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Title

The Ferry Building - San Francisco, CA by SMWM; Baldauf Catton von Eckartsberg; Page & Turnbull [EDRA/Places Awards 2007 -- Design]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87b8g9fn>

Journal

Places, 19(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

2007-10-15

Peer reviewed

The Ferry Building—San Francisco, CA

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In American cities, the second half of the twentieth century saw a pervasive expansion of freeways, an industrialization of food supplies, and a transformation of restaurants and cafes by national franchises. But as this design award to San Francisco Ferry Building indicates, the first half of the twenty-first century may see a turning of the tables. The need to create a sense of place, focused on local identity and cultural values, may once again be taking hold in the American psyche.

Above: The restored San Francisco Ferry Building dominates a revived waterfront. Photo by Richard Barnes.

Inset: The double-deck Embarcadero Freeway once cut the Ferry Building off from the rest of the city. Historic photo courtesy of BCV Architects.

Opposite: Illustrative site plan of restored Ferry Building and surrounding plazas. Illustration by J. F. Mahoney, copyright 1998. www.candraw.net. Courtesy of SMWM.

As the San Francisco newspaper columnist Herb Caen once put it, the Beaux Arts Ferry Building was once “a famous city’s most famous landmark.” But for years it languished in obscurity, hidden behind the double-decked Embarcadero Freeway along a largely abandoned waterfront. A four-year, \$110 million renovation and reinvention has returned it to its former status as one of the most significant civic monuments in the western United States and a cornerstone of the public realm.

After the demolition of the damaged Embarcadero Freeway following the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake, the mandate from the Port of San Francisco was specific: use the reconstruction of the Ferry Building along a newly designed grand Embarcadero boulevard to draw San Franciscans back to the waterfront. Since its reopening, the Ferry Building has done just that, providing a spark for surrounding redevelopment, and establishing a self-sustaining

center for the sale of local food and produce.

As one juror noted, “it is a catalytic piece, and incredibly important piece of the city, and the region.... it is once again the center of San Francisco’s Noli map.”

The jury agreed the project also defined design excellence on a number of levels. It held to strict preservation standards while applying innovative techniques and using new materials to stabilize the structure and update building systems. Dramatically, it also restored the building’s original 660-foot-long skylit second floor nave and brought it through to the ground level for the public to enjoy. This magnificent transit hall had been partly demolished and infilled in the years since ferries had ceased to be the primary means of travel around San Francisco Bay.

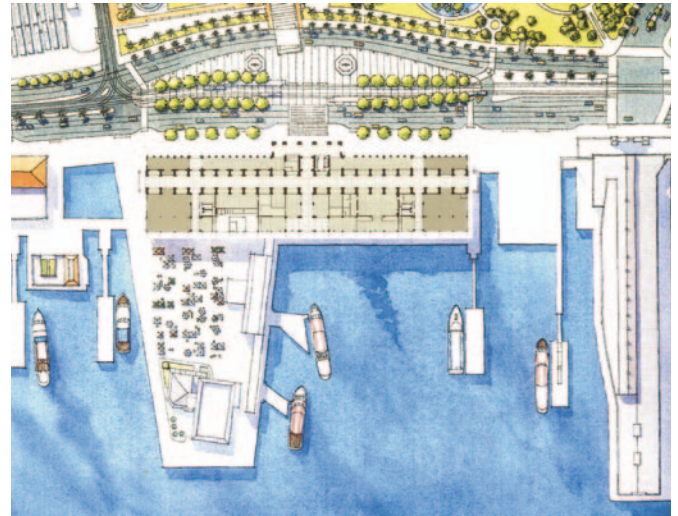
A Storied Past

The story of the Ferry Building is synonymous in many ways with the rediscovery of urban waterfronts across America. Built in 1898, the Ferry Building quickly became the second busiest transit terminal in the world, with as many as 50,000 people passing through it each day.¹ Until the construction of the Bay and Golden Gate Bridges in 1936 and 1937, all residents of the region, except those coming from the south, entered the city there. However, the construction of the bridges all but ended ferry service around the bay and led to the marginalization of the once great central terminal.

In 1950, the Ferry Building went through its first major renovation. Its owner, the Port of San Francisco, removed some of its signature public archways and filled in part of its nave to create general office space. Then, in 1957, the double-decked Embarcadero Freeway was built along the downtown waterfront, obscuring views of the Ferry Building’s majestic facade and cutting the city off from the water.

After decades of marginalization the Ferry Building’s transformation began with a near disaster. Had the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake lasted seconds longer the entire freeway structure in front of it might have come crashing down, as did a sister structure in Oakland. Following the quake, voters chose to tear the freeway down rather than pay for an expensive seismic retrofit. The demolition, combined with the relocation of commercial shipping to the container terminals of the Port of Oakland across the bay, opened up a vast new public waterfront space.

Although a series of improvements have been made to this space in the years since, including a tree-lined boulevard and a new trolley line, it has been the rebirth of the Ferry Building since 2003 that has most activated it effort both in place and in history.

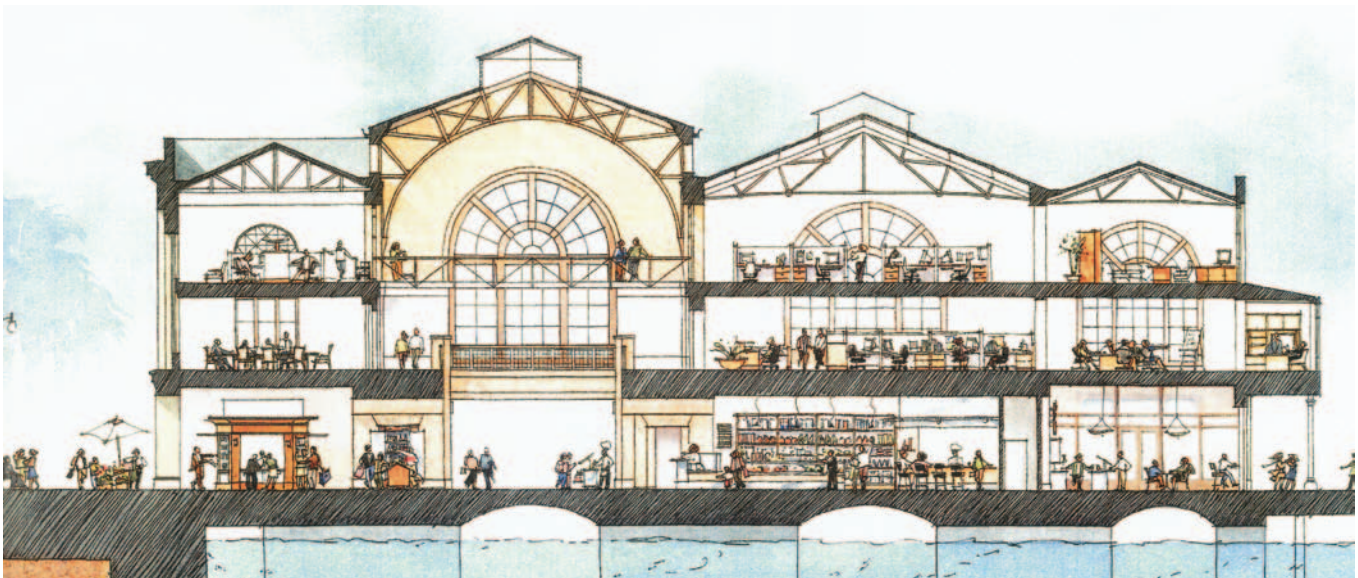


The Transformation Plan

The transformation of the Ferry Building has been a long process, one that has involved nearly ten years of public input and review. In 1998 four teams submitted proposals to redevelop the landmark building. The winning proposal stood apart from the rest for two important reasons that have subsequently played an important role in the success of the project.

The first was that the team decided to open the 660-foot-long passenger concourse, its central nave which had formerly been a second-floor space, all the way to the ground floor. When the building had been a bustling transit facility the ground floor had been used for baggage handling and other “back-of-house” uses. However, opening this nave to street level with two dramatic 30-by-150-foot openings allowed sunlight to penetrate all the way through the building. It also revealed the beauty of its ceiling vaults to the ground floor, paving the way for the creation of a unique and inspiring interior street and marketplace.

Cutting these openings through the second floor concourse, although critical to the success of the ground floor, was a difficult and complicated restoration decision. The marketplace mosaic flooring on the concourse level was considered an integral part of the building’s historic character. But the bold decision to cut two big holes into it paid off, creating a truly great public space, and the removed mosaic tiles were ultimately reused to patch sections of floor elsewhere that had been damaged in previous building modifications. Glass railings were also used around the floor cuts so one could envision the second floor concourse without the holes.





The second key decision by the renovation team was to reserve the marketplace for local culinary businesses, restaurants and vendors. This retail approach has been unique, offering what one juror referred to as “the best of Northern California” in terms of produce and food service.

By concentrating on local businesses, the Ferry Building marketplace now offers a reflection of the values and aspirations of area residents. As jurors amply noted, this focus sets it apart from other festival marketplaces across the country, which are dominated by franchise outlets with little connection to local culture. Indeed, many of these marketplaces have become tourist traps, indistinguishable from one another, rarely visited by locals, and offering little insight about region or place.



A Complex Formula

Although the award cited the physical and programmatic reinvention of the building, jurors noted that these accomplishments could hardly have been achieved without equally creative financial ideas. While preserving the nave and the ground floor for community use and 65,000 square

Opposite above: The ground-floor market hall features Bay Area products.

Photo by Richard Barnes.

Opposite below: Illustrative section showing relation of ground-floor commercial areas to offices and meeting areas above. Illustration by J. F. Mahoney, copyright 1998. www.candraw.net. Courtesy of SMWM.

Left: Organic produce on sale in the ground-floor market. Photo by David Wakely.

Right: The renovation opened up the second-floor concourse to the ground floor, making it a popular event location. Photo by Richard Barnes.

Sample Juror Comments—San Francisco Ferry Building

Ann Forsyth: The Ferry Building, I think, is really worth a discussion. I wish they had talked a bit more about design research and such in their materials.

Buzz Yudell: But to me there is. I see the Ferry Building not as just another, but as an extraordinarily unusual and successful public project that also provides an almost antithetical model to the big festival market. What really impresses me about the Ferry Building is that somehow they put together the programs, and

then financed it, and got it built in a way that reinforces some of the best qualities of the Bay Area. It is all organic, local produce from the Bay Area, basically. So it's the best vintners, the best food, olive oil, the best cheese, the best oysters. And then it's also high-end restaurants and quite a few moderate places.

Anne Whiston Spirn: I think that's what Pike Street [in Seattle] did....

Buzz Yudell: But I'm not sure if it was as complex as

this. With the Ferry Building, a lot of its financing was because they were able to create office space above that helped pay for the public spaces below. What is intriguing is that the space that is least valuable for the public is generating the most money, which then helps support this extremely public space. And the process involved the public sector going out and saying here is this problem, we have to restore this place and keep it an important part of the city. This was the only



feet of retail market space, it was supported by public-private cooperation and a long-term development/management model that created 175,000 square feet of leaseable Class A office space on the upper two floors.

The Port of San Francisco entered into a 67-year ground lease with Equity Office, a private investment firm, which invested \$110 million in the restoration. Like most mixed-use projects, the leaseable office space created the opportunity for the public spaces and retail market. The

Above left: Outdoor areas around the Ferry Building host a popular farmer's market. Photo by Richard Barnes.

Above right: A popular ground-floor oyster bar. Photo by David Wakely.

Opposite: Ground-floor restaurant with view of the Bay Bridge. Photo by David Wakely.

ground lease includes a public thoroughfare through the building, access to the grand hall, and public restrooms.

The project has been a huge financial success. In a challenging leasing environment following the dot-com crash, the Ferry Building, in its first four years, has achieved financial viability, a 100 percent lease-up of both office and retail space, and is generating positive returns. The second-floor grand hall has even become a popular event space, holding, on average, two private events a week.

Meanwhile, the farmer's market and the local businesses create a symbiotic relationship, each thriving off the other's clientele, making the Ferry Building marketplace a true neighborhood, regional, and even international epicurean destination. Since it was inaugurated, the farmer's market has increased from 5,000 to 8,000 weekday visitors, and from 10,000 to 25,000 Saturday visitors.

Sample Juror Comments—San Francisco Ferry Building

plan that leveraged market forces to actually create something that was not about commodities, but about the best of the region. I'm not sure I can think of another place that has been commercially successful at leveraging an important piece of architecture and restoration. So it walks a fine line. It creates a destination, even a tourist attraction, but all within the highest aspirations of the region.

Ann Forsyth: What I like about it is it's a public/private space, but it looks polished. And it is nice to have something that has a high quality.

Roberta Feldman: And what makes it an important preservation project is that it was a restoration project. The spaces in the building had been enclosed. They were no longer visible. We can't overlook the value of sustaining and restoring these architectural treasures.

And it is done in a way that values public life as a community, rather than just the money and promoting the tax base. What's interesting is that this model attracts probably just as many tourists as the other.

Ann Forsyth: I also liked that it shows what can happen after you take the freeways down, and how to create a fairly grand public space out of an area that had been pretty marginal.



The rejuvenated Ferry Building has also served as a catalyst for more than \$257 million of future development on the bordering waterfront. Restaurants are already taking up shop on adjacent piers. And nonprofit organization that produces the farmer's market has reported that its corporate underwriting and sponsorship has increased since it moved to the Ferry Building, providing room for new vendors to join, and strengthening the agricultural growth of small farms in the region.

Thus, in addition to offering locally based farm-fresh produce, specialty retailers, open-air cafes, and opportunities for bay-front dining, the Ferry Building is supporting many of the region's social goals: sustainable agriculture, environmental health, and economic growth.

Finally, the Ferry Building is not only a new center for food and agriculture, but it is once again becoming a hub

of transit. Its redesign has brought a resurgence of ferry service around the bay, a trend that is scheduled to increase as local freeways reach their maximum capacity. In the next nine years the San Francisco Bay Area Water Transit Authority is looking to add upward of three new births and more than double the number of ferry routes connecting San Francisco to such outlying cities as Redwood City, South San Francisco, Berkeley, Richmond, Hercules, Martinez and Antioch. The Ferry Building is once again at the heart of San Francisco and the San Francisco Bay.

More than a Historic Time Piece

The importance of the Ferry Building as a catalyst was not lost on the former mayor of the city, Willie L. Brown, Jr. "The rehabilitation of the Ferry Building is a lasting legacy for San Franciscans," he said at the grand public ceremony to rechristen the building's 245-foot-tall clock tower.

"The re-starting of the clock signals the Ferry Building's return to public service as an icon on the vibrant waterfront. The restoration would not have come to fruition without the tremendous public support and backing by the Port and the Ferry Building investors and stakeholders."

—Chris Sensenig

Note

1. From wikipedia: In the 1930s the San Francisco Ferry Building was the second busiest transit terminal in the world, second only to London's Charing Cross Station. It served as the embarkation point for commuters to San Francisco from the East Bay who rode the ferry fleets of the Southern Pacific and the Key System. A loop track existed in front of the building for streetcars. A large pedestrian bridge also spanned the Embarcadero in front of the Ferry Building until the late 1940s.

Anne Whiston Spirn: That's one of the things that impressed me. Many of the festival market places transformed previously private spaces. This was an extraordinarily important public building at one time. The spaces are so grand. It's a matter of a retrieval of a grand public space to be enjoyed by the public and a reminder of how public buildings were once designed. They put beautiful tile work and detail in the building. It was a statement of how important this was to the City of San Francisco, to the public. I was also moved by the

fact that the shops in the Ferry Building are featuring the best of California, not chains.

Buzz Yudell: The other thing that isn't talked about too much, but that I think is effective, is that it's not just the building. It's the building and all of its adjacent sites, so that it still activates the pier. The ferry still comes in there. There are new plazas on multiple sides that get used for specific events. And farmers markets are now happening four days a week because they are so successful. It is also connecting to updated transit

modes. It has become a catalytic piece, an incredibly important piece of the city, and the region, by extension.

Roberta Feldman: What is also impressive is that the initial photographs give you a sense that this space is actively used. The density of people is really remarkable. You understand that this place is successful by the people doing exactly what they hoped people would be doing in these spaces. That kind of presentation is unusual. Normally, a preservation project is presented as an artifact, not a building, which implies activity.