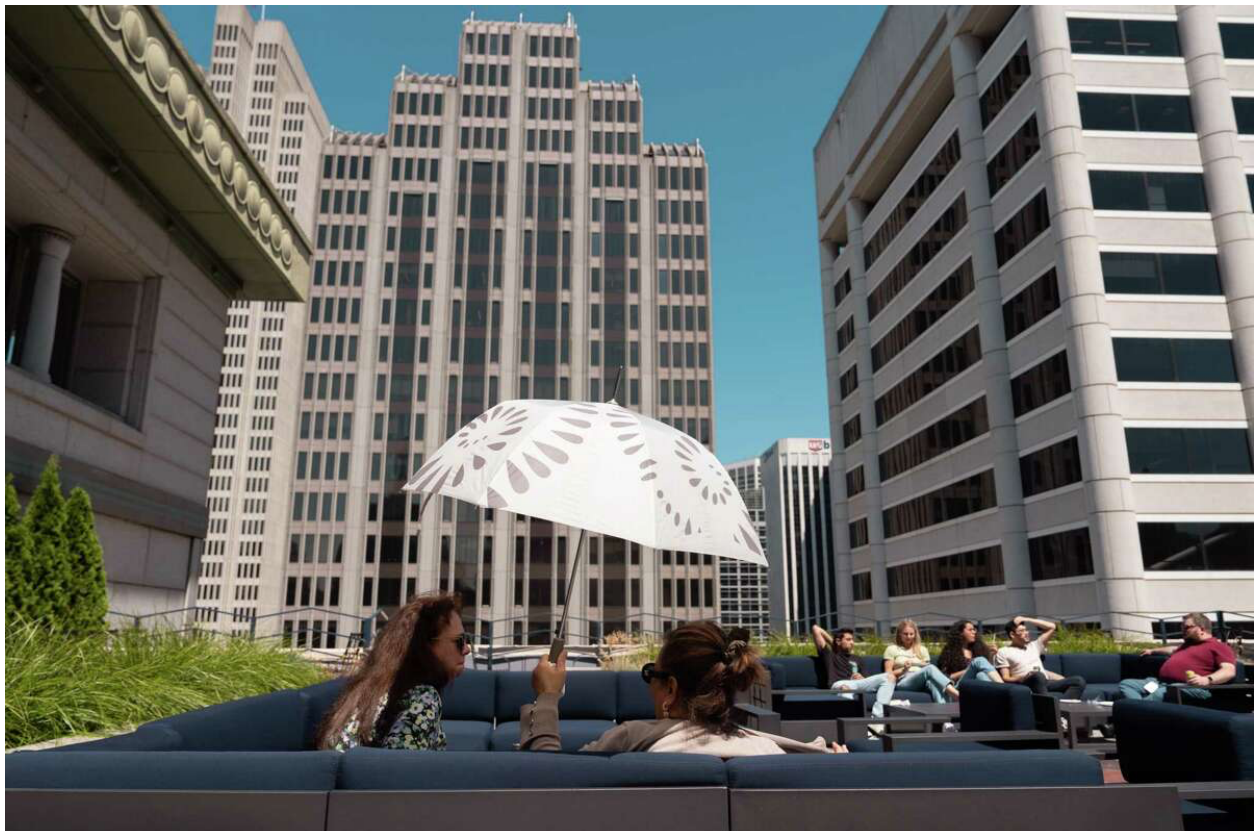
Height playing off height. Strength meeting strength, down to the round granite fountain that spilled water with a traffic-muffling roar.

That gusto is what I miss about the former space: This one is all about methodical calibrated placemaking. It feels innocuous.

But it also feels safe and inviting, and that's what counts in our day and age. You can migrate to central or peripheral spaces depending on your mood. Sight lines add a sense of security, but the space isn't stark.

"The challenge was, how do you make things feel more open and public and accessible," said Gregory Mottola of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, the architecture firm that teamed with the OJB landscape architects to remake the plaza and the tower's atrium for the owner, Hines. "We wanted to change the nature of the space."

The third public area, 343 Sansome's rooftop terrace, received the lightest touch. In some ways it works the best — but it also shows how problematic the notion of *privately* owned public space can be.



The recently reopened public rooftop terrace at 343 Sansome in the Financial District of San Francisco is among three redone downtown public spaces. This one provides nice views of the skyline. Michaela Vatcheva/Special to The Chronicle

This one offers unique views of how a skyline looks when you're in the middle of the fray, plus seating that runs the gamut from resort-type sofas to sturdy metal tables perfect for a brown-bag lunch. There's a bonus delight for art fans: Joan Brown's "Four Seasons," a tiled obelisk done not long before the death of the masterful Bay Area artist in 1990.

Brown's colorful piece has been touched up to reverse decades of exposure to the elements, and the rooftop feels more open after removal of the bench-circled olive trees that filled the western half of the terrace. Add new furniture and that's about it.

What's enticing, besides the views, is the primer on how to make a good space: Include enough greenery to soften the ambiance but not overwhelm it. Offer different types of seating in different layouts. Make sure some of that seating can be moved back and forth, because some people like to fiddle with their chairs.

The catch? To get to the 15th floor you must — spoiler alert — walk through 343 Sansome's lobby to reach the escalator. There's no requirement to sign in or show identification, unlike other rooftop spaces, but it's still a powerful filter.

That's the trade-off that comes with what the city calls "POPOS," a clumsy acronym for privately owned public spaces. Some developers embrace such accessibility. Others resent it — especially after the pandemic hit and the combination of drugs and mental illness added to the number of troubled people on downtown streets.

Even with flaws, it's good to have these three spiffed-up spaces returned to the Financial District's public realm. Now it's up to us to put them to use. After all, they're ours.

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