



San Francisco makeover: Nothing short of inspired

By John Ritter, USA TODAY
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SAN FRANCISCO — Where else but here, the cradle of psychedelic, would you expect a sleek, skyline-dwarfing skinny office tower crowned with a spin-in-the-wind, glowing, turbine-powered light show?

It's all part of a \$1 billion development the city — like a few others with major projects underway — is betting will be the wave of the future: building up instead of out, the denser the better, stressing trains and buses over cars.

The proposed Transbay Transit Center with its possible 1,200-foot tower, elevated public park the length of five football fields and room for high-speed trains someday linking California's major cities, will be a "symbolic expression of our environmental values," says Gabriel Metcalf, executive director of the San Francisco Planning & Urban Research Association, a public policy think tank.

"It's a statement that our highest value is ecology," he says. "Just as church steeples were always the tallest buildings in the Middle Ages, we're marking our transit hub as the most important spot on the skyline."

The joint agency formed to handle this project approved the skyscraper's design last month. Its developer, Hines, has announced a tentative financing deal. City officials have said they hope to move the project through the planning bureaucracy in 18 months.

According to David Goldberg, a spokesman for Smart Growth America, a national coalition working to slow sprawl, other sprawl-spoiled cities are embarking on long-term developments aimed at getting commuters out of cars and encouraging mass transit to cut pollution and traffic congestion:

- **Atlanta's** BeltLine project is an example: a rail loop around the city core with parks, trails and dense neighborhoods clustered at station stops.
- Another is **Denver's** voter-approved regional light rail and rapid bus system designed to concentrate future growth closer in.
- **Salt Lake City's** light rail system would do the same.

•**Dallas** has plans for "transit-oriented developments" around light rail.

•Even **Los Angeles** "is trying to figure out how to retrofit the prototypical automobile-driven metro area" around subway and light rail lines, Goldberg says.

"In a place like San Francisco, the notion of higher density and a mix of uses is not radical," he says. "But even there that kind of planning and development hasn't been real common."

The Transbay tower, which hasn't been named yet, would rise nearly 400 feet above the city's tallest structure, the Transamerica Pyramid, pending zoning changes to allow taller buildings. The skyscraper designed by Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects would be part of a long-term effort to change San Francisco's relatively low, flat, "pancake" skyline, says city planning director Dean Macris.

The building and 12-block redevelopment area around it could support more tall towers, spaced among town house and condo neighborhoods, Macris says.

"In San Francisco, oftentimes tall buildings become political statements rather than a building form," he says. "Will there be pushback? Of course there will be." In the 1920s, three 400-foot-tall buildings caused a stir. Forty years later, the pyramid and 52-story Bank of America Center did the same.

"We want the skyline to rise to certain peaks to express the importance of certain locations in the city," Macris says.

The design of the tower could have done a better job of that, says Henry Urbach, architecture and design curator at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "It's a competent building, but not one that will necessarily break new ground in urban space and urban infrastructure," he says. "We should insist on a building that people will come to San Francisco to see. This isn't it."

Peter Bosselmann, an urban design professor at the University of California, Berkeley, believes the building's height will be reduced. "I think it would stand out in a bad way," he says, because of San Francisco's tradition of height limits compatible with its hilly topography. Bosselmann also wonders whether office-space demand will bear out to make it profitable.

Hines will pay \$350 million for land the tower will be built on in the city's south or market district. The money will help finance the transit center, a hub for light rail, commuter trains and, at some point, high-speed, or bullet, trains.

The tower would taper as it rises and provide 1.6 million square feet of office space, "not an absurd amount" in a city that absorbs 1 million new square feet a year, Hines Vice President Paul Paradis says.

"We think people have come to realize the benefit of tall in urban cores," he says. "That's why we're not seeing a lot of opposition."

As for those penthouse turbines, housed in a 100-foot-tall metal cage above the top floor, their purpose, for now, is aesthetic only. The wind would spin four turbines, powering a light that would glow brighter the stronger the gusts. Paradis says he believes technology will be perfected to take advantage of high winds and help generate energy.

"You need to make the turbines quiet and not vibrate too much for the space near them to be habitable," he says. "With the wind going as fast as it does and these turbines creating resistance, that's not an easy engineering problem."



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The Transbay Joint Powers Authority has selected the team of Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects, based in New Haven, Connecticut, and international real estate development firm Hines to design and develop the proposed new Transbay Transit Center and Transit Tower for San Francisco, California. If built, the Transit Center will centralize nine San Francisco Bay Area transportation systems. A 40-acre (16-hectare) area around the center would be redeveloped to include housing, retail, and the office tower.

The proposed 1,200-foot- (370-meter-) high Transit Tower — a simple, slender obelisk — would become the tallest building in San Francisco. A public square at ground level would connect the Tower and the adjacent Transit Center. The winning proposal includes installation of a 5.4-acre (2.2-hectare) public park on the roof of the Transit Center.

The winning team also includes architecture firm WRNS Studio of San Francisco; landscape architecture firm Peter Walker and Partners of Berkeley; Carmel Valley-based Rana Creek, green roof and habitat restoration specialists; and environmental artist Ned Kahn.