



**FROM**

**THE**

**LOCAL EFFORTS  
TO CREATE  
RESILIENT CITIES**

**GROUND**

**UP**



**Alison Sant**

# About Island Press

Since 1984, the nonprofit organization Island Press has been stimulating, shaping, and communicating ideas that are essential for solving environmental problems worldwide. With more than 1,000 titles in print and some 30 new releases each year, we are the nation's leading publisher on environmental issues. We identify innovative thinkers and emerging trends in the environmental field. We work with world-renowned experts and authors to develop cross-disciplinary solutions to environmental challenges.

Island Press designs and executes educational campaigns, in conjunction with our authors, to communicate their critical messages in print, in person, and online using the latest technologies, innovative programs, and the media. Our goal is to reach targeted audiences—scientists, policy makers, environmental advocates, urban planners, the media, and concerned citizens—with information that can be used to create the framework for long-term ecological health and human well-being.

Island Press gratefully acknowledges major support from The Bobolink Foundation, Caldera Foundation, The Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation, The Forrest C. and Frances H. Lattner Foundation, The JPB Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The Summit Charitable Foundation, Inc., and many other generous organizations and individuals.

The opinions expressed in this book are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of our supporters.



**FROM**  
**THE** LOCAL EFFORTS  
TO CREATE  
RESILIENT CITIES  
**GROUND**  
**UP**

**Alison Sant**

© 2022 Alison Sant

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the publisher: Island Press, 2000 M Street, NW, Suite 480-B, Washington, DC 20036

Library of Congress Control Number:  
2021934509

All Island Press books are printed on environmentally responsible materials.

Designed by MacFadden & Thorpe  
Illustrations by Packard Jennings

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Keywords: activism, bike infrastructure, bike paths, bike share, bus rapid transit, car-free public space, climate action, climate change, codesign, community-based planning, congestion pricing, COVID-19 pandemic, environmental design, environmental justice, environmental stewardship, equitable development, green infrastructure, greening playgrounds, green jobs, greenway, guerrilla tactics, habitat restoration, heat island effect, managed retreat, micromobility, multimodal transportation, nature-based solutions, oyster-tecture, oyster restoration, Park(ing) Day, parklet, pedestrian safety, pilot project, placemaking, purple-lining, racial justice, redlining, resilience district, Safe Routes to School, shoreline adaptation, Slow Streets, social resilience, stormwater management, street trees, sustainable development, systemic change, tactical urbanism, transportation equity, tree canopy, urban design, urban forest, urban forestry, urban resilience, Vision Zero, watershed planning

For my mother, whose love of cities  
and their people was infectious

# CONTENTS

Foreword by Eric W. Sanderson	xi
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
List of Interviewees	xx
A Note on the Illustrations	xxi
Introduction: Reimagining Our Cities	1
<b>PART 1: RECLAIM THE STREETS</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> Places by People, San Francisco	12
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> Safe Streets for Everyone, Minneapolis	32
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> Making the City Accessible, New York City	47
<b>ESSAY</b> Building Inclusive Cities from the Ground Up by Tamika L. Butler	65
<b>PART 2: TEAR UP THE CONCRETE</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4</b> Living with Water, New Orleans	73
<b>CHAPTER 5</b> Watershed Planning, Portland	91
<b>CHAPTER 6</b> Green Spaces for All, Philadelphia	107
<b>ESSAY</b> Green Infrastructure Lessons from US Cities by Mami Hara	117





PART 3: PLANT THE CITY	121
<b>CHAPTER 7</b> Canopy Cover in the “City of Trees,” Washington, DC	125
<b>CHAPTER 8</b> From Street Trees to Natural Areas, New York City	141
<b>CHAPTER 9</b> The Forest in the City, Baltimore	155
PART 4: ADAPT THE SHORELINE	171
<b>CHAPTER 10</b> Restoring Nature and Building Equity, San Francisco	174
<b>CHAPTER 11</b> Growing One Billion Oysters, New York City	194
<b>CHAPTER 12</b> Moving Away from the Coast, Louisiana	211
<b>ESSAY</b> Adapting Urban Districts to Sea-Level Rise by Mimicking Natural Processes by Kristina Hill	226
Conclusion: A Path Forward	231
Notes	235
About the Author	281







Portable park installation along Maiden Lane by Bonnie Ora Sherk with Howard Levine, San Francisco (1970) (Source: A Living Library)

PART 1

# RECLAIM THE STREETS

“NOT TV OR ILLEGAL DRUGS BUT THE  
AUTOMOBILE HAS BEEN THE CHIEF  
DESTROYER OF AMERICAN COMMUNITIES.”<sup>1</sup>

—JANE JACOBS

In the United States, 25 to 35 percent of a city’s developed land is devoted to streets, which are dominated by the automobile.<sup>2</sup> Many of the city’s streets are inhumane, lacking enough space for safe walking and biking, efficient public transit, or vibrant public spaces. Cars take up a lot of room in cities.<sup>3</sup> While the private automobile carries 600 to 1,600 people an hour, two-way protected bikeways move 7,500 people, sidewalks 9,000, and on-street bus or rail transitways between 10,000 and 25,000.<sup>4</sup>

As Christof Spieler described in *Trains, Buses, People: An Opinionated Atlas of U.S. Transit*, the advantages of transit are “a matter of geometry.”<sup>5</sup> Cars not only claim space while they are being driven, but also when they sit parked and idle nearly 80 percent of the time. For example, San Francisco’s 440,000 on-street parking spaces make up enough space combined to create another Golden Gate Park and still fill the floor space of 120 Transamerica Pyramids with affordable housing.<sup>6</sup> This reality has prompted tactical interventions to reclaim parking spaces in San Francisco and permanently close entire streets in New York City ([see chapters 1 and 3](#)).

Americans pay dearly for roads whether we drive on them or not. The cost of automobile debt and ownership is often more than an average household spends on food, twice what it spends on health care, and three times what it spends on rent.<sup>7</sup> In addition, US households pay an average of \$1,100 per year in taxes to pay for the costs of driving.<sup>8</sup> As addressed in this book’s introduction, roads cost lives as well ([see introduction](#)). Reclaiming city streets presents one of the greatest opportunities to mitigate global climate change.<sup>9</sup> Expanding low- and zero-carbon mobility options is essential to curbing greenhouse gas emissions. It is also an opportunity to build equitable transportation systems that offer affordable fares and reasonable daily commutes, especially for those who have been pushed to live farther and farther from the center of cities due to the rising costs of housing. New York City, for example, is expanding its Select Bus Service (SBS) and creating new busways that prioritize transit on city streets and make service more reliable throughout the five boroughs.

## ROADS WERE NOT MADE FOR CARS

In the 1890s, city streets were shared spaces, used mainly by people walking, biking, riding transit, and occasionally by those driving cars. The iconic San Francisco film *A Trip Down Market Street* characterizes what roads once felt like. It depicts a blur of trains, bikes, horse-drawn carriages, pedestrians, and cars all in a seemingly chaotic but slow dance.<sup>10</sup> It also depicts the rhythm of the street before the crosswalk and the traffic light. People had the time and space to encounter and negotiate with each other directly.

As urban populations and traffic swelled, the rules of the road became more formalized and space more congested. As Evan Friss described in his book *The Cycling City: Bicycles and Urban America in the 1890s*, “The American city of the 1890s was, more than ever before or after, a cycling city.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, bicycles were nearly as ubiquitous in cities across the United States as they are today in the best cycling cities in the world.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, “good roads” campaigns were advanced by cyclists to replace the cobblestone streets, muddy paths, and hazardous cable-car tracks with smooth streets for speedy travel on two wheels.<sup>13</sup> The roads were paved for bikes. However, cars soon came to dominate streets that were once shared public spaces. Pedestrians became criminalized in the 1920s as “jaywalkers” for disregarding traffic rules, and cyclists were increasingly marginalized from roadways.<sup>14</sup>

Historically, transportation investments have favored those who have access to cars. The Collier-Burns Act, passed in 1947, reoriented

the state highway system from multipurpose rural roads to limited-access superhighways and extended them into the cities for the first time. Republican President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act of 1956 devoting \$25 billion to reorienting the American landscape to the automobile. Black neighborhoods were often gutted by new freeways ([see introduction](#)). These planning choices have left multigenerational scars that physically divide communities, promote segregation and disinvestment, and perpetuate poverty.<sup>15</sup>

Simultaneously, public transit was underfunded, often exacerbating underlying inequities as inadequate service made communities car-dependent or commuting times excruciatingly long and thus limiting access to jobs, schools, and services. As this book describes, the legacy of slavery and systemic racism has created long-term disparities legible in every aspect of the urban landscape.

### “PURPLE-LINING”

During 2020 shelter-in-place orders, Oakland, California, was one of the first cities in the country to begin closing streets to traffic. These streets allowed space for physical distancing while making room for walking, rolling, jogging, and biking. They provided critical social services, room for schools, and opportunities for businesses to stay open as the pandemic wore on.<sup>16</sup> In cities worldwide, where temporary street closures created safe space for biking during the pandemic, ridership increased by as much as 48 percent.<sup>17</sup> Oakland prioritized routes in under-resourced neighborhoods, recognizing that many of the communities hardest hit by the pandemic were those that have the

least access to parks, open spaces, and streets that are safe for walking and biking. However, these programs were criticized by urbanists for not engaging the community in the process. Many were asking, who are these streets for?

Dr. Destiny Thomas is a cultural anthropologist and planner, as well as the founder and chief executive officer of Thrivance Project, an organization focused on social justice and racial equity. She argued that because Black and Brown communities were not involved, an opportunity was missed to reverse the legacy of discrimination.<sup>18</sup> She refers to this practice as “purple-lining,” an analog to the post-Depression era “redlining.”<sup>19</sup> In his book *The Color of Law: The Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Richard Rothstein describes how discriminatory housing policies were repeated in cities throughout the United States, effectively creating the nation’s Black ghettos.<sup>20</sup> Redlining was a practice whereby neighborhoods predominantly occupied by people of color were considered high risk for home loans, causing banks to avoid lending in these areas for mortgages and home repairs. Insurance companies wouldn’t offer homeowner’s policies. These racist policies were followed by disinvestment in public infrastructure, including transportation, civil services, parks, and street trees, and have left an indelible mark on the landscape of US cities.

Thomas explained that her use of “purple” came from her own experiences in the Los Angeles Department of Transportation leading community engagement efforts. She described walking into meetings at which her mostly White colleagues—having left her out of conversations—would update plans, and areas of the

map where Black people lived would be shaded in purple. She said, “We outlawed redlining practices. But it became so ingrained in our processes and policies that no one ever blinks an eye at the fact that the legacy of redlining is still written into everything. To me, purple-lining is a reiteration of keeping people out of the process and stripping people of self-determination.”<sup>21</sup> For Thomas, the process of creating Slow Streets was analogous. As she explained: “I’m excited about open streets, too, but I can’t help but to acknowledge that we have undermined their value by not centering the people who we’re saying they are most beneficial to.” She continued, “We can’t lose sight of the fact that our personal experiences, and relationships to and with the built environment, don’t always match that of other people who, in this crisis, are experiencing disparities, by way of structural racism.”<sup>22</sup>

During the pandemic and beyond it, Thomas advocates for a “community planning model” in which decision-making power is shifted to residents. “I think that it’s time for something radical,” she said. “We need to think creatively about how to funnel resources directly to the people who are actual experts in the land use area, which is the people who live on the land.”<sup>23</sup> Tamika Butler (see [Butler’s essay, “Building Inclusive Cities from the Ground Up”](#)) explained that the community must drive the process. That is true whether advocating for a Slow Street in San Francisco or a bike lane such as the Northside Greenway in Minneapolis (see [chapter 2](#)). “For so long, folks have conflated community outreach and community engagement and they think they’re the same thing,” Butler said. “Just going out and telling people what you’re going to do is not the same as actually engaging them. Because when you are engaging with

somebody, you are open to the possibility that however you start that engagement might not be how you end it.”<sup>24</sup>

## BLACK LIVES MATTER

In the United States, Thomas makes clear that “‘Safe streets’ are not safe for Black lives.”<sup>25</sup> On May 25, 2020, the nation witnessed evidence of this enduring reality when George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man, was murdered in South Minneapolis, Minnesota, by a White police officer. Floyd is one of many Black Americans killed by police on the nation’s streets.<sup>26</sup> Captured on video, the footage of Floyd’s murder was instantly seen by many Americans. Street protests erupted throughout the nation (and many parts of the world), reigniting the civil rights movement, with calls voicing “Black Lives Matter” and demands to reallocate police funding. The names of Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black people who were killed by White police officers were written on the signs of millions of protesters. Streets provided important sites for protest, reaffirming their fundamental place in civic life.<sup>27</sup> As sociologist and criminologist Patrick Sharkey pointed out in his book *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence*: “These deaths are not independent, isolated incidents. They are only the most visible examples of a national approach to confronting violent crime, and the larger problem of urban poverty, in the nation’s poorest, most segregated neighborhoods.”<sup>28</sup>

Today, emerging community policing models empower what Sharkey described as the “new guardians” who care for their neighborhoods through a benevolent community presence.<sup>29</sup>

These approaches are explored in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood (see chapter 1). They speak to the history of the Black Panthers for Self Defense, whose "survival programs" in the mid-1960s resisted police brutality and provided food, clothing, and safe passage in Black communities.<sup>30</sup>

## RECLAIMING OUR STREETS

For the benefit of humanity and the sustainability of the planet, this is a time to reclaim the streets for people. As Janette Sadik-Khan, former commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation, described, "If cities truly want a future where more people choose to take buses or trains, to bike or walk, then cities must invest in trains and buses, bikes and better streets."<sup>31</sup> Congestion pricing, which requires drivers to pay a toll for entering the central business district, has been approved in New York (see chapter 3). Estimates project \$1 billion in revenue from the program, part of which will go to pay for public transportation.<sup>32</sup> A \$10 billion federal pilot program was proposed to help communities tear down urban highways and invest in communities of color through the Restoring Neighborhoods and Strengthening Communities Program (also known as the "Highways to Boulevards" initia-

tive).<sup>33</sup> These large-scale funding approaches are necessary to create equitable public transportation and rebuild communities that have suffered from long-term disinvestment.

Equity will require commitments that no longer continue the flawed "separate but equal" approaches of the past, but, rather, ensure that greater resources will be devoted to the communities that deserve them. To be successful, these investments must be directed by the type of community planning model defined by Thomas and an open-ended engagement process described by Butler to ensure that community investment is activated by communities themselves.

The streets will continue to be the place in which Americans assert their democratic rights. From the freeway revolts of the 1950s, the civil rights protests of the 1960s, and the bike-ins of the 1970s, to the Critical Mass bike rides started in the 1990s and the Black Lives Matter protests today, Americans have occupied the streets and made their voices heard.<sup>34</sup> Let's make sure that the calls for change deliver streets that are the stage for healthy lives, safe cycling, affordable transit, and meaningful connections, regaining what has been lost by putting cars in the center of our public spaces.



CHAPTER 1

**SAN FRANCISCO**

PLACES BY PEOPLE

In 2005, a San Francisco collective of artists and designers called Rebar ignited a global street intervention, which later became known as Park(ing) Day. John Bela, one of Rebar’s founders, said, “We observed that 70 percent of the right-of-way was allocated to vehicles while only 20 or 30 percent was for people on foot or bike. That just seemed like an imbalance.”<sup>1</sup> The group decided to reclaim a small piece of the road. On a sunny weekday morning in November, Rebar members fed a downtown San Francisco parking meter and set up a temporary park with grass, a bench, and a young bay tree. There the park remained for two hours until the

meter ran out. They rolled up the sod, packed away the bench and the tree, gave the spot a sweep, and left. Bela recalled the day, saying, “When people sat down on the bench and began having a conversation, we realized it was a success.”<sup>2</sup> Rebar wasn’t the first to reclaim San Francisco streets for pedestrians. Artist Bonnie Sherk had introduced portable parks under freeway overpasses and alleyways in the 1970s. But in 2005, the idea took off. Flooded by requests from other cities, Rebar published an open-source how-to manual empowering others to create their own installations.<sup>3</sup> Many people were eager to see cities change, and



The first Park(ing) intervention in downtown San Francisco, which instigated Park(ing) Day (2005) (Source: John Bela)

Park(ing) Day allowed them to take this process into their own hands. Park(ing) Day is now an annual open-source global event, a day when people take back parking spots to make spaces for people in hundreds of cities all over the world.<sup>4</sup>

By 2009, cities across the United States were finding inventive ways to reclaim city streets with tactical experiments using quick, low-cost methods. These increasingly common practices became known as “tactical urbanism.”<sup>5</sup> Street interventions were not just the creation of guerrilla artists and activist planners; they were the work of transportation agency directors and mayors. The introduction of New York City’s plaza program, including closing Times Square to traffic, set a new bar for cities. Inspired by Park(ing) Day, the San Francisco Planning Department began an official program repurposing parking spaces into what they called parklets. By design, parklets are temporary microparks, permitted with one-year renewable permits; they usually occupy one to three curbside parking spaces.<sup>6</sup> Parklets often include seating areas, planters and greenery, bike racks, and café tables, but in contrast to more typical restaurant patio or sidewalk seating areas, parklets are public spaces. They are an extension of the sidewalk into the parking lane and offer a fast, inexpensive way to create much-needed open space on city streets. Rebar strongly advocated for parklets to be public, and today each has a small sign indicating that seating and amenities are open to all. Parklets are constructed and maintained by residents and local businesses in public-private partnerships with the city’s Planning Department.

Robin Abad-Ocubillo, the director of Shared Spaces at San Francisco Planning, ran the parklet program for ten years after his tenure at the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. Working in parks gave him an appreciation of their democratic influence. “Our shared

open spaces are the venue and the vehicle for connecting us as individuals across class, race, and other demographic divisions. They cultivate civic engagement and our sense of stewardship,” he said.<sup>7</sup> These principles could be applied not only to San Francisco’s large parks, but to the small ones as well. Abad-Ocubillo and his colleagues envisioned the 25 percent of city land given up to roads as the perfect site for a new park system.<sup>8</sup> Since the parklet program began, close to 80 parklets have been installed, turning more than 100 parking spaces green across the city and inspiring similar programs worldwide.<sup>9</sup> However, the biggest expansion of the program came during the COVID-19 pandemic when, as an emergency response, a version of parklets was initiated as the Shared Spaces program. Within one year, close to two thousand applications were approved, transforming many of the city’s commercial corridors and supporting the operation of businesses during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the open-space benefits of parklets, their design-heavy execution by upscale coffee shops and restaurants associated them early on with the forces of gentrification and displacement. They have been called “utopian window dressing on gentrifying development plans.”<sup>11</sup> San Francisco is one of the most expensive and challenging housing markets in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Minimum-wage workers must work more than four full-time jobs to afford a two-bedroom unit in the city.<sup>13</sup> The Mission District, which is home to at least fifteen parklets, has become a symbol of these forces. With the city’s highest eviction rate, the neighborhood is steadily losing its long-term Latinx population and has the third highest rates of unhoused people in the city.<sup>14</sup> Bela, once a resident of the Mission, rejects this view. “In the Mission, along the 24th Street corridor, they didn’t want parklets as they saw them as vectors of gentrification,” he said. “However, gentrification and displacement are a bigger





structural issue of systemic inequality that shouldn't be conflated with access to safe sidewalks, public transit, and a quality public realm in that neighborhood. How many cycles of disinvestment are we going to allow before we address these systemic causes? It's critical that any public space investment be distributed equitably throughout the city."<sup>15</sup>

As a planner, Abad-Ocubillo sought to guide the parklet program to invest in communities, not just commerce. "We emphasized technical assistance and outreach to parts of the city that needed extra support because of our legacy of neighborhood disinvestment, including less well-provisioned park spaces," he said. "We diversified the composition of parklet sponsors to include cultural institutions such as art galleries, youth development organizations, and educational institutions that could experiment with programming public space."<sup>16</sup> Swissnex created the Event Machine parklet, which hosted film screenings, panel discussions, and workshops. A Mission District gallery used its parklet for rotating art exhibitions. A progressive science museum called the Exploratorium created *Ciencia Pública*, in collaboration with the Boys & Girls Clubs of San Francisco, and installed it outside the Buena Vista Horace Mann Community School as an outdoor lab for science classes.<sup>17</sup> San Francisco has even experimented with installing bathrooms in parking spots, such as the P Planter designed by Hyphae Design Laboratory, which uses plants as biofilters to treat urine and wastewater, aiming to solve the problem of public urination.<sup>18</sup>

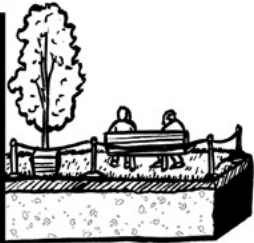
Opposite, top: Four Barrel Coffee Parklet on Valencia Street, San Francisco (2011) (Source: Lucy Goodhart). Opposite, bottom: *Ciencia Pública* parklet, designed for informal science learning at Buena Vista Horace Mann School, planned by San Francisco Boys & Girls Clubs and a team from the Exploratorium, San Francisco (2017) (Source: Amy Snyder, Exploratorium).

The trial contributed to the Public Toilet Project masterplan in the Tenderloin neighborhood.

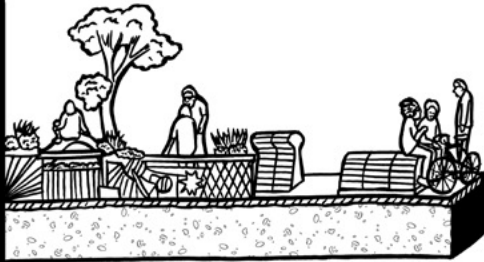
It is not just parking spots that have been reclaimed in San Francisco, but entire streets. With growing recognition of the public appetite to create public spaces, city officials built upon the parklet program and other public space experiments to create the Places for People Program in 2016.<sup>19</sup> This interagency permitting framework aims to lower the barriers to participation for all the city's communities. It integrates permitting processes for curbs, sidewalks, streets, and lots into one public space program called Groundplay. With the tagline "When imagination goes public," the program intends to enable a fast-paced grassroots process that promotes resident initiatives to create and activate inventive public spaces on sidewalks, curbsides, roadways, crosswalks, and public parcels.<sup>20</sup> Jodie Medeiros, executive director of Walk San Francisco, said that "experiments like Park(ing) Day, Parklets, and Groundplay have enabled us to do a lot more with city streets. These pilots go even a step further with car-free streets."<sup>21</sup> Now these tactical approaches are being used to retake roadways with Vision Zero quick-build projects deployed to help make San Franciscans safer from the threat of speeding cars.<sup>22</sup>

In January 2020, San Francisco realized a long-envisioned goal of eliminating cars from ten blocks of its central commercial corridor, Market Street. Improvements at intersections were installed to make the street safer for pedestrians and cyclists.<sup>23</sup> Within the first two months, bike and scooter usage increased by 25 percent, and bus travel speeds went up an average of 6 percent.<sup>24</sup> When the pandemic hit, the city expanded car-free streets by deploying a 45-plus-mile network of slow streets, supporting walking and biking.<sup>25</sup> In March 2021, Mayor London Breed announced legislation to transition Shared Spaces from an emergency

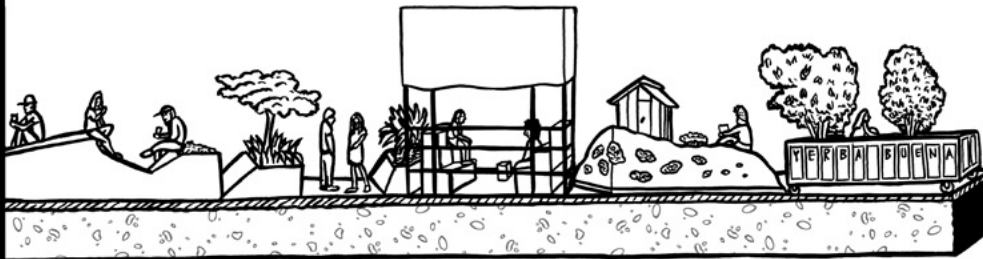
**SAN FRANCISCO PARKLETS**



**2005:**  
1 PARKING SPOT



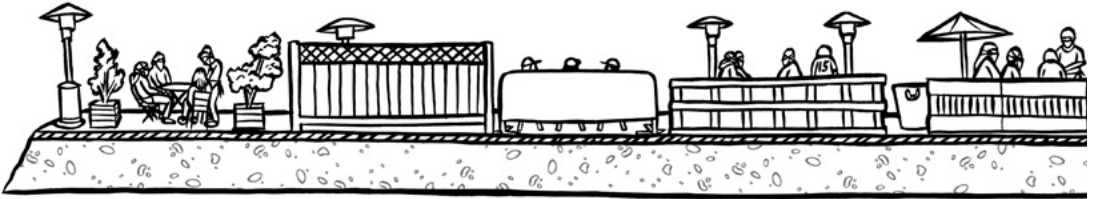
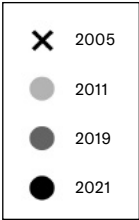
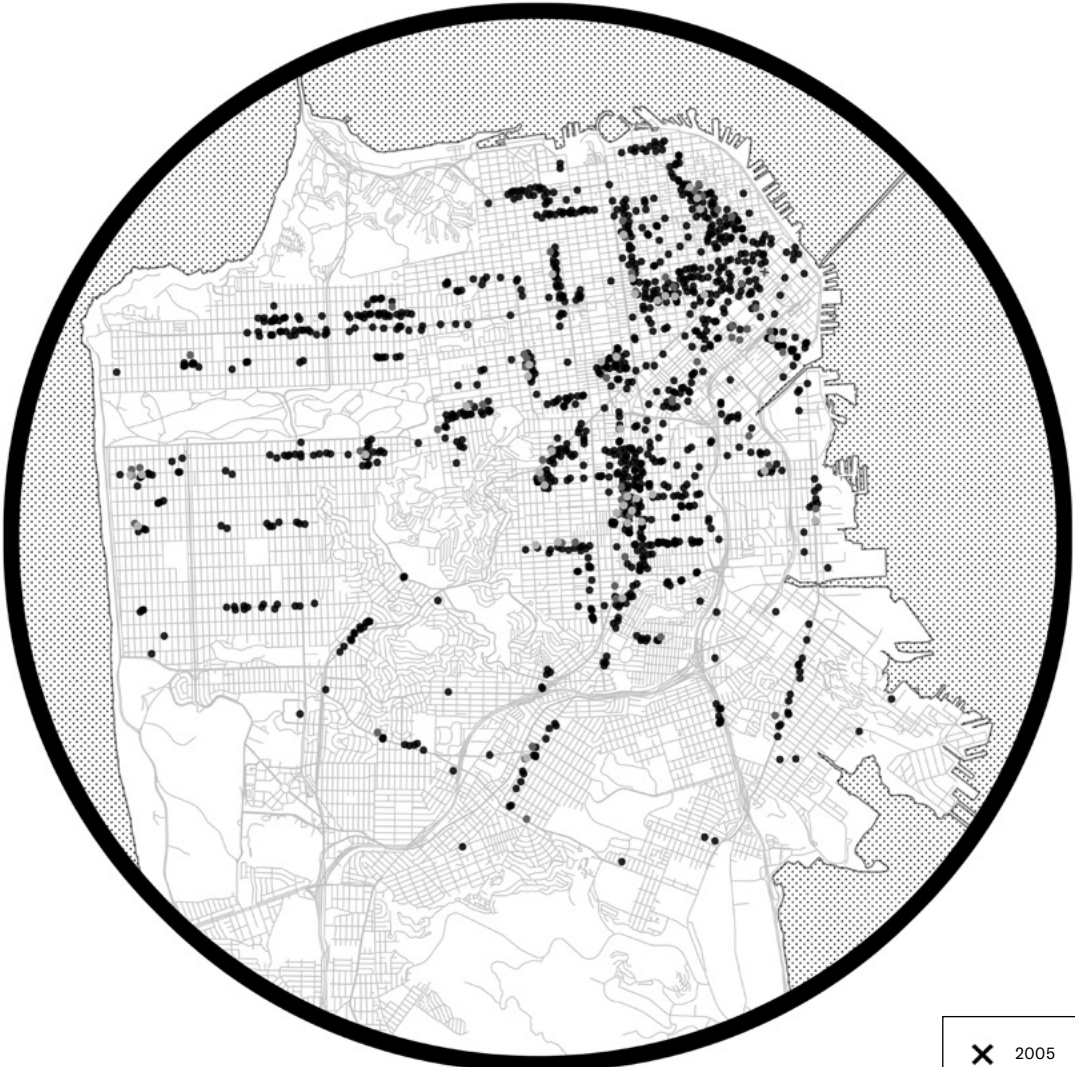
**2011:**  
36 PARKLETS



**2019:**  
76 PARKLETS



(SOURCE: SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT)



2021: 2,032 APPROVED PERMITS FOR SHARED SPACES



Public spaces in the Mission District created under the Shared Spaces Program to allow for physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, San Francisco (2020)  
(Source: Alison Sant)

response into a permanent program, helping to move San Francisco more aggressively toward the goal of making pedestrians safe.<sup>26</sup>

## WALKING IN THE CITY

Traffic violence is a persistent threat in San Francisco, where every year approximately thirty people lose their lives and two hundred more are seriously injured while walking and biking on the city's roadways.<sup>27</sup> Vision Zero SF identified a network of streets, called the High Injury Network, where there is a higher incidence of severe and fatal collisions.<sup>28</sup> More than 70 percent of collisions occur on just 12 percent of streets—often located in communities of color—where many residents are low income or seniors who rely on walking and transit as their primary means of transportation.<sup>29</sup> A confluence of systemic factors, including decades of funneling investment in street safety to affluent or gentrifying areas and housing policies that concentrate poverty

around highways and industry, make low-income people twice as likely as others to be the victims of fatal crashes.<sup>30</sup> In San Francisco, this silent epidemic has made it critical to focus on areas of the city disproportionately affected by traffic violence.

Among these is the Tenderloin, a forty-block section of downtown San Francisco bordered by Union Square to the east and City Hall to the west. It is one of the most diverse populations in San Francisco and home to more than 28,000 people, including a mix of Asian, White, Latinx, and Black residents.<sup>31</sup> The area, which has the city's densest housing, four times higher than the city average, is home to many families, seniors, and immigrants.<sup>32</sup> It has the most children per capita of any neighborhood in the city and the greatest number of families living below the poverty line.<sup>33</sup> Eighty-three percent of Tenderloin households do not own cars, and these residents walk, bike, and take public transit instead of driving.<sup>34</sup>



Although the Tenderloin is one of San Francisco's most walked neighborhoods, it is the least safe.<sup>35</sup> Nearly every street in the Tenderloin is designated as a "high-injury corridor" due to traffic crashes.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the roads were designed for speed. Most are one-way, constructed to increase speeds for through traffic traveling to and from the freeways and downtown San Francisco.<sup>37</sup> For generations, Tenderloin residents have suffered blatant neglect for their safety in favor of the swift movement of automobile traffic. In 1988, neighbors strung banners across high-speed streets in protest and warned cars to "Drive Slowly," but today their calls are still relevant.<sup>38</sup>

Historically, the neighborhood has acted as a "containment zone," a place where activities like open drug dealing and use, prostitution, and homelessness are condensed to avoid spread to other parts of the city.<sup>39</sup> It is also a neighborhood where social services offering shelter, meals, clothing, medical aid, and addiction recovery programs are gathered, keeping many in need of these services local.<sup>40</sup> This long-term pattern of containment has neglected the lives of Tenderloin residents. In 2019, twenty-nine people were killed in traffic violence in San Francisco.<sup>41</sup> Five of the deaths recorded were concentrated in the Tenderloin, outraging community activists.

Simon Bertrang, executive director of the Tenderloin Community Benefit District (TLCBD), said that "the neighborhood's role as a containment zone produces a general disregard for the people who live there. That perception produces the kind of recklessness and negligence that kills and injures people."<sup>42</sup> Community organizations, including the TLCBD, have protested for years to advance neighborhood safety. Finally, a Tenderloin Traffic Safety Task Force was formed in 2018 to demand the city be responsive, invest in street improvements, work alongside residents to make streets safer,

and provide emotional support services for the many residents who experience trauma from traffic violence.<sup>43</sup> The group combines community-based organizations and city-wide transportation advocacy groups.<sup>44</sup> As described below, their requests have begun to change the Tenderloin's streets.<sup>45</sup> As Bertrang said, "We want our streets to be for the neighborhood, not highways for people to move from one side of the city to the other."<sup>46</sup>

Bertrang believes that the positive activities of the neighborhood could be enhanced by better infrastructure. At its best, people occupy the sidewalk for community barbeques and bring chairs down from their apartments to sit together. Small businesses and restaurants are fixtures in the neighborhood and take responsibility for looking after their sidewalks and streets. There has been some progress on Taylor Street, where a Vision Zero quick-build project has created temporary improvements.<sup>47</sup> Permanent designs are planned to protect pedestrian safety and improve public space with wider sidewalks, seating, public artwork, plants, trees, and trash cans while officially creating a Transgender Cultural District, reflecting the neighborhood's cultural legacy.<sup>48</sup> The city also constructed quick-build projects on Golden Gate Avenue and Leavenworth Street, and temporary Slow Streets have been installed during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>49</sup>

Providing spaces for neighborhood culture is not only part of the neighborhood's character; it is a part of its safety. Patrick Sharkey, author of *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence*, pointed out that social cohesion and trust within a community are often the key to limiting violence—not police enforcement.<sup>50</sup> The prevalence of crime, homelessness, filth, violence, and forceful police presence impact the safety of the street and can cause residents to fear walking to school, work, and daily needs.



Tenderloin residents rally for traffic safety on Eddy Street, San Francisco (1988)  
(Source: Lance Woodruff/Dogwood + Lotus)



Residents blocking traffic in a protest for safety on Eddy and Taylor Streets, San Francisco (2019) (Source: Tenderloin Community Benefit District)

“There’s a lot of street culture that helps contribute to the feelings of safety,” said Bertrang. “What doesn’t is the intense, open-air drug trade. The intensity of the people, many who are not welcomed anywhere else in the city, who are addicted, using publicly, and end up on the sidewalks in the Tenderloin. That concentration of people and chaotic energy can make it difficult to create a neighborhood that feels safe.” Decades of neglect and disinvestment have created problems that must be remedied by supporting the people and organizations already at work in the Tenderloin and providing new ways for them to direct the future of their neighborhood and the safety of its streets.<sup>51</sup>

## THE NEW GUARDIANS

Sharkey argues that the actions led by community groups have been critical to addressing

violence in poor neighborhoods. He wrote: “The new guardians looking out over city streets are not just public and private security guards but also residents, mobilized in new organizations specifically formed to build community life and control violence. And their presence is a crucial part of the story about how urban communities have changed over the past twenty years.”<sup>52</sup> In the Tenderloin, a network of public space guardians has been slowly growing. Their model is to create a nonthreatening presence on the street that inspires safety and is born out of community responsibility. By bringing a benevolent attitude to the neighborhood, they make streets accessible and safe, even for a short time. Their care makes all the difference to children walking home from school.

In 2008, Safe Passage was instigated by concerned mothers from La Voz Latina, a local





Safe Passage corner captains help students safely cross Turk Street, San Francisco (2019)  
(Source: Tenderloin Community Benefit District)

organization supporting the needs of the Latinx population living in the Tenderloin.<sup>53</sup> This group would gather to discuss ways of keeping their children safe in a neighborhood with open drug use and dealing, people with mental health problems, and gun violence. Margarita Mena, one of the mothers who started the program, recalled its beginnings: “One day, there was a child that was missing. This boy left school and was supposed to go to his after-school program, but nobody saw him there. The mother got very scared. So, people gathered together to try to look for him. Fortunately, they found him safe and unharmed. In order to avoid a repeat of the situation, the mothers decided to take action.”<sup>54</sup> They conceived of Safe Passage as a way to supervise neighborhood children to and from school by positioning corner captains at high-risk intersections.<sup>55</sup> According to Mena, they made sure not to threaten anyone on these

corners, telling them, “We are not here to take you away. We have come to protect the children and get them safely to where they need to go.”<sup>56</sup> Over time, she believes that the people on the streets of the Tenderloin have come to understand and respect Safe Passage. Even if they are dealing drugs, they tend to move elsewhere when the kids come through. By being a visible presence on the street, Safe Passage is helping promote a culture of safety in the neighborhood.

Mena, working as a corner captain today, believes that their efforts have dramatically helped the families of the neighborhood. “The changes are big for families,” she said. “Since the beginning, when parents started to notice all the corner captains, they started feeling confident. Many have to work when their kids are getting out of school, but they know that

the corner captains will ensure that the kids get safely home or to their after-school programs. The children feel safe when the corner captains are around and often say ‘good afternoon’ or ‘thank you so much.’”<sup>57</sup> In 2016, Safe Passage was formalized as a program of the TLCBD. It has expanded to cover fifteen city blocks, serving two hundred neighborhood children daily. Through the TLCBD, Safe Passage has now grown into a small workforce development program employing seven part-time corner captains on staff in addition to awarding stipends to approximately thirty volunteers.<sup>58</sup> The program also provides chaparrones for the neighborhood’s approximately seven thousand seniors.

Safe Passage is not the only group working to make the streets safer in the Tenderloin. In 2013, Mike Anderer was a schoolteacher in the neighborhood’s De Marillac Academy. That year, he helped start a block safety group on the 100 block of the school’s street, Golden Gate Avenue. As Anderer recounted, the idea caught on. “It grew to encompass neighbors on the 200 and 300 block. Then it became the mother of all block safety groups and a hub where lots of city representatives and neighborhood leaders met,” he said.<sup>59</sup> This group was a collection of residents and local businesses who organized to take responsibility for their public spaces. Resident Eric Rozell is one of the 300 block group organizers. “It all really began in our residential building’s lobby, with shared complaints among our neighbors as we came and went, about how seriously the situation outside our doors had declined,” he recalled. “Our most active members have been living in the building for many years and have memory of a time when we didn’t have drug dealers and users camped in our doorway. As we kept running into each other and our frustration grew, we began to think of ways to improve the situation.”<sup>60</sup> They engaged in simple acts like sweeping the sidewalk, speaking positively with people on the

street, and planning for emergencies.<sup>61</sup> Block safety groups meet monthly to connect as neighbors, lead community-building activities such as hosting public art installations in their storefronts, and participate in local festivals, such as the Tenderloin Halloween Crawl, that strengthened neighborhood pride.<sup>62</sup> Block safety groups have begun to focus on other areas of the Tenderloin as well. They volunteer for Safe Passage and have been involved in advocacy to reduce open-air drug dealing.

Anderer also helped create an outgrowth of the Block Safety Groups called Four Corner Friday.<sup>63</sup> It started in 2015 on the 100 block of Golden Gate and was quickly formalized. Concerned with neighborhood safety, local business owners and organizations began activating the sidewalk on Friday evenings, putting out balloons, passing out food, and playing music.<sup>64</sup> While being careful not to make people feel unwelcome, these acts aimed to marginalize activities like drug dealing by elevating activity on the street, creating acts of kindness, and generating a sense of community. Four Corner Friday is now held throughout the neighborhood on the first Friday of each month.<sup>65</sup> As Anderer recalled, “Little by little, we took responsibility for our sidewalks. We tried to give people opportunities to have positive experiences in these shared spaces. We would take students out on our corner, and they would give away hot chocolate. They would engage with a homeless person, who before they may have been fearful of. Students were having really positive exchanges with people on the street, including eye contact and smiles. That was the idea.” Today, six block safety groups are working throughout the Tenderloin. According to Sharkey, groups like them began to form across the United States starting in the early 1990s when, as he wrote, “groups of neighbors began to organize, on a large scale, to reclaim the streets around them.”<sup>66</sup> Today, Safe Passage, block safety groups, and Four Corner

Friday are all supported by the framework of the TLCBD.

## URBAN ALCHEMY

Anderer continues to work in the Tenderloin and is currently director of strategic partnerships and special projects at a nonprofit organization called Urban Alchemy.<sup>67</sup> Urban Alchemy creates economic opportunities for men and women who have been previously incarcerated, many of whom were formerly serving life sentences. Prison reforms have made these individuals eligible for parole, but not without considerable effort. In earning their freedom, they have had to transform themselves and their attitudes to society in the process.<sup>68</sup> As Anderer noted, “Those who really did their work are very motivated to give back to the communities that, at one time in their lives, they were tearing apart.”<sup>69</sup>

Many of Urban Alchemy’s employees now work in the Tenderloin neighborhood, making its streets, parks, and people safer. Urban Alchemy was started in 2018 by Lena Miller, a passionate and tireless activist. Miller grew up in Bayview–Hunters Point and is well aware of how limited job opportunities make the illegal drug trade one of the few economic options for many young Black people (see [chapter 10](#)).<sup>70</sup> She said, “If people don’t have a way to make money, then they get into the underground economy.”<sup>71</sup> She saw an opportunity to apply former inmates’ unique capacities to programs that could benefit communities like the Tenderloin, offering legitimate employment in the process. Miller, who holds a doctorate in psychology, believed that Urban Alchemy employees’ life experiences prepared them with the social and emotional intelligence to handle any situation. “These guys have been on prison yards, they’ve been in riots, they’ve spent decades in situations where people were trying to kill them, or they were trying to kill other

people,” she said. “Every day it was a possibility, even in prison. So, they’re not real quick to react; they figure out how to de-escalate.”<sup>72</sup>

The name Urban Alchemy describes its approach. Alchemy is a metaphor for the methods staff use to shift chaotic and violent streets to calm ones—from metal to gold. Employees are called practitioners to convey the alchemical process of this transformation. They help create a positive experience, not by criminalizing people or engaging in punitive methods, but by setting a high standard of social behavior through their presence. Urban Alchemy began serving the Tenderloin by maintaining city-run public toilets called Pit Stops. Their presence made these facilities safe and accessible, providing dignity to those who are unsheltered. They quickly expanded to providing litter reduction services in the neighborhood, ensuring safe, clean, and accessible sidewalks. Soon they partnered with Bay Area Rapid Transit and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) to create a presence on public transit elevators, keeping them operational.

In 2020, two Tenderloin neighborhood parks, Turk-Hyde Mini Park and Sergeant Macaulay Park, reopened in the spring and summer after major renovations.<sup>73</sup> In an area of the city with few parks, these open spaces are essential for the neighborhood’s high concentration of children and families. Once reopened, the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department hired Urban Alchemy to ensure a safe and welcoming experience for park goers.<sup>74</sup> Bertrang said, “These sites have been an experiment, and we’ve been very pleased with the local results. At Turk-Hyde Mini Park, Urban Alchemy has made it feel calm and safe for families to bring their kids and for seniors to come. It’s still pretty intense right across the street where there is dense dealing and using of drugs. And yet, the corner is calm.”<sup>75</sup>

Anderer explained that “because of their life experience, our practitioners can see and understand everything that’s going on out there.” He said, “They are ‘them’ whether ‘them’ is the intravenous drug user, the dealer on the street, the gang leader, or the person who is unhoused—they’ve been through all of that. They’ve also survived it and transformed that experience into something positive.”<sup>76</sup> In training sessions, Miller validates her employees. She believes that their leadership experiences in gangs, intuitive read of social dynamics, and hyperawareness of potential violence are transferable and necessary skills. She often tells them, “All those years that you did in prison, that you thought was a waste of time, you’ve been getting a triple PhD in all this stuff. The world may not appreciate it, but we do. Now you’re the one with the superpower to change this Pandora’s box that is let loose on the world. Nobody knows what to do, now only you do. You have the skills.”<sup>77</sup>

## STATE OF EMERGENCY

No place in San Francisco was hit harder during the pandemic than the Tenderloin. In a community where homelessness is already routine, these numbers increased during the crisis. In January 2020, the number of homeless tents in the Tenderloin hovered between 100 and 150.<sup>78</sup> By June 2020, there were more than 400 tents on the street.<sup>79</sup> Encampments overwhelmed sidewalks throughout the Tenderloin, and residents felt unsafe leaving their homes.<sup>80</sup> “With the pandemic, the streets are even worse,” said Mena. “There have been shootings in the middle of the day, the drugs and drug dealing are worse, and the sidewalks are really, really dirty. It’s impossible to keep them clean because of the number of people that are living outside. Most people in these buildings are families with children, and parents have to go out to get some groceries or take their children for a walk, and those things are happening where they are.

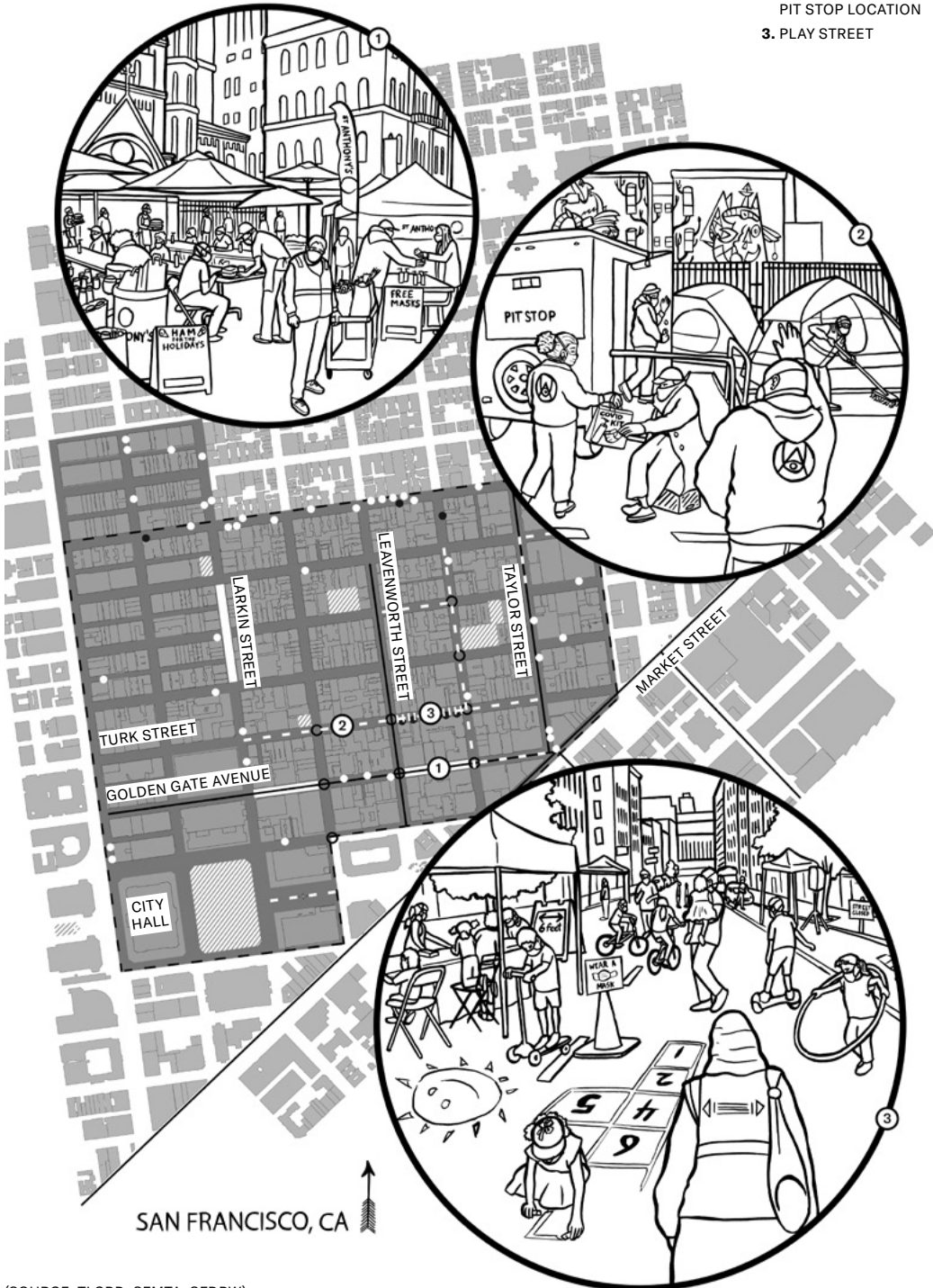
Families don’t feel safe.” Ultimately, the city was sued by six plaintiffs, including the University of California, Hastings College of Law, which compelled San Francisco to find solutions to crowded encampments, rampant drug dealing, and unclean conditions.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the urgency for open space in the Tenderloin during the COVID-19 crisis, the city’s response was delayed. As Slow Streets programs closed miles of streets to cars across the city, just one block (and several blocks of parking lanes) had been closed in the Tenderloin.<sup>82</sup> These closures were intended to accommodate people in need of services and meals at neighborhood support centers, such as St. Anthony’s and Glide Memorial, where streets were used to distribute food and clothing, medical services, counseling, and information.<sup>83</sup> On the city’s official Slow Streets program map, the Tenderloin was indicated by a yellow rectangle, marking it as an area of concern, but without specific plans for street closures appropriate to the problem’s scale. Bertrang was frustrated by the response. “As the city rolled out its third round of Slow Streets, we were still waiting for ours,” he said.<sup>84</sup> According to the SFMTA, keeping the Tenderloin’s fast-moving one-way streets open to traffic was one reason the neighborhood was “not a good fit for the program.”<sup>85</sup> By Labor Day weekend 2020, just one block of Turk Street was closed for six hours to provide a play street to neighborhood kids, and four blocks of Jones Street were planned for the temporary removal of traffic lanes to provide a “physical distancing lane.”<sup>86</sup> Greg Moore of Safe Passage put it bluntly: “You’re talking about decades of institutional inaction and operating procedure that has created these impacts. Over generations, the belief has been instilled that this is all we can expect.”<sup>87</sup>

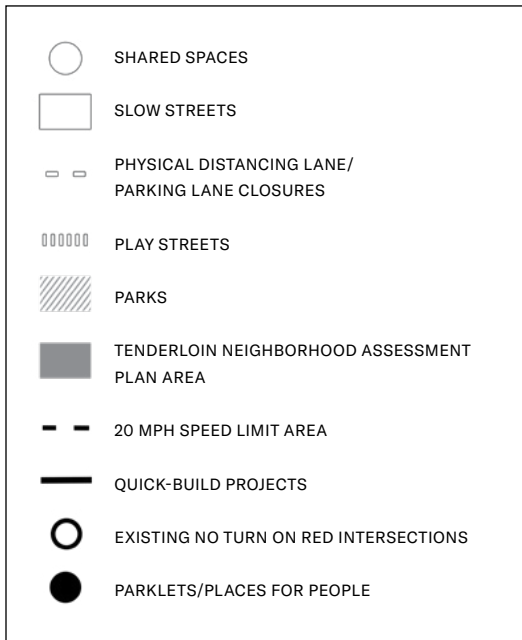
This neglect fueled protests blocking the intersection of Taylor and Eddy Streets to demand more street closures.<sup>88</sup> By necessity, streets

**SLOWING THE TENDERLOIN'S STREETS**

- 1. ST. ANTHONY FOUNDATION
- 2. URBAN ALCHEMY  
PIT STOP LOCATION
- 3. PLAY STREET



(SOURCE: TLCBD; SFMTA; SFDPW)



had been abandoned for months under shelter-in-place orders, until people filled them to protest injustice when George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 (see [chapter 2](#)). In San Francisco, thousands joined Black Lives Matter protests on Market Street night after night. Just a few blocks away, the Tenderloin held reverberating demonstrations. On June 19, hundreds showed up to protest for Black transgender rights and equality for people of color, beginning at the federal courthouse, crossing Market Street, and ending in the Tenderloin.<sup>89</sup> And on June 23, the Black Unhoused Lives Matter rally at the Tenderloin San Francisco Police Department station resisted the unjust criminalization of homelessness and called for defunding the police.<sup>90</sup>

Market Street has long been a site for labor demonstrations, strikes, transportation-related activism, and political marches. In 1934, in the West Coast waterfront strike, 150,000 Longshoremen and other marine workers hit the streets, shutting down the port in a four-day general strike to protest for workers'

rights. Antiwar marches were held there in 1967 against the Vietnam War, in 1991 against the Gulf War, and in 2003 against the Iraq War. Market Street was the site of the AIDS/ARC vigil from 1985 to 1995 and has been the epicenter of the annual San Francisco Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Pride parade for more than fifty years. In 1992, Critical Mass demonstrations, a monthly bike ride taking over the streets, began along Market Street, becoming an international movement that continues today. While San Franciscans continued to be confined to their homes during the pandemic in 2020, the streets fulfilled a critical role as the locus for expressing the American right to gather and protest. Black Lives Matter demonstrations around the United States underscored that ending police brutality is critical to ensuring that the streets remain a place where people—all people—have the right to assemble.<sup>91</sup>

Protests also focused public attention on the systemic inequities that deteriorated the lives of Tenderloin residents during the pandemic. Sheryl Evans Davis, executive director of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, was instrumental in focusing City Hall on the crisis there. Davis has spent her career leading community-based organizations and advocating for the people living in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods across San Francisco.<sup>92</sup> During the pandemic, she established the Tenderloin Working Group, bringing together community members, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and other stakeholders with the Emergency Operations Center, a citywide group tasked with managing the pandemic. Together, they created routines of communication and city accountability for directing emergency response in the Tenderloin. These efforts produced the "Tenderloin Neighborhood Plan for COVID-19."<sup>93</sup>

Davis described how the community led this effort: "To work with the folks in the Tenderloin,

I didn't go into the Tenderloin and say, 'This is what we're going to do.' They came and said, 'This is what we want.'" She made certain their requests were heard. "I worked to make connections that would amplify their voices."<sup>94</sup> Community members asked for increased pedestrian safety, space for physical distancing, a safe tent policy, health and social services, and access to bathrooms, food, and water. Most importantly, they sought continued collaboration between the city and community-based organizations so that, post-COVID, the Tenderloin would receive the support it deserves.<sup>95</sup>

Among the solutions created by the Tenderloin Neighborhood Plan were city-sanctioned camping areas called Safe Sleeping Villages.<sup>96</sup> These sites provided protected encampments with spaced tent sites, meals, toilets, hygiene kits, and access to showers and laundry services for the unhoused.<sup>97</sup> Urban Alchemy was hired to staff Safe Sleeping Villages to ensure the safety and dignity of the people living in them. Reflecting the last words of Eric Garner, George Floyd, and so many others in the hands of police officers, Miller pledged, "I promise you, by the time we're done with this, you'll never hear 'I can't breathe' again."<sup>98</sup> Most recently, Urban Alchemy was hired by Hastings College of Law for a six-month experiment to test a community policing model that brings a sustained presence to the blocks around its campus. Rather than rely on police enforcement, this model tested positive and insistent engagement, holding people to standards of behavior. The experiment worked. Students and staff reported that having Urban Alchemy there made a dramatic and positive difference on the street. Its approach encouraged peaceful interactions and was carried out with dignity and respect.<sup>99</sup> At the end of the pilot, Urban Alchemy's contract was extended by another six months.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

In April 2021, the Tenderloin became the first neighborhood in the city to limit speeds to 20 miles per hour and outlaw cars from making a right turn on a red light.<sup>100</sup> Quick-build projects, sidewalk widening, and street safety improvements on four major streets are scheduled for completion in 2021.<sup>101</sup> Street closures that have provided crucial space for social services are being proposed for permanent pedestrianization.<sup>102</sup> More play streets are planned and will occur more often.<sup>103</sup> As neighborhood children returned to school after the pandemic, a new block-scale parklet, called Safe Passage Park (SPark), was constructed along a Safe Passage route to local schools. It creates an outdoor play area for local youth, seating areas for residents, and open space for community classes and gatherings.<sup>104</sup> The park was designed and constructed by Bay Area design firms Envelope and Studio O in collaboration with local block safety groups and community volunteers (see [chapter 10](#)). The park is seen by local advocates as a model for creating more public spaces throughout the neighborhood.<sup>105</sup>

To complement these efforts, the TLCBD and other neighborhood community groups envision an expanded role for Urban Alchemy and other urban guardians to steward these public facilities and ensure that they are usable by all Tenderloin residents. Led by the TLCBD,

Opposite, top: Safe Sleeping Village at city hall hosted by Urban Alchemy Practitioners to provide shelter for unhoused people during the COVID-19 pandemic, San Francisco (2020) (Source: Santiago Mejia, @San Francisco Chronicle/Polaris). Opposite, bottom: Neighbors volunteer for a community build day to create Safe Passage Park in the Tenderloin (2021) (Source: Douglas Burnham).







the coalition has requested that the city fund a multimillion-dollar program to create a community-based safety program for the neighborhood. Bertrang is optimistic that the combination of prototyping through quick-build approaches developed in the years before the pandemic and the strategies of emergency response will create the momentum for change. “The city is supporting all this, and it feels like we might be able to transform the Tenderloin to really increase pedestrian safety and to make public spaces that are available for people,” he said.<sup>106</sup> As Sharkey discussed, this trend is growing nationally.<sup>107</sup> Acknowledging that police enforcement can be negligently violent, community models are emerging in which neighborhoods are kept safe through the relationships of urban guardians who understand local dynamics and protect communities with mutual respect.<sup>108</sup>

With expansions during the COVID pandemic, Urban Alchemy now employs seven hundred people. According to Anderer, “We’re seizing on every chance to redistribute wealth by continuing to seek opportunities for our workforce to receive the wages that they deserve. It’s about trying to create wealth in communities that were not given the opportunities to build it because the systems were set up against them.”<sup>109</sup> Miller is demanding higher wages for her employees, in some cases making them equivalent to the salaries of police officers or hotel workers. As she said, “Police officers are making about 100 grand a year starting off. Our people are making around 40 grand, \$16.50 an hour. They need to be paid more.”<sup>110</sup> Better living wages also validate their unique skills and experience. Davis aims to make the future different. “Hopefully, the long-term impact is that these strategies, relationships, and efforts don’t go away once the pandemic is over, but that we continue to value the building of these relationships and let them inform the city process,” she said.<sup>111</sup>

Community guardians are hard at work in the Tenderloin, creating new models of workforce development, community policing, and neighborhood altruism. They are doing what they can to improve people’s lives and make the streets accessible to all. This work deserves public recognition and support. Sharkey claimed that there is an opportunity to fight the war on violence in neighborhoods like the Tenderloin by relying on community resilience rather than enforcement. “The residents and institutions that look out over city streets must be supported on the front lines, as these urban guardians have the greatest capacity to create safe, strong urban communities,” he wrote.<sup>112</sup> Urban resiliency requires that cities no longer overlook underresourced neighborhoods and communities of color, routinely or in times of crisis. Remedying the systemic imbalances that have concentrated poverty, drugs, violence, and homelessness in neighborhoods like the Tenderloin must be a part of reclaiming our streets for people.

## STREETS FOR PEOPLE

San Francisco is a city that has long experimented with ways to initiate change. It has shown that individual residents, businesses, and community groups can transform their cities. From reclaiming parking spots to activating their streets, people are organizing to create safe, livable, and car-free public spaces. Equal access to public space is critical to a healthy democracy and a just society. Although closing streets to cars helps mitigate climate change, it also empowers civic participation. It gives people access to the outdoors, access to their neighbors, and a connection to one another. The freedom to walk, bike, occupy, and peacefully protest on city streets safely is a right that all must share. Unintentionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed new ways of making streets for people. It has pushed cities to rapidly reallocate streets and sidewalks for

the public good. These spaces have tested ways to provide access to the outdoors, emergency medical services, food, and areas to gather and sleep. Emergencies exaggerate the endemic conditions of neighborhoods such as the Tenderloin, where poverty, drugs, and violence have been condensed and ignored, even in a wealthy city like San Francisco.

The pandemic exposed these glaring inequalities, shining an undeniable light on long-term neglect. The streets were the stage for this tragedy; they were also the site for its remedies. City streets are undoubtedly made better with infrastructure that constrains cars and offers safe places to walk, ride, and rest. However, these spaces are only accessible when residents feel safe using them. The insistent presence of urban guardians assures parents, their children, the elderly, and those that are unhoused that they are looked after. This seed of community health is rooted in the Tenderloin, but it needs support to thrive. The Tenderloin and many other communities like it have organized around a vision for their neighborhood. We must invest in their capacity to act on it. Access to jobs, neighborhood economic development, and affordable housing will be key to ensuring an inclusive city. As Mena said, “We cannot do this alone,” and as Moore added, “It will take

everybody. Not only the village of the Tenderloin but all of San Francisco, California, and the country to make the change.”<sup>113</sup>

As Bela noted when reflecting on these times, “The tool kit of tactical urbanism, short-term experiments leading to long-term change are more relevant now than ever. There is a new sense of urgency around how we use our public space and our streets, but we need to ask, who are they for?” The events of 2020 will certainly shape the design of city streets in years to come, but they also have the potential to shape much more. Bela continued, “It has become clear that we need to support local economies. We need to meet our needs within our communities and rely on our neighbors. We need to create space for the unhoused, mentally ill, and elderly because we conceive of them as part of our community, not somebody else’s problem. This COVID experience is training us for the big crisis, which is the climate crisis.”<sup>114</sup> We have an opportunity today to learn from the shocks we encounter now to better prepare the road ahead. Creating community resilience demands looking after those who are the most exposed to the future crisis of outbreaks, natural disasters, and storms. Only then can we ensure that our streets may serve us all.