

THD Recommendations on Shared Spaces

Telegraph Hill Dwellers, <https://thd.org>

Changing Cityscape

Shared Spaces embodies the notion that a city's public and private spaces work best when they mix, overlap, and interact with each other. An urban setting thrives when barriers are rare, space is uninterrupted, and people share an open and communal presence.

In the midst of the COVID crisis, many businesses invested a significant amount of effort and capital in the construction of the existing structures. In the near term, it is reasonable for business owners to expect a return on their investment, especially while the area is undergoing a period of adjustment. In the long term, for shared spaces to be sustainable, they need to adapt so that they exist in harmony with the surrounding environment and local culture.

Rather than a series of walled forts and plywood cubicles, a street should be a large, open gathering place. Larger streets and intersections should set the stage to connect progressively smaller areas. Public life coexists and merges with smaller, more intimate gatherings, with chairs and tables free of walls and windows. Sit at a sidewalk table in a parklet or shared space, look across the street, and you want to see people, not plywood. You may even want to smile and wave to them.

For example, in this photo, the customers of these restaurants are encased in wooden boxes, isolated from the people sitting in the open-air shared space across the street:



San Francisco has plenty of examples where erecting barriers between the public realm and private space has created dark, lifeless streets. Consider, for example, the Embarcadero Center, where all public life is encapsulated inside concrete courtyards, lining the sidewalks with

tall, dead, monolithic walls. Take a walk down Clay Street in front of the Alcoa Building, and you will see a sidewalk that was dark and deserted long before we even heard of COVID.

Reclaiming Space From the Street

When they occupy the public right of way, tables and chairs from shared spaces make navigation by foot difficult, as servers must cut across the sidewalk to serve their customers. Arranging seating along buildings would minimize this problem. However, many sidewalks are too narrow to allow tables and chairs, essentially forcing them out onto the street.

A high priority should be given to extending the width of certain sidewalks. In particular, the sidewalks on Grant Ave. between Columbus and Filbert can be widened by eliminating a small number of parking spaces. Columbus between Broadway and Bay could also benefit from this change.

Proposal: eliminate parking spaces and widen sidewalks along certain streets, while keeping a small number of spaces available for deliveries and disabled parking.

Aesthetic Considerations

In our neighborhood, the quality of life derives overwhelmingly from the success of its architecture and streetscape. *Everyone* has a right to enjoy the air, the sun, and Architecture. *Everyone* should benefit from the beauty and human-scale layout of our most popular streets. A window pane that creates a kind of fish tank, or a blank plywood wall that conceals and encases a building's facade may make paying customers more comfortable, but that comfort comes at the expense of everyone else.

For shared spaces to work, we certainly need boundaries, both physical and visual. The goal should be to create these boundaries while keeping sight lines as open as possible. To accomplish this goal, any walls surrounding a shared space should be of high quality construction, and no taller than a couple of feet. Keeping these walls short enough will enable people to look around and enjoy the beauty of our neighborhood. Building them with quality materials and workmanship will establish them as integral components of the built environment.

In keeping with the priorities of Vision Zero, structures must not hide pedestrians as they attempt to cross the street. Aside from being short enough, structures need to be set back from the intersection so that someone driving a car can see any pedestrian or animal standing at a crosswalk, no matter how tall they are.

Thanks to the parklet program, a great deal of thought has already been given to the conversion of parking spaces to non-vehicular use. Much of the guidance that applies to parklets can also benefit a shared spaces program. That guidance can be found at:

<https://groundplaysf.org/publication/san-francisco-parklet-manual/>

Proposal: enact standards for construction quality, following parklet-type guidelines where appropriate. Limit the height of any wall such that it is below the line of sight for someone sitting at a table. Do not allow any structure to hide pedestrians who are standing at a crosswalk.

Pedestrians First

Space taken up by parked bicycles, rental scooters, and cars is unusable by humans. For this reason, parking of any type of vehicle should be carefully planned for any sidewalk that has a shared space. Consistent with San Francisco's "Pedestrian First" policy, the sidewalk must be wide enough in all cases for people in wheelchairs to move easily and without obstacles. In many places, parking meters and parking-related street signs can be removed.

Proposal: do not allow bicycles or scooters to be parked on sidewalks when their presence obstructs pedestrian pathways.

People, not Consumers

Much of our neighborhood follows a pattern of ground-floor retail with housing above. This urban pattern has consistently succeeded in establishing a vibrant, rich culture here and around the world. This implies that people who live on such a street have a right to a normal life, without a noise level that induces stress or other unhealthy effects. Therefore, any live music played outdoors must be kept at a volume low enough to allow people who live in mixed-use areas to sustain a sane, healthy existence.

Related to "pedestrians first" is the notion that we should be able to enjoy our city without buying stuff. The public has the right to enjoy public spaces. This means that as many people as possible should be able to sit in shared spaces, even if they are not buying something. When music is performed outside, people should be able to enjoy it without being forced to buy a drink. Consideration should be given to public performance spaces, where anyone can perform live music (or other live arts). Any such performance spaces would need to be located in non-residential areas.

Proposal: allow passing pedestrians to casually enjoy music and other live performances in shared spaces. Maximize the time and amount of space available to the general public.

All Businesses

We have always tried to sustain our community not just as a place to eat out and drink, but as a place where you can access goods and services required to live a normal, everyday life. That implies that operators of bars and restaurants need to respect neighborhood-serving businesses as equals.

Someone should be able to buy groceries, get their dry cleaning done, get a haircut, pick up a box of nails, etc. Which is to say, our neighborhood should continue to be a real place where

real people live. If eating out and drinking at a bar are the only activities available, you don't have a community; you have a resort town.

Shared spaces should not harm local businesses by obstructing the view or access of storefronts, signs, or entryways. Pedestrians making their way to any establishment should not feel intimidated or in any way be impeded by those who are using shared spaces.

A storefront business relies on visibility to the sidewalk and to the street. Each business has a right to visibility, natural light by day, and ambient light by night. For this reason, it's critical for every bar and restaurant to remain a good neighbor, and not obstruct or darken any business next door.



Two public views of the same storefront. Which one is good for business?

The structure for a shared space should not be allowed to spill out into the area in front of someone else's establishment. If a business chooses not to take advantage of the Shared Spaces program, the space in front of it should be required by law to remain open for parking.

Proposal: Do not allow any structure to block neighboring storefront windows, signage, or ambient light. Keep structures for any given business within the street space directly in front of it.

Work with establishments that are not bars or restaurants to determine the best way to allow customers to access their businesses. Establish a number of flexible spaces that can be used for parking during the day, drinking and dining in the evening and on weekends.

Tree Restoration

At a time when climate change threatens our very survival, City Hall has largely neglected its stewardship of San Francisco's urban canopy. As a result, many of the sidewalks that were once shady oases now bake in the heat. In place of trees, we've gotten patio umbrellas and cheap, portable tents. Many tree wells have been filled in and cemented over.

The adoption of shared spaces must include a serious effort to remedy this situation, at least locally, and restore the urban canopy. This starts with planting trees in all of the wells that have been filled in with concrete and paved over. Tree species should be chosen for their ability to withstand life in the city, and to supply shade. With widened sidewalks, more space will be available to plant additional trees.

Proposal: require replanting of all known sidewalk wells with appropriate tree species. Until trees supply adequate shade, allow only temporary solutions, such as umbrellas, for overhead shelter.

No Contribution to Climate Change

A typical patio heater emits about 40,000 BTU per hour, although that number can be much higher for larger heaters. Considering that a gallon of gasoline contains about 116,000 BTU, three of these patio heaters are burning the rough equivalent of one gallon of gasoline per hour. A recent count found 12 of these heaters at one of the larger restaurants. If those heaters are on for 5 hours, they're burning the equivalent of about 20 gallons of gasoline per day, or about 400 one-mile car trips down Columbus Ave.

France has recently announced that it is banning outdoor heaters at restaurants and cafes ([link below](#)). Considering America's cowboy culture, this seems unlikely to occur here. However, all outdoor heaters should be electric. We're banning gas stoves and heaters for indoor spaces; there's no reason to use them outdoors.

Proposal: allow only radiant electric heat, if any, to be used outside. Consistent with the City of San Francisco's movement away from fossil fuels, require that any power used to heat outdoor space comes from a carbon-neutral source.

Welcoming

Any plan must take into consideration the source of many of our visitors. In particular, we need to be aware of the number of people who come from the Central Valley, the surrounding suburbs, or any other place where public transit is impractical. Those people are not arriving on bicycles or buses. They are driving here, and we need to be realistic about that.

As we hand over parking spaces to shared spaces, we must also find a way to replace reduced capacity for those who arrive in automobiles. Pricing for public parking garages should be lower on weekends, and signage should make them easy to find.

If we make it impossible or difficult to park, or if we implement hostile measures like Congestion Pricing, people will not use public transit to get here; they will simply make the rational decision to skip San Francisco.

Proposal: continue to support Transit First, but do not punish people who are unable to use public transit to visit our neighborhood. Be sensitive to the fact that visitors arrive from all over California.

No Hitchhiking

Any legislation should be focused on the issue at hand: Shared Spaces. Unfortunately, that hasn't been the case for proposed legislation so far.

Proposal: don't use Shared Spaces legislation as a vehicle for the mayor's other priorities.

Day-to-Day Usage

A business that benefits from a shared space bears responsibility for maintaining it and keeping it clean. This includes the responsibility for removing litter and debris, and quickly removing graffiti. Shared spaces could follow the same guidance for maintenance that has been established for parklets. Businesses, especially bars and restaurants, should ensure that their operations do not spill onto and obstruct public sidewalks or otherwise interfere with pedestrian passers-by.

References

“France to ban heated terraces in cafes and bars”

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53552526>

San Francisco Parklet Manual

<https://groundplaysf.org/publication/san-francisco-parklet-manual/>

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