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Giving Jack London Square a nip and tuck

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Richard Keup of Livermore, looks at a bronze paw print next to the wolf sculpture in Palm Plaza in Jack London Square in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, February 18, 2013. The space holds several monuments to Jack London, including his cabin and Heinold's First And Last Chance Saloon, where London would spend time when he lived in Oakland. Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez, The Chronicle



A strange undercurrent of American urbanism is the belief in magic among the powers that be.

One city closes Main Street and sees a bump in business, so 20 others follow suit. A developer turns an old factory into a new retail destination, and every rival tries to replicate the formula. Museum B prospers by means of a fancy new building, so museums C, D, E and F shift into growth mode as well.

When these leaps of faith fall short - as imitations often do - the damage can linger for decades. That's why Rene Bihan takes the long view about his work at Oakland's Jack London Square.

"You design for now, but also you're making your best guess at how things might be five or 10 years from now," said Bihan, a managing principal at the landscape architecture firm SWA Group. "It's good to have flexibility in terms of how things are designed."

The firm's San Francisco office in 2008 and 2009 freshened up the public spaces and connections at the five-block-long mix of offices and shops along Oakland's inner harbor. Three squares were created, each with a grid of palm trees as a visual anchor.

There's a grass berm alongside a marina. Long bars of concrete slide through a gravel plaza. Wooden benches adorn amphitheater-like steps leading to the water.

Visit during a festival, or the popular Sunday farmers' market, and it's a genuine scene where the pieces added by SWA work in a variety of ways. That grass berm is great for adult sunbathers, for instance, and for little kids who enjoy running up and down little hills. It's also a clever way to narrow the walkways - and a good thing, since for much of the week they're as empty as can be.

The square is owned by the Port of Oakland, which hired a developer in the 1970s to build what then was all the rage: a cozy shopping village with nooks and crannies and twisting paths. Very European! Except ... Americans don't shop like Europeans when they're at home.

Fifteen years later the port had another developer who imposed a more suburban order. New retail buildings lined a pedestrian corridor with office buildings at either end and, in the middle, a Barnes & Noble on a raised pavilion.

The bookstore closed in 2010, yet another victim of a certain Amazonian rival. By then, Jack London 3.0 was trying to get off the ground.

The success of the Ferry Building across the bay had the port and a new developer convinced that artisanal food would put the Inner Harbor on the regional map. Glassy new buildings were added to hold food emporiums, with SWA Group's spaces at their feet.

The office space in the five-block area now is 90 percent leased, according to a recent release from Ellis Partners LLC and DivcoWest, the management team. Several large restaurants have opened to good reviews. But the food hall concept never clicked, and the Barnes & Noble building remains empty. The only change to the raised pavilion is a play structure and a "performance green" designed by TS Studio of San Francisco.

This isn't the only Bay Area location where the Ferry Building's success raised false hopes. The reborn Nut Tree, once the favored stop between San Francisco and Sacramento, included local food purveyors when it debuted in 2007, but they didn't fit what otherwise is a standard shopping center. Oxbow Public Market in Napa has fared better, but it took several years to find its niche.

The problem in Oakland is that the long-ago decision by the port to create a mixed-use wonderland never clicked. Every effort to improve it since then has faced the same challenge, to soften a rigid terrain where there aren't the resources to start from scratch.

Indeed, SWA's update to the landscape worked around much of what already was there, such as paving patterns and public art. Think nip and tuck, not total makeover.

"It's better to leave some existing pieces as a cultural layer," Bihan said. "We wanted simplicity, end to end, and a little bit more of a garden scale."

If the simple approach had been taken from the start, Jack London Square today might be a seamless portion of the city around it. This isn't magic, just common sense. Too bad that in the life of American cities, common sense often is in short supply.

<http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/place/article/Giving-Jack-London-Square-a-nip-and-tuck-4290563.php>