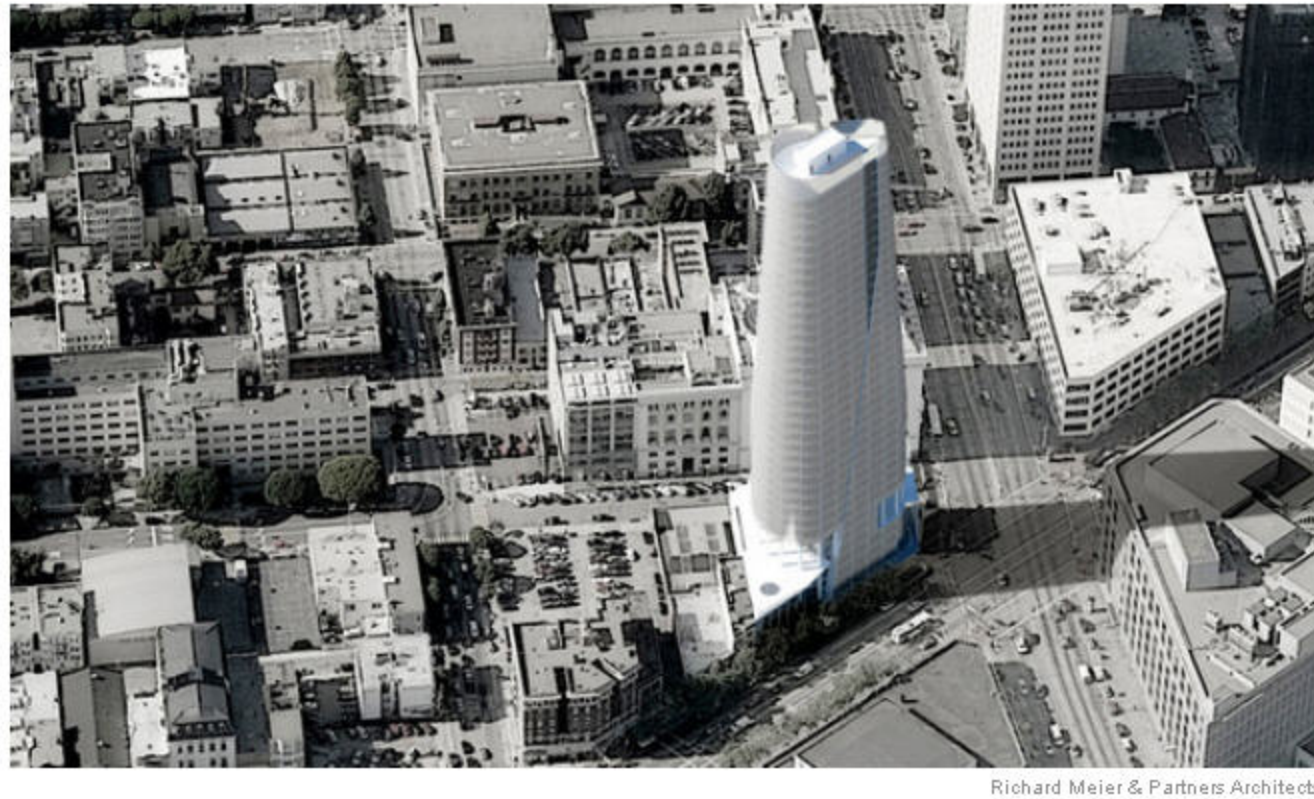


BIG DEAL

In San Francisco, Life Without 'Starchitects'



Richard Meier & Partners Architects

HOLDING PATTERN A project by Richard Meier at Market Street and Van Ness Avenue has been held up for five years because of concerns over wind conditions for pedestrians on surrounding streets.

By **ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO**
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WHETHER it's Frank Gehry at New York by Gehry, Christian de Portzamparc at One57 or Robert A. M. Stern at 15 Central Park West, showcasing a "starchitect" is part of the arms race that is luxury condo development in [Manhattan](#) these days.

The developers of Walker Tower, a luxury condo conversion in Chelsea, have taken it a step further, trumpeting the original designer of the former commercial building, Ralph Walker, whom The New York Times in 1957 called the "architect of the century." They have even erected a small museum about Mr. Walker, who died in 1973, in the tower's sales center.

But across the country, San Francisco offers an intriguing counterpoint: distinctive architecture is conspicuously lacking in the high-rise building boom.

Forty years after it was completed, the 850-foot Transamerica Pyramid remains the most recognizable high-rise tower built in the City by the Bay. Designed by the architect William Pereira, it took a lot of flak from locals during its planning and construction, with detractors sometimes referring to it as a phallic symbol, though their actual wording was more blunt.

Nevertheless, it became a fixture of the city's skyline. Today it stands mostly alone in a city more interested in conserving its old Victorian-style homes than in making a statement with new development. It is a puzzling phenomenon in a part of the country often seen as an engine of American innovation.

"People work hard to preserve old things without taking the risk to build something new," Mr. Gehry said about San Francisco in a recent phone conversation.

He was critical of the high-rise building boom under way in San Francisco's South of Market area, where the newly built towers are boxy and utilitarian. "It's business without heart," he said.

In the past decade, 13 high-rise condo towers of 20 stories or more have been built in San Francisco. Another four such projects have been approved by the city, according to the Mark Company, a real estate marketing and sales firm.

There is nary a brand-name architecture firm to be found among the towers that have already been built, though Handel Architects did design the sleek Millennium Tower. A new luxury high-rise being designed by Richard Meier is still struggling to get approved by the city after almost five years of development.

The new buildings South of Market are meant to attract singles and young couples, many of whom are working in the tech industry and don't yet want the hassles of a single-family home. And while higher-end offerings like the Millennium have attracted a few prominent locals — like the former 49ers quarterback Joe Montana — foreigners, especially from China, make up a large chunk of the buyers.

At the Madrone, another high-rise in the newly developed neighborhood of Mission Bay, a young techie apartment owner I spoke with said that the architecture of the building had never really been a consideration.

That doesn't surprise Mr. Stern, who doesn't see young tech buyers as having the sophistication to care about buildings (though, it must be said, they may have refined tastes in the subtle design touches of the latest smartphones). "I think it takes them awhile to get over the initial high-dose blast of wealth to realize that wealth can be used more creatively than just buying big shoebox spaces and sticking in foosball games and other things like that," Mr. Stern said.

The young software engineers may not care too much about the quality of architecture where they live, but down in Silicon Valley some big tech firms have tapped world-renowned architects to design their new headquarters.

Facebook hired Mr. Gehry, 83, for the expansion of its campus in Menlo Park. Mr. Gehry designed a 433,555-square-foot building with a rooftop garden that will be built on stilts. "It should look like a floating forest where the building peeks from beneath a series of trees," said Slater Tow, a Facebook spokesman. "We are not out to make an architectural statement, we are out to make the most functional building for engineers."

It was Steve Jobs himself who commissioned Sir Norman Foster to design Apple's new 2.8-million-square-foot headquarters in Cupertino, which Mr. Jobs described as a "spaceship."

Both the Apple and Facebook projects are expected to be completed by the end of 2015.



City of Cupertino

Steve Jobs commissioned Sir Norman Foster to design Apple's new headquarters in Cupertino, Calif., which Mr. Jobs described as a "spaceship." Both projects are awaiting approval.

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But just a commute away in San Francisco, there is little buzz about big-name designers. "San Francisco is not a place where people shout architects' names on a building," said Mary Comerio, a professor in the Graduate School of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. "You get more controversy when that happens."

Indeed, developers in San Francisco are loath to take architectural risks because the city's approval process for new development is long and rigorous, perhaps the most onerous in the country, architects say.

It's hard to fault their caution when you consider how small San Francisco really is — 47 square miles (Manhattan alone is 23 square miles) — with much of the area consumed by neighborhoods zoned for single-family homes. More than the pedigree of the architect, the city worries about things like shadows and wind and, of course, earthquakes.

The earthquake issue is not as tough to navigate as you might think, but it is still a costly concern. The Bay Area remains highly susceptible to earthquakes, and "seismic readiness" can add as much as 15 percent to the cost of a new structure, said Mark Sarkisian, director of seismic and structural engineering in the San Francisco office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, which built the John Hancock Center and Sears (now Willis) Tower in Chicago.

Not surprisingly, the science of engineering tall buildings has come a long way in the last 20 years. The structures have special joints to dissipate energy without fracturing during a quake. They can bend, almost like a fishing pole.

In the South of Market area, the sandy soil creates a bigger risk if a big one hits. So developers need to dig foundations 100 to 125 feet deep, Mr. Sarkisian said.

All the engineering advances have made newer high-rises less susceptible to collapse than lower-rise brick structures being held together by gravity, experts say.

But it hasn't been fear of earthquakes that has held up the approval of a residential tower being designed by Mr. Meier's firm for the corner of Market Street and Van Ness Avenue. City planners were concerned about how an early design for the building, currently scheduled to have 37 floors, would affect wind conditions for pedestrians, said Bernhard Karpf, an associate partner at Richard Meier & Partners, who is in charge of the project.

"They describe that area as having 'hazardous wind conditions,' where people would literally get blown off the street," Mr. Karpf said.

The developer David Choo asked Mr. Meier in 2009 to do something that was "not your traditional San Francisco architecture," Mr. Karpf said. Meier & Partners initially designed a "free-standing sculptural object" on the small site. With approval threatened, the firm hired a Canadian company to test a scale model in a wind tunnel, delaying the design process by another year.

"We had never heard of these kinds of wind regulations," Mr. Karpf said. "It became almost obsessive on the planning board's side to make sure wind is mitigated."

Their frustration mounting, the Meier architects asked the Canadian company to give them three or four shapes that would meet the wind requirements. "We have to move forward," Mr. Karpf said he told them. "We have to find a solution that works. It may look horrible, but let's see if we can reverse the process and turn it into a building."

In the end, the slender shape of the building "was strongly influenced" by studies in the wind tunnel laboratory, which showed that it would "actually improve wind conditions in this part of town," he said.

When Mr. Karpf asked Mr. Choo how he could stand to buy a property and still have nothing to show for it some five years later, he shrugged and told the architect, "That's the way it works in San Francisco."