



Urban Greenery / Tour of the downtown canyons

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Author: MARGOT PATTERSON DOSS

The ever-increasing greenery in deepest downtown has been delighting everyone who works, shops or dines there for years. It has become so noticeable that in 1989 the prestigious Strybing Arboretum Society, whose purview had only included the 70-acre botanical garden in Golden Gate Park, began bestowing annual design awards for urban landscaping.

Not surprisingly, the first Strybing Urban Landscape Award went to 101 California Street, which is located on the entire block surrounded by California, Davis, Pine and Front streets.

A walk through or around it is one of the most upbeat in the city, partly for the building's wonderfully comfortable and well-planted outdoor plaza, and partly for its vast glass-enclosed slanting atrium lobby, which soars seven stories from street level and encloses what may well be the largest private collection of exotic palms in the country.

101 California is also near enough to the six-block-long Embarcadero Center, a winner of one of this year's Strybing awards, that a walker can conveniently visit both 101 and the center's public green spaces, including its newest addition, the block of Commercial Street between the old Federal Reserve building, now rehabilitated to house a law firm, and the new Park Hyatt Hotel.

This entrance has a ramp that leads through a colonnade under a vestigial roof rather like the ribs of a beached whale to reach Embarcadero Center's celebrated skybridges.

Public transportation is the best way to begin this ramble. The California Street cable car, ferries, BART, Muni Metro and any number of Muni buses are all handy to the 101 California building.

Once afoot, walk to the corner of Market and Davis streets and look bayward, where the Embarcadero Freeway, which has stretched like a double headache-band across the front of the historic Ferry Building for so long, is at last being demolished. When it is gone, walkers will once again enjoy the exhilarating proximity to the bay that prompted San Francisco's pioneers to settle this shore.

Then make an about-face and look at the 48-story, multifaced cylinder of pink granite and tinted glass that is 101 California. Designed by Philip Johnson/John Burgee for Hines Interests, it is a distinctive addition to the downtown skyline.

For the walker at ground level, however, the eye is drawn to the half-block of open space, the informal arena of three stepped berms rather like sections of an Aztec temple, the many potted shrubs and trees, the charming 115-year-old gazebo flower stall, the sidewalk cafe and the conservatory of palms at the foot of the tall, drumlike building. A natural for music, the plaza is the scene of outdoor concerts on Saturday mornings in summer.

Today and next Sunday, 101 California's lobby will be open between noon and 2 p.m. as a special courtesy to readers of "San Francisco at Your Feet."

Walk over to the nearest entrance to that huge glass room, and go in to see the lobby garden of palms, all well labeled; the current exhibit of art or history in the Pine Street lobby gallery; and the elevators in the corridor between the two lobbies, each with a different marble facing. Anyone who has ever dreamed of visiting the tropics will recognize the coco palms, banana trees, pandani and anthuriums. Count yourself as knowledgeable if you can also identify at a glance the tall ruffled fan, fishtail, king, queen, ponytail, reed, spindle, triangle, sego, windmill, Christmas and stilt-root palms. Incidentally, the one that looks like a tremendous fan is the traveler's tree of Madagascar.

"We get a lot of palm lovers who walk five or six blocks out of their way to walk through our lobby at lunchtimes," says Shirley Vaughan, 101 California's horticultural director. She and her staff of gardeners also tend the plantings at 580

California Street and 343 Sansome with just as much loving care.

From the palms, walk toward the nearest architectural berm to look at its plantings and those in the nearby fountain, pressed into use during this drought time as a planter, containing ceanothus, escallonia, raphiolepis, hebe and azaleas. Continue toward California Street between two of the berms and turn left to see that planter boxes on the street face of the berms reflect the same selection of plants, chosen for their staggered blooming times. Flowers that are more tender and showier are grown in the 130 huge pots scattered on the interior shelves. On weekdays, the gardeners put out cushions on nearby stone benches.

When you have enjoyed this exuberant city garden to your heart's desire, continue past the Swiss Italian and Atrium restaurants, then cross to the northwest corner of California and Front Streets. Here is a charming little seating area, not unlike a wayside shrine, maintained by the owners of 200 California Street.

A Madonna-like sculpture by Gwynn Merrill stands in front of potted shrubs and a series of benches, reminiscent of those in old railroad stations, to make a rest area for passers-by. A plaque on a nearby wall says that Whisler/Patri were the architects of this amenity.

Walk north on Front Street and you'll discover several other trendy changes in this block, including a sidewalk deli window at the venerable Schroeder's Restaurant and a new coat of green on Harrington's Irish bar.

Turn left onto Sacramento Street to pass at Battery the Embarcadero Center West, an office building that seems unrelated to those gray booklike stacks of Embarcadero One through Four. Embarcadero Center West has a dark plaza with little regard for the sensitivities of the man or woman in the street.

Across the street, the colonnade of the restored Neoclassical Federal Reserve Building, a historical landmark familiarly known as the Old Fed, seems inviting. To see the original colonnade, continue on to Sansome Street. The rear columns are a hollow copy. The 1920s temple of finance now houses the law firm of Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, founded in 1863 and much older than the landmark that it's in.

Turn right and walk over to take a good look at the sculpture by Arman on the front steps. The title is "Harmes and Dyonisos," but you could have fooled me. I thought it was a ballsy lawyer torn by an unfavorable verdict.

The Old Fed main banking hall is open to the public. Look in if you wish, but return to the north side of the building, where San Francisco's cradle of commerce, Commercial Street, slides between the Old Fed and the new Park Hyatt. Turn right on Commercial and walk between the mayten trees. The black sculpture that greets you is not three guardian demons but a work by Dimitri Hadzi entitled "K458 - The Hunt Variation."

Just beyond is the new formal western entrance to Embarcadero Center, sort of a concrete semi-marquee blazoned with two-thirds of poet e.e. cummings' initials in his traditional lowercase. It overhangs a staircase whose glass railings were designed to shield walkers from water splashed by the running streams on either side, dry during the drought, as is the reflecting pond below. Walk up through this entrance to play at being Jonah in the whale for a few minutes.

You emerge at a skybridge over Battery Street, with the ziggurat of the Park Hyatt on your left. Look down through the center of the staircase on your right alongside the Old Fed catwalk to spot another statue. This is by Fritz Koernig and is called "Untitled Sphere."

Embarcadero Center's art collection has been compared to that of Paris' Galerie de Plein Air, and several of its sculptors are represented in both. The major pieces are placed in open garden-like squares between the buildings. These openings are duplicated, like a huge club sandwich on three levels, each containing shops and restaurants.

To discover the succession of plazas, cross Battery Street on the skybridge, the first of five that connect the four Embarcadero Center office buildings and the two Hyatt hotels. You emerge on podium level near the open court, where sculptor Willi Gutmann's "Two Columns With Wedge" always reminds me of a big tin whistle. It is surrounded by cissus antarctica, an ivylike plant used in many of the troughs in Embarcadero Center, raveling out like wind-shredded lettuce.

If you would admire the other sculptures, pick up a guide to the center near the escalators. It lists shops and restaurants you will pass as you make your way bayward from one skybridge to the next. Part of the fun is the changing shadows and reflections of the cityscape around you as you walk.

Given a sunny day, the skybridges with their huge pots of colorful flowers - there were pansies and primulas when I walked there last -

and the casualness of outdoor diners at the sidewalk-cafe tables and many "bench-ledges," the podium scene is festive indeed. Explore as you wish. Then to end this springtime walk, seek out Sidney Walton Park, the Maritime Plaza (around the Alcoa Building) or Embarcadero Plaza, all accessible via skybridge. The bridges will give you seven-league boots that make the distances seem much closer.

Caption: PHOTO (2), MAP

PHOTO: (1-2) A collection of exotic palms fills the lobby of 101 California Street. Above, a skybridge offers a pleasant stop between buildings at Embarcadero Center / PHOTOS BY CHRIS STEWART/THE CHRONICLE, MAP: BILL SMITH/CHRONICLE

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