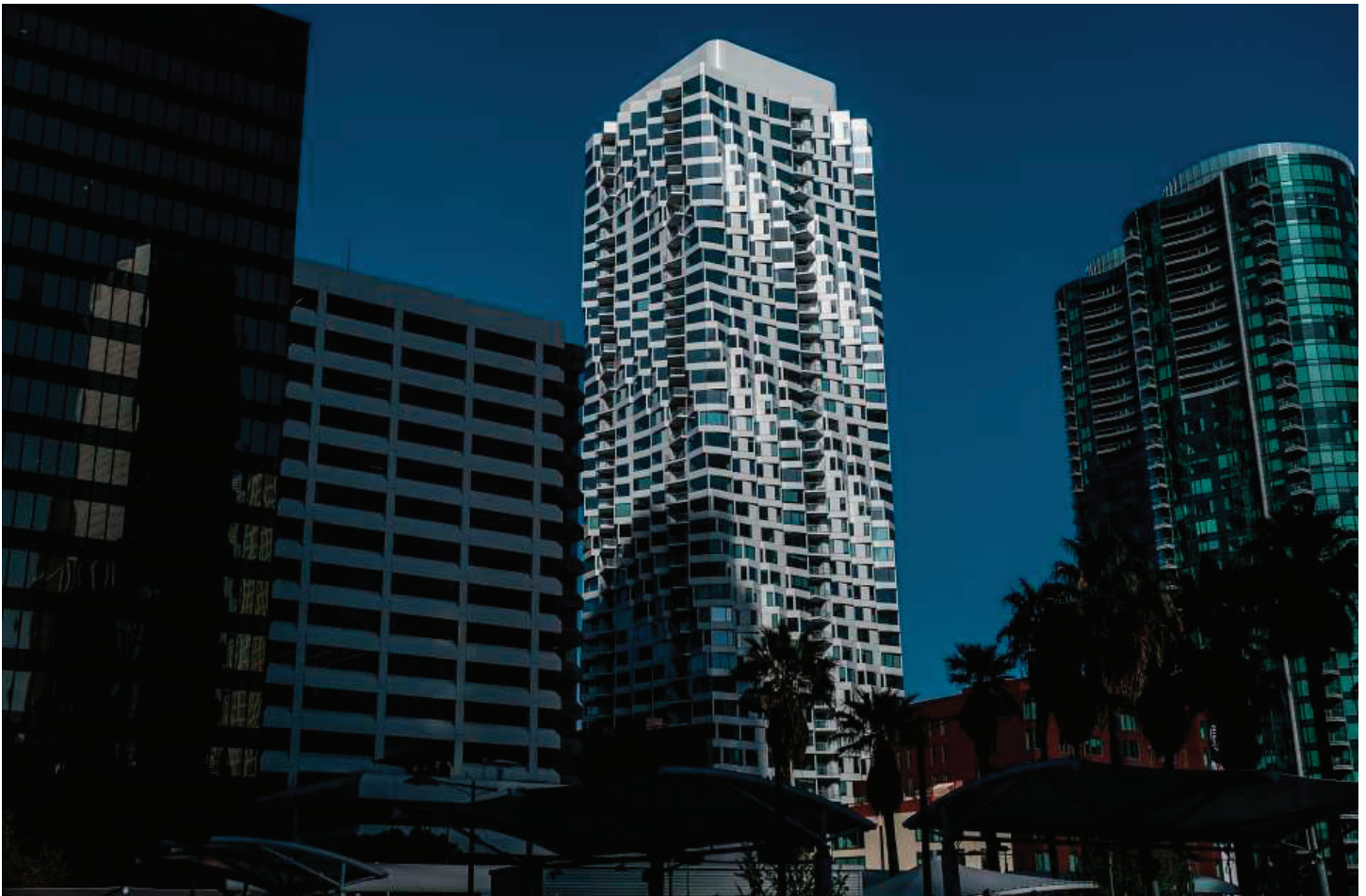


While you were gone: Downtown S.F.'s 10 new architectural highlights

Construction didn't stop during the pandemic: Central San Francisco has added new towers, plazas and head-turning architecture since March 2020. Here are some of the newcomers worth seeing.

By John King | April 15, 2021 | Updated: April 19, 2021 2:09 PM



If you haven't visited central San Francisco since March of 2020, be prepared for unfamiliar sights — like when you see an old friend and realize that your mental snapshot is out of date. The changes go far beyond social distancing decals on sidewalks outside the stores and cafes that remain open (bless them!). We're talking re-imagined public spaces and newly

opened towers, along with smaller buildings that add a visual jolt to once-busy corners. So if you are heading in, to work or shop or simply wander, these 10 spots are worth a visit — destinations conceived before life as we knew it slammed to a halt.



Ferry Terminal Plaza

Located just south of the Ferry Building, this granite plateau lined by widely spaced benches is designed to accommodate hundreds of ferry patrons waiting for their figurative ship to come in. As for the nine-step elevation from the sidewalk, the plaza's height relates to sea level rise projections through 2100 – reminding us that the Embarcadero faces profound changes ahead.



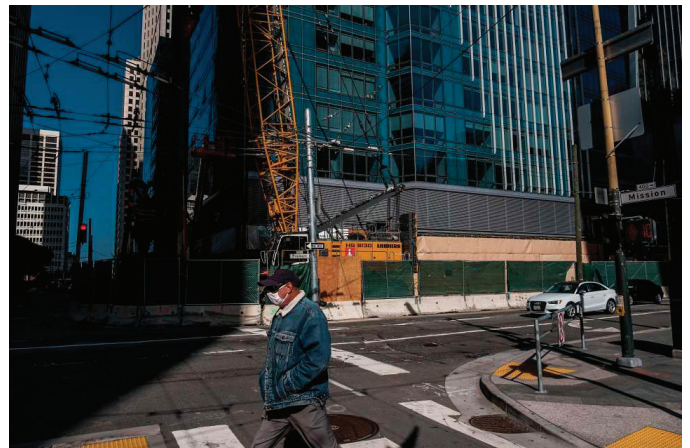
Mira

This eye-popping Jeanne Gang tower with its energetic corkscrew calibrations already has enlivened the skyline. Now the ground level is complete as well – including a broad public staircase leading up from Folsom Street that's perfect for a socially distanced bag lunch and a pedestrianized Clementina Street (complete with dog park!) by Interstice Architects that will only get better with age.



Fireboat Station 35

Sea level rise won't be an issue at the buoyant container-like structure moored off Pier 22½ that was assembled on Treasure Island after the steel float beneath it was towed here from China. Designed by Shah Kawasaki Architects, the future home to three fire boats should be in operation this summer; it will also include a public deck where we'll be able to gawk at the Bay Bridge above.



Millennium Tower

Your eyes do not deceive: The schadenfreude-packed soap opera of Millennium Tower has reached its final act. Construction workers have begun the process of driving 52 piles down to bedrock at the corner of Mission and Fremont streets, part of a subterranean intervention that should lock the tilting tower in place once and for all. Estimated cost? \$100 million, with \$30 million from public coffers.



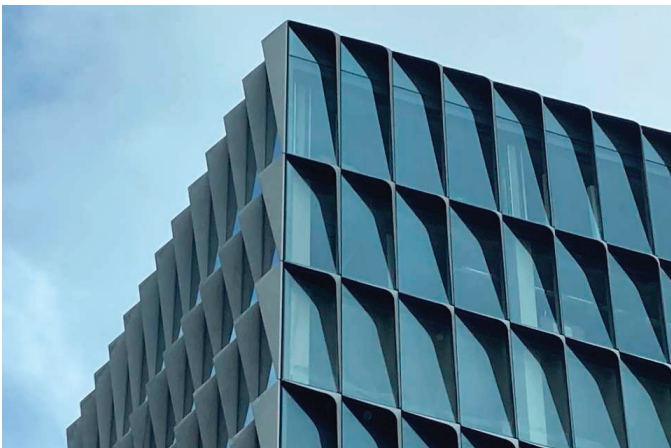
Folsom Street

City agencies have been busy the past year redoing blocks south of Market Street near the bay with an eye to creating a better environment for pedestrians and bicyclists. This includes the transition of Folsom Street – adding wide sidewalks, landscaped bioswales and well-marked bike lanes. Newcomers might not believe it, but until the mid-1990s there were freeway ramps overhead.



Four Seasons residential tower

This 43-story high-rise on Jessie Square by Handel Architects, which includes the restoration of the robust 1903 Aronson Building next door, has quietly opened its ultra-lux doors. Also complete: the ebullient metal screen by artist Jan Hendrix that cloaks the base and is intended to serve as the visual marquee for the Mexican Museum, which has a 99-year lease but no firm opening date.



633 Folsom St.

Few people noticed 633 Folsom St. when it was a seven-story chunk of low-rent office space. Then the firm that built it in 1966 and has owned it ever since, Swig Co., hired the architects at Gensler to jazz things up. They added five stories and cloaked it in a new glass skin with curving sunshades of fiber-reinforced plastic – as if hundreds of sleek boomerangs had attached themselves to the facade.



300 Grant Ave.

It's rare that a new building rises on posh Grant Avenue, and this six-story blend of retail and office space meets the historic Union Square setting with a contemporary look that shifts from marble entrances to a shaft screened by ceramic-hued metal tubes to a knifelike metal cornice. In the words of MBH Architects' John McNulty, "We weren't looking to make a huge statement, but something that can stand on its own."



950 Market St.

As several large residential projects near completion in Mid-Market, the easternmost one is the marquee attraction – a 12-story flatiron with streamlined waves of lightweight white masonry. Built to house a boutique hotel as well as 242 condominiums, this Handel Architects design is highly visible from the Powell Street BART Station. It also radiates a supple confidence that better times are ahead; we shall see.



Fifteen Fifty Mission

With 39 stories veiled in precast concrete, this apartment tower designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill serves as a western bookend to Mira in terms of new high-rises that aren't fixated on glass. But if you're nearby, it's worth visiting on foot: the plaza that separates the tower from a new (glass) city office building includes a fun public art installation – "Rolling Reflections," with 20 geomorphic forms by Sanaz Mazinani that are mirrored on one side and richly colored on the rest.