

Twitter a reason 10th and Market will be hot spot

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Sean Culligan / The Chronicle

The Fox Plaza, which houses a few shops and restaurants, is likely to have some more attractive neighboring buildings in the future - and probably will have more customers as well.

The intersection of 10th and Market streets isn't much to look at now: an abundance of asphalt, construction workers in a hole and on a roof, a sandwich board touting the virtues of bacon.

Stop by in a few years.

I'll wager that what you see is San Francisco's newest hot spot.

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Some clues are obvious on the landscape. Others aren't yet apparent. And if the details are site-specific, the alchemy at work shows what cities everywhere need to thrive - a diversity of economies and scales that are flexible enough to allow for transformations large and small.

The clearest sign of change is the hole on the southwest corner: Concrete is being poured for the basement of a 754-unit apartment complex that includes a 37-story tower. It was approved in 2007 but the site sat empty until last fall, fenced-off blight.

Now there's activity, a stylish design update by Handel Architects and an optimistic name: NeMa, for New Market. Why? Cause and effect. On the east side of 10th stand the brooding 1937 and 1974 wings of the 1.2 million-square-foot former Merchandise Mart. It's now dubbed Market Square and is being renovated by Shorenstein Properties - not as furniture showrooms, its former life, but as space for firms such as Twitter, which has signed a lease for 200,000 square feet. As many as 7,000 workers could fill the two buildings when work is complete, even without the 1941 penthouse along Market that is being dismantled, to be replaced by an employee roof deck.

By numbers alone, these two projects will enliven a stretch of Market that for years has been moribund. More intriguing is what could happen on the ground, the scene that could emerge.

Market Center today meets the street with sealed-off storefronts, tall but blank. In another year or so the idea is that they will be filled with stores and cafes, some spilling onto an enlivened dead-end alley off 10th that separates the two wings. The apartments being developed by Crescent Heights will come with retail space and a plaza to allow room to spread out.

The counterpart to these Big Moves is the northeast corner of the intersection. That's where you'll find Little Griddle, a daytime spot that's nascent hipster through and through, from the burger served in a glazed doughnut to the breakfast promise of "cage-free eggs."

The hash browns and coffee hit the spot, and Little Griddle draws a truly diverse crowd. It also signals cultural change: Where San Francisco politics of a generation ago treated downtown as a soul-sucking place apart, there's nothing contradictory in 2012 about the notion that a social-media firm would put down roots on Market Street. Or that a sleek high-rise will include at least 250 bicycle stalls for residents. Funky diners are game changers, not just relics of the past.

All this signals a more experiential form of urbanity, one where grit and gloss can coexist. It's not that the old rules are gone, simply that they're more relaxed. Street life has parity with skylines. Context-defying contrasts are part of the show, at least in some parts of town.

The real challenge is to make the corner feel like a crossroads, rather than beachheads separated by broad rivers of asphalt. One-way 10th Street absorbs more than 2,000 cars an hour in the evening commute to the freeway from Civic Center and nearby districts. Buses and historic streetcars clamber slowly down Market Street.

The city is studying - yet again - how to make Market live up to potential. At this corner you can imagine small tweaks to make pedestrians feel at home, the removal of a lane here or parking spaces there.

There are other snags. The corner includes Fox Plaza, a brown slab from 1966 that creates a lethal downdraft on windy days. Nearby is Argenta, a 20-story apartment tower that lands with a thud of low-ceilinged retail space (the battleship gray hue isn't flattering, either).

The corner, in other words, will never be pristine. Neither are cities. These days, that's part of the appeal.

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