

POWER POLITICS and HOLLOW FORMALISM

Andy Friedman

It's been ten years since the area known as Yerba Buena has been anything other than several giant parking lots and a few gaping holes in the ground.

Yerba Buena was the name the Spanish gave to the first settlement in what is now San Francisco. The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency used the name, which means "good herb," for its project to demolish a large section of the South of Market area and replace it with a sports arena, a convention center, hotels, and office buildings.

Last week the Mayor's Select Committee on Yerba Buena Center submitted to Mayor Moscone a new plan for Yerba Buena. The original Redevelopment Agency plan never got past the demolition stage. It was stopped by residents who were mistreated, and taxpayers who felt ripped off. The committee's plan represents an attempt to reconcile these opposing forces that have been deadlocked for ten years.

The history of Yerba Buena is a very long and complex one; an outline is essential to understand the story.

In the early Fifties the federal government began making money available for urban "redevelopment." This redevelopment was supposed to tear down "blighted" areas of cities and replace them with shiny new offices, hotels, and city plazas. In San Francisco the South of Market became the target area for those interested in redevelopment.

Market Street has always been a dividing line in San Francisco, dividing the poorer, working-class neighborhoods to the south from the downtown offices and retail stores. For over a century, the South of Market has been home to workers of all kinds seeking employment around California and the Pacific basin. The area has been a community of people with common interests since World War II, when many single men retired to live in the low rent hotels and boardinghouses there. It was these people that the city sought to displace with its Yerba Buena scheme.

The first plan to redevelop South of Market came from hotel owner and real estate broker Ben Swig, in 1954. His San Francisco Prosperity Plan called for a huge convention center and sports arena complex, with parking for 7,000 cars, to be built on several key South of Market blocks.

Swig didn't own the land, however, and his plan ran into opposition within city government from people who didn't think the area was "blighted" and therefore didn't need redeveloping.

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But Swig's idea received continuing attention from a group of top Bay Area business leaders called the Blyth-Zellerbach Committee, formed in 1956. The men of the Committee were presidents and chairmen of major corporations and banks, including Bank of America, Standard Oil, Southern Pacific, and Bechtel.

Their main interest was the promotion of San Francisco as the regional headquarters for the orderly exploitation of the vast area of the "Pacific rim." In their scheme, San Francisco was to become the "brains" of the Bay Area, doing all the administrative and managerial functions required to direct the trading, mining, shipping, and building going on around the Bay Area and the Pacific.

Perhaps Rudolf Peterson put it the best in 1968, in this quote from the book *Yerba Buena: Land Grab and Community Resistance in San Francisco*, by Chester Hartman. Peterson, at that time president of Bank of America, said, "Were we California businessmen to play a more dynamic role in helping trade development in the Pacific rim, we would have giant, hungry new markets for our products and vast new profit potentials for our firms."

For all this activity, more buildings and more space were needed. South of Market provided the best opportunity. It was flat and sunny, and the generally elderly residents were not likely to cause much trouble.

But even in the fifties, direct corporate action was unseemly. So the Blyth-Zellerbach Committee formed the San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal Association, or SPUR, as a "citizens group" to promote the Committee's interests behind a more genteel facade.

SPUR's directors come from the Committee, and from other big businesses in the Bay Area. And the committee provides two-thirds of SPUR's funds.

SPUR, born in 1959, took to its assigned role in life quite quickly. It began promoting a redevelopment scheme for the South of Market area similar to Swig's original plan. With the influential support of SPUR's mentors and the city's supervisors, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency put together the plan.

In July, 1967, the agency had obtained all the necessary government approvals, and began displacing residents and demolishing their homes.

Throughout this process, the residents were never consulted. The Redevelopment Agency and the major daily papers cooperated in portraying the residents as "winos and bums" who were unwanted burdens to the city.

The agency, though, was required by law to provide decent replacement housing for the people it kicked out. In fact, it failed to do this. In response, a group of residents organized TOOR, Tenants and Owners in Opposition to Redevelopment. In 1969 TOOR sued the

Redevelopment Agency in federal court to get replacement housing.

TOOR obtained an injunction against the continuation of the project until guarantees of safe housing were provided. The SFRA was not anxious to comply, and it wasn't until 1973 that Judge Stanley Weigel approved a plan that guaranteed 2,400 units of housing for displaced YBC residents, including 400 to be made available immediately.

But before the TOOR settlement was implemented, other suits opposing the massive expenditure of city money without a vote resulted in still further delay of the project.

Some of the suits were dismissed, others were settled by modifying the plans. A final suit in 1975 delayed the project past the deadline for the start of construction under the developer's bid, and effectively killed the original project.

It was at this point, in January, 1976, that newly elected Mayor George Moscone decided to do what should have been done ten years before: get resident and citizen input and participation in the planning of YBC. On March 30 the Mayor appointed the Select Committee on YBC, and asked it to come up with a plan for the area that had public support.

The Mayor appointed 17 people to the committee. They were to represent all sides of the controversy over YBC: business, labor, community, concerned citizens, city government.

The Select Committee is probably unique among redevelopment schemes around the country because it does include actual representation of different groups affected by the project. Previously SPUR had been designated the official "citizens group" that the federal agency (HUD) had required to show citizen involvement in the project.

One member of the committee is Mike Davis, a longtime community activist. He was appointed by the Mayor because of his work with the Citizens Committee on YBC (CCYBC). CCYBC was formed in 1975 to organize citizen input and participation in the planning of YBC. At least part of the credit for the formation of the Select Committee must go to CCYBC, and Davis.

Steve Dutton is also a member of the committee. He's been involved with YBC since 1970, when he became a staff worker for TOOR. Dutton also worked with the city's anti-poverty agency.

On the other hand, this is not a committee of radical activists. The Mayor made sure there were many pro-YBC people—and people influenced by him—on the committee. Henri Lewin, president of Hilton Hotels, John Jacobs of SPUR, Thomas Mellon, chief administrative officer of the city, Supervisor Diane Feinstein

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Morris Evenson of the Building Trades Council, and Flora Douglass of the SF Labor Council all were supporters of the SFRA plan before the committee was formed.

So off they went in a flurry of hearings, proposals, and more hearings. There's no doubt that the Mayor hot his money's worth in time and effort from the committee. Whether he got a plan with real public support is the important question.

The Committee ostensibly considered six different possible plans for the YBC. There were two plans similar to the original plan, a plan for a park, a plan for a "Tivoli Gardens" area, for a light industrial park, and for a mixed residential-commercial area.

The Tivoli proposal was the public's favorite. A proposal by architect Richard Gryziec, Tivoli would have been a two-block, twenty-acre open-space amusement park, modeled after a park of the same name in Copenhagen. The Tivoli plan would have yielded up to \$4 million annually to the city.

Sources on and off the committee agreed that more than 50 percent of the people who testified favored the Tivoli concept.

Yet in the committee's draft final plan, although there is provision for an "Urban Park" of either 17 or 6½ acres, there is no mention of "Tivoli."

Public testimony or no, Tivoli was just not "the big enchilada." The driving forces behind YBC have been, and still are, the downtown businesses and hotels. They want office space and a convention center.

Although the committee was supposed to "investigate a full range of possible land uses for YBC," it became clear after the committee's first vote on July 28 that a convention center and office buildings were in the offing.

Wednesday, July 28, was the committee's first meeting after taking public testimony. The committee had previously adopted a 2½ rule to approve a final plan. Eleven of the members that day were ready, even impatient, to approve a final plan very similar to the Redevelopment Agency proposal. When 12 votes couldn't be mustered, several members, including Supervisor Feinstein, became quite angry. They acted as if they had been betrayed by the six members in the minority.

Ex-Supervisor Jack Morrison, one of the six, requested an adjournment until that Friday so that the minority could come up with a compromise. Morrison's request

on Friday to postpone the meeting again until the following Monday brought howls of indignation.

Only Mayor Moscone's long-distance request for a meeting with the committee on Monday (Moscone was in Washington, D.C.) prevented the split in the committee from getting deeper. Moscone had heard of the split and wanted to add his two cents.

The majority wanted a plan, and they wanted it right away, even though, as Gene Coleman, in the minority, had pointed out, the committee had "at no point discussed the public input."

Monday morning Moscone came down hard. He said he "feels strongly" about the convention center—stating this after directing the committee to investigate "a full range of possible uses" three months previously.

That day the committee approved a plan by a vote of 16-1. Mike Davis was the one. The minority had submitted a compromise proposal, most of which was accepted by the committee.

The draft final plan includes two alternatives—either a convention center above ground, or a convention center underground with a park above it. It includes 3 million square feet of office space, the "urban activity park," and a 750-1,200-car parking garage. Also, importantly, there are sites for 400-600 units of subsidized senior citizen housing, 400-600 units of subsidized family housing, and 400-600 units of market-rate family housing (market-rate rents could be as high as \$600 per month).

In comparison to previous plans, this does represent substantial gains by community interests. More housing, a larger park, a less expensive convention center will all be better for the city as a whole. The efforts of the committee minority, Davis, Coleman, Engman, Dutton, Kahn, and Morrison, are responsible.

It's nothing to sneeze at. The housing and park especially will make the area more livable, and placing the convention center underground will make an enormous difference.

Still, the convention center remains. The total cost to the city of an \$80-million convention center will be close to \$200 million with interest. This enormous expenditure at a time when city services such as General Assistance, Muni runs, and General Hospital outpatient care are being trimmed, shows quite clearly who runs City Hall.

CCYBC figures show that building the convention center will produce only 1,300 permanent jobs directly or indirectly. They calculate that the difference between the new taxes created by the center and the total cost to

the city will be \$98 million over 32 years. This amounts to a subsidy of \$3 million per year to the hotel and tourist industry by the city treasury.

Alternative plans rejected by the committee could have resulted in net gains to the city of up to \$11 million annually.

What's left to do? Is the story over?

The draft final plan states that a policy statement about the convention center will be on the November ballot. Although policy statements are non-binding, a strong vote against the convention center would have some effect on the Board of Supervisors, which has to approve it. The CCYBC will be working for a no vote on the convention center resolution. You can contact them at 621-9553.

The Redevelopment Agency's disregard for South of Market residents ultimately engendered other opposition that has led to a ten-year delay in the project. The combined opposition of South of Market residents and concerned taxpayers—the formation of formal organizations opposing the Redevelopment Agency's plan for the Yerba Buena Center that gain their legitimacy by their broad base in the community, groups that provide an alternative to the sham "citizens' group". SPUR financed primarily the Blyth-Zellerbach Committee—has been strong enough to gain some voice in planning for the area.

And yet the statement of Gene Coleman that the members of the Mayor's committee—a group appointed specifically to get resident and citizen input into the planning of the YBC—never even discussed the public testimony strongly suggests that the public has been hoodwinked once again by a hollow promise of formal objectivity. In actuality the minds of the various members of the committee were made up before the public testimony began; whatever compromise is effected was the result of internal committee discussion. The weight given each of the factions (those solidly in favor of a large convention center similar to the one proposed by the Redevelopment Agency, those willing to accept such a center with minor differences, and those wholly opposed to such a plan) was determined by the number of members of the committee of each particular persuasion. Eleven of the seventeen members are in favor of a large convention center. Where was the room for discourse?

A sham citizens' group that was really composed exclusively of people with corporate interests (SPUR) has been supplanted by citizens' groups with legitimate community roots (TOOR and the CCYBC); decision of an investigative committee that never even discussed as a group the testimony that it was appointed to consider can now only be repudiated at the polls. □

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Information for this article came from the following sources:

Hartman, Chester; *Yerba Buena: Land Grab and Community Resistance in San Francisco*; Glide Publications; San Francisco; 1974.

Mayor's Select Committee on Yerba Buena Center; *Six Alternative Plans and Draft Final Plan*; July and August, 1976.

San Francisco Redevelopment Agency; *YBC Basic Project Information*; March, 1976.

Letters and Leaflets by Citizen's Committee on YBC, especially July 24, 1976, and August 16, 1976; CCYBC, 88 1st St., 2nd Floor, SF.

Yerba Buena Glossary of Abbreviations

YBC: Yerba Buena Center, the name of the plan for redevelopment South of Market.

SFRA: Redevelopment Agency, an organ of the city

HUD: the Department of Housing and Urban Development, a federal agency

SPUR: San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal Association

TOOR: Tenants and Owners in Opposition to Redevelopment

CCYBC: Citizens Committee on Yerba Buena Center, formed in 1975



Question: What do you do in your spare time when you're not out creating great works of art?

Ronnie: I like to go racoon hunting. Never do you see me coming back empty handed.

Kevin: Oh, I don't know about that.

Ronnie: Don't listen to that dude he don't know nothing.

Gregg Mancuso '75 Giles & Barnes Interview