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BRICKS, BRANDING, AND THE EVERYDAY: DEFINING GREATNESS AT THE UNITED NATIONS PLAZA IN SAN FRANCISCO

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Keywords

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Abstract

After over a decade of reports, designs, and public outreach, the United Nations Plaza in San Francisco was dedicated in 1976. Using historical documents such as government reports, design guidelines, letters, meeting minutes, and newspaper articles from archives, I argue that while the construction of the UN Plaza has failed to completely transform the social and economic life of the area, it succeeds in creating a genuinely public space. The history of the UN Plaza can serve both as a cautionary tale for those interested in changing property values purely through changing design, and as a standard of success in making a space used by a true cross-section of urban society.

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INTRODUCTION

After over a decade of reports, designs, and public outreach, the United Nations Plaza in San Francisco was dedicated in 1976. An eddy for pedestrians along the spine of Market Street, the brick-paved plaza with a memorial fountain was the brainchild of a handful of local property owners who had formed a task force to push for its creation. It was an attempt to increase property values in an area of San Francisco better known for risqué theaters than for the high-end shopping the task force was hoping would arrive with the planned underground commuter rail. The task force was manipulating the design of the space in the hopes of drawing different people to the area and creating a social scene more accommodating to the white middle class that could afford higher-priced goods. The design changes failed to evict all of the existing uses of the plaza, but good programming supported by the new space has diversified both the people and the activities in the plaza. The history of the UN Plaza can serve both as a cautionary tale for those interested in changing property values purely through changing design, and as a standard of success in making a space used by a true cross-section of urban society.

Social life is produced and reproduced through space (Hayden, 1997; Lefebvre, 2011), and adequate public space is deeply important to levels of social interaction and to social well-being (Chitrakar, 2016). The manipulation of space is an attempt at producing a new social order; in the case of the United Nations Plaza, the manipulation has been guided by business leaders and technocrats. However, agency for the design of cities can be placed not only with technocrats, policy makers and designers, but also with the social producers of the space (Tonkiss, 2013), as demonstrated by the history of the UN Plaza. In spite of the monumental design of the space, including sporadic additions of monoliths and insignia, the social life of the plaza has never completely turned into a space purely for middle-class shopping as the original task force had hoped: the manipulation of space has failed to overturn the social order entirely. Because the designers lacked a real understanding of the local market conditions or customer desires, the plaza has continued to be peopled by the homeless and other populations that the task force was trying to banish through high design, or what Dell Upton calls “big-A” Architecture (2002).

The primary designer of the plaza and the fountain was Lawrence Halprin, who was thought to be especially sensitive to design’s potential to change the economic fortunes of cities on the decline. He was “as responsible as any designer or builder at work today for the “new” architecture that is changing the face of several decaying cities, [and] reviving moribund neighborhoods” (Engles, 1972). Moreover, Halprin thought of himself as sensitive to the social life of cities, which he said “...require the participation of the people who live in them,” saying designers at his firm “involve ourselves deeply in interaction with them as well as the physical environment” (Halprin, no date). Yet, the early plans and designs for the Plaza were all created by a small group of select business leaders trying to bolster property values in the area: neither the residents of the nearby neighborhoods nor the potential customers for the planned rejuvenations were allowed to have any of what scholars Caneparo and Bonavero (2016) call “self-organization”. The idea behind the design of the UN Plaza was a common one at the time: using design to make the area attractive to white suburban women to shop in (Isenberg, 2004), to spur Market Street to become “one of the major retailing thoroughfares of the world” (The Wyman Company, n.d.).

In this, Halprin never quite succeeded. The Project for Public Spaces, an organization dedicated to highlighting design that supports good sociability in spaces, has the UN Plaza on its wall of shame (Project for Public Spaces, n.d.), and Halprin himself could not understand “...the street’s stubborn resistance to greatness” (quoted in Murphy, 2004). If by

greatness he means “monumentality” then he is assuredly correct. The homeless people have not left the plaza, ceremonies are held there only occasionally, and the obelisk declaring the re-dedication of the plaza to the UN is used as a prop for leftover market day supplies. Yet, with the farmer’s market, tourists, people eating lunch there, and continued presence of multiple people, maybe the plaza is more of a success than we realize. Is the Plaza’s greatness in the fact that the use value has in fact not diminished, but instead increased, with a variety of eyes on the street (Jacobs, 1961)? If “urban life...requires a certain...willingness to engage with the unknown and unpredictable” (Solnit, 2002, p. 123), the United Nations Plaza in San Francisco is an excellent representation of urban life. No one group has unspoken reign over the plaza (King, 2002), so it is populated by a mix of the economically disadvantaged, tourists, middle-class office workers, and farmers market merchants. Even monumental, carefully planned spaces can be part of the everyday fabric of social practices in the city. Appropriated by the everyday, swept up in the moment instead of remaining outside time, the UN Plaza is part of the everyday, described as “ambiguous and unstable,” existing somewhere “...between private, commercial, and domestic” and containing “multiple and constantly shifting meanings rather than clarity of function” (Crawford, 1999a, p. 28).

Using historical documents such as government reports, design guidelines, letters, meeting minutes, and newspaper articles from archives at the San Francisco History Center and at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design, I argue that while the construction of the UN Plaza has failed to completely transform the social and economic life of the area—Halprin’s “resistance to greatness”—it succeeds in creating a genuinely public space. Market Street, and especially the United Nations Plaza, has all the signs and symbols of design for a globalized world, yet still has resisted monumentality. Open spaces may be designed to meet people’s needs (Al-Bishawi & Ghadban, 2011), but it is worth asking whose needs are being met. In the case of the UN Plaza, the design responded to the perceived needs of the business leaders who commissioned it, but the use is responding to the needs of the community. Design as the sole solution does not work without consulting the potential users of the space and customers to nearby businesses—an important lesson for cities looking to rejuvenate cultural districts and improve property values with spectacular architecture.

THE UNITED NATIONS PLAZA

The United Nations Plaza is part of the Market Street Corridor in San Francisco. Market Street runs diagonally across the more-or-less North-South grid of streets from Embarcadero Boulevard at the Ferry Building—historically the connection between San Francisco and the East Bay and San Francisco and the rest of the world, and more recently a center of tourism—to Castro Boulevard, dividing the financial and shopping districts in the North from the warehouse and historically low-income residential districts in the south. Public transportation runs along Market Street, both above ground in the form of busses and trolleys, and below-ground in the form of the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART). The UN Plaza covers an intersection that leads from this corridor to City Hall and the Civic Center, which were both part of an earlier attempt at reform during the City Beautiful era (Wiley, 2000). Parades that begin at the Ferry Building and process along Market Street can make a soft left at what is now the UN Plaza to arrive at the Civic Center and City Hall. The Plaza is bordered on the north by a Federal building and on the South by Orpheum Theater (Figure 1). The plaza consists of over two acres of brick paving, with an entrance to the BART, raised planters with grass and rows of trees, rows of granite columns with lights, and a blocky fountain (Figure 2).

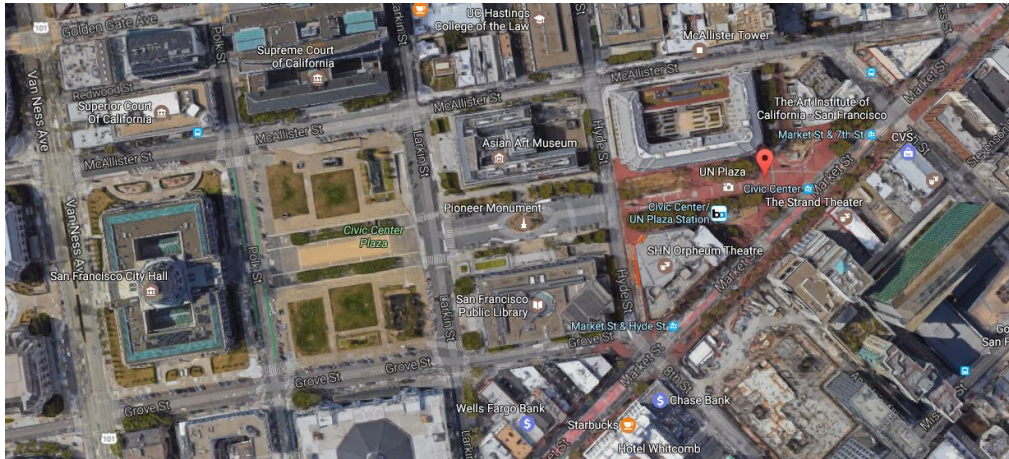


Figure 1. The United Nations Plaza and surrounding buildings in San Francisco (Image and Map Data Source: Google, 2017).

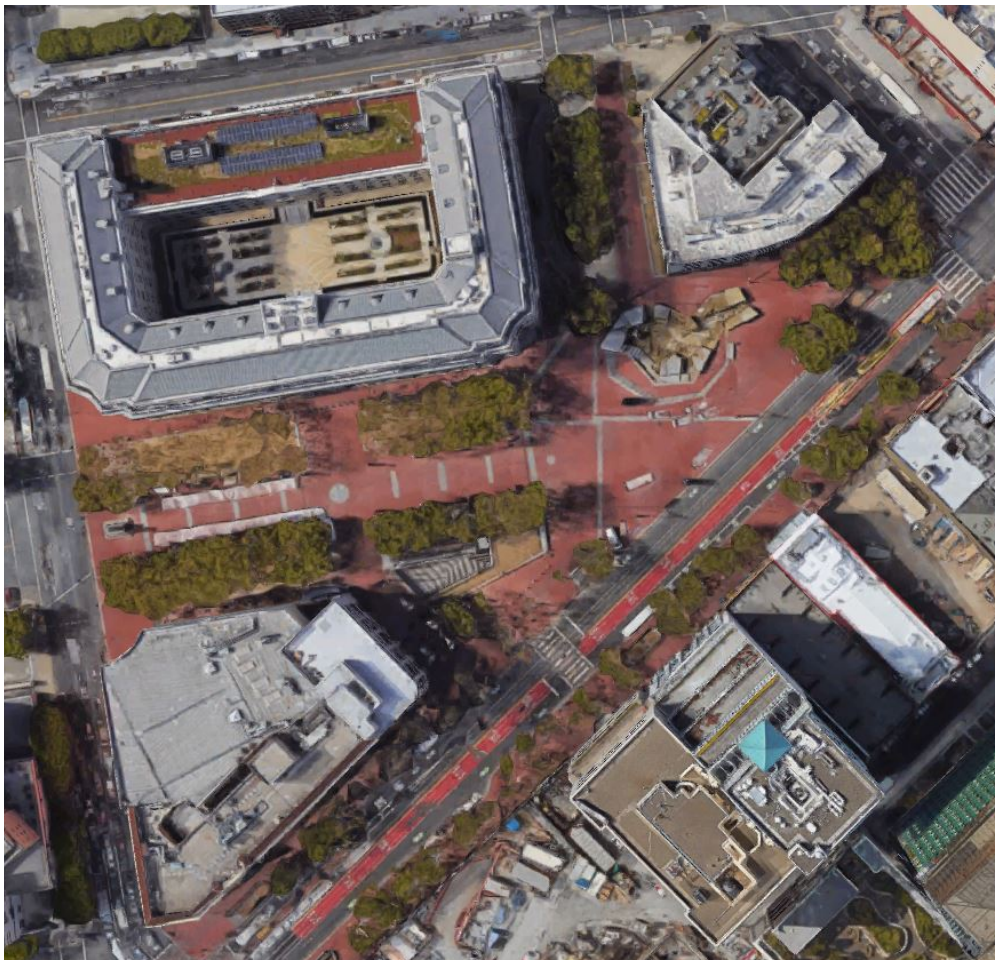


Figure 2. Aerial image of the United Nations Plaza (Image Source: Google, 2017).

The plaza and fountain (Figure 3) were designed by the Market Street Joint Venture Architects, which consisted of three firms: Lawrence Halprin and Associates, Mario J. Ciampi and Associates, and John Carl Warnecke and Associates (City and County of San Francisco, n.d.). The project was tied to the creation of BART, a regional train system to bring people to

the city center from the surrounding areas (Figure 4). Many municipalities saw the coming of BART as an opportunity to “create a new environment in the communities, to upgrade the communities, [and] to enhance their economic values” (Board of Supervisors, 1966, p. 7).



Figure 3. (Left) View of the Plaza from Market Street looking West toward City Hall. The Fountain is to the right, and the Federal Building is visible on the right. (Right) The United Nations Fountain (Photographs: Author, 2015).

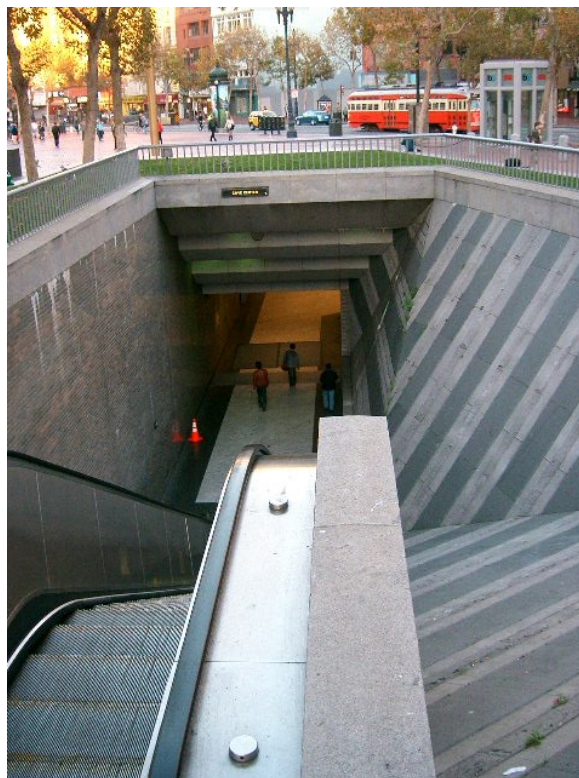


Figure 4. Entrance to the BART station (looking East-Southeast from the UN Plaza). Market Street is visible in the background (Photograph: Author, 2015).

AN ECONOMIC ARGUMENT WITH A DESIGN SOLUTION

While the topic of this paper is the United Nations Plaza, that project was just one part of a larger redevelopment project to bring business and tourists down to Mid-Market and the Civic Center area from the Financial District. Calls for reform along Market Street began in 1962 when the Market Street Development Project (MSDP) Steering Committee, a group of self-

appointed business leaders, commissioned a report called *What To Do About Market Street*. The neighborhood had been largely ignored in an urban renewal report on San Francisco in 1966 (Arthur D. Little, Inc, 1966), and the Steering Committee had decided to address the matter themselves. At the time, the area was heavily used—it is the populated spaces of a city which are the most interesting and alive (Crawford, 1999b), as it is the presence of people that most often draws more people (Whyte, 1980)—but used by people who were not prosperous enough in the eyes of the Steering Committee.

In its report, the MSDP Steering Committee identified a list of problems with Market Street, calling it “congested, dirty, unattractive...ugly and depressing...a barrier” between North and South San Francisco, and home to “penny arcades, risqué movies, and cheap merchandising outlets” with low property values (Livingston and Blayney, 1962, p. 1). Even though “it is within a few hundred feet of some of the city’s most valuable retail properties”, the report complains about the “poor quality tenants” who occupy the area (Livingston and Blayney, 1962, p. 5). The report cites “low-grade commercial uses”, including not only the aforementioned penny arcade and risqué movie theaters, but also magazine stands with “girlie” magazines, “low quality tenants”, vacancies, and “even a pawn shop”. According to the report, these low-quality tenants drew people who were “less prosperous-looking”, and that “the proximity of the tenderloin [a low-rent area of San Francisco] is fairly evident”. The young crowds, the report complains, consist mainly of servicemen and young women who use the area as a club (Livingston and Blayney, 1962, p. 5). The everyday uses of low-income and young people were seen as transgressive and degenerate.

In response, the Committee recommended improving four different areas: i) land use and transportation; ii) the environment, including better signs, street furniture, and plazas; iii) public action, including curtailing loitering, reducing litter, and improving street cleaning; and iv) public relations, including convincing property owners that they should contribute financially to the project, and to convince the public and the city that public funds should be used as well (Livingston and Blayney, 1962, pp. 2–3).

Four patterns emerge in the critique laid out in the report. First, the Market Street Redevelopment Project was financially driven. The problem was stated in terms of declining property values. The final page of the report declares that “investments in Market Street improvements will pay dividends” (Livingston and Blayney, 1962, p. 39). Private interests would contribute to making the street look better, but the re-paving and street furniture was something that the public would have to support, to “do their part” (“Market Street”, 1968) in cleaning up Market Street.

Second, these business interests represent a small group of relatively powerful people trying to convince other merchants and the city to go along with their project (Hartman & Carnochan, 2002). Not even all the local merchants were convinced of the plan: the MSDP asked the city to fine merchants who did not keep their sidewalks clean (“Market Street group,” 1975), and asked the city to “clamp down on pornographic bookstores and massage parlors in the Union Square area”, wanting to get rid of them before they became a problem (“Merchants call”, 1976).

Third, it was a top-down project. At no point were the opinions of shoppers, residents, or non-committee members included in the report. The only mention of including people other than those on the committee was in asking the city for funding to begin the work; they received \$350,000 (Tatarian, 1964, pp. 2–5). Instead of reporting on the opinions of the types of people who would be drawn to the space, or inquiring as to what the current users wanted, the report relies instead solely on the opinions of designers and planners to envision a new space.

Finally, the report emphasizes appearance—middle-to-upper class tidiness. A full 12 (of 39) pages are devoted to a section called “The Look of Market Street,” in which the visual sins of the street are catalogued, including things like signs obscuring buildings, rooftop billboards, a motley array of street furniture, and “miscellaneous visual mayhem” (Livingston and Blayney, 1962, p. 14). As a result, the scope of work to solve these perceived problems was primarily design-focused, and required an “overall spatial concept for Market Street including site plan for the entire street, with design of open spaces, architectural and landscape features, plazas, sidewalks, and station areas” (Tatarian, 1964, p. 1). With no attempts to understand the market in any sophisticated way, a group of designers proposed a physical solution to a financial problem. Like Daniel Burnham’s master plan for a great civic area (Scott, 1959), this was an attempt by designers to create an “*extraordinary* landmark in a vast expanse of the ordinary” (Upton, 2002, p. 709), invoking high design to distinguish the plaza from the ordinary and everyday landscape around it.

Symbols for the Plaza

Instead of inquiring as to the desires of their target audience or asking for participation from existing users of the area, the Steering Committee hired a design firm to monumentalize the space. The monumental design was intended to support a shift that is still underway today, what cultural critic Rebecca Solnit sees as a shift “from a blue-collar port city...to a white collar center” of finance, tourism, and knowledge (Solnit, 2004), to make the space attractive to global capital (Logan & Molotch, 1987). The steering committee used symbols to connect the plaza to more economically well-off parts of the city, and also to connect the area to global ideas, as a way to brand the area, creating an identity which could help build tourism opportunities and create a feeling of local belonging.

Some design elements symbolically connected this area to the rest of the city in an attempt to rejuvenate the area in the minds of San Franciscans. The intersection at Market and Fulton Streets was paved in brick and turned into a plaza to “functionally integrat[e] the flow of people from the subway levels to the streets, the Plaza is scaled to accommodate the daily crowds of office workers as well as the periodic demands of civic ceremonies, such as parades” (Transit Task Force, 1967, p. 21). The “ceremonial role” of Market Street was heightened by paving the plaza with the same brick as other parts of the street (Figure 5), connecting the Ferry Building, with its plaza, through nodal points at the Mechanics Statue Plaza, Yerba Buena, Powell Plaza, and the United Nations Plaza to City Hall (Transit Task Force, 1967, p. 7). Called “beautification by brick,” the re-paving project was the first part of the change, with bricks laid even before the rest of the Plaza construction (“Brick Beautification,” 1972; Britton, 1974).

The global symbolic content of the plaza—the idea of dedicating it to the United Nations, which had been signed into being in Herbst Theater in the Veterans Building just north of City Hall—was added only after the plaza had been funded by the voters. When it was part of the 1968 Beautification Plan and \$34.4 million ballot measure, the location was called Civic Center Plaza and the plans called for a “major piece of civic sculpture of monumental scale [to] dominate the major plaza space, and generate the character of the plaza” (Mario J. Ciampi and Associates and John Carl Warnecke and Associates, 1967). By 1974 when construction started, that “monumental sculpture” had become the UN Fountain, and the Plaza had become the UN Plaza. Between the plans and ground-breaking, the fountain became the “principle feature” of the plaza, designed to serve “as a focal point at the Civic Center axis and establish...a visual hub from the street to City Hall” (City and County of San Francisco, n.d., p. 2). It is made from the same Sierra white granite that City Hall and the other civic buildings in the area are constructed from, arranged into seven clusters to

represent the seven continents, and the water is supposed to display “...both jet action and tidal action, imitating the back and forth and up and down motion of the sea” (City and County of San Francisco, n.d., p. 2).

In another of the symbolic gestures made in the plaza, the trees were to be named after various UN “personalities,” from Dag Hammarskjöld to Harry Truman (Market Street Joint Venture Architects, 1976). The first, an evergreen pear tree, was planted during the dedication ceremony in 1975, before the mall and plaza construction had even begun, during the UN 20th anniversary celebrations (Robinson, 1975).

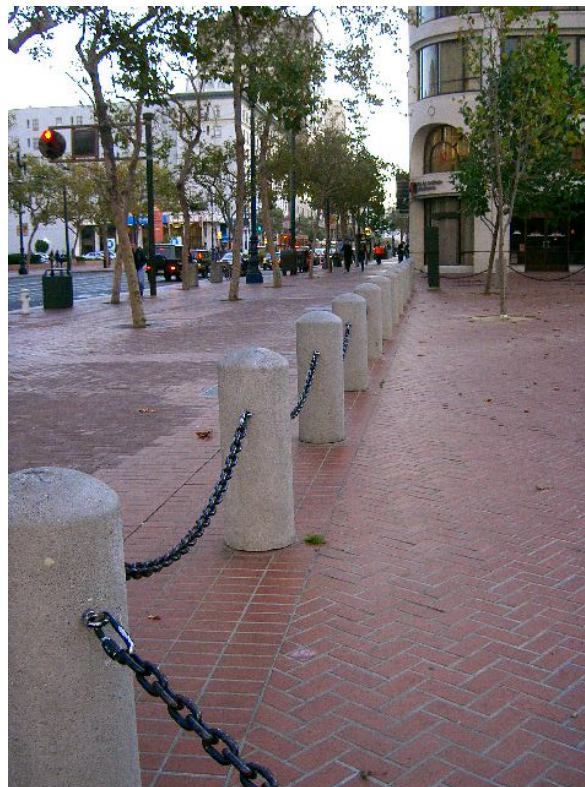


Figure 5. The United Nations Plaza (visible on the right side of this picture) is paved in a similar brick as the Market Street sidewalk (on the left side of the bollards in this picture). Originally, the bricks were exactly the same, but subsequent replacements have changed the brick somewhat. Regardless, though, the plaza maintains aesthetic continuity with the sidewalk of Market Street (Photograph: Author 2009).

MEASURING “GREATNESS”

Critically, the design met with mixed reviews. Architectural Forum praised Halprin’s work along Market Street (which includes the fountain), calling it “a cluster of kinetic human-scale experiences which make it architecture” (“San Francisco” 1973), and delegations from Atlanta, Miami, New Orleans and Chicago visited the city to study the changes, impressed with the MSDP association (Flynn, 1979). Yet local critics thought the “madly assembled granite fountain” was pompous (Temko, 1979) and too similar to the Villiancourt Embarcadero fountain, an unpopular fountain at the time (Bess, 1971) and now unused. Lawrence Livingston, Jr., one of the authors of the

original report, lamented the “bland” mall and abstract fountain, comparing it unfavorably with Halprin’s “exuberant plazas and graceful malls in downtown Portland and Seattle” (Livingston, 1981, p. 14). The arts commission vetoed the fountain proposal calling it “too blocky” (Craib, 1971), but after a few years’ delay, construction went ahead with largely unchanged designs.

But the true success or failure of a design explicitly created to change the fortunes and social life of an intersection is not in the critical response but in whether change occurred. For the United Nations Plaza, the results were again “decidedly mixed” (Market Street Advisory Committee, 1985, p. 2). The plaza opened with a dedication ceremony, which was combined with a welcome to the cast of “Raisin,” the first Broadway production to play in San Francisco, “...to help bring attention to the manner in which the area is being developed” (Averbuch, 1976). Local papers reported on the opening of a cafe in a small corner building and on the noon-time concerts in the Plaza (Waugh, 1978). To encourage people to visit the Plaza, the newly-created Market Street Development Association (MSDA) launched a variety of programs, including the People in Plazas concert series in 1976, and the Heart of the City Farmers’ Market (The Greater Market Street Development Association, n.d., p. 6). And the plaza did take on increased symbolic weight. The regional director of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare asked that the address of the “old” Federal Building” be changed to Number One United Nations Plaza, from 50 Fulton St. The justification includes the building’s historical value as well as the 900 employees who represent “almost every San Francisco ethnic group” (Maldonado, 1976). The owner of 35 Fulton St. (now 1 United Nations Plaza) was similarly willing to endure what he called a “big hassle” to change his building’s address (Waugh, 1978).

But in spite of those early successes, the Steering Committee did not feel that the new space had created the desired social and economic changes. In the early 1980s, a decade after the plaza had opened, Skidmore Owings and Merrill was hired to undertake another report on the Mid-Market area. It said, “The United Nations Plaza fountain area is chiefly a focus for the social problems in the area. The conditions are a sign of the City’s neglect of a portion of the population” (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and the San Francisco Study Center, 1982, p. 75). Changing the space alone had not changed the fortunes of local businesses: Mid-Market, one of the City’s major tourist destinations, was still home to “one of the seediest collections of disreputable riffraff this side of Port Said, dispiritedly hawking, praying, begging, drinking and sleeping among debris of every description” (Editorial Staff, 1985). Tourists complained about the “weirdos” that made them nervous, and merchants complained about the effects the “panhandlers, winos and street people” had on their business (Grace Harris, as quoted in Ginsburg & Waugh, 1985). Newspaper columnist Herb Caen called the area “*le grand pissoir*” because of the smell (Caen, 1985). In May of 1990, the Convention and Visitors Bureau released a report that said that “23 percent of two thousand tourists polled listed street people as the worst thing about the city” (Hartman & Carnochan, 2002, p. 378).

The formal strategies had clearly failed to evict the lower-income residents and everyday uses that the local business leaders found so problematic. They had

removed the social life of the Plaza without adequately replacing it with anything but bricks. The UN Plaza and nearby Market Street were no longer the everyday space of the young, but had become the site of citizens neglected by the government and the criminal, those left behind by Regan's trickle-down economy. The 1980s was a period of disinvestment in social services by the Federal government; local municipalities were supposed to take over caring for the mentally ill and economically challenged, but often did not have the resources to. The Plaza, then, and the people who occupied it, represented a change in how much citizens could expect from their government. Homelessness doubled in San Francisco in the 1980s, because of increased rents, and decreasing availability of single-room occupancy hotels in the city (Hartman & Carnochan, 2002, p. 376).



Figure 6. (Left) The UN Charter carved into the back of the obelisk by the fountain.
(Right) The UN symbol carved into the obelisk (Photographs: Author, 2009).

Design was once again called upon to solve perceived social and economic ills. In 1995, the Plaza received a facelift, adding more “memorial” content to what was in essence simply a plaza and fountain, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Charter. In three short months in 1995, the words of the UN Charter were carved on the black obelisk (Figure 6), a quote from Roosevelt (chosen by Halprin, who was working on the Roosevelt Memorial at the time) was carved into the fountain, granite inlays were placed into the brick mall with chiselled words from the UN in the stone, the names of all the member countries and the year they joined the UN were carved on granite lamp posts, and the UN emblem in the center of the plaza were all added (Figure 7). The new design, by San Francisco landscape architect Andrew Detsch, cost \$400,000, all of which was paid for privately (Epstein, 1995). Halprin was commissioned to design a more permanent way to keep the homeless out of the fountain, instead of the cyclone fences and chain barriers that had been used and the total removal that had been proposed (Murphy, 2004),

Even today, the area is contested. Retail in the area continues to be dominated by adult stores and pawn shops, and other retailers are “quickly dissuaded by the open drug dealing and abusing, public inebriation and urination, and aggressive panhandling” (Temple, 2008). Christine Adams, manager of the Farmer's Market, fears that the homeless drive away the customers (Baker, 2000). Because of the continued problem with the homeless and the many criminal activities in the Plaza, the benches in the plaza were removed in 2001, in the middle of the night (King, 2002). The MSDA claims that the space is successful: “The United Nations Plaza has

now become a different type of gathering place—it's classy but classless. The young and old, the well-to-do and those less well off, people from every social group and every occupation mix freely. The plaza is now perceived in a more positive vein" (The Greater Market Street Development Association, n.d., p. 6).



Figure 7. (Left) The sun sets over City Hall behind many newly added symbols, including a granite UN Seal embedded into the brick, and granite lamp posts with names of member nations. (Right) A granite lamppost with member nations carved into it (Photograph: Author, 2009).



Figure 8. (Left) The obelisk in use on Farmer's Market Day. (Upper Right) People shopping at the Farmer's Market. (Lower Right) People and pigeons enjoying the fountain at a close range (Photograph: Author, 2009).

The continued controversy about what to do to spruce up the plaza resulted in a 2005 plan to hold more events in the plaza as a way of creating activities to welcome everyone, from the homeless to tourists, to residents, to "everyone else". The \$1.5 million project was paid for by a combination of federal transportation funds, city general funds, and a grant from the San Francisco Foundation, a non-profit (Fagan,

2005). The plan called for the removal of the fences and increasing activities in the plaza, as a way of reducing the criminal activities through continued and lively use of the plaza by a wide variety of people (Figure 8).

CONCLUSION

The need for social interventions in the UN Plaza is an admission that the Architecture, the monumentality of the space, failed in controlling the informal, self-organized everyday life within the Mid-Market area. However, that does not mean that the UN Plaza is an entirely failed space. The use of the Plaza is contested, but at least it is used. The history of the UN Plaza asks the question of what we want from our public spaces, and who we are willing to let design our urban environment. Urban identity is not only about monuments and formal spaces, but also about the meaning that places have in the minds of locals (Oktay & Bala, 2015). As a monument, the UN Plaza has generated ongoing discussion about who has a right to the city, who cities are designed for, and how people should behave in public. It is a source of conversation about what the UN stands for—human rights, civil rights, and dignity. In a series of newspaper articles, bond issues, police and citizen action, and stubborn inaction, the Plaza continues to spark debate about who uses the city, who has a right to public space. It is still a space under production whose territories have not yet been fully assigned. The Plaza is a physical manifestation of the forces that shape every city: attempts to draw global capital, contested designs, contested space, and questions of whose uses are the best uses of space. That the most entrenched social problems of the city manifest in what was supposed to be the culmination of a ceremonial way along the backbone of San Francisco, in spite of monumental attempts to make those people who represent the city's failure to provide for its citizens, is perhaps the greatest result of a plaza dedicated to the United Nations.

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