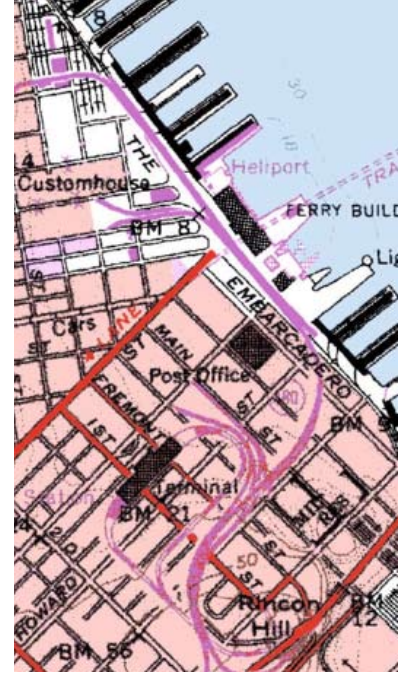


Embarcadero

From Freeway to Boulevard
San Francisco, CA | USA

prepared by Claire Gear & Eric Scharnhorst



The Embarcadero Freeway, an elevated roadway built in 1958 and officially Interstate 480, was a backwards-bending ramp off the Bay Bridge. The first section of the Embarcadero Freeway, from the Bay Bridge approach, opened in 1959. The Embarcadero was just one piece of a larger engineering scheme to link the Bay Bridge with the Golden Gate Bridge (this was never realized). The Embarcadero effectively separated San Francisco's downtown from the waterfront. By the 1970s, the city had turned its back on the waterfront. Prior to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the Embarcadero Freeway carried approximately 70,000 vehicles daily near the Ferry Building, and another 40,000 vehicles/day near the Main and Deale Street ramps.

(above, left): photo of old Embarcadero Freeway: <http://i.pbbase.com>

(above, right) map of old Embarcadero Freeway, shown in violet | <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

1958 Revolt:

In 1958, after just a mile of the Embarcadero Freeway was built, construction was halted as the citizens began a "freeway revolt". Over 30,000 people signed petitions protesting the freeway. Although hated by the public, the freeway never reached its full intent, to connect the Bay and Golden Gate Bridges. Two stub ends of the elevated highway would remain, going nowhere.

	construction begins citizens revolt	new buildings turn their backs to the freeway	Loma Prieta Earthquake
1950	1958	— 1970's —	1989

construction begins
citizens revolt

new buildings turn their
backs to the freeway

Loma Prieta
Earthquake

demolition
planning|construction

1950

1958

— 1970's —

1989

1991 — 2001

2008



(above, left) photo of Embarcadero Center West, designed while the elevated freeway still stood. Architect: John Portman
-www.portmanusa.com

(above, right) experiential photo of Embarcadero from ground plane, Embarcadero Center West in background
-www.preservenet.com

Urban Form Responds

Once the Embarcadero was built between downtown San Francisco and the waterfront, subsequent urban structures adjusted to this elevated freeway. New office towers and hotels that were built adjacent to the structure were designed with their backs to the freeway (and water).

Controversy

On November 5, 1985 San Francisco's Board of Supervisors voted to tear down the Embarcadero Freeway. The proposal called for the elevated freeway to be replaced with a surface boulevard and an extension of the city's trolley system. The project would cost \$171 million. In 1987 this proposal was put to the voters and soundly defeated (mainly out of fear of traffic congestion). It appeared the movement to remove the freeway had failed.

Loma Prieta Earthquake: 1989

The 7.1 magnitude 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake damaged the structure to the point of closure, although the structure still stood. Traffic patterns adjusted quickly, proving that the city functioned well without the Embarcadero's artery. Discussion started again over whether to retrofit to the highway or to demolish it. A hearing was held by the board of supervisors in April of 1990 and the surface boulevard plan moved forward, despite resistance from Chinatown merchants.

new buildings turn their
backs to the freeway
— 1970's —

Loma Prieta
Earthquake

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1989 1991 — 2001 2008

Embarcadero: From Freeway to Boulevard



Implementation: Embarcadero as a Public Place

The structure was demolished in October 1989. It then became clear that merely removing the freeway was not enough to unify the waterfront and the city.

The Planning Approach: Reclaiming the Embarcadero

The city now needed to transform a gritty and largely hidden industrial zone into a great public space along the waterfront. The removal of the freeway opened up space for 3,000 new housing units, 2 million square feet of offices and 375,000 square feet of retail. The plan included a large number of publicly oriented projects at the water's edge:

- A redesigned Embarcadero roadway
- The reintroduction of historic streetcars
- A series of new waterfront parks
- A pedestrian promenade marked by a continuous ribbon of light
- The renovation of Pier 1 and the Ferry Building

"The emergence of the waterfront as a major asset has created a public open space that redefines the edge of the city with a farmers market, marinas, historic trolleys, condominiums, and more. The waterfront is now lively and magnetic, filled with touristsh, inline skaters, strollers and people just admiring the view and the setting."

- Rose, 2003 p87

(above, left) Embarcadero and ferry terminal
- <http://www.wayfaring.com>

(above, right) Embarcadero demolition begins
- <http://lh3.ggpht.com>

(bottom, right) Embarcadero totally demolished
- picasaweb.google.com/john.holtzclaw

"..A transformative Earthquake: In reality, though, the winds of change had been blowing for years, and the earthquake just revealed the opportunities and compelled the city to face them."
- Rose, 2003 p84

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“A key element of this strategy was to provide access to the downtown from multiple points rather than continuing to rely upon a single corridor, taking advantage of the city’s grid to shift the 100,000 average daily trips that had once used the freeway onto existing streets.”

- Fisher, 2005

(above, left) Inside renovated ferry terminal
-www.sampadesf.com

(above, right) Embarcadero plaza
-http://www.preservenet.com

(next page) new boulevard
-google earth

Critique:

Mark Hinshaw, the director of urban design of LMN architects in Seattle and contributor to The Seattle Times, questions whether the new Embarcadero really connects San Francisco to its waterfront. Hinshaw comments of the reconstruction, “...largely, the effect is breathtaking.” The headhouses of the piers are now visible, the Beaux-Arts facades curve along the boulevard, palm trees line the space, historic trolley cars run the length of the new Embarcadero. However, as Hinshaw observes, the elevated highway sat for so many years that development turned itself away from the waterfront. “The bunker like Embarcadero office towers and hotel-inward-oriented designs by architect John Portman-now offer no face to the new street. Other portions of the adjacent residential complex were similarly divorced from the street and built on raised plazas.”

Connections

According to Hinsaw, the buildings present no connectedness to the sidewalk. Rather than being a part of the urban fabric, some seem suburban in their self-containment. The critique by Hinshaw observes that there are whole stretches of the street that are simply boring, with no reason to be there. The areas south of Market Street, where the former elevated freeway did not exist, is in better condition. The area, named South Beach, almost resembles a subtropical resort town.

new buildings turn their
backs to the freeway
—— 1970's ——

Loma Prieta demolition
Earthquake planning|construction
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Embarcadero: From Freeway to Boulevard



“Eventually, the slow process of redevelopment will cause buildings to turn their attention (and their facades) to the street. And, without a doubt, the new Embarcadero is open, serene, and pleasant- a vast improvement over the days of the elevated freeway.”

- Hinshaw, 2002

Project Credits:

Landscape architects:

Martha Ketterer, Scott Burbank and Edward Chin, San Francisco Department of Public Works

Consulting landscape architects:

Roma Design Group, San Francisco; Sasaki Associates, San Francisco

Landscape consultants:

John Meserve, horticulture; Ace Pacific Geotechnical Engineers, tree pit design

Engineers: San Francisco Department of Public Works Bureau of Engineering

Transitway design: San Francisco Public Utilities Commission

Client: Port of San Francisco

Excessive width

One of the most difficult challenges of redesigning the Embarcadero is its excessive width. Although the insertion of a wide median down the length of the streetcar tracks helps to visually compress the width, it is simply too broad to feel lively. Hinshaw comments, “Pretty it is. Lively it’s not.”

Comparison

While the similarities between San Francisco’s Embarcadero and Seattle’s viaduct are striking, Seattle’s is in a unique position on two fronts. First, many of Seattle’s freeway-facing buildings were built before the freeway and can more easily be retrofitted to activate the space left behind after the viaduct is gone. Second, Seattle has the benefit of planning with the lessons of San Francisco fresh in our memories.

Resources:

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Thompson, J. William. “Embarcadero: free from the freeway.” Landscape architecture 1993 June, v.83, n.6, p.60-61