

NORTHERN NEWS



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Making Great Communities Happen

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FEATURED ARTICLE

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New eastern span
San Francisco—Oakland Bay Bridge
Photo © James Pan
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San Francisco's street wars

By James Rojas and Fay Darmawi

A bitter battle is being fought over the future of the quaint and charming streets of San Francisco, and it is pitting cyclists, pedestrians, and business owners against each other.

James Rojas was invited by a group called StreetUtopia to help mitigate some of this tension and assist in their campaign to “reimage” Columbus Avenue — possibly the worst street in the US for mobility. Columbus cuts through the street grid diagonally and creates more five-point intersections than in all of LA County! The street — which slopes with the topography to connect Fisherman’s Wharf with downtown via North Beach and Chinatown — has become a shortcut for drivers to and from Marin County. The narrow street is unsafe for pedestrians, cyclists, transit users, and drivers, yet it is one of the most beautiful streets in America, with its historic triangular buildings and a perfect and direct view of the Transamerica Pyramid. The street — rich in literary history and lined with dozens of coffee shops and bike rental places — attracts hundreds of tourists.

StreetUtopia was selected to participate in the San Francisco AIA’s celebration of Architecture in the City. SFMTA and Bubble Real Estate provided support for the project to build a 50-foot long base map of Columbus Avenue as an experiment to engage the public on the streets. The goal of the model was to ask, “When is a ‘street’ not a street?” and to distill the “street” into its most basic construct: a large, flat, “concrete plain.” From that point, people are asked to imagine other ways they would like to live on this concrete plain. Once they see the concrete plain as part of their lives, infinite ideas bubble up.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon in September, over 150 tourists, residents, and children walked through and took part in re-imagining Columbus through active and passive activities.



Planner James Rojas at Grant Avenue and Jack Kerouac Alley, San Francisco. Photo: Fay Darmawi.

Energetic participants shared and built a different vision for Columbus Avenue as others looked on. These “builders” unearthed their vision not by answering surveys or sitting in focus groups, but simply by playing. Results of this new groundbreaking public engagement process revealed that people deeply craved “unique gathering places” for human connection, pleasure, joy, and community.

The StreetUtopia event started like no other participatory planning process. First, it was held outside in Jack Kerouac Alley, a decidedly public crossroads, to attract those who ordinarily would not participate in or even think about urban design. Above the din of tour buses on Columbus and a street festival in Chinatown, James called

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out like a town crier to passersby to build their ideal street. The intrepid and curious wandered to tables filled with found objects (discarded plastic toys, buttons, and scraps of this and that). Using these alien yet familiar objects, they were asked to create their utopian vision of Columbus Avenue. While most models highlight buildings, this one captured street activities only, giving participants a plain of no restraints.

Participants varied from tourists exploring literary San Francisco to Chinese families going to and from the New Moon Festival. While some participants may have been visiting Columbus Avenue for the first time, they responded to what they saw, felt, and projected from their previous experience, memories, or needs. For example, a German Tourist created Oktoberfest, and children created park spaces. Many local residents knew exactly what they wanted to see on Columbus and where, from wide sidewalks to roundabouts.

It took no longer than a few minutes for the participants to gather materials and build their utopian vision. It was as if they already knew what they were missing in their urban experience and were only waiting for someone to ask.

Two organizers of StreetUtopia, Fay Darmawi and Phil Millenbah, AICP, asked the participants to describe their creations in words on handy Post-it notes. Other volunteers distributed a short survey developed by StreetUtopia.

The results of the found object exercise and the surveys were astonishing. A StreetUtopia volunteer noted, "The Post-its and the survey had clear winners, and they were not the same."

The survey responses to the question of what would you change on Columbus Avenue focused on wider sidewalks and traffic calming. Imagination generated by the "found objects" exercise led people to what we call the "third space" that allows people to build, share, inspire, and shape ideas through playing together.



Found objects are used to re-imagine streets into "concrete plains" and from there into "living plains." Photo: James Rojas.



Co-author Fay Darmawi and her twin sons prepare to welcome participants. Photo: James Rojas.

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"China, CA team up on climate. In a move to strengthen cooperation on lowering carbon dioxide emissions, China's top climate negotiator and California's Governor signed a Memorandum of Understanding in San Francisco on September 13. The first-of-its-kind agreement between the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of China and a US state clarifies 'areas of cooperation' as well as 'forms of cooperation' and 'implementation.'"
—Chen Jia, *China Daily USA*, <http://bit.ly/1aGi5aY>

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Many of the ideas created with the found objects focused on our primal need to find intimacy in public space through a flower, water, small animals, and most importantly, each other. The ideas generated from the exercise ranged from the banal (a bank) to the truly inspiring, including a Columbus canal with gondolas, a floating zoo in the Bay, an inland beach at one edge of Washington Square, a bridge over a small lake with flower beds, and a sort of “space needle” in the middle of a roundabout.

Because this method gives people autonomy and agency over the process, it diffuses tension between the urban planners and the public. Rather than the public reacting to a plan, the planner is reacting to the public's ideas — ideas that can shape the project or plan.

The participants on this day saw Columbus Avenue as not merely a means for getting from point A to point B. They also saw Columbus Avenue as a destination in itself, and they expressed a deep desire for Columbus to be designed that way.

For a full set of amazing photos from the day, please go to <http://bit.ly/15F0Nw6>

James Rojas is a globe-trotting planner who developed a visualization method to engage the community in the urban planning process. Rojas, who lives in Alhambra, California, is a member of the California Planning Roundtable and a founder and member of the Latino Urban Forum. You can contact him at jamestrojas@gmail.com

Fay Darmawi holds a Master's degree in City Planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is a 20-year affordable housing finance professional currently managing a portfolio of low income housing tax credit investments for a mid-size San Francisco Bay Area bank. Darmawi lives in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood with her twin 12-year old boys and is passionate about making her city a better place to live. ■

Inclusionary Housing Requirements suffer another blow

By Megan Burke

On the heels of the *Palmer* fix bill (AB 1229) being vetoed by the Governor, the California Supreme Court held on October 17 that a below market rate (“BMR”) housing requirement was an “exaction” under the Mitigation Fee Act. This ruling may make it easier for developers to challenge local affordable housing regulations.

The case, *Sterling Park v. City of Palo Alto*, involved a 96-unit condominium project. As a condition of project approval, the city required the developer to give it an option to purchase 10 units at below market rates and pay in-lieu fees equal to a percentage of the units' selling price or fair market value. The developer agreed to the BMR condition, but years later when the city requested conveyance of the units, protested and filed suit.

The city argued that the suit was untimely under the 90-day statute of limitations in Government Code §66499.37. The Court disagreed and held that the BMR condition was an exaction subject to the pay-under-protest requirements in §66020 of the Mitigation Fee Act. Under those requirements, a developer must protest a condition within 90 days of receiving notice from the city that it is being imposed.

The 90-day protest period does not begin until the city issues the notice. Therefore, cities would likely benefit from providing a section 66020 notice, which specifically references the BMR condition, at the time the condition is imposed.

This decision also indicates that the Court may conclude that BMR requirements are exactions subject to stricter standards of review, rather than land use regulations, in the *CBIA v. City of San Jose* case, which is currently pending before the Court.

Megan Burke is an associate attorney at Burke, Williams & Sorensen, LLP. In addition to serving as the assistant counsel for the Eastern Contra Costa Transit District, Ms. Burke focuses on general municipal law, the California Public Records Act, conflicts of interest, local land use and zoning, inverse condemnation, eminent domain, and revenue issues such as Proposition 218 compliance and other tax and fee related matters. ■

Database of city planning and urban design jobs. Jason Su, Project Management Trainee at City and County of San Francisco, Department of Public Works, has put together a “working list” of city planning and urban design job websites. The list is “for all those looking for employment opportunities — whether a job or an internship.” You can see the clickable list at <http://bit.ly/15vDo03>