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San Francisco Toilets

some of this advertising was already on self-standing kiosks along Market Street. What made this deal different was the number of kiosks Decaux proposed and the considerable size of each one.

Many San Franciscans did not like the idea of selling the public right-of-way for advertising, no matter what the public benefit. There was concern about the scale and character of the kiosks; many people felt they would be too tall, block views and demean the city's jealously guarded sense of place. (The kiosks are 14 to 17 feet tall, depending on their "hat," and roughly four feet in diameter. The toilets have a floor plate of five by eight feet and are about eight feet tall.) There was considerable doubt about the long-term viability of the project; would the toilets really be taken care of? And some people said the deal was not fair: Decaux could make a considerable profit on the advertising; shouldn't the city share the windfall?

Decaux offered a standard toilet design and two kiosk designs, each with newsstands and public art designed specifically for San Francisco. The toilet design was reviewed and modified to meet accessibility requirements and aesthetic considerations. The kiosks were reviewed, too, for they were offered as "public service kiosks" on which there would be three panels, two for advertising and one for designation by the city. The city decided that two-thirds would be used to replace unsightly newspaper stands and the rest for public art.

The placement of the elements also required scrutiny; each proposed location was subject to a public hearing. The planning and public works departments, working with other city agencies, developed design and placement guidelines to facilitate the installation of the toilets and kiosks while preserving citywide pedestrian goals. For

In 1993, the city of San Francisco issued a bold request for proposals, seeking a company to install and maintain public toilets on city sidewalks.

While such facilities are increasingly common in Europe, they are unheard of in U.S. cities. Moreover, San Francisco decreed that it could not afford to pay for the amenity it desired. Instead, the company that operated the toilets would be authorized to erect advertising on the street. JCDecaux USA, the winning bidder, proposed putting up 4.5 advertising kiosks for each toilet.

For years, cities have had privately managed bus shelters underwritten by ads. In San Francisco,

Above: Newsstand on Market Street. Courtesy Evan Rose.

Opposite page, top:

Advertising kiosk on Geary Street. Courtesy Evan Rose.

Opposite page, bottom:

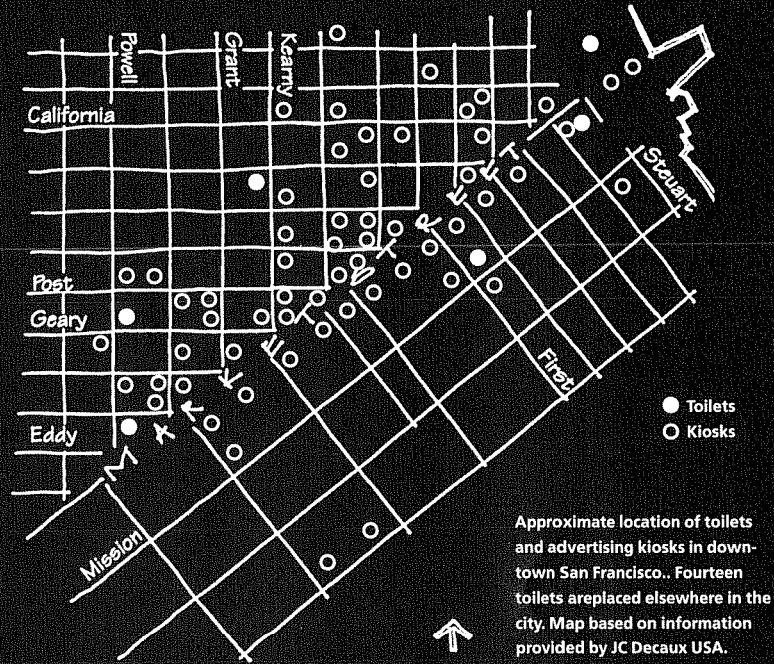
Toilet next to Washington Square Park. Courtesy JCDecaux USA.

the downtown area, the guidelines were integrated with a streetscape design plan that was being developed concurrently.

The toilets have been installed throughout the city, but the kiosks are concentrated downtown, especially along Market Street. For advertisers, this concentration makes sense, but to many people, the kiosks have become the dominant design element on the street. This concern was mitigated somewhat by the quality of the design, although some designers in town aren't thrilled by the neo-Victorian motif (the city rejected the contemporary designs it was offered).

The installation of twenty toilets and ninety advertising kiosks, which took about a year, has been a guarded success. The toilets are used frequently, by everyone from tourists to the homeless. The maps on the toilet structures seem popular, too. However, the newsstand kiosks seem underutilized and the public art component has been underwhelming, primarily due to lack of city funds. The most controversial detail was Decaux's attempt to install a few rotating kiosks, which were quickly removed at the city's insistence.

Some people will always be opposed to change in San Francisco, but the general reaction to this initiative seems favorable. There is a sense that the vendor has delivered as promised, and that a well-designed, well-maintained streetscape is a fair trade for the presence of more advertising. In fact, the city is investigating whether the city should increase the number of toilets and exploring other street furniture improvements, including some soon-to-be-installed kiosks designed by Norman Foster, and a tantalizing technological solution to the vexing problem of proliferating newsracks.



Approximate location of toilets and advertising kiosks in downtown San Francisco. Fourteen toilets are replaced elsewhere in the city. Map based on information provided by JC Decaux USA.



San Francisco's new toilets and advertising kiosks seem, on balance, to be a positive addition to the cityscape.

The scale of the kiosks is hefty, but it actually seems appropriate for the city's streets, and the dark color fades easily into the cityscape. The advertising images are dramatically overscaled, but since the ads are turned to face the street, this effect is diminished somewhat; pedestrians rarely encounter a perfume bottle or alluring model face to face. The backlit ads add a splash of color to the streets, particularly on foggy or overcast days; they cheapen the street no more than normal commercial signage (but could be more tasteful).

Undoubtedly, the kiosks are over-concentrated in places. At the foot of Market Street, they jostle with flimsy triangular frames that carry ads placed by a bus shelter company; sometimes they flank opposite sides of the street like pincers. Spacing all the advertising structures with a maximum of one to a block would make more sense.

When one encounters a kiosk, there is first a sense of surprise, then a feeling of recognition, since the kiosks have become familiar elements of the streetscape. One only wishes that each kiosk could be more localized, with more space for information about local history or activities. Instead of enclosing newsstands, they might include bulletin boards, neighborhood maps or information terminals. At least it would be good to see a wider variety of ads, and ads that relate to local businesses, not only national marketing campaigns.

—Todd W. Bressi

