

Small steps in search of street's potential

By John King
CHRONICLE URBAN DESIGN CRITIC

So now we know what it takes to bring the sorriest blocks of Market Street to vibrant life: a World Series parade.

Fill the wide red-brick sidewalks with people in an exultant mood, frame them with masonry buildings in a classical mode, and voila. The most

The series

This is part of an occasional series that looks at the challenges of redeveloping one of the most blighted stretches of street in San Francisco, the Mid-Market area.

dragged-out stretch of San Francisco's main drag last Wednesday was in its glory.

That backdrop is why it's hard to get excited about the newest set of small-scale initiatives to activate the stretch

between Fifth Street and Van Ness Avenue — hopeful notions that include placing pianos at several corners and using empty news kiosks for such activities as bicycle repair.

The flip side is, proponents know these tiny ripostes aren't the remedy to decades of disinvestment and bad policy. They're concepts that, nurtured with finesse, might take root in heartening ways.

"There are many different aspects in terms of revitalizing a neighborhood," points out Daniel Hurtada, executive director of the Central Market

Street continues on C3



Illustration by HOK

One idea for abandoned kiosks: sell theater tickets.

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FROM THE COVER



Illustration by HOK

A planning study suggested that an empty kiosk could be used as a bicycle repair and advice station.



Illustration by HOK

Another kiosk suggestion: Store furniture in them that could be brought out when a food truck stops.

Small-scale ideas for revitalizing Mid-Market

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Community Business District, an organization funded by building owners that provides a variety of services for much of the area. "Small-scale projects won't be cure-alls, but we want things we can manage and test to see how they work."

Hurtada's group participated in a recent planning effort led by the architecture firm HOK to try to improve the street's ambiance by making use of what already is there. Their solution: finding a new role for Mid-Market's procession of handsome but vacant Parisian kiosks from the 1990s.

The concepts include a "cycle station" staffed by someone offering advice and repairs to the bicyclists who use Market as their route downtown, and a retail spot selling discounted tickets to performances in the area's remaining theaters. Another could be filled with tables or chairs that are deployed when a food truck pulls up nearby.

"This could be a way to turn something closed and hard into something that creates a multitude of positive actions," suggests Justin Lowe of HOK.

At first flush it's also an invitation to disaster; I wouldn't want to be the ticket vendor inside a kiosk with no means of escape when one of Market's more dangerous denizens homes in.

Yet there's a certain logic at work that conceivably could tap into the street's latent cultures. The cycle station's



Mike Kopka / The Chronicle

The Giants' parade brought the Mid-Market area to life, but only for a day.

a good example. Anyone who spends time on those blocks knows the number of bicycles that stream by. A kiosk located near other retail functions could add to the scene rather than seem dangerously exposed.

Similarly, U.N. Plaza already is home to a farmers' market that sells an abundance of food that could be consumed on-site. Rogue seating deployed as the need arises would probably be used.

A different street-life stimulus is proposed by the civic organization San Francisco Beautiful.

The group gave a \$5,000 grant this summer to landscape architect Cynthia Talley, who responded with a detailed study of current conditions and a design concept that turns five spaces along the north side of the thoroughfare into "cultural activation zones."

The wide sidewalk at

Sixth and Taylor streets would be turned over to movable furniture, food carts and a piano that could be played by passers-by, a la artist Luke Jerram's successful installation this summer in New York. Near Hyde and Market, potted trees would be deployed to signal the path to Civic Center Plaza, and a band shell would be nestled against the jagged edge of the Fox Plaza concept.

"One of the problems is that the sidewalks here are too wide for the pedestrian traffic that occurs on them," says Jim Chappell, San Francisco Beautiful's executive director. "There's room for temporary interventions. The ones that work could get rolled over into the city's long-term plans."

It's this spirit of experimentation that needs to be nurtured, more than specific elements.

The reality of Mid-Market is that too many

buildings sit empty or underused, waiting for large developments that may or may not occur. Plant pianos along the way and they'd take a worse battering than some of the "storefront art" unveiled with fanfare last winter by Mayor Gavin Newsom.

But both of these efforts grasp a fact easy to miss: There are pockets of potential even now.

Fox Plaza is easy to ignore, for example, but today its block feels sterile rather than scary. The right performance space, managed well, could flourish as an enticing nook.

Given local politics and the larger economy, Mid-Market's true revival won't come anytime soon. But there's room in the meantime for urbanism of an experimental sort — and some of it might even stick.

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Online resources

- For the San Francisco Beautiful study "Mid-Market: A Center for Creative Action," go to <http://sfg.ly/9KkmeC>.
- For the concepts of converting news kiosks to other uses, go to <http://sfg.ly/buDwe6>.