



SoMa no longer the other side of the tracks

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John King, Chronicle Urban Design Writer

Only the most hidebound San Franciscan still sees the blocks south of Market Street as the other side of the tracks.

During the past 20 years, downtown's center of gravity has shifted to make the former South of the Slot a crossroads of culture, commerce - and contemporary design. Traditional architecture might still be the look of choice in other neighborhoods, but new buildings here wear a 21st century sheen.

It's not just design that is in flux: Look at SoMa as an ever-morphing work in progress that shows how cities themselves evolve. Buildings respond to larger social issues, such as the need for affordable housing or the desire to live within walking distance of work and fun.

So with that in mind - and with a nod to the 141st annual convention of the American Institute of Architects, which opens today in Moscone Center - here's a highly selective stroll through the changing terrain. These aren't the 10 best recent buildings or the 10 most important; but everything you'll see has opened since 2001, and each building is noteworthy for its architecture or for what it says about where San Francisco might be headed next.

The walk begins in what can politely be termed a transitional part of town but ends just one short block from the Embarcadero.

1. San Francisco Federal Building

Design architect: Morphosis. Executive architect: SmithGroup. Year opened: 2007.

Love it or hate it - and there's no shortage of haters - you can't miss this 18-story slab of concrete and glass on the skyline. The eccentric cloak of perforated steel draped across the south-facing wall has a purpose: to filter sunlight and even out temperatures in the naturally ventilated tower.

Even if you find the exterior too brash, head inside: The three-story-high cube piercing the middle of the slab is public open space.

2. SoMa Studios and Family Apartments

David Baker + Partners Architects. 2004.

This complex of 162 low-income apartments not only fills a social need, but it also brings color and life to a long-drab part of town. The Eighth Street facade suggests a pastel circuit board and shows the amiable flair that marks this firm's work, with metal bays snapping out from multihued stucco, while along the sidewalk, a glassy produce market (locally owned, *of course*) is the most welcoming space for blocks around.

3. Plaza Apartments

Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects in association with Paulett Taggart Architects. 2006.

Another batch of excellent affordable housing by local designers, this is poised rather than playful - and despite the dicey location, pause to appreciate the smart way the apartment bays are arranged one way on Howard Street and another on Sixth Street to modulate the incoming sunlight. The bays are clad in a resin-impregnated wood atop recycled craft paper, one of many sustainable touches in a building that will endure.

4. Yerba Buena Lofts

Stanley Saitowitz/Natoma Architects. 2001.

Until the Federal Building came along, this was downtown's most controversial injection of modern design: a concrete frame with 200 lofts inserted into bays that are 16 feet wide and 17 feet tall, stacked five high and screened by translucent glass. But the monochromatic rigor exudes a dignified calm - especially in comparison with the poorly detailed schlock of the newer housing on the block. No wonder his national peers watch Saitowitz's work with such interest.

5. Contemporary Jewish Museum

Studio Daniel Libeskind and WRNS Studio. 2008.

Proof that preservation can be fun: The brick walls and metal trusses of a Willis Polk-designed 1907 power station now form the shell of a 63,000-square-foot museum that grabs extra space by bursting into Yerba Buena Alley with an immense tilted cube clad in brushed blue steel. As jarring as this might sound, it's a juxtaposition that brings out the best in both centuries. It also reminds us that there's more to Libeskind than cowboy boots and hype.

6. The SPUR Urban Center

Pfau Long Architecture. 2009.

OK, the final touches are still being applied to a building that doesn't open until May 28. And with a midblock setting just 40 feet wide, the four-story structure doesn't scream for attention. But the facade is as refined as a Mondrian painting, a right-angled collage of clear and opaque glass accented with crisp aluminum louvers. The use speaks to San Francisco's future as well: This is the new home for a civic nonprofit group focused on urban issues. It sure beats another swank restaurant.

7. The Montgomery

Reid Brothers, restoration by Huntsman Architectural Group. 1914/2008.

A building with good bones can take a city's transition in stride. That's the case here, a seven-story exercise in columned classicism built for the long-defunct Call newspaper. While the exterior looks as it did during World War I, the interior has been converted into high-ceilinged condominiums aimed at young adults and empty nesters. Add the seismic upgrade included as part of the meticulous restoration, and it's ready for another century.

8. 560 Mission St.

Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects. 2002.

Glass towers are all the rage these days in cities around the world; too bad most of them come off as brittle stabs at eternal cool. This 31-story office building not only predates (slightly) the trend, but it also stands the test of time - adding texture by etching a delicate grid of forest green steel across the clear skin. Lit from inside by commerce, the result evokes a boxy but exquisite Japanese lantern. Yes, glass can have class.

9. 235 Second St.

Fee Munson Ebert. 2001.

This seven-story office building is a case study in contextualism, showing deference to neighbors with its yellow-brick facade and a formal colonnade, but taking a modern stance in the glassy details tucked back from the street behind those robust bricks. Add the sunny plaza notched into the southwest corner that comes with tables and chairs, and this is small-scale city building at its best. Too bad the sole tenant, CBS Interactive, uses the plaza's retail space as a studio. It's the perfect spot for a cafe.

10. The Infinity

Arquitectonica and Heller Manus Architects. 2009.

The tour ends with a dose of future shock: San Francisco as sci-fi sleek, with a pair of 35- and 40-story towers shaped like suave clovers and wrapped in (surprise!) green glass. More intriguing is the 30-foot-wide sidewalk along Spear Street: Landscaped with a combination of terrains from grass to clustered benches, it's meant to function as a linear minipark - the first

piece of a network that will extend among the high-rises of Rincon Hill when (if?) they move from plan to reality.

E-mail John King at jking@sfgate.com.

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