San Francisco’s hilly streets, eclectic architecture and magnificent Bay views contribute to the City’s renowned urban character. The waterfront, with its arched bulkhead buildings, rectangular finger piers and pattern of piers and open water between them, also is a key element of the City’s built form. This section describes how the waterfront contributes to San Francisco’s identity, and how its built character can be enhanced through design and architectural criteria applied to new development.

City Pattern
San Francisco has a unique “city pattern” comprised of several elements: water, hills and valleys, open spaces, streets, and buildings and structures such as the piers. The varying juxtapositions of these elements create the physical and visual image and character of San Francisco. The waters of San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean provide a distinct edge to the City along three sides, and affect the City’s climate and way of life. The hills provide impressive views of the City and water and, together with the valleys between them, help define the boundaries of the City’s neighborhoods. The open spaces provide a natural green contrast to, and respite from, the built areas and often further define the City’s neighborhoods. The City streets which overlay the hills, allow movement between districts and provide some of San Francisco’s most striking views. And, the City’s buildings and structures reflect the character and history of districts and provide orientation points to residents and visitors.

People perceive this city pattern from their homes, streets, parks, the waterfront and the Bay. The pattern helps to provide a sense of identity and place for the seven distinct neighborhoods (Fisherman’s Wharf, Base of Telegraph Hill, Downtown, Rincon Hill, South Beach, Mission Bay, and Pier 70) that are adjacent to the waterfront. To weaken or destroy the pattern would adversely affect the image of the City.

The waterfront contributes to the city pattern in many ways. It is the edge where the City meets the Bay. It provides a comprehensive series of existing or planned open spaces along the waterfront that connect with the City. The Embarcadero roadway serves as one of the City’s most important streets because of its bold design, perimeter location, and ability to accommodate movement along the waterfront for transit, cars, trucks, and pedestrians. Finally, the City’s layering of structures begins at the waterfront with low buildings that increase in height on inland property as the City steps up the hills.

To preserve and enhance the city pattern, the objectives and design criteria which follow address the architectural character and design considerations for different types of Port property. They will guide new waterfront development to ensure that new waterfront buildings and structures contribute to the form of the City, preserve the character of adjacent neighborhoods, and emphasize the uniqueness of the waterfront.
City Pattern Policies
Two architectural design policies are continually expressed in the Design & Access Element for all Port property: 1) celebrating the uniqueness of the waterfront and 2) maintaining compatibility with adjacent City neighborhoods. The Embarcadero roadway and other waterfront roadways in Fisherman’s Wharf and Mission Bay provide logical division points for these two policies. The waterfront roadways are a public space where the waterfront edge is present, and the change in city identity and built character can reflect the changes in the natural and built environment.

Neighborhood Character
On the land side of The Embarcadero or other waterfront roadway, the character of new development will reflect and enhance the developed character of the adjacent City neighborhoods.

Waterfront Character
On the waterside of The Embarcadero or other waterfront roadway, the character of new development will reflect its unique location at or over the water.

Property Types
There are three distinct types of waterfront property under Port jurisdiction: piers, bulkhead sites, and seawall lots. The piers are the structures that extend out over the water. The bulkhead sites are the areas between the Embarcadero Promenade, or other waterfront roadways, and the piers or water. Many bulkhead sites house structures which provide entrances to the piers. The seawall lots are parcels of land, generally located on the City side of The Embarcadero or other waterfront roadways, which were created when the seawall was built. One can think of each of the three property types as a built layer of the City: the layering begins with the piers in the Bay, continues with the bulkhead sites which mark the edge where the land meets the Bay, and the seawall lots which are part of the city fabric that ultimately extends up the hills of San Francisco. Each property type has its own physical characteristics that are the basis for the design criteria which follow. Together, these properties provide a pleasing transition between land and water, and give the San Francisco waterfront its unique visual identity.
Piers

Today’s shoreline contains a variety of piers. The historic “finger piers” (built before 1931) are the most common type of small pier. They are generally 150 feet wide by 600-900 feet long, and approximately 120,000 square feet in area (excluding bulkhead structures). The historic pier sheds are simple industrial warehouse structures with exposed interior framing and regularly spaced roll-up doors for servicing ships. The linear, rectangular shape of the historic finger piers, which generally extend out perpendicularly to the seawall, contribute to San Francisco’s unique city pattern.

Modern piers vary in size and shape and include a variety of commercial and industrial structures. The BART platform/Ferry Plaza pier has the same approximate area as a “finger pier” but is shorter and wider. Pier 39 is a medium-sized pier with a unique bulb shape framed on two sides by a small boat marina. Pier 27-29 is a triangular-shaped pier with over 500,000 square feet of surface area. Height limits on the piers along the waterfront are generally 40 feet, except Piers 1-5 and the Ferry Building, where the height limit is 84 feet.

The piers now accommodate a variety of activities, including cargo shipping, fishing industry, offices, cruise ship staging, ship repair, excursion boats, warehousing, restaurants, recreation, special events and public access. When new pier development projects are undertaken, the Port will also be able to expand public access onto piers.

Piers along the Northeast Waterfront at the Base of Telegraph Hill
The following policies allow changes to piers that are sensitive to the historic and industrial character of the piers and pier sheds:

**Unique Experience**
Design development on piers to encourage public access and celebrate the uniqueness of being over water, (e.g. openings within pier decks, transparent or movable exterior walls, views from the interior of large piers to the edge.)

**Industrial Maritime Character**
The architectural character of pier development should respect, but not mimic, the historic industrial/maritime character of the waterfront.

**Pier Shape**
Any extensions beyond existing pier shapes should visually complement the linear, rectangular form of the historic finger piers and not detract from San Francisco's unique city pattern.

**Destination Points**
Create pedestrian destination points in new developments on piers including, if feasible, piers in maritime mixed use projects.

**Linear Form**
Architecturally emphasize the length and linearity of piers with a rhythm of doors, windows, perimeter lighting, or other pier edge improvements.

**Historic Preservation**
Retain and reuse the historic piers and pier sheds.
Bulkhead Sites

Bulkhead sites are located on top of the seawall and marginal wharf, between The Embarcadero and the piers. They are generally about 30 feet deep, and contain open space, and modern and historic buildings. The modern bulkhead buildings are generally simple and utilitarian in design. The historic bulkhead buildings, which include connector buildings between piers in certain locations, were built between 1912 and 1936 to hide industrial pier uses behind a regularly spaced series of monumental waterfront structures. Today, they contribute to San Francisco’s urban waterfront form and identity in many ways: they define both the edge of The Embarcadero roadway and the edge where land meets the Bay; they serve as the main entrance to their respective piers; and they often create focal points at the terminus of City streets. The highest historic bulkhead building is approximately 55 feet tall. The height limit for new structures on bulkhead sites generally is 40 feet. The following policies of the Design & Access Element seek to ensure that new development on bulkhead sites helps to define The Embarcadero and waterfront edge, and to preserve the architectural rhythm of bulkhead buildings and views between them that is a unique characteristic of the San Francisco waterfront.

**Historic Preservation**

Preserve bulkhead buildings 1-5, 45 and 48 consistent with the Secretary of Interior’s Standards for Historic Preservation. Retain and reuse bulkhead buildings at Piers 9, 15, 19, 23, 29, 31, 33, 35, 28, 29, 38, Pier 43 Ferry Arch and connector buildings at Pier 29 1/2 and 33 1/2. Develop guidelines for rehabilitation.

**Rhythm of Buildings and Views**

Create a balanced rhythm of buildings and views which is sensitive to the preservation of historic structures.

**Highlight the Waterfront Edge**

Use design elements such as building placement, materials, etc. to highlight the edge where the City meets the Bay.

**Embarcadero Edge & Scale**

Where new structures are located on bulkhead sites, create a built edge at or near the Embarcadero Promenade and use strong and bold building forms and detailing to reinforce the large scale of The Embarcadero.

**Arched Openings**

Repeat the use of large, central arched openings to pier uses behind the bulkhead buildings.

**Historic Context**

Design new development that complements and does not detract from the historic bulkhead buildings.
Chapter 3

Seawall Lots

Generally, the Port’s 50 seawall lots are parcels of land located inland of The Embarcadero or other waterfront streets. They are often triangular or odd shaped lots because of the angle of the intersection of waterfront streets with the City’s street grid. Many of the seawall lots and other adjacent parcels were originally developed with warehouses and industries that served the waterfront. Today, most of the seawall lots north of China Basin have been redeveloped with retail, parking, open space, and some residential and office uses.

The height limit for seawall lots north of Vallejo Street (in the Northeast Waterfront and Fisherman’s Wharf areas) and south of China Basin Channel is 40 feet. Seawall lot height limits in the Ferry Building area, up through Broadway, range from minimal structures within the Ferry Building Plaza open space to 84 feet adjacent to downtown. Within the South Beach area, the height limit on seawall lots is 105 feet, except for the ballpark site which is in a 150 foot height district.

Development of the seawall lots must be consistent with the public trust, and should be compatible with the seven City neighborhoods that begin at the waterfront—Fisherman’s Wharf, Base of Telegraph Hill, Downtown, Rincon Hill, South Beach, Mission Bay, and Pier 70—each of which has a distinct architectural character that is derived from original or new land uses, building scale, and architectural finishes. The following policies for seawall lots under Port ownership seek to ensure such compatibility.

Respect City Form

Respect City form by stepping new buildings down toward The Embarcadero or other waterfront roadways.

Embarcadero Scale

Use strong and bold building forms and detailing on new buildings to reinforce the large scale of The Embarcadero.

Neighborhood Scale & Character

New buildings should respect the scale and architectural character of adjacent neighborhoods.

City Street Views

Maintain City street corridor views shown on the City Street View map in Chapter 3.
Chapter 4 provides design criteria for specific sites in each of the six “design subareas” of the Port: Fisherman’s Wharf; Northeast Waterfront; Ferry Building; South Beach; Mission Bay; and Pier 70. (Design criteria are not included for the area south of Pier 70 because that part of the Southern Waterfront is primarily industrial in nature. The Port’s cargo handling facilities are located at Piers 80, 94 and 96. Most of these piers and the areas between and adjacent to them are reserved for long-term container terminal expansion.) The introductory discussion for each design subarea includes background information, a summary of uses from the Waterfront Plan anticipated for each design subarea and key urban design characteristics of the subarea. This information is followed by design criteria which address site and building massing, open space and historic preservation requirements, building orientation, and architectural details that will be incorporated in new development projects for specific sites. The design criteria reinforce the public access & open space, view, historic resource, and city pattern policies described in Chapter 3.

Housing and restaurants on seawall lots in the South Beach Area
Subareas Within Port Property

- Pier 70
- Mission Bay
- South Beach
- Ferry Building
- Northeast Waterfront
- Fisherman’s Wharf