Mountain View, California: Fiat Res Publica

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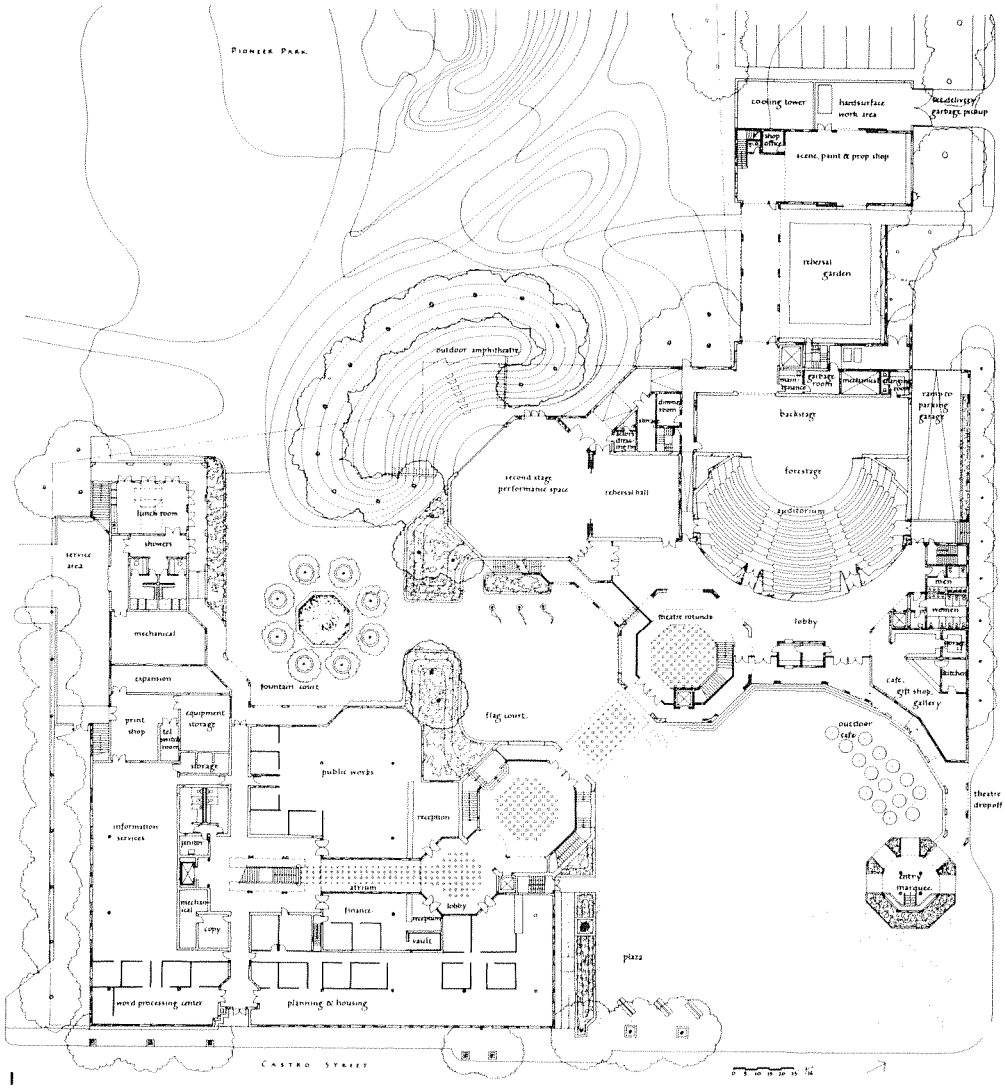
Historically, American cities on the up-and-up have remade themselves toward a new, usually commercial, vision. Lithographed nineteenth-century aerial views of prairie street grids, bordered by images of local businesses and monuments, remind us of the boosterism of communities that try to be distinguishable from their neighbors in order to draw new settlers and entrepreneurs. With the 1980s phenomena of suburban gridlock and "urban village," however, the landscape of metropolitan regions is now both saturated and undifferentiated. In Mountain View, California (population 63,000), the "mush" of tilt-up chip assembly plants, freeways, and cul-de-sac tract housing developments of Silicon Valley have overgrown the cherry orchards of the recent rural past. Its original city identity, bound up in the hierarchy of its main street cluster and rural boundary, is nearly indiscernible as one drives the El Camino Real strip up the Peninsula toward San Francisco.

Some Bay Area communities such as Walnut Creek, Napa, and adjacent Palo Alto have embraced no-growth policies in frustration over the perceived loss of cherished small-town virtues. But other cities are finding it difficult, realistically, to hold back change when the entire surrounding region is changing. Fortunately, Mountain View is avoiding a "just say no" policy and is attempting to reconcile widespread dismay over disorderly growth with recognition of its market's extraordinary development opportunities. By harnessing development through enhancement of, and investment in, its public realm, the city intends to create a "there," a new locus for public pride and city identity.

It was not a sudden realization that brought the Mountain View city staff and council around to this vision. A series of opportunities for educating and opening a dialogue on design and place-making issues came our way, beginning in 1984. Several field trips were made and dozens of slide shows and talks were given on what makes a memorable district, the ingredients of a successful main street, the importance of public buildings in civic imagery, and related topics. These efforts gradually and sometimes quickly changed perceptions of what could be done to improve the city. We have found and continue to find this educative aspect of our approach to be the most powerful (if typically the most neglected) tool for achieving real change in city design. It is a different avenue toward a lost art of city building, of helping to make a public realm. The process differs from, yet remains dependent upon, the separate activities of project design, economic development, and plannerly regulation.

A long-standing concern with revitalizing the somnolent downtown of Mountain View became tied to this new awareness. The new vision of making downtown once again an economic, social, and civic destination took over the previously fragmented motions toward sporadic beautification or parking lot paving. But we had to proceed with a watchful awareness of the competing context of business parks, regional shopping malls, and commercial strips, lest the effort end up like the failed pedestrian malls of a decade past.

During this introductory period, a common planning snafu precipitated one of the necessary changes to Mountain View's district-making process. The city found itself having to permit construction of what seemed an inappropriate office building design of the suburban business park type, on the main street, across from the old city hall. The plans had passed uneventfully through the existing design review process. The review process's shortcomings awakened realization of the need for better control of the increasing volume of development in the downtown, leading to new downtown site plan and architectural design guidelines tailored to the public space needs of a


Pioneer Park
cooling tower
hardsurface work area
scene, paint & prop shop
rehearsal garden
outdoor amphitheatre
backstage
forestage
auditorium
second stage performance space
rehearsal hall
lunch room
showers
service area
mechanical
expansion
fountain court
flag court
theatre rotunda
lobby
men
women
cafe, gift shop, gallery
outdoor cafe
theatre dropoff
Mercy Street
public works
reception
information services
atrium
finance
lobby
vault
plaza
word processing center
planning & housing
Castro Street

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particular type of district. The guidelines are aimed at architecturally harmonizing an expanded and redefined downtown and encourage new, mostly larger developments to observe the scale and rhythm of the blocks of older storefront buildings. But the city leadership quickly began to understand that major change must be coaxed and wrought as well as regulated into being. It gradually took on a more activist role in both encouraging private investment in downtown and setting higher standards for building projects.

Presently under construction in the downtown are several resultant large-scale civic, commercial, and residential building projects. Prominent among these is the project for a new City Hall, Performing Arts Theatre, and Civic Plaza. Mountain View determined that renewing the civic presence in the downtown would be important in making it more meaningful to its citizens. By this time, they were particularly concerned with making a great public place in the heart of the city. Through an involved process of research and discussion, a city hall committee prepared a detailed master plan design program for a city hall complex. Two civic buildings would frame a major urban plaza, leading from the main street to a historic park; the city hall would be located on its predecessor's main street site. A competition followed in 1986, held among mostly California architects. William Turnbull Associates' winning design was selected from among schemes by Charles Moore, Christopher Alexander, Jack Diamond, and Tony Carrasco. Its two flamboyant towers and grand corner plaza, forming a diagonal gate to downtown's Pioneer Park, manifested the city's conscious desire to make a bold civic statement. With its lively facades and unfolding sequence of public indoor and outdoor spaces, it has signaled Mountain View's aspirations toward a distinct city identity as much for potential developers as for its local citizenry. Other large projects have been collaboratively shaped by the city's design review teams and developers to enhance public space as well as provide high-density housing, offices, and recreational facilities, in order to expand the mix and cycle of downtown activities.

The city staff also realized that to rebuild a district would take more than a few isolated projects, that the public investment had to be better distributed through the district as a more continuous and sometimes subtle presence. Some main street improvements such as adding the typical brick crosswalks and street trees had been undertaken in years past, but these had not really changed the nature of how one perceived and used the downtown. The first hint of how this could be accomplished was a 1985 project that highlighted

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1 Plan, Mountain View City Hall and Theatre for the Performing Arts (William Turnbull Associates).

2 Perspective View of Plaza and Mountain View City Hall and Theatre for the Performing Arts (William Turnbull Associates).

3 Parking lot alleyway arch structure and improvements, downtown Mountain View. Photograph by Michael Freedman.

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a different way to enter downtown. In the three blocks of "historic," small-parceled main street, the previously dowdy alleyways that connected rear-of-shop public parking lots to the storefronts are now well marked by large ornamental ironwork arch structures paved with patterned granite and lit by closely spaced light standards. The arches have caught local imagination, celebrating this typically American and generally neglected passage from the parked car to the main street.

These small enhancements to the spatial structure of the city, along with the design guidelines and revised design review process, have been nudging new private sector projects toward supporting a district identity. But, as on many American main streets, some blocks on Mountain View's Castro Street are not exclusively lined by small storefront properties. Most of the blocks south of the original, older core are characterized by larger parcels assembled for the bigger development increments typical today. The increasing scale of development parcels, combined with the varied renovations and modernizations of the last 40 years, makes for a downtown building stock of styles and scales for which heterogeneous is a kind term, something no set of guidelines can affect quickly and substantially.

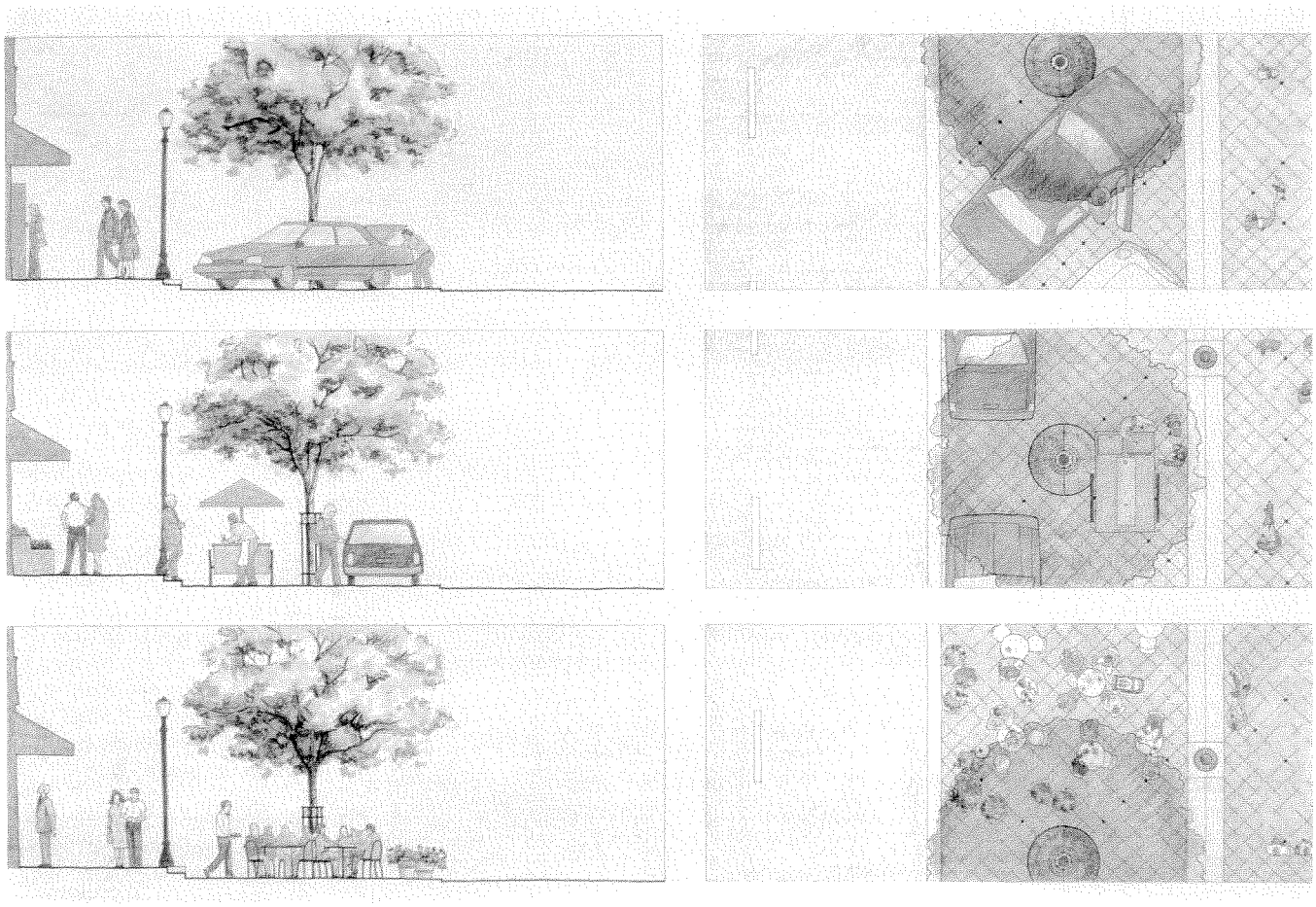
As people realized that Mountain View could not emulate Santa Barbara and impose a unitary style to its architecture in pursuit of a unique character, the redesign of the main street right-of-way became a major thrust of the effort to make an identifiable city center. Like the improvements to the parking lot passages, the new street design would attempt to ornament, intensify, and make legible a main street district structure and character. By strengthening that character, it would also help to quiet the disunity of the downtown buildings.

In addition to educating and advising, we were now charged with designing the main street improvements. We began by attempting to address the limitations of the American main street as a public place. The 1960s saw many well-intentioned but ineffective efforts to create active downtown districts by eliminating the friction between pedestrians and cars. The resulting segregated innovations seemed to create an unfamiliar brave new urban world. Many of the new plazas that resulted proved to be improperly sized or enclosed, or they were cut off from street activity, or people did not quite know how to use them; and pedestrianized main street malls mysteriously lost their clientele to shopping malls. We have observed that American main streets derive much of their vitality and spatial definition from the presence of parked cars and people entering and exiting them, particularly when the parking arrangement is on the diagonal. This is most important in smaller towns and cities, where downtowns are predominantly made up of local service businesses. On the other hand, we have found too many main street right-of-ways designed as if they were sewer pipes, with sections created for maximum flow, rather than following a riverine ecology, with shoals and eddies as well as fast moving water. An example of the latter is the way St. Mark's Place in Manhattan works for pedestrians, with its repeating split-level brownstone storefronts set back from the sidewalk by a zone of entry stairs and submerged spaces. These pockets create rich casual opportunities for sitting on steps, pausing comfortably to fumble with change, or having sidewalk conversations, making that street itself a destination.

Castro Street's typical existing right-of-way dimensions, 90 feet wide with 10-foot sidewalks, gave most of its width to the four and sometimes five lanes of traffic and two rows of parallel parking. Here was the sewer pipe effect at work, cars lording over public space, leaving only slivers of passageway for pedestrians and trees along the base of

4 Castro Street in the historic core (existing), Mountain View, California. Photograph by Michael Freedman.

5 Market Street sidewalk, San Francisco. Photograph by Michael Freedman.



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the buildings. Strolling or lingering are inconceivable in this environment. But widening the sidewalk alone, without the foot traffic to justify it, is no answer.

We devised a new section for the street by decreasing the lanes to three, reducing the asphalt crossing from 70 feet down to 34 feet. The newly gained width went to a flexible parking and pedestrian activity zone on each side of the street, 18 feet wide, between the sidewalk and the moving traffic. Uplit street trees would be regularly spaced along the street at 30-foot intervals. A powerful architectural cadence would be established for the corridor day and night, unlike the effect created by the existing, irregularly spaced trees. The trees would center in the activity zone, pulling the line they form further toward the right-of-way center and visually claiming more of the street section for pedestrians.

Pairs of cars would park diagonally between trees, but they would be interlopers on pedestrian turf. The 15-inch-square concrete pavers they rested on would also tile the 10-foot primary sidewalk. The pattern of pavers, set in a 45-degree grid, contains smaller, accent pavers in a geometric pattern (as opposed to painted striping) to mark parking stalls. A "stair curb" of two steps between sidewalk and zone, interrupted by plinths every 30 feet and streetlights every 60, both stops car tires and provides an additional architectural element to define the spaces.

Most importantly, the space between roadway and side-

6 Sections and plans, proposed Castro Street improvements concept (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran). Cars may be diagonally parked, parallel parked, or removed altogether, to create space for pedestrian activities. Street trees are 30 feet apart and centered in this flexibly used area.

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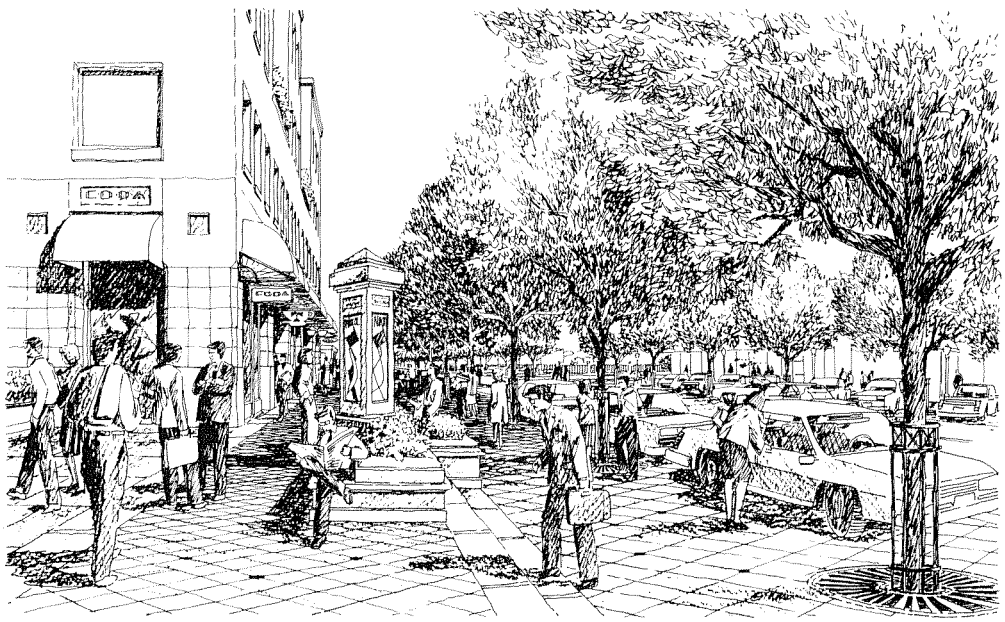

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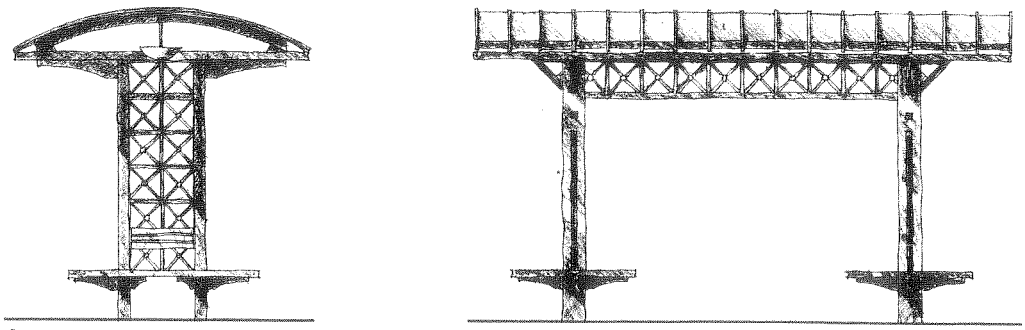
7 Castro Street outside of the historic core (existing), Mountain View, California. Photograph by Michael Freedman.

8 Perspective view of sidewalk and flexible area, Castro Street improvements (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran). Parallel parking is shown in the foreground.

walk operates as a "flexible zone," where the cars may also be parallel parked so as to allow additional pedestrian space and activity, or totally removed to allow the space to be occupied by tables and chairs for outdoor dining at the city's discretion. Here the parking space and pedestrian space borrow from each other according to determined need, allowing new space to be "found" in an existing non-negotiable width of right-of-way.

The absence of the sidewalk café in California is striking, considering the climate and the popularity of outdoor eating. It is an example of the poverty of our activity options (and our perceptions of them as well) in the American public realm, and of the excessive spatial division one experiences when moving between public and private property. The provision of outdoor eating capabilities for Castro Street was also suggested by the many existing downtown restaurants. Although we may disparage the recent spread of cappuccino and croissant culture as a passing affectation, we should consider the opportunity it provides for relegitimizing street life, helping to make that life safe and acceptable by American perceptions (particularly in the suburbs). Also essential to that street life is the mix of activities located there. One of the most successful revitalization projects in Mountain View thus far was not an urban design feature—rather, it was



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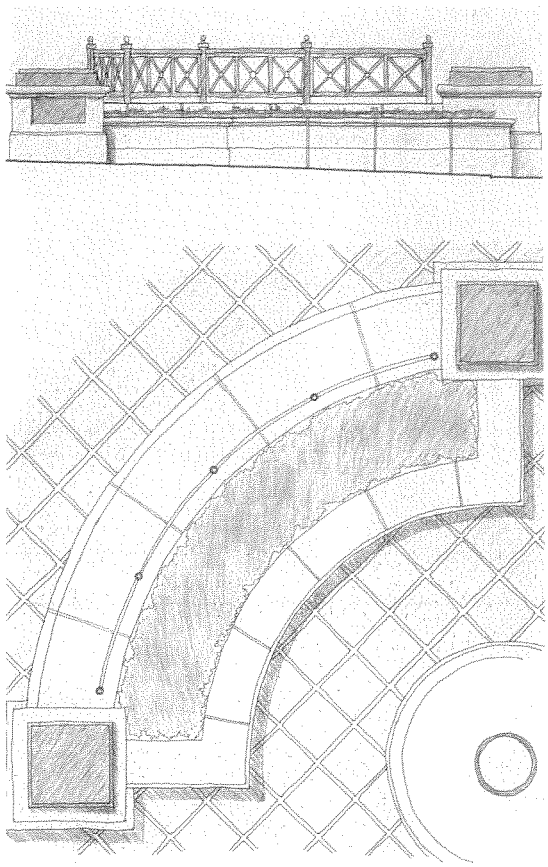
the successful inducement of a bookstore/coffeehouse to open a new location on Castro Street.

In counterpoint to the usual practice of strewing catalogue street furnishings along the curbside, we are experimenting with combining furniture functions to make a more substantial "architecure of the street" itself. A family of specially designed street furnishings supports the changes to the street section. They are made with a palette of precast concrete, cast and fabricated metalwork, and work with squares, circles, rectangles, X's and arc shapes—bus shelters, kiosks, planters, seating, tree grates and guards, and hybrid combinations of these. One ironwork pavilion, marking the intersection of a major public paseo from a large new commercial and residential development with the main street, is an elaborate domed cross-barrel vault, an amplified version of the existing parking lot alleyway arches. The street furnishings are placed in geometrically composed and consistent locations, integrating with corner and midblock crosswalk designs.

The emphasis on clear and regular geometry and spacing, and the avoidance of soft S curves is not merely a formal preference. It is an attempt to wrest the indication of who the street is for from the random parabolas and "pork chop" islands of traffic engineering, to orderly



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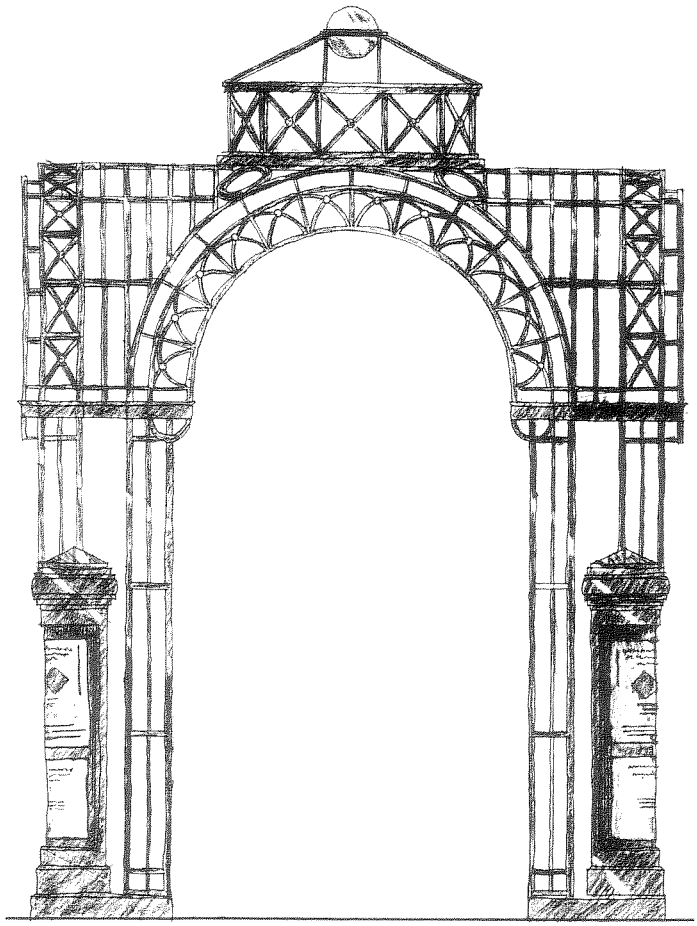
9 Bus shelter, Castro Street improvements (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran).

10 Plan and elevation, curved planter bench with globe lights, Castro Street improvements (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran).

11 Tree guard, Castro Street improvements (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran).



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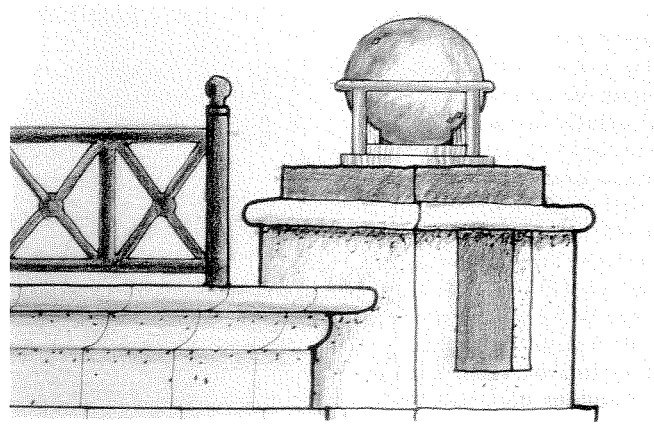

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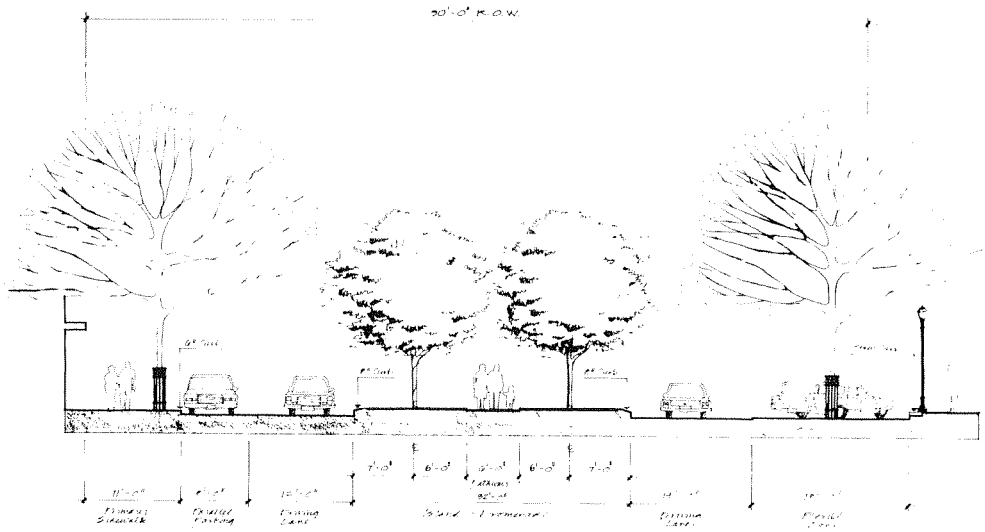

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12 Paseo pavilion, Castro Street improvements (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran).

13 Globe light detail, Castro Street improvements (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran).

14 Street section at island promenade, Castro Street improvements (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran).

15 Downtown Castro Street and surrounding buildings, Mountain View (Freedman Tung Ashley & Cochran). The historic core of contiguous storefronts with midblock alleys to parking behind can be seen at the north end, close by the Southern Pacific tracks. City Hall Plaza is visible just south of the center. Large-scale developments predominate south to the district edge, El Camino Real.

shapes pleasingly recognizable at walking speed. Similarly, the classicist organization of the furniture composition, with simple interpretations of copings and bases and small parts that support larger compositional figures, is an attempt to reflect the architecture of the body, rather than continue the 1960s public works design idiom of stripped down, visually indestructible furnishings suitable for asylums. When it was necessary to select catalogue furnishings, we tried to avoid Victoriana, the ubiquitous street furniture industry alternative. Our belief has been that publicness, as a design quality, has a temporal quality, on which the sense of authenticity depends, hence our reluctance to use nostalgic period reproductions.

Another essential element in making the street memorable is the inclusion of mysterious pieces within the orderly matrix, like the backlit, copper-framed, solid glass sphere lights that mark the crosswalks, inspired by library floor globes.

Merely unrolling the new street section through the downtown would be insufficient as the district armature. We felt that it must also create a hierarchy, a sense of having places-within-a-place. Having noted that the new city hall complex would be a block south of the major downtown intersection, we proposed a change to the street section to help mark a civic core.

In the center of the major intersection, we proposed a 60-foot monumental tower, on a 25-foot-diameter island. Spanning from there to the city hall plaza, a fortuitous building set back the length of that one block allowed us to propose two 32-foot-wide, tandem, grass-covered islands with a cherry-tree-lined, decomposed granite promenade, on axis with the tower. The cherry trees group into three equal-length bosks, the one furthest from the tower forming an edge to the city hall plaza.

Despite the usual compromises and difficulties, the street improvements are slated for construction in 1989, though some items such as the intersection tower are to be postponed for later funding and community review. Looking at the street design, the city hall, housing developments, and small renovations, we can feel an urban structure that capitalizes on the district's existing features slowly beginning to emerge. In the long process of educating the participants (ourselves included) on what could make the small and medium-sized city a better place, in consolidating those community visions through extended dialogue and interaction, and in learning to exploit the latent design potentials of the gridiron street matrix and the linear main street, the notion of attempting to build a public realm has begun to seem not quite so unlikely or impossible an idea.