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# To Grow or Control, That is the Question: San Francisco's Planning Transformation in the 1980s and 1990s

Richard Hu<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

San Francisco's urban planning was dominated by a powerful progrowth alliance of the business sector and the city government in the decades after World War II (WWII). This urban hegemonism did not change until the mid-1980s when the *Downtown Plan* and *Proposition M* were passed to restrict unfettered urban growth, which were preceded and followed by a series of debates and attempts to advocate for or against growth throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This article addresses two questions of the significant transformation in San Francisco's planning history: (1) how did the transformation occur? and (2) what were the transformative themes? Through finding answers to these questions, this article concludes the conflicts between laissez-faire and interventionist planning philosophies as well as the transformative process toward a more balanced planning approach in San Francisco.

## Keywords

urban planning, transformation, San Francisco

## Introduction

San Francisco rose as an "instant city."<sup>1</sup> The historic instants such as the Gold Rush in 1848 and the earthquake and subsequent fire in 1906 were important landmarks of the city's history. Another important instance that essentially reshaped the city's urban morphology was its "Manhattanization"<sup>2</sup> in the decades after World War II (WWII). It was driven by a powerful progrowth coalition comprising business and the civic leaders with support from the general public. Under a belief in laissez-faire planning philosophy and market force, they carried out large-scale urban redevelopment, and legitimized it with the view that it could maximize San Francisco's competitiveness in the expected rise of postindustrial economy in America.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, a growth control coalition that was concerned about the negative impacts of the unfettered urban redevelopment began to develop from grassroots and gradually accumulated momentum. The conflicts between the progrowth and growth control groups formed a prominent planning scenario in San Francisco until the

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1980s when a fundamental planning transformation occurred toward growth control and a more balanced planning approach. This strategic planning reorientation was reflected in the *Downtown Plan* (1985) and *Proposition M* (1996)—two benchmark plans that have been effective ever since, and related policies and practices.

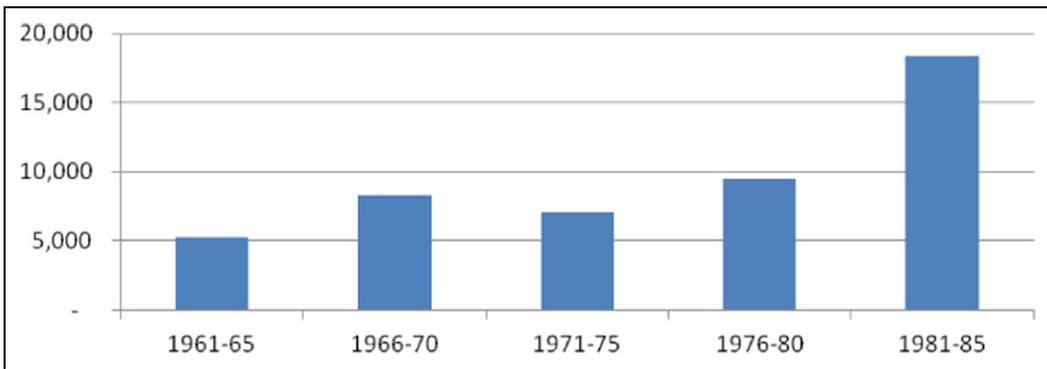
This article seeks to investigate the nature of the urban planning transformation and its contextual drivers and effects. It starts with a historic narrative of San Francisco from the post–WWII years to the 1990s as a backdrop. The article then makes a content analysis of the two benchmark plan documents—the *Downtown Plan* 1985, *Proposition M* 1986—using the thematic spectrums of economic planning, physical planning, and social planning.<sup>4</sup> The plan analysis is followed by a systemic review of the progrowth and growth control debates and practices in San Francisco throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, the article discusses and concludes the thematic patterns of San Francisco’s urban planning transformation in the 1980s and 1990s.

## Background

Between WWII and 1960, San Francisco was characterized by rapid suburban growth, declining central city population and employment, stagnant central city real estate values, and influx of minorities, particularly the blacks into inner neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> The City Hall commissioned a complete survey of commercial and industrial property and land uses, and the housing, and felt the need for planning for the whole city to prevent deterioration of areas.<sup>6</sup> The resulting strategy was a Manhattan style urban redevelopment that was based on two basic propositions. For one, the rise of the post-industrial economy in America was anticipated. In this economic transition, San Francisco should maintain its historical status as a national and regional center of financing, administrative, and service sectors. The notion was that a dynamic downtown with high-rise office buildings would help strengthen such an urban center role in that it would maximize land value, attract headquarters business, investment, and people.<sup>7</sup> For the other, San Francisco should be American gateway to the rising Asian Pacific area. San Francisco’s geographical vicinity and historical links with the area would help build relationships with the emerging growth centers of Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> A global city image with modern high-rise buildings would be an asset in facilitating trade, attracting business and tourism with these areas.

Large-scale urban renewal program was a consensus in the post–WWII San Francisco. This consensus was shared by the business, the government, and the general public.<sup>9</sup> They accepted the legitimacy of large-scale urban redevelopment, believed in a laissez-faire approach and accepted market forces as the determinants of urban development process. Based on this consensus, a progrowth coalition was formed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Such a coalition was initiated by the business, advocated by the government, propagated by the media, and supported by the general community.<sup>10</sup> This progrowth coalition exercised preemptive power over the city’s land use policy and created a typical market landscape mainly driven by private property development.<sup>11</sup> Very swiftly, lands were cleared for redevelopment, and high-rise office buildings mushroomed. Commencing from the late 1950s and the early 1960s, this wave of urban redevelopment particularly of office construction continued until and culminated in 1981–1985 (see Figure 1). By the mid-1970s, San Francisco’s present Manhattan-style skyline had almost taken its shape; by the mid-1980s, San Francisco’ office space supply more than doubled that in the 1950s. As Manuel Castells described in 1983, “San Francisco is a headquarters city. It is the second largest banking center in America, and the high-rise shape of its new downtown skyline tells the story.”<sup>12</sup>

The progrowth culture dominated San Francisco’s planning without any challenge until the early 1970s. This planning culture is dubbed as “private hegemonism” in that it was led and dominated by the private sector.<sup>13</sup> From the early 1970s, some different opinions began to be voiced. They were first voiced by some progressive activists. This was not surprising, given San Francisco’s liberal



**Figure 1.** San Francisco Downtown Office Development 1961–1985 (in thousands of ft<sup>2</sup>). Source: Stephen J. McGovern, *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D. C.* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), figure produced by the author.

tradition.<sup>14</sup> They initially expressed “aesthetic and environmental concerns” over the loss of San Francisco’s traditional character with the advent of overwhelming modern building boxes and argued for growth control.<sup>15</sup> Partly as a response to these challenging voices, the San Francisco Planning Department released the Urban Design Plan under the planning director Allan Jacobs in 1971. The plan was the city’s first attempt to guide the redevelopment boom, though the focus was on improving San Francisco’s architecture and urban design of new high rises and public spaces.

The antigrowth voices continued and turned even stronger in the late 1970s. Apart from aesthetic considerations, the concerns expressed expanded to include environmental pollution, pressure on transport infrastructure and housing supply, and impact on social equity. Progressive activists established community-based organizations to push forward the cause to harness the growth juggernaut. They proposed a series of public ballots as “initiatives”<sup>16</sup> to change the course (Proposition T in 1971; Proposition P in 1972; Proposition O in 1979; Proposition M in 1983; and Proposition F in 1985). Though they all failed in public voting ultimately, they managed to convey some message of the negative impacts of continued downtown growth and gained certain momentum for future progress. The successful election of Mayor George Moscone, a leftist growth control advocate, in 1975 was the most encouraging benchmark for the growth control movement. Moscone commenced some growth control efforts, but came to a sudden end when he was assassinated in 1978. Moscone’s successor Dianne Feinstein was viewed as an ardent growth advocate until the early 1980s when her progrowth stance turned loose under political as well as market pressures.

The attitude of the progrowth groups toward downtown growth began to indicate some change from the early 1980s. The business and the government were ready to review their progrowth stances, first of all, out of market considerations. The rapid expansion of the office had not been viewed by business as entirely positive: the office vacancy rate in the Financial District climbed steadily from 1 percent in 1980 to 17 percent in 1986; more jobs, particularly the back office jobs comprising routine, computer dependent, information processing operations that required large office spaces were pushed out to suburban centers.<sup>17</sup> The investment incentive of office construction somewhat lessened. On the other hand, negative impacts of urban growth on environmental and social issues generated stronger community reactions. Growth control was widely discussed and was accepted by more people.

At the same time, the City Hall increasingly felt the pressure to adjust the laissez-faire planning approach and the need to take some interventionist planning actions from the early 1980s. In 1983, the San Francisco Planning Department released the *Downtown Plan* to guide future downtown development. It also served as a government response to the growth control calls. According to Dean

Macris and George Williams—the former was San Francisco’s planning director at the time and both were the lead authors of the *Downtown Plan*—the plan was based on the premise that San Francisco should continue to develop its role as an international center of commerce and services, but only if the adverse effects of additional office growth could be mitigated.<sup>18</sup> This tenet was stated in the plan’s Introduction:

The Downtown Plan grows out of an awareness of the public concern in recent years over the degree of change occurring downtown—and of the often conflicting civic objectives between fostering a vital economy and retaining the urban patterns and structures which collectively for the physical essence of San Francisco.<sup>19</sup>

The plan was officially ratified by the Board of Supervisors, the legislative branch of the city’s government, in 1985. It was the first comprehensive downtown plan of its kind in the United States and put San Francisco at the forefront of American city planning and urban design efforts.<sup>20</sup> It was on the front page of the New York Times twice and won the National Merit Award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 1985.

However, the growth control supporters were not satisfied with the city’s development reorientation set in the *Downtown Plan*. They proposed another public initiative through popular voting in 1986. This time, they succeeded. The ballot initiative, which is generally known as *Proposition M*, was approved by 51 percent of voters. It imposed the strictest limits on commercial office development ever witnessed in a major U.S. city. The influence of *Proposition M* has been fundamental: it represented not merely a change *in* the system but a change *of* the system.<sup>21</sup>

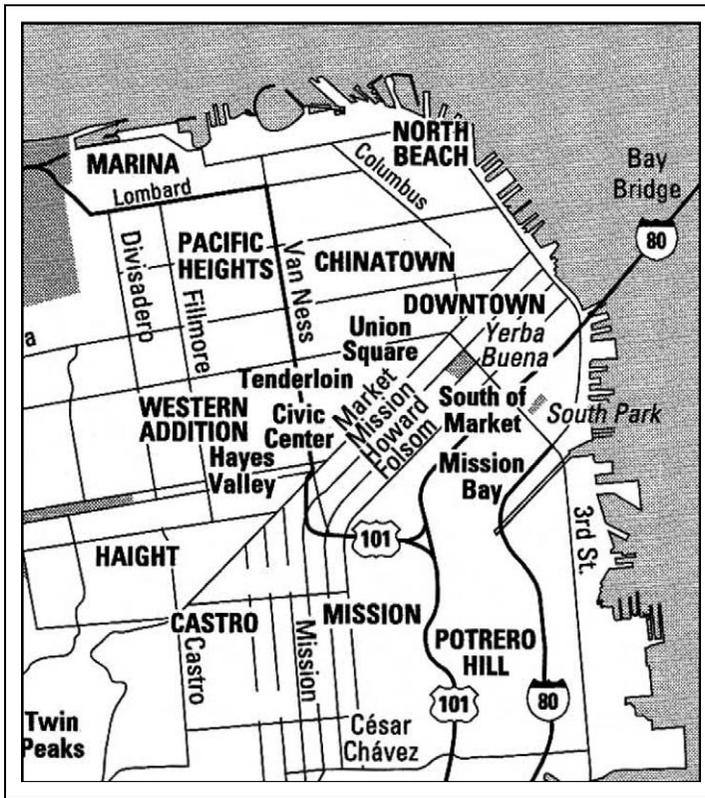
The two plans—the *Downtown Plan* (1985) and *Proposition M* (1986)—are the benchmark planning documents that have been shaping central San Francisco’s urban development ever since and are continuing to be in effect. Figure 2 shows the location of downtown San Francisco where the area plans guide and control the urban development. The following two sections provide a content analysis of the two plan documents in order to identify thematic patterns.

## The Downtown Plan (1985)

The *Downtown Plan* envisaged downtown San Francisco as a center of ideas, services, and trade, and a place for stimulating experiences. For this goal, downtown San Francisco should “encompass a compact mix of activities, historical values, and distinctive architecture and urban forms that engender a special excitement reflective of a world city.”<sup>22</sup> This was a strategic envisioning of San Francisco as a world city and its matching urban morphologies.

The main body of the *Downtown Plan* includes seven sections: Space for Commerce, Space for Housing, Open Space, Preserving the Past, Urban Form, Moving About, and Seismic Safety, which in total cover twenty-three objectives and eighty-two policies. Before approving the plan in 1985, the Board of Supervisors insisted on a growth cap as a condition of approval. As a result, the final plan included an annual limit of 950,000 square feet on construction of downtown office buildings of 50,000 square feet or larger. This was the most restrictive planning measure ever imposed on the city’s urban development before *Proposition M* was enforced one year later. The planning themes of the *Downtown Plan* are summarized as follows:

*Economic planning.* The section of Space for Commerce exclusively deals with the theme of economic planning. This section includes six objectives regarding the commercial spaces of office, retail, hotel, and support of commercial space. The overall objective is to enhance the city’s living and working environment through economic growth and change management. Downtown San Francisco should be a prime location for financial, administrative, corporate, and professional



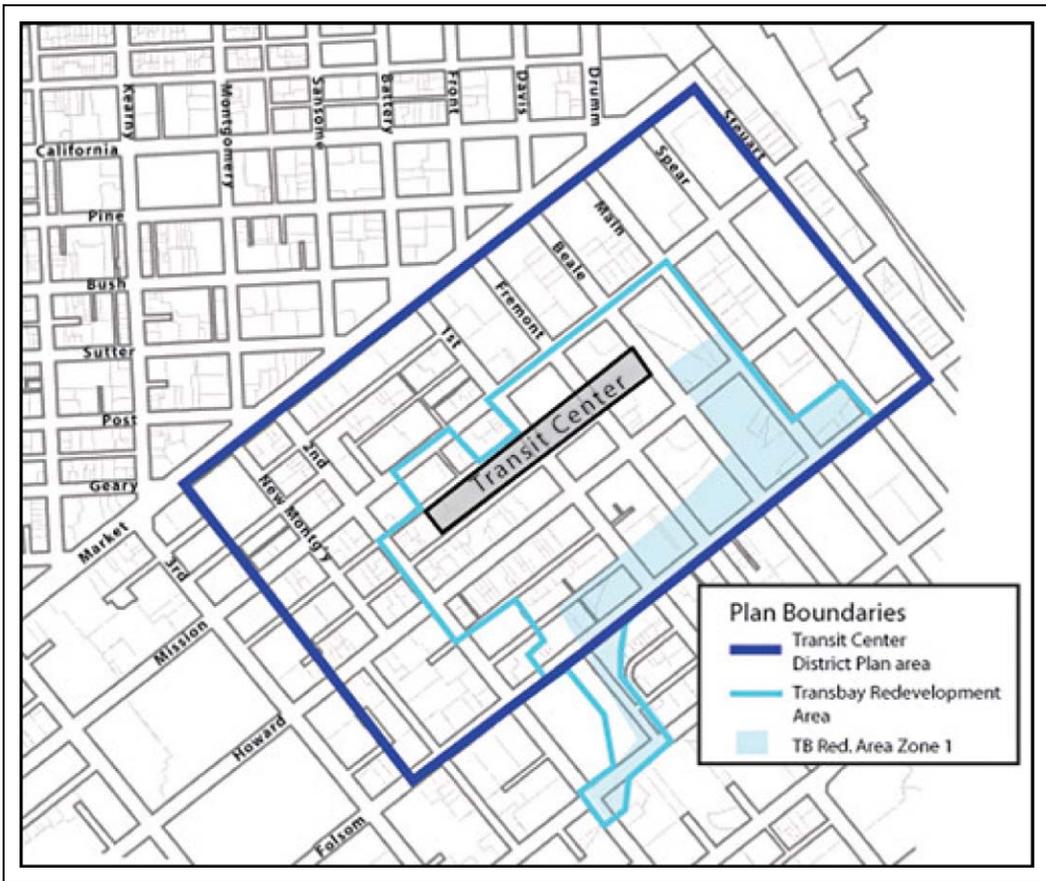
**Figure 2.** Map of San Francisco Downtown and South of Market. Source: Richard DeLeon, *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), reproduced by the author.

activities, as well as a center of specialized retail trade, tourists, and visitors. Future land use and density for these commercial activities should be maintained and enhanced in and around downtown area.

The *Downtown Plan* was meant to continue downtown development to sustain its economic vitality. Some restrictive measures were introduced to control the development to an appropriate extent to “minimize undesirable consequences.”<sup>23</sup> This was an official admission that while prior growth did generate economic vitality, it also brought about environmental and social costs. Future office development is restricted within the downtown core of north and south of Market Street and is allowed to expand to the Transbay Terminal in the South of Market area (see Figure 3).<sup>24</sup> The quality retail core and local retail services are conserved from office encroachment. All in one, a compact downtown should be developed and maintained with a diversity of commercial activities of office, retail, hotel, and support facilities.

**Physical planning.** The physical planning theme covers all the other sections of Housing, Open Space, Historical Preservation, Urban Form, Transport, and Seismic safety in the plan.

For housing, the policies are balanced between providing more housing and protecting existing housing. Lack of housing provision was becoming problematic for downtown’s vitality at night and on weekends. This problem was exacerbated by the downtown office development pressure that had demolished or converted housing into commercial uses. San Francisco was short of affordable housing, forcing low and medium incomers out of the city.



**Figure 3.** Transit Center District Plan Area. Source: San Francisco Planning Department, Transit Center District Plan <http://transitcenter.sfplanning.org>.

The plan emphasizes the importance of open space for a vital, comfortable, and economically vigorous downtown. Many policies are exclusively on developing sufficient and sophisticated open space for workers, residents, and visitors. Design requirements are specified to make open space usable, accessible, and of aesthetic value. Originally a place of residents, workers, and shoppers, the functions of a public place now expand to be an entertainment event location and tourist destination.

Historical preservation is emphasized. San Francisco's traditional architecture character was heavily impacted by the modern downtown redevelopment characteristic of large scale, square shape, and heavy color. The *Downtown Plan* requires architectural continuity with history. It specifies building design and classifies 251 buildings of architectural value for protection. As a preservative incentive, the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program was introduced to allow for the transfer of unused development rights from designated buildings of historical significance and contribution.<sup>25</sup>

The requirement on urban form is enforced through detailed urban design specifications. The plan claims to build San Francisco into the most visually attractive city in the world. Urban design specifications include building height and bulk, sunlight and wind, building appearance, and streetscape. Visual aesthetics and sensual comfort are considered from the pedestrian perspective. Traditional street patterns and street-building relations should be preserved.

Transport enjoys the largest number of policies of all policy categories, whose objectives fall into three broad themes: encourage transit use; discourage auto use; enhance pedestrian and cyclist circulation. In a way, having the largest number of policies on transport issues can be translated into the emphasis on transport in the *Downtown Plan*. This is justifiable since accessibility was thought of as a barrier to fully reaching the potential of downtown competitiveness. One important argument by the growth control group was related to downtown redevelopment's pressure on public transit.

Seismic safety requirement responds to San Francisco's geographical conditions in the earthquake prone region. This is of special importance for the high-rise buildings in downtown area.

*Social planning.* The Downtown Plan provides no policy exclusively on social planning issues. One policy stipulates to "encourage the retail businesses which serve the shopping needs of less affluent downtown workers and local residents." It is embedded with a bit of thematic quality of addressing social equity. However, the overall theme of this policy is on economic planning.

*Thematic summary.* The Downtown Plan is a predominantly physical planning document. Though issues of commercial spaces are thematically categorized as economic planning in the content analysis, they are essentially about physical codes of land use and urban development. The social planning theme nearly does not exist. The predominance of the plan's contents on physical issues partially explains why it won the National Merit Award from the AIA rather than an award from a planning professional body such as the American Planning Association (APA). The physical planning theme is centered on issues of spatial development, urban design, and conservation: development issues include the growth of commercial spaces, provision of housing and public transport, and expansion of public space; urban design issues include the emphasis on open space design and urban form to create enjoyable built environment for workers, residents, and visitors as well as present a world city image; conservation issues include the protection of the historic urban character of architecture and street pattern and the protection of housing and historic building from office development encroachment.

Economic competitiveness and livability are two primary goals of the *Downtown Plan*. Economically, downtown San Francisco should be the center of activities of finance, insurance, administration, corporate, and professional services, as well as retail and hotel. This is to be maintained and enhanced through controlled and balanced land uses of office, retail, hotel, and commercial support services. Livability is to be achieved through better urban design of open space, urban form, and historical protection. The competitiveness of the city requires the kind of environment that is attractive, compact, walkable, and accessible. Housing and transport are two major supporting infrastructures for a sustainable downtown development. Enhancing housing supply and preserving existing housing from being encroached by office development will help achieve vitality in downtown area. Efficient public transit systems will sustain the downtown's competitiveness.

## **Proposition M (1986)**

*Proposition M* was the greatest victory for the growth control group in San Francisco's long urban contestation. It is then not surprising that most of its policy proposals embody the thematic attributes of either "restriction" or "conservation." In almost every piece of its proposal or policy, the word of "conserve" or its synonyms occur.

*Proposition M* has four parts: growth limits; citizen participation; job training for local residents; and priority policies. In growth limits, *Proposition M* raised the restrictive measure of the *Downtown Plan* by imposing a permanent annual 950,000 square feet cap on all new buildings of more than 25,000 square feet and reserving annual 75,000 square feet for small buildings. In social planning, *Proposition M* empowers community participation in deciding on any large-scale development

projects. Other social planning measures include creating a coordinated training program for local residents to take newly opened jobs and responding to the primary needs and concerns of ethnic minorities, workers, and low incomers. *Proposition M* proposed eight priority policies of the above issues to be included in the *Master Plan of San Francisco*. Their thematic patterns are summarized as follows:

*Economic planning.* Three policies touch upon the economic planning theme on issues of economic diversity and neighborhood-serving retail. Conservation is a strong thematic attribute, aiming at protecting the existing diverse economic base and local serving retail from being encroached by office development.

*Physical planning.* The majority of the eight priority policies focus on general physical planning issues of urban form, housing, open space, transport, and seismic protection. Almost all physical planning policies embody the thematic attribute of “conservation,” that is, to conserve the existing physical features from being otherwise impacted.

*Social planning.* In Proposition M, social planning prevails over economic planning and physical planning in terms of thematic weight. Social planning issues include citizen participation, social equity of employment and business ownership, affordable housing, and development mitigation. Four of the eight priority policies are categorized as policies on social planning: cultural diversity; affordable housing; preference toward local employment; and preference toward local ownership of business. The overarching themes include: the cultural diversity and existing housing should be protected; local employment and business ownership as well as the supply of affordable housing should be enhanced.

## Pendulum: Grow or Not

In the one decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, downtown San Francisco development was declining and stagnant. Although the construction of preapproved projects before the *Downtown Plan* rose modestly in the late 1980s, new development fell in the early 1990s. The *Downtown Plan* predicted about 15 million square feet of new development by 1990, but only about 9 million square feet were built; by 1993, 12 million square feet had been built, still below earlier prediction.<sup>26</sup> Three major reasons could explain this development shortfall. First, the restrictive *Downtown Plan* (1985) and *Proposition M* (1986) capped the development vision for business and developers. Second, from 1989 to 1994, San Francisco entered another cycle of economic recession along the general trend of the whole country. Thirdly, from the mid-1980s on, the office vacancy rate began to increase in San Francisco, partly due to excessive office development in the 1960–1985 boom and partly due to competition from cheaper renting of commercial spaces in suburban centers of the San Francisco Bay Area. San Francisco’s downtown office vacancy rate was only 1–2 percent in 1982, but soured to about 14 percent in 1989, and only slightly declined to 10 percent in 1992.<sup>27</sup> This was not a phenomenon unique to San Francisco. The vacancy rate was even as high as 20 percent at the same time in some other big American cities.<sup>28</sup> In retrospect, it was counted that *Proposition M*’s extremely restrictive construction cap prevented a glut of high-rise buildings from going up at the end of the economic boom in the late 1980s.<sup>29</sup>

However, in the second half of the 1990s, San Francisco faced a renewed pressure for urban development. Like the growth pressure in the post-WWII era, this time the pressure also came from both global and regional competition, but in a different sense. With an accelerated process of globalization, San Francisco was now competing with global competitor cities for being locations of corporate headquarters, investment, and tourism. On the other hand, further regional

**Table 1.** San Francisco Mayors and Their Urban Development Stances (1978–2003)

Mayors	Mayoralty Years	Stance on Urban Development
Dianne Feinstein	1978–1985	Progrowth
	1986–1987	Growth control
Art Agnos	1988–1991	Growth control
Frank Jordan	1992–1995	Growth control
Willie Brown	1996–2003	Progrowth

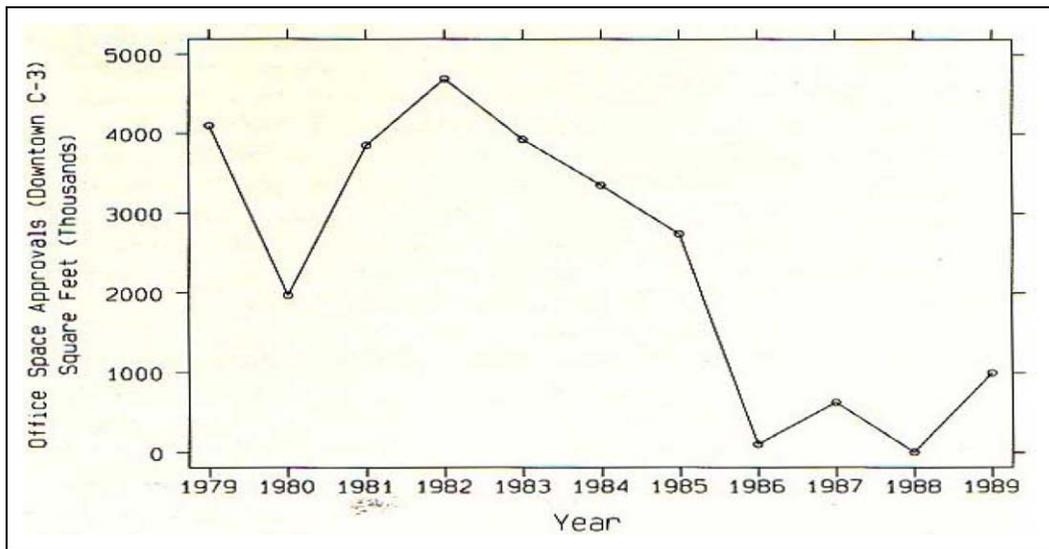
decentralization trend threatened San Francisco's central role in the Bay Area. This trend traced back to the 1960s when the Bay Area was transiting to be a polycentric urban region, but the process was speeding up with the facilitation of information technology application and the rise of such new economy centers as Silicon Valley around San Francisco. The concurrent challenges of global competition and regional decentralization and resulting competition fostered a tendency to reexamine the civic attitudes toward growth and redevelopment in San Francisco. At the same time, the community's attitude began to indicate some sign of loosening too. They were dissatisfied with a stagnant job base in the downtown office sector and seemed somewhat relaxed of urban growth now, as shown in the election of a socially liberal but prodevelopment mayor, Willie Brown (1996–2003). In 1995–2000, several major urban renewal projects were approved or completed.

The shift from growth control ethos to reignited progrowth urge is interesting and worth scrutinizing. The following paragraphs examine the growth control and progrowth shift timeline in the 1980s and the 1990s along with the mayoralty changes (see Table 1).

Dianne Feinstein, the President of the Board of Supervisors who succeeded the assassinated Mayor George Moscone in 1978, claimed to be a centralist but proved to be an ardent progrowth advocate. In the pre-1986 period of her mayoralty, downtown development reached its climax in San Francisco. It was ironic that both the *Downtown Plan* and *Proposition M* occurred during her mayoralty. For her, the *Downtown Plan* was meant to adjust the urban development orientation, and pay more attention to urban design and moving future construction to the South of Market area, rather than simply being a growth control plan. *Proposition M* was not a willing choice, but a forced acceptance. After the passage of *Proposition M* in 1986, she reversed her course by putting aside reservations about the initiative and ceasing speaking out against the annual cap. She turned more of her attention to the concerns of the community groups. During her mayoralty, some linkage programs were adopted to require developers to contribute to affordable housing, open space, public transit, child care, and job training and placement. Developers paid exaction fees in proportion to the amount of commercial office space constructed. Mayor Feinstein's changed attitude toward land use and housing issues was indicative of San Francisco's transformative planning culture in the mid-1980s.

The changed course of Mayor Dianne Feinstein, the passage of *Proposition M*, and the general milieu of growth control in San Francisco paved the way for the mayoralty of Art Agnos (1988–1991). Art Agnos had been a supporter of growth control movement for long. The political culture in the 1987 campaign immediately after the passage of *Proposition M* put him in a position almost without any substantial challenge. He was the first and probably the last "fundamentalist" growth control Mayor.<sup>30</sup> Once elected, he kept his promises of sticking to the spirit of *Proposition M* and went even further. He appointed several activists of growth control and affordable housing to key positions in the city government and virtually reshuffled the powerful Planning Commission to make sure that his growth control measures could be implemented.

Basically Agnos' growth control actions fell into three categories: land use, housing, and employment. In land use, Agnos blocked the spread of high-rise building beyond the traditional downtown district. This was a reversal of the Feinstein administration's *Downtown Plan* to shift commercial office development from the north of the Market Street area to the South of Market area. Agnos



**Figure 4.** Office Space Approvals in Downtown C-3 District San Francisco (1979–1989). Source: Richard DeLeon, *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975–1991* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992).

issued a series of redistributive policies on housing and employment. He increased mitigation fee for affordable housing and applied its exaction to expanded scope of commercial office buildings. Inclusionary housing policies required developers of market-rate housing to set aside a fixed percentage of their apartment units for lower-income people. Otherwise, building permits would not be granted. By integrating different socioeconomic classes within a neighborhood, the inclusionary program, it was believed, would help foster a stronger sense of community. Agnos' most innovative linkage policy was on employment. In May 1991, the Planning Commission established a nonprofit corporation—the Central Employment Brokerage Association (CEBA). Its board of directors would be equally divided between representatives of community-based employment agencies and downtown developers. Its role was to provide accurate information on what kinds of jobs were being created by the downtown office buildings and what people were getting the new jobs. In addition, the agency would require that developers of commercial office buildings work with employment agencies to ensure that San Francisco residents would be employed.

After the passage of *Proposition M* in 1986, a host of policies implemented at the end of the Feinstein administration and throughout the Agnos administration helped strengthen the popular participation in the planning process and an equitable development of the city. Downtown development was now guided by a mix of developmental, regulatory, and redistributive policies, something that would have been inconceivable prior to the 1980s.<sup>31</sup> Office approvals in downtown San Francisco fell sharply in the second half of the 1980s (see Figure 4). However, as stated earlier, low approved project rate was more related to the market downturn than an effect of the restrictive policies since the construction cap was not reached during the post *Proposition M* years.

Richard DeLeon uses three “leftism”—liberalism, environmentalism and populism—articulated by Art Agnos in his campaign for mayor in 1987 to describe San Francisco's progressive tradition.<sup>32</sup> In matters of land use and urban development, such a progressive planning culture was characteristic of strict growth limit, redistributive policies, and popular participation. Mayor Frank Jordan (1992–1995) maintained the progressive planning momentum. In 1992, Jordan extended housing linkage ordinance to retail project which should apply only to commercial office development. Jordan and his top appointees approached land use policy in ways that were perfectly acceptable to the growth

control activists. By this time, progressive planning ideas and practices had been deeply embedded in local political culture. Like the “private hegemonism” in the pre-1980s era, progressive activism was the hegemonic ideology of downtown development in the post-1980s era, a so-called progressive hegemonism.<sup>33</sup> Developing from its initial antigrowth efforts in the 1970s, the growth control coalition had evolved for almost two and half decades to become an established regime of the progressive activists, the civic leaders, and the public community.

It was during Willie Brown’s mayoral tenure (1996–2003) that the “progressive hegemonism” began to receive some substantial backlash. Brown’s election was backed by an unusual coalition of business people, developers, organized labor, progressive groups, racial minorities, and gays and lesbians.<sup>34</sup> Brown’s mayoralty witnessed a new wave of redevelopment in San Francisco as a response to the renewed growth pressure as mentioned earlier in this section. Contrary to the growth control attitudes of his predecessors of Art Agnos and Frank Jordan, Brown was straightforward in his prodevelopment stance. Brown was determined to leave a legacy of new development to cope with San Francisco’s revived economy driven by new information economy and visitor economy. He was nicknamed as “Mayor Bricks-and-Mortar” in the local media and was sometimes compared with the former mayors Joseph Alioto (1967–1965) and Dianne Feinstein (1978–1987) for his strong prodevelopment motivation.<sup>35</sup> Firm on his redevelopment vision, Brown turned himself into virtually a planning leader and centralized planning power in his office. This stance, without any doubt, stirred controversy and even anger among the historic preservationists and activists, but the developers and business community welcomed.

Brown’s tenure was marked by a significant increase in real estate development, public works, city beautification, and other large-scale projects. In the late 1990s, San Francisco was the country’s top commercial real estate market, beating out Los Angeles, New York, Boston, and Washington, DC.<sup>36</sup> However, this wave of development imprints were different from the post-WWII one in three senses. First, the post-WWII development was concentrated on high-rise office buildings in the Financial District to embrace the growth of postindustrial corporate economy. Brown-supported projects in the late 1990s were both vertical and horizontal by expanding downtown development to the South of Market area and other eastern neighborhoods. Second, the new batch of projects encompassed not only office space but also meeting facilities, housing, shopping malls, entertainment, and R&D centers. These major new redevelopment projects underpinned San Francisco’s economic transformation toward convention and exhibition, tourism, retail, arts, entertainment, sports, biomedical, and multimedia.<sup>37</sup> This economic transformation was mostly felt in the metamorphosis of the South of Market area from a working-class place to one home to the new economy of information and media technologies, social life activities, and visitor economy of venues and hotels. One example is the Yerba Buena Gardens area, which was expanded during Brown’s mayoralty, is now a clustering of conference and exhibition, hotel, art museum, and public park. Third, unlike the high-rise office development boom in 1960–1985, which was more driven by private investment mainly by banks and tax syndicates, this wave of redevelopment emerged largely through the impetus of public investment and dot-com entrepreneurs funded mainly by Silicon Valley venture capitalists.<sup>38</sup>

Brown’s strong progrowth stance contributed to the rise of a new round of urban contestation in San Francisco. In 2000, both growth control *Proposition L* and progrowth *Proposition K* were submitted on November ballot. For almost fifteen years, the growth controllers did not see a need to make a ballot initiative. This time they were concerned about the “dot-com invasion” driven by “digital capitalism,” which generated the sudden gentrification and displacement impacts on the low-income residents, merchants, artists, and nonprofit workers living in the South of Market, Mission, and Portrero Hill neighborhoods.<sup>39</sup> Between 1995 and 2001, the city approved twenty-two small office projects and thirty-four large office projects; ten of the small and eleven of the large office projects have been approved in the South of Market and other eastern neighborhoods.<sup>40</sup> *Proposition L* proposed to retain the 950,000 square feet annual limit of 1986’s *Proposition M*, but allow

additional space in future years and exempt large projects already in the works. It proposed to ban office construction in parts of the Mission, Potrero Hill, and South of Market and to reclassify live-work lofts as housing. It also required that developers pay more fees and dot-coms be treated as offices rather than as business services, which allowed enormous development to evade limitations set in *Proposition M* (1986). The progrowth Mayor Willie Brown and some Supervisors placed an opposing *Proposition K* on the same ballot, as a countermeasure. *Proposition K* aimed to exempt live/work lofts and all federal, state, and local offices from the new law limitation. Both Propositions lost. *Proposition K* lost badly by winning 39 percent of votes, while *Proposition L* lost by a tiny margin of winning 49.8 percent of votes.

The failure of both *Proposition K* and *Proposition L* in 2000 meant that *Proposition M*'s stringent growth control would continue. Mayor Brown's progrowth stance was thwarted on other political fronts too. In the election for his second term of office in 1999, Willie Brown was forced into a runoff with Tom Ammiano, the President of the Board of Supervisors, and a progressive opponent of Brown's progrowth policies. Real political punch on Brown's progrowth cause came in the next year's district elections. In 2000, nearly all progressive candidates, who were mostly proponents of growth control and took an anti-Brown stance, won the district elections and formed an unprecedented 8-3 "progressive majority" on the Board of Supervisors.<sup>41</sup> Brown-led growth machine which worked reasonably well in the second half of the 1990s was ruined by the district elections and the resulting progressive-dominated Board of Directors. The rise and fall of Willie Brown, Richard DeLeon contends, represents an emerging new urban progressivism in San Francisco at the turn of centuries.<sup>42</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

The *Downtown Plan* and *Proposition M*, together with the associated linkage programs, constitute a dividing line in San Francisco's planning history. They marked the end of the progrowth regime that had dominated San Francisco's urban development in the post-WWII decades and the beginning of a growth control regime. They marked the end of the laissez-faire planning approach and the beginning of an interventionist planning approach in San Francisco. The market-driven "private hegemonism" was gradually replaced by strong government intervention and "progressive hegemonism."<sup>43</sup> The philosophy behind this transformation was that market could not effectively address the negative impacts of excessive development. Government intervention and community empowerment were necessary for equitable growth through construction limits and redistributive policies. This interventionist ideology did not change even in the renewed progrowth wave in Brown's mayoralty during the late 1990s: it was government-led urban redevelopment. The beliefs of the two contrasting planning philosophies that have shifted in San Francisco in the 1980-1990s are listed in Table 2.

The interventionist planning policies and practices indicated two outstanding thematic patterns. First, the overall trend of the interventionist planning approach was toward a balanced growth through regulation and growth limit. There were some voices calling on the return of the post-WWII free market force to determine the city's growth in the renewed urban redevelopment in the late 1990s, but the political culture that had contextualized the laissez-faire planning tradition had gone. Second, interventionist regulations were expanding from sheer control on building scale and bulk and total construction limit to social redistributions. Linkage programs were imposed on commercial developments to mitigate their impacts on public transport, housing, and employment. This urban political culture that has nurtured the mitigation mechanism is unique to San Francisco, the nation's most liberal city and the urban capital of progressivism.<sup>44</sup> Richard Walker argues that San Francisco's distinctive aura of urbanity "is not a gift of Nature or the Market, but the outcome of favorable social conditions and fervent struggles."<sup>45</sup>

**Table 2.** Planning Philosophical Transformation in San Francisco: Laissez-Faire versus Interventionist

Philosophies	Beliefs
Laissez-faire	Private hegemonism: business-dominated elite Laissez-faire approach: market-driven and minimum government intervention Manhattan model for aesthetic appreciation and embracement of postindustrial economy Faith in market forces as a fair distributor of costs and benefits of development Minimal concern about the negative consequence of vigorous development Virtual absence of regulatory and redistributive policies Expert skills
Interventionist	Progressive hegemonism: grassroots and community-based Skepticism of market forces: government interventions guarantee a more equitable outcome Popular empowerment and citizen participation in urban decisions Downtown development is not inherently positive Growth limits and linkage policies to offset social and environmental costs of downtown development Popular initiative as a powerful tool to change urban strategy

Another thread linking the planning transformations is the shifted roles of three major collective stakeholders—business, government, and the community—in the process of building consensus on either progrowth or growth control. Table 3. lists their role shifts—leadership, advocacy, or acceptance—in the different historic phases of San Francisco’s urban development marked by either progrowth or growth control. In the pre-1985 phase, the business sector led the progrowth coalition with strong support from the City Hall. It was accepted by the general public in a belief that large-scale downtown redevelopment would make good economic sense in positioning San Francisco in the expected postindustrial economy. In the growth control phase of 1985–1995, the community force turned to become the leader in imposing balanced and equitable growth, which ultimately won advocacy from the government and acceptance from business. In order to reinvigorate downtown San Francisco and meet the rise of new economy and tourist growth in the second half of the 1990s, the City Hall led by Mayor Willie Brown took the leadership in the renewed process of urban redevelopment, which was supported by the business and was generally tolerated by the community that came to realize that extreme growth limit might be detrimental to the economic vitality of the city. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that Brown’s progrowth phase should not be equated to that in the pre-1985 era. Though both are named as progrowth phases, they are different in nature and degree. As explained in the previous sections, Brown’s progrowth stance and practice responded to the emerging new economy and mostly occurred in the South of Market area. It did not manage to wreck the growth control regime to restore the progrowth machine that existed in the pre-1985 era.

The shifts of the roles of leadership, advocacy and acceptance between business, government and the community should be understood in the specific economic and social settings of the time. In the pre-1985 period, San Francisco’s corporate economy was dominated by giant firms and powerful developers. They had the resources, capacity, and drive to lead a progrowth regime. Feeling the negative impacts of the business dominated urban development most directly, the community was thus enthusiastic in struggling for growth control led by community activists. When the progressive growth control ideology dominated the planning discourse and practice, the city was witnessing a process of losing corporate headquarters and increasing small businesses under a dual context of globalization and regionalization. Some big firms fled San Francisco while numerous small firms, particularly the start-up and small firms of the rising new economy of information and media industries, saw San Francisco’s dynamic urban settings as attractive. Feeling the pressure of declining

**Table 3.** Roles of Collective Stakeholders in Planning San Francisco

	Pre-1985 (Progrowth)	1985–1995 (Growth Control)	Post-1995 (Progrowth)
Business	○	■	●
Government	●	●	○
Community	■	○	■

Note: ○ Leadership.

● Advocacy.

■ Acceptance.

corporate economy and opportunities offered by new economy, the government could have the will as well as capacity and resources to take a lead role in reinvigorating a new round of urban development.

The driving forces behind the historic phases of San Francisco's urban development are different: the driving force for progrowth was exogenous while the driving force for growth control was endogenous. The driving forces for progrowth phases in the pre-1985 and the post-1995 periods were essentially derived from the process of globalization: in the pre-1985 period, the progrowth strategy was meant to maximize San Francisco's competitiveness in the postindustrial economy by attracting the location of corporate headquarters, enhancing investment, trade and tourism in San Francisco; in the post-1995 period, the progrowth strategy was aimed to accommodate the new economy facilitated by information technology as well as rising experience economy of San Francisco as a tourist Mecca. On the other hand, the push for growth control has been endogenous since it grew from the grassroots and gradually developed into an activist community movement.

The case of San Francisco's fundamental planning transformation in the 1980s and 1990s challenges some leading theories and generates the need for theoretical paradigms responding to the uniqueness of San Francisco's context. For example, it challenges the theories of urban politics, which argue that growth control efforts are either economically undesirable, politically infeasible, or both.<sup>46</sup> One of the challenged theories is the growth machine theory, which posits that a city is dominated by some land-based elite of the mayor, planning office, and downtown business interests, and argues that the very essence of a city is its operation as a growth machine.<sup>47</sup> The two key hypotheses derived from the model of the city as a growth machine—the pervasive influence of progrowth coalitions in local governing regime; the heavy influences of growth regimes on local development—provide theoretical underpinnings to explain San Francisco's urban development prior to the mid-1980s under the world city aspiration and postindustrial growth machine;<sup>48</sup> however, the growth machine model turns to be short of rigor in justifying what occurred on San Francisco's urban development scenario afterward. Though the emerging countercoalition movement and increasing progressiveness in local politics are recognized, the growth machine model maintains reservations about their authenticity and effectiveness.<sup>49</sup> This insufficient acknowledgment of the antigrowth machine forces impacts on the applicability of the growth machine model to capturing a panorama of the transformation of San Francisco's local politics during this period.

The related but more inclusive urban regime theory offers a broader framework to explain the San Francisco case. An urban regime is defined as “the informal arrangement by which public bodies and private interests function together to make and carry out governing decisions.”<sup>50</sup> Four regime types have been suggested: a caretaker regime organized to maintain the status quo; a developmental regime organized around promoting economic growth; a middle-class progressive regime organized around regulating development for environmental or egalitarian purpose; a lower-class opportunity expansion regime organized around the mobilization of resources to improve conditions in lower-income communities.<sup>51</sup> The existing application of the urban regime theory to San Francisco's transformation has been focused on the regime shifts in the local politics in the period of the 1980s and

1990s. Richard DeLeon posited a regime transformation from a “progrowth regime” to an “antiregime” in around 1990 and later an established “progressive regime” in around 2000 in the local politics on issues of land use, race, and identity.<sup>52</sup> Stephen McGovern focused on a transformative politics on downtown development from a “hegemonic privatism” to a “counterhegemonic activism.”<sup>53</sup> Both DeLeon and McGovern converged to acknowledge the entrenched regime shifts in the local politics and the fundamentality of the change in the political culture. These theoretical underpinnings are made from a political perspective. They provide a contextual framework to understand the catalyst for the planning transformations to occur and help identify the thematic patterns of the planning transformation embedded in the planning documents and initiatives.

The two benchmark plans—the *Downtown Plan* and *Proposition M*—and the associated linkage programs were the effects of San Francisco’s changed social and political settings for planning. Thematically, they were collectively aimed at reaching a balance between economic planning, physical planning, and social planning. They marked a difference from San Francisco’s prior strategy that attached more importance to the city’s economic dynamics and urban growth. These planning transformations along the themes of economic planning, physical planning, and social planning are summarized as follows:

Economically, the goal was to continue and strengthen San Francisco’s status as an international center of financing, headquarters and service. At the same time, San Francisco’s growing role as a center of ideas and experience was emphasized. It was recognized by major stakeholders that unfettered urban redevelopment was not necessarily beneficial for the city’s economic development since it might generate negative environmental and social consequences, which would ultimately impact on long-term economic prosperity. A more balanced development approach would help revitalize the community, sustain its future development, and preserve its historic character. In terms of achieving economic prosperity, the *Downtown Plan* is typical of the kind of land-use plans produced for the central business district (CBD) of headquarters cities.<sup>54</sup> It has since attracted many other cities to produce plans of similar kind.

The physical planning theme enjoys the most coverage in the *Downtown Plan*. Physical planning issues range from restrictive building caps, transport and housing infrastructure provision, to detailed urban design guidelines on streets, public space, and historic architecture preservation. The *Downtown Plan* is essentially an urban design plan with “extensive and detailed aesthetic elements.”<sup>55</sup> San Francisco has been a world city leader in urban design plan. Its *Urban Design Plan* (1971) was the first plan of its kind in the world and was followed by other American cities and even Japanese cities afterward. The *Downtown Plan* (1985) continued to put San Francisco in a leading position of urban design. The urban design element was further strengthened by the Beauty Contest program endorsed by the Board of Supervisors in the next year, which required competition of development schemes prior to choosing developers, and tended to favor smaller-scale and site-sensitive designs. One important derivative outcome of the Beauty Contest program is, in addition to emphasizing the design amenities of their projects, developers would try to outdo one another by offering contributions to the affordable housing, public transit, child care, open space, and job training, which were above and beyond what the existing linkage policies required. The post-WWII modernist style buildings were criticized aesthetically and socially. Their large-scale bulk and big box shape were thought of as lacking aesthetic value, creating space unfriendly to human beings, and negatively impacting on San Francisco’s traditional urban character. San Francisco should have a compact downtown that was walkable, livable, and enjoyable for workers, residents, and visitors, thus improving the city’s competitiveness. The imposed urban design requirements took effect. New projects after 1985 began to demonstrate different architectural style and have more design flavors. San Francisco has been known for having one of the most demanding sets of design controls of any major city in the United States.

*Proposition M* was noted for its very strong social planning aspirations. Favorable policies were made to protect local residents, especially the low- and moderate-incomers, from being

disadvantaged by market forces and commercial development pressures. Policies for community interests were introduced in linkage programs of affordable housing, employment, and local business activities. The outstanding presence of the social planning theme was a function of San Francisco's unique culture of liberalism and progressivism: San Franciscans are the most politically active and civically engaged.<sup>56</sup> Community participation has been an important force in deciding on the city's civic life, particularly on issues of urban planning and development.

It is the combination of the two plans and the associated linkage policies and practices that has been functioning to guide San Francisco's urban development to achieve economic prosperity in such a way as not to cause undesirable environmental and social consequences. Office construction was controlled in both volume and location. Emphasis was laid on urban design and downtown livability. Conservation of existing economic and social diversity, and historical buildings and architectural aesthetics was enforced. Linkage programs were adopted to favor community interests. The pursuit for such a "balanced" planning approach, punctuated with constant "contestations," had dominated San Francisco's planning transformation in the 1980s and 1990s.

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### Notes

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2. Stephen McGovern, *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D. C.* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998).
3. Brian Godfrey, "Urban Development and Redevelopment in San Francisco," see note 1 above; Stephen McGovern, *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D. C.*, see note 2 above.
4. The broad categorization of thematic planning spectrums as physical, social, and economic planning is adopted from the definition of planning activity by the American Planning Association: "... to advance the art and science of planning and to foster the activity of planning—physical, economic, and social—at the local, regional, state, and national level."
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23. *Ibid.*
24. The San Francisco Planning Department has been working on a Transit Center District Plan since the early 2006 built on the Downtown Plan 1985 that envisioned the area around the Transbay Terminal as the heart of the new downtown. This project is still in the process of consultation among stakeholders and the newest plan update (May 26, 2009) is that it is a mixed use commercial land use and will add 2.54 million ft<sup>2</sup>, 235 housing units, and 425 hotel rooms (Source: San Francisco Planning Department, *Transit Center District Plan* <http://transitcenter.sfplanning.org>).
25. TDR is a planning tool for redirecting development away from the sites of historic buildings and is useful in protecting certain historic buildings in perpetuity in San Francisco. TDR could be transferred to any parcel or parcels within the same zoning district if the height, bulk, and other rules of the planning code would permit the increased square footage. TDR from the retail and office districts and to a limited extent from the general commercial and support districts can also be used in a special development district. TDR has helped the San Francisco City in accommodating orderly growth while preserving a compact downtown. TDR provides property owners of significant and contributory buildings economic incentives to maintain these cultural resources. (Source: San Francisco Preservation Society, *San Francisco Preservation Bulletin No.6: Preservation Incentives*, <http://sfpsociety.org/incentives.html>).
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his former work, Richard DeLeon contended that San Francisco could be described as lacking an urban regime in the form of a dominant governing coalition of the type that ruled the city's urban development in the pre-1986 era, and used the term "antiregime" to describe the nonregime status. DeLeon's "antiregime" proposition was based on his observation of the city's post-1986 political contestations until the early 1990s. In his latter work, DeLeon developed his "antiregime" argument and pointed out "an emerging new urban progressivism" largely based on his observation of the rise and fall of the progrowth Mayor Willie Brown in around 2000.

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### **Bio**

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