

C. Visual Quality and Urban Design

This section describes baseline visual conditions in the Eastern Neighborhoods and analyzes the potential for the proposed rezoning options to affect those conditions, focusing on the visual character of the Eastern Neighborhoods, views from public areas, and light and glare. The information in this section is general in nature and is intended to provide a basis for assessing the potential impacts of implementing the range of rezoning options described in the Project Description. Photos are included in this section to supplement the descriptions of the baseline visual character of each neighborhood.

Environmental Setting

Visual Character

The visual character of the project area is varied, reflecting the unique characteristics of each neighborhood's natural and built elements. However, it is possible to describe some general characteristics that establish the project area's visual setting.

The topography of the project area is mostly flat or gradually sloped, although it includes a few hills that serve as visual markers and scenic outlooks. From roughly sea level at the San Francisco Bay shoreline, the landscape gently rises to around 25 feet above sea level (asl) in elevation in most of the Central Waterfront, East SoMa and Showplace Square. Parts of the Mission District rise to slightly greater elevations toward Liberty Hill to the west, reaching close to 100 feet asl near 24th and Guerrero Streets. East SoMa includes part of Rincon Hill, which rises to approximately 100 feet asl near First and Harrison Streets. In the Central Waterfront, a small, 65-foot high rocky promontory located near the intersection of Illinois and 22nd Streets represents the remainder of Irish Hill. In contrast to the other neighborhoods, Potrero Hill is built on a prominent hill and has significant elevation—it rises to over 300 feet asl near its crest at 22nd and Arkansas Street.

Natural boundaries in the project area include San Francisco Bay, which defines the eastern edge of East SoMa and the Central Waterfront, and Islais Creek on the southern edge of the Central Waterfront. Built elements, such as freeways, also act as neighborhood boundaries, visual edges, and, in some places, structural and optical barriers, throughout the project area. Elevated portions of I-80 traverse East SoMa in an east-west direction;⁶³ U.S. 101 separates Showplace Square/Potrero Hill from the Mission District to its west; and I-280 visually delineates Showplace Square from Mission Bay. Further south, I-280 creates a border between the Central Waterfront and Potrero Hill.

⁶³ By convention, Mission Street and the streets that parallel it, including the I-80 freeway, are considered east-west streets, while the numbered streets such as First, Second, Third, etc., are considered to run north-south.

The type and distribution of land uses in the Eastern Neighborhoods also contribute to their visual character. The project area includes many production, distribution, and repair (PDR; generally, light industry) uses in portions of East SoMa, the Northeast Mission Industrial Zone (NEMIZ), Showplace Square, and throughout most of the Central Waterfront. These areas exhibit an industrial aesthetic, generally characterized by bulky single- and multi-story buildings with large floor plates, industrial sash windows, roll-up garage doors and delivery bays, saw-toothed roofs, and smooth plaster finishes.

The Eastern Neighborhoods also include visually distinctive neighborhood commercial corridors—frequently with residential units above ground-floor commercial space—such as along Mission, Valencia, 16th, and 24th streets in the Mission District; 18th and 20th Streets on Potrero Hill; 22nd Street in the Central Waterfront; and in the mixed-use district surrounding South Park in East SoMa.

While exclusive residential neighborhoods exist throughout much of the Mission District and on Potrero Hill, and residential enclaves exist in other locations, there are many areas in the Eastern Neighborhoods where residential uses are adjacent or very close to commercial and PDR uses. A mixed-use development pattern with varied building styles is one of the defining characteristics of the Eastern Neighborhoods.

Other elements that contribute to the baseline visual setting of the project area include street patterns and street widths, right-of-way elements (such as street furniture, signage, and vegetation), parks and open spaces, building heights and setbacks, building age and architectural styles, and visual resources unique to the specific subareas in the project area. The following section describes these elements in each neighborhood.

East SoMa

Streets and Street Pattern

The large scale of streets and blocks contributes to the visual character of East SoMa. A grid of very long blocks—ranging from 550 feet to as long as 825 feet—is intersected by mid-block alleys.⁶⁴ The primary streets are wide (e.g., about 80 feet) and accommodate up to five lanes of traffic. East-west oriented streets, such as Howard, Folsom, Harrison, Bryant, Brannan, and Townsend Streets, carry one-way traffic for much of their length through the project area, as do major north-south couplets such as Third and Fourth Streets. These streets are flanked by sidewalks, overhead utility wires, and often lack street trees and other pedestrian amenities. The pedestrian corridor is narrow in relation to the overall right-of-way, resulting in a relative lack of visual boundary between the street and the pedestrian realm, which tends to lack landscaping,

⁶⁴ The term “alley” is used to denote minor streets between the multi-lane major streets in East SoMa. Although most are not technically alleys as defined in the Planning Code (by which an alley is a right-of-way less than 30 feet), these minor mid-block streets are commonly referred to as such, and are distinguished from the major streets by their relatively narrow widths.



Wide streets and long blocks establish the urban pattern and contribute to a sense of large scale in East SoMa.



Alleys are part of the urban fabric in East SoMa.

street furniture, or other definition. A set of freeway on- and off-ramps is located immediately adjacent to the district (at Fourth, Fifth, Harrison, and Bryant Streets, and additional ramps are located nearby). These factors contribute to a vehicular rather than pedestrian orientation along the primary streets in East SoMa. The long blocks and wide rights-of-way also contribute to the impression of a large development scale and greater domination of the streetscape by the automobile, relative to other parts of San Francisco. The prevailing visual experience is one of vast expanses of asphalt, sparse landscaping, street parking, bulky buildings at the street edge. By contrast, the narrow alleys that intersect the primary street grid, and the development around South Park, and in the other residential enclaves in the eastern portion of East SoMa display a finer pattern. South Park's unique street pattern, focused on the oval park, is a vestige of an early-day fashionable neighborhood in 19th-century San Francisco.

The I-80 freeway runs in an east-west direction through East SoMa. With its structure reaching up to 50 feet above street grade, the elevated freeway creates a visual edge along Harrison and Bryant Streets, obscuring north-south views.

Buildings and Streetscapes

East SoMa has a highly varied architectural character, with early 20th century buildings often situated in the same block as buildings constructed within the last 10 years, and with residential and industrial buildings interspersed. The historic building types include brick and stucco warehouses, and art deco commercial/industrial buildings, typically with steel sash windows. A particularly strong collection of such buildings exists on Brannan and Bryant Streets between Second and Fourth Streets, some of which are in the South End Historic District, listed in Article 10 of the Planning Code (see Section IV.K, Historic Architectural Resources). On many alleys, and surrounding South Park, are a number of wood-sided Victorian and Edwardian-era residential and mixed-use buildings.



East SoMa contains a number of older commercial and industrial buildings, some in the Art Deco style.

Typical character-defining architectural features for industrial buildings in East SoMa include: concrete construction, steel industrial sash, a regular grid of openings, corrugated metal doors, and minimal Classical Revival details typically rendered in sheet metal or stucco. Character-defining architectural features for residential structures include: wood-frame construction, rustic siding, double-hung sash bay windows, flat roofs, box-cornices, and minimal Classical Revival details rendered in wood or stucco. Typically the residential structures have undergone more exterior alterations than the industrial buildings. In many cases wood siding has been replaced with stucco, ornament stripped, and wood sash replaced with aluminum casements or sliders.⁶⁵

Interspersed with the older building styles are a few mid-century modern commercial and industrial buildings with relatively flat facades, as well as contemporary residential loft-style buildings, many of which incorporate elements and materials from industrial architecture, such as concrete, glass and steel.

⁶⁵ Although many former industrial buildings have been converted to other uses, the level of exterior alteration tends to be lesser than with residential structures.

Compared to most of the area, a greater degree of homogeneity of building era and style is present in the South Beach neighborhood along the Embarcadero, where at least three blocks along Brannan, Townsend, and King Streets are occupied entirely by new mid- and high-rise multi-family residential construction.

Building footprints in East SoMa are generally large, often occupying entire lots, and building walls are long. New residential construction is also in a large-volume design that seeks to maximize a lot's building envelope, though newer buildings often exhibit features such as balconies, porches and other projections that modulate building mass and create variation and visual interest along street-facing facades.

Heights within the neighborhood vary from single-story⁶⁶ commercial and industrial buildings to a few new towers, such as the 17-story Brannan Towers at Brannan and Delancey Streets. Several towers, with one reaching up to 63 stories, have been built, are under construction, or are planned in the adjacent Rincon Hill neighborhood, just outside of the project area. More typical in East SoMa are buildings between two and six stories tall. Certain subareas are characterized by more consistent building heights. For example, surrounding South Park, buildings are two and three stories. Along the Sixth Street corridor, most buildings are four to six stories, with height and development intensity increasing close to Market Street. One exception: the Plaza Apartments at Sixth and Howard Streets, on the edge of East SoMa, is nine stories tall.

Visual Resources

AT&T Park, a 41,500-seat baseball stadium on a 13-acre site adjacent to the San Francisco Bay, serves as perhaps the visual landmark in East SoMa, although nearby residential construction (both to the north, and to the west, in the Mission Bay North Redevelopment Area) has dramatically changed the visual character of the former warehouse district at the southeastern edge of the neighborhood. Other newer development in East SoMa is also visually prominent, including the Yerba Buena Lofts on Folsom Street and—just to the northwest of the subarea—the new Federal Building on Seventh Street. Also outside the subarea, Moscone Center and Yerba Buena Gardens are visual and cultural landmarks.

East SoMa contains three larger parks—South of Market Recreation Center, South Park, and the recently opened Victoria Manalo Draves Park, all of which provide visual relief from the built environment.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ “Story” is used for descriptive purposes. However, floor-to-floor heights in multi-story buildings can vary considerably, and thus the number of stories is not an accurate representation of building height, in feet.

⁶⁷ Parks and open spaces are discussed in greater detail in Section IV.H, Recreation and Public Spaces, and in Section IV.I, Shadow.



Left: A few tall buildings, such as “the Brannan” on Brannan and Delancey Streets, have been constructed along the eastern edge of East SoMa, in South Beach. Above: Low-slung buildings typically prevail in other areas.



Left: South Park is flanked by one- to three-story mixed-use buildings with active ground-floor uses. Right: Four- to eight-story buildings typify the Sixth Street corridor, which becomes denser as it approaches Market Street.



Left: Completed in 2000, AT&T Park is visually prominent element at the edge of SoMa. Right: New mixed-use construction on King Street near the ballpark.

The Mission

Streets and Street Pattern

The Mission District is built around a regular grid of streets that form 200- by 500-foot blocks, with variation to this pattern in the northeast Mission, where the larger blocks were designed to accommodate industrial and light industrial uses in large-footprint multi-story buildings, many of which remain. In the residential areas are a number of north-south oriented alleys, concentrated between Mission and Guerrero north of 21st Street, and between Harrison and Guerrero south of 24th Street.

Although the street pattern is primarily orthogonal, two diagonal streets exist: Treat Avenue between 18th Street and the northern study boundary, and San Jose Avenue between 22nd and 24th Streets—both of which once served as railroad rights-of-way. The diagonal intersections result in some triangular buildings and other unusual building angles on corner lots.



Diagonal intersections result in interesting building shapes. Left: Treat and Harrison Streets. Right: 22nd and Harrison Streets.

Buildings and Streetscapes

There are three major areas and land use types in the Mission District, each with typical associated building types and development intensities. The majority of the Mission is residential, with a mix of single-family, duplex, and multi-family dwellings. Many blocks are composed of side-by-side Victorian and Edwardian dwellings, typically two to four stories tall, set on 25-foot by 100-foot lots.

The Mission also includes significant retail spines. The most prominent neighborhood commercial districts are located on Mission, Valencia, 16th and 24th Streets. Building heights along Mission and Valencia Streets are generally from one to five stories, though two and three-story buildings are more typical. Exceptionally, there are two buildings that are nine stories tall.

There are many mixed-use buildings with apartments above ground-floor commercial space. Largely from the first half of the 20th century, these buildings have pronounced detailing and

articulation. The Mission's commercial streets have an intimate scale and pedestrian-oriented feel, with a regular rhythm of small storefronts that house a variety of restaurants, bars, shops as well as some workshops and light industrial uses such as automobile garages. While an older building stock predominates, some contemporary residential and mixed-use buildings have been constructed in the last 10 years.

The Mission District features a number of design elements that are unique to the neighborhood and help lend it flavor, such as the tall palm trees, historic street lights, and colorful tile sidewalk insets along Mission Street, the public plazas at that 16th and 24th Street BART stations, sidewalks crowded with merchandise that spills out of stores whose signage features English, Spanish, Chinese, and other languages. The pattern of eclectic storefronts continues along 24th Street, although at a slightly smaller scale than on Mission Street, and 24th Street's densely planted ficus trees give that street a slightly quieter character. The many alleys subdivide the neighborhood's blocks into smaller entities, in a number of instances moving vehicle parking away from the front entrances of residential buildings that back onto the alleys.



Ornately detailed older buildings with a regular rhythm of small storefronts contribute to the human scale and active pedestrian realm along Mission Street.



Left: Older mixed-use buildings typify Valencia Street, but some contemporary residential construction has occurred at the northern edge of the district. Right: Valencia Gardens, a San Francisco Housing Authority property.

The Mission's many colorful murals also constitute part of the urban fabric. The murals are largely concentrated in the western and southern portions of the district, particularly around 24th Street and along Balmy Alley. Murals are painted on building walls in alleys, on corner commercial buildings, and on larger civic buildings such as schools and churches.



The Northeast Mission Industrial Zone, or NEMIZ, roughly occupies the area north of 20th Street and east of South Van Ness Avenue. Parcel sizes and floor plates are generally larger than in the residential neighborhood and a variety of older and newer building styles is present. There are some early 20th century commercial/industrial buildings, including masonry buildings and a few stucco-exterior moderne/art deco buildings. There are also modern, one-story industrial buildings occupied by light PDR uses. Buildings heights and streetscapes are also highly varied, but, in general, both height and overall development intensity is low.



The northeast Mission has a few early 20th century industrial and commercial buildings.



One- or one-and-a-half-story buildings with roll-up doors are typical for many of the light PDR uses in the Mission.

Though the district is largely built up, a few establishments in the NEMIZ have open yards devoted to fleet storage. These include the PG&E yard at 19th and Harrison Streets and the Muni yard at 17th and Bryant Streets.

Recent construction and changes in use have occurred in the NEMIZ and become part of its visual setting. The southeastern part of the district has seen the development of a number of new loft-style residential buildings and the growth of an arts and cultural district. Educational and cultural uses, such as the temporary home of the City College of San Francisco Mission Campus, and some galleries and theaters, have occupied former industrial buildings in this subarea.

A few new large-scale retail buildings, with surface parking at the front of the lot, have been constructed on the northern edge of the district along Division Street.



Left: City College Mission Campus. Right: New residential construction at Alabama and 17th.



New, large-format retail buildings near 14th and Harrison streets on the northern edge of the district

Visual Resources

Noteworthy visual resources in the Mission District include the former National Guard Armory at 14th and Mission Streets, with its distinctive vaulted roof; the only two high-rise commercial

buildings in the Mission – the US Bank Building (former Bayview Bank Building) at 22nd and Mission Streets and the Pacific Telephone/Pacific Bell/SBC/AT&T telephone switching building – each of which is nine stories tall, and the seven-story Capistrano Apartments at 25th and Bartlett Streets. Additionally, St. Luke’s Hospital’s 10-story tower is just across César Chávez Street from the Mission District. A massive former steel warehouse on Harrison Street now serves as Muni’s Flynn Division, where articulated diesel buses are stored.

Other visually distinctive elements of the built environment include a number of large former movie theaters along Mission Street, which retain their tall “blade” signs and marquees but are disused; smaller active theaters on 16th Street (the Roxie and the Victoria); the newly rebuilt Valencia Gardens housing project on Valencia Street, the San Francisco Women’s Building on 18th Street; and the San Francisco Fire Department Training Center on Folsom Street, with its distinctive tower. The Mission also boasts a number of churches, including the massive St. Peter’s Catholic Church at 24th and Alabama Streets, the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation on Valencia Street, and the bright-red Hua Zang Si Buddhist Temple on 22nd Street (the former St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church). The U.S. 101 freeway (Central Skyway) forms an elevated northern edge to the Mission.

Parks in the Mission District that are sizable enough to provide visual relief from the built environment include Garfield Square, Rolph Playground, Franklin Square, Mission Playground, Jose Coronado Playground, and Parque Ninos Unidos. In addition, Dolores Park is just west of this subarea.

Showplace Square/Potrero Hill

Streets and Street Pattern

Showplace Square exhibits the oversize blocks prevalent throughout SoMa. Long, but narrower blocks occupy the Seventh Street corridor. From Division south to 20th Street, Showplace Square and lower Potrero Hill are built around 200- by 400-foot blocks. From 20th to 23rd Street, Potrero Hill is built around longer 200- by 800-foot blocks.

The elevated U.S. 101 freeway (James Lick Freeway) runs in a north-south direction on the western side of the neighborhood. I-80 (San Francisco Skyway) and U.S. 101 intersect in Showplace Square with a network of ramps and the green-painted, elevated structures constitute an important visual element in the area, rising 25 feet or more above street level. While they somewhat restrict north-south views, the ramps also form part of the urban fabric and industrial aesthetic of the area. Division Street runs under Highway 101, which shades and encloses the street. The presence of the freeways also affects development intensities within the freeway right-of-way itself. Much of the freeway right-of-way at the ground level is used for parking.



The elevated freeway interchanges are dominant visual elements in Showplace Square.

Buildings and Streetscapes

The Showplace Square area is essentially flat with a lack of high-rise buildings, which imparts a relatively homogenous, less distinctive urban form compared with many other neighborhoods of San Francisco, which are characterized by greater variations in topography, building heights, and/or proximity to the San Francisco Bay or the Pacific Ocean.

The Showplace Square area is characterized by design showrooms for a variety of other home furnishings and design materials. The southern portion of the subarea is a commercial/industrial neighborhood with a variety of industrial, retail, multimedia and office uses, in addition to home furnishings and interior decoration businesses. The historic four-story red-brick buildings of the San Francisco Design Center, at Henry Adams (Kansas) and Division Streets, provide a visual anchor to Showplace Square. In contrast, just north of the Design Center is the San Francisco Fashion Center, a brick-clad six-story building completed in 1990. Further south and east is a predominately residential area of primarily two- and three-story single-family residences. Architecture in the area consists of a combination of early Twentieth Century buildings and more recent construction. Although buildings vary in style, age, and size, with heights distributed roughly uniformly between one and six stories, there is a broad pattern of rectilinear low-rise buildings, with generally flat rooflines, regular boxlike forms, and horizontal, rather than vertical massing. Buildings are generally built to the property line.

Brannan and Bryant streets between Seventh and 10th Streets have traditionally been home to a variety of light PDR uses, but a number of buildings have been converted to wholesale and retail uses, and there has been new construction of large-format retail in recent years. The area has a mix of older and more modern building styles. Heights range from one to three stories, relatively low in relation to the broad streets. Because they were originally constructed for industrial uses, the buildings tend to lack storefront windows and transparent doors, so there is not a strong pedestrian orientation along the streets. Even some of the newer retail buildings are primarily auto-oriented and lack a pedestrian focus.