CAP

San Francisco's Alleys

Part of the Planning Department's Citywide Action Plan for Housing

# San Francisco's Alleys

With the planned increase in population in the neighborhoods that the Citywide Action Plan (CAP) identifies for significant new residential development, there is the need to balance increased density with the characteristics that build livable neighborhoods: walkability, a human scale and a vibrant public realm. As these areas are planned to provide opportunities for new housing and other development, there is an obligation and a need to conserve and enhance a neighborhood's existing livable qualities, and augment them where they are currently lacking.

In the history of San Francisco, alleys have played a very important role in the development of many neighborhoods, including SoMa, the Mission and the Market/Octavia neighborhood. However, over the years, many alleys have been cut off, developed over or variously made unusable. This discussion piece describes the importance of alleys towards creating livable neighborhoods, and some preliminary strategies for enhancing alleys as meaningful urban places.

## Why are alleys important?

Alleys have often been thought of as purely functional, a place for loading, deliveries and garage access. At worst, they have become dark, derelict or unsafe. In recent years, however, people have begun to appreciate the benefits that alleys provide, and to see them as place-enhancing spaces in their own right.

Most importantly, alleys break up the scale of large blocks and parcels. In SoMa, for example, blocks were laid out on a very large scale (550 feet by 825 feet). Soon after these blocks were laid out, property owners began to break the scale of the blocks by building alleys, in order to create a more useable development pattern and to enable access to the center of blocks.

Alleys also provide an alternative circulation network, distributing traffic on more streets and providing a choice of routes. Because they are a slow-traffic alternative to busy streets, alleys can be especially important to bicyclists and pedestrians. In dense urban neighborhoods, alleys create a human-scale space, allowing the penetration of sunlight, sky and greenery into the centers of blocks. Less tangibly, alleys can provide a sense of discovery, wonder and beauty to an often routine urban environment.

## What components make up a successful alley?

Whether or not an alley becomes a successful urban place is greatly determined by a handful of urban design factors: scale, sun and sky availability, a mix of access and use, greenery and connections.

San Francisco's historic pattern of development, and the city's development controls, demonstrate that streetwall height should be related to street width. This is important both to create an appropriate scale that defines the street without overwhelming it, and to ensure that sun and sky is available to people on the street. This relationship carries over to alleys: if buildings are too high, an alley can become a dark chasm, and a pleasant sense of refuge can turn into a perception of a dangerous place. Because alleys are narrower than streets, appropriate heights along alleys are lower than on streets.

Less quantifiably, successful alley places have a quality of disorder that makes them interesting and attractive places to walk. Whereas streets often benefit from an unbroken streetwall that defines an 'urban room,' alley streetwalls can be more broken up: there can be a mix of residential units, secondary units over garages, small business entries, opportunities for glimpses into yards, walls, greenery, variation in building heights and massing and a fine-grained development pattern.

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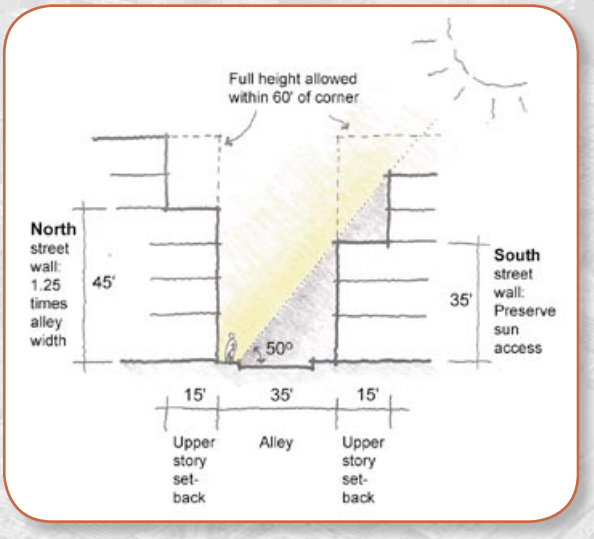
## How can we create quality alley places?

A variety of controls will achieve a quality system of alleys. The following ideas describe a draft proposal for how this could be achieved, using the neighborhoods of the SoMa as an example. Building heights, street widths and sun angles will be different in other neighborhoods; however, the general ideas about sculpting building mass can be applied elsewhere.

1) For alleys in height districts of 85 feet or less, regardless of orientation, streetwall height at the property line should be no greater than about 1.25 times the alley width. Above that height, there should be a stepback of about 15 feet. (For a 35-foot alley, this gives a maximum streetwall height at the property line of 45 feet, rounded up from 43.75 feet.)

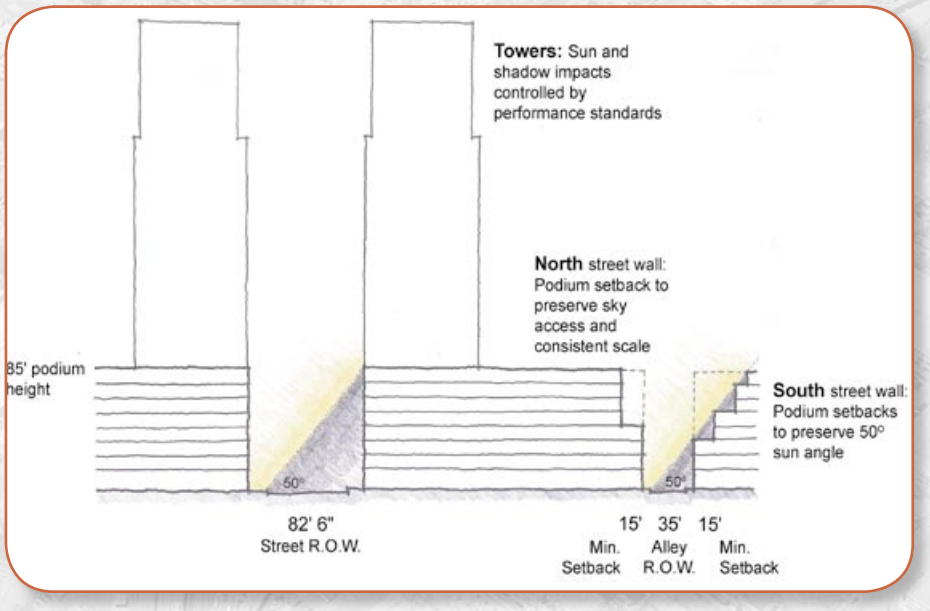
2) Additionally, in east/west alleys in height districts of 85 feet or less, development on the south side of an alley should be further sculpted to retain sunlight on the north sidewalk of the alley, assuming a 5-foot walkway. Above that height, there should be a stepback of no less than 15 feet, and additional stepbacks as necessary to preserve a 50° angle from the curb of the north sidewalk to the building corner. (For a 35-foot alley, this gives a maximum streetwall height at the south property line of 35 feet, rounded down from 36 feet.)




3) At corners where an alley intersects with a street, the streetwall height at both property lines should extend without stepbacks 60 feet back from the street. See image at right.

4) Towers above 85 feet in height should not be subject to the stepback requirements listed above. Instead, towers should be required to meet sun and shadow performance standards to ensure that important streets, alleys and open spaces are not overly in shadow. Additionally, maximum floorplates and minimum tower separations will combine to allow adequate light and air through to streets and other public spaces.

5) Podiums on parcels that also contain towers will be subject to the same sculpting requirements as buildings in height districts of 85 feet or less.




### Sculpting controls for SoMa alleys

*These figures show sun and sky access controls for alley frontages. Height districts of 85 feet or less are shown at top, and districts with towers are shown immediately above.*

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