

The Bay Area's 10 most important buildings of the past decade

These provocative structures have redefined our region in more ways than one

By [Leilani Marie Labong](#)

Ten years is a fair length of time to witness a landscape evolve, and here in the Bay Area, land of innovation and limited space, that transformation comes with no small amount of friction. Growing pains, citified.

With tech really coming into its own over the last decade, we've seen the industry forge a new Dickensian existence for the region: The decade has been the best and worst of times. A company's horizon-defining skyscraper ascend into the stratosphere over San Francisco, and residential high-rises sprout up to solve the need for more (luxury) housing amid maxed-out urban density. We've observed artists fleeing the city limits unable to afford the lavish cost of living, at the same time the arts have been strongly advocated for with edgy new structures. Down in the Silicon Valley, tech campuses have become more extravagant in direct proportion to their steady slip from Bay Area reality, the heaviest constant of which is the homeless epidemic. Good thing there's been a game-changing solution for that, too, NIMBYs be damned.

Without further ado, may we present the Bay Area's design of a decade.

Salesforce Tower

"The tower is not beautiful but it is impossible to ignore," claimed *The New York Times* of the Salesforce Tower. While its hopelessly vertical silhouette has been likened to a phallus, in more polite company, it's referred to as a modern obelisk—a 1,070-foot-high, 61-story, \$1.1B ter-



ritory marker for the powerful tech industry. The Tower blatantly broke the beloved Transamerica Pyramid's half-century-old height record in the SF skyline by more than 200 feet, lest a quibble erupt over a more subtle and gracious size delta. And rather than quietly presiding over the city during the dark of night or thickness of fog, the building's crowning 11,000-LED light installation by Jim Campbell has become a distracting beacon—we're certain that trying to make out its high-altitude visuals while operating a vehicle is not too far removed from texting while driving.

The *San Francisco Chronicle's* urban-design critic John King wondered why Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects "sacrificed the exuberance that make the best tall towers memorable," citing the Chrysler Building in New York or John Hancock Tower in Chicago as gleaming examples. Aiming for such an imposing height, the Salesforce

Tower designers had nothing but sky as their canvas, and confoundingly gave us the architectural equivalent of a different human appendage—a sore thumb.

Minnesota Street Project

While the matte-black facade and sawtooth roof of the Minnesota Street Project have become symbols of a vibrant contemporary arts scene in San Francisco, they also signal an innovative model of cultural preservation: Rising rents, attributed to a dearth of affordable housing thanks, in part, to the Invasion of the Tech Workers, have resulted in an exodus of artists. Philanthropists and art collectors, Andy and Deborah Rappoport, co-founded MSP, a Dogpatch complex of affordable art studios and galleries, plus workspaces for cultural non-profits—the reduced rates are subsidized by a lucrative art-storage business.

SF-based Jensen Architects turned an existing warehouse, located at 1275 Minnesota (unmistakably emblazoned in large white sans-serif on the black facade), into an impressive accomplishment of adaptive reuse. As the complex's anchoring unit, the arts center features a sunlit double-height central atrium; cantilevered perimeter walkways and floating glass-walled bridges that lead to a network of permanent galleries on the upper floor (there are more galleries around the corner at 1150 25th Street); a stand of bleacher seats for events; and enough original steel truss and concrete to honor the former warehouse's industrial past.

Mira

Not since the de Young Museum's gently torqued observation tower has the city seen such a feat of twisting architecture. While not an arts building, per se, the Mira high-rise, designed by Studio Gang, nevertheless displays Escher-like artistry, taking the corkscrew motif to new heights—literally. Reaching 400 vertical feet, the



Photo courtesy of Minnesota Street Project



Photo by Brock Keeling

spiraling ribbons of glass and Italian white panels are made possible by a sophisticated curtain wall that guides a coiling pattern of modern bay windows, a motif adopted from San Francisco's architectural heritage.

Topped off in April to great fanfare, the tower, on track for LEED Gold recognition, has already energized the Embarcadero neighborhood, and is scheduled to open in 2020 with 392 condos—40 percent of which are designated below market rate.

8 Octavia

For one of San Francisco's busiest gateways—the intersection of Highway 101 and Market Street—local designer Stanley Saitowitz created a loft residential building that puts the city's sustainable innovation on display. The west-facing facade features operable louvers that give residents the power to filter variable amounts of sunlight and sound into their unit; this kind of cutting-edge architecture is what our tech-forward city, long suffocating under the pageantry of Victorian gingerbread, is moving toward.

While the building's texture changes by the minute (an exciting junction of technology, design, and the human experience that makes 8 Octavia a real-life example of futurism), such a dynamic exterior hardly translates to overall visual enchantment. It's as if Saitowitz, in his effort to provide a counterpoint to SF's pretty, but dense facades, decided to make a smart one that gives a residential building the visual appeal of a school of dentistry.

Apple Park

The new 175-acre campus and headquarters for Apple, Inc. in Cupertino features a 2.8-million-square-foot circular building, known as The Ring. Nestled into a once-flat landscape (now a hilly, manufactured woodland of 9,000 trees), it's no surprise that the circuitous structure, designed in collaboration with Apple's design studio—helmed by chief design officer, Jony Ive—and London-based architectural firm Foster + Partners, has been drawing cosmic comparisons. After all, it looks like a landed spacecraft or a school of spacecraft education. The latter, of course, is closer to Apple's *raison d'être*—to conceptualize and engineer tech objects of minimalist design that touch daily life with sci-fi–style futurism.

The inherent possibilities of this forward-looking approach are underscored by The Ring's modular office spaces, which can be configured in private or open formats; its rooftop of photovoltaic panels, which draw 80 percent of the building's energy use from the center



Photo by Patricia Chang



of the solar system; and its facade of 800 curved-glass panels, each 45 feet high, which provide distant views of the Santa Cruz mountains.

“The building will evolve. Actually, I’m more interested in being able to see the landscape,” Ive told Wallpaper. The Ring’s idyllic 30-acre courtyard of orchards and ponds and pergolas would seem to suggest otherwise, drawing people inward, deeper into its core. In fact, the circular form speaks to Apple’s autonomy, depicting the notion of “the whole”—a fitting metaphor for such an enigmatic, self-contained culture.

Transbay Transit Center

Since the last thing SoMa needs is another shiny, blocky tower, the new Salesforce Transit Center (née Transbay Transit Center) is anything but. Making a repeat appearance on this list, the global architecture firm Pelli Clarke Pelli gave the building a lacy cladding of perforated steel that's luminous and pretty, thanks to its coat of white mica-flecked paint—we suspect you've never seen this level of finery from a hub of public transportation. What's more, the gritty environment seems to have biblically parted to make room for this dainty, curvilinear structure—in more Eastern terms, the yin to the neighborhood yang.

A five-acre rooftop park, complete with green lawns, a wetlands marsh, and a cluster of oak trees, is a lush and verdant surprise amidst a concrete jungle. But the oasis that was given to us in August 2018 was then suddenly taken away—less than two months after the Transit Center opened, it was red-tagged due to a couple of cracked girders. The building reopened almost a year later, and its bustle of activities, from midday yoga classes in the park to the regularly scheduled comings and goings of commuter life, has since become part of SoMa's daily fabric, which was perhaps the metaphorical intent of its meshy wrap.



Photo by Patricia Chang



Photo by Henrik Kam, courtesy of SFMOMA

SFMOMA expansion

By now, we've heard all the visual comparisons to SFMOMA's Snøhetta-designed annex, clad in off-kilter, off-white fiberglass panels: A glacier. A cruise ship. The billowing mist of San Francisco Bay. But why, pray tell, has no one submitted for consideration the new wing's most obvious resemblance—a mummy's muslin-wrapped face? Regardless, the expansion—stylistically incongruous to the original, brick-wrapped Mario Botta-designed building, a vision of postmodernism from 1995—has been met with a mountain of judgement, most harshly from the former Los Angeles Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne, who accused the expansion of “performing a lobotomy on the museum's existing

building.” Indeed, removing Botta's statement-making, black-granite staircase in the full-height atrium was an audacious act, especially since Snøhetta replaced it with a quieter, smaller, duller maple-clad model that arguably gives the already-cavernous space a little too much air.

Otherwise, we can liken the role of the expansion to that of a younger, well-meaning step-sibling: Full of verve and eager to please, it offers triple the exhibition space (all the better to house the Fisher Collection of 1,100 postwar works); lush sculpture-garden terraces; and framed views of the city. New floors have been carefully stitched to the ones in the original building, creating

a seamless interior experience for the visitor, even as the exterior feels oddly disjointed in the urban landscape. But maybe that was the point—if good art creates dialogue and discomfort, why should the building that houses the art do anything less?

Fruitvale Transit Village

Though Fruitvale Transit Village looks like a television set from the backlot at Universal Studios, it is nevertheless the most sentient bit of mixed-use urban planning, earning accolades from the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Environmental Protection Agency, which cited the project for “best practice” in social equity and transportation design.

Built on a BART-owned lot adjacent Fruitvale Station, where once a parking garage was envisioned, the bustling complex opened in 2003 with 47 housing units and all the amenities needed to support the mostly Latino community, from a grocery store and charter high school to a medical clinic and public library. The project continues to evolve, albeit slowly, which is why we’ve given it a spot on this list. Just last year, ground broke on the Village’s second phase of affordable housing, the 94-unit Casa Arabella, and another 181 mixed-income units are scheduled for the near future. BART has since committed to developing the agency-owned land around its stations (all told, more than 200 acres), adding approximately 20,000 units to the housing market by 2040, much to the dismay of park-and-ride commuters.

Don’t be fooled—Fruitvale Transit Village is in fact a model of gentrification, but one that masterfully maintains the cultural identity of the area’s deeply rooted population by simply creating a vibrant, safe, and livable place to go right outside the station gates. As Citylab puts it, “Fruitvale’s transformation is unusual in one key way: It hasn’t gotten whiter.”



Photo by Henrik Kam, courtesy of SFMOMA

Facebook’s MPK 20 and MPK 21

From an outsider’s perspective, the Big Tech trend of creating vast, high-design campuses that cradle their dogged workers in secluded, thematic environments seems ideologically on par with cultism, two signs of which, according to *The Atlantic*, are “isolating members” and “inappropriate loyalty to leaders.” If you do worship at the altar of Mark Zuckerberg, frequent guest of the U.S. Congress, perhaps it’s because he’s a prospective savior of the Bay Area residential crisis: Caused by a confrontation between excessive staffing at tech companies and a historically limited housing inventory, Zuckerberg’s Willow Village redevelopment project includes 1,500 apartment homes, including 225 affordable units.

The Village will be adjacent to Facebook’s main campus in Menlo Park, designed by international starchitect Frank Gehry. Its latest mind-boggling expansion, MPK 21, was unveiled in Fall 2018 after a speedy 18-month construction—MPK20, the 430,000-square-foot sibling, is a few years older and was also designed by Gehry. LEED Platinum-certified, MPK21 encompasses 525,000 square feet of industrial-cabin-style workspace complete with a “main street” and “neighborhoods” of offices. Exposed wooden beams aren’t as functional as they are aesthetically mountainy, and there’s enough unfinished

plywood—cost-effective and utilitarian, the material reveals a distinctive grain and evokes start-up level ambition—to have cleared out Home Depot inventories within a 300-mile radius.

The campus's woody environment may be fabricated (MPK 21's 3.6-acre rooftop park is planted with 200 trees, and the Town Square and The Bowl amphitheater are enclosed by redwoods), but whether it's just as effective at calming coders as a native forest would be is up for debate—are the peaceful, easy feelings as authentic as they could be? Luckily, you don't have to work at Facebook to pick up an existential quandary, you can just log into your account.

Navigation Centers

If you want to enrage the NIMBYs, make plans to set up a homeless Navigation Center within eyeshot of their rooftop pool. Despite vehement opposition, a court has shot down a NIMBY lawsuit challenging the construction of one of these pioneering shelters, and it is scheduled to open, in all its tenty, ad-hoc glory, on a parking lot facing the Embarcadero by the end of the year.

Navigation Centers launched in 2015 under late Mayor Ed Lee and his former homeless czar, supervisor Bevan Dufty, as a way to disrupt the staid shelter model: The centers only take referrals from the Homeless Outreach Team, who are on the lookout for a particular subset of the population—those who have lived on the streets for more than a decade and who also suffer from addiction, mental illness, or other prohibiting problems. Even though Navigation Centers allow pets and partners and don't enforce a curfew, they offer intensive counseling for substance abuse and job placement, among other issues. And while the goal is to place residents in permanent housing within 90 days, there is no formal limit on their stay, which might be the program's most humane ground rule of all—knowing that timelines are nothing if not individual, action is required, but rushing is not.



Photo courtesy of Facebook



Photo by Brock Keeling

When the Embarcadero Navigation Center opens, it will be the seventh in operation in the city. The San Francisco Chronicle reports that 57 percent of the approximately 3,000 homeless that have come through the program have found housing elsewhere. (Success rates and types of housing vary, according to Mission Local's Joe Eskenazi.) In a city where approximately 4,300 people (or more) sleep on the streets nightly, this program is a significant stride in the right direction. And if proposed legislation to build a Navigation Center in every single district in the city passes, be sure to check Next Door for details on the inevitable formation of NIMBY Neighborhood Watch groups, meeting soon at a poolside near you.