An Urban Waterfront

Of the over 400 miles of shoreline that encircles San Francisco Bay, the Port of San Francisco oversees a five mile stretch of unique urban waterfront from Fisherman’s Wharf to Pier 70. Here, the waterfront possesses built features which distinguish it from the less developed or natural shoreline found elsewhere around the Bay. These features include: The finger piers which extend into the Bay; The Embarcadero roadway - a major arterial that parallels much of the northern waterfront; the City street grid pattern that begins and ends at the waterfront in a variety of unusual angles; the City’s famous hilly topography and densely developed waterfront neighborhoods and districts; historic waterfront buildings; and a rich mix of urban activities. From the San Francisco waterfront, one can enjoy views of maritime activities, the Bay, historic architecture and the City’s vibrant neighborhoods and commercial districts.

The piers and bulkhead structures which line the waterfront are reminders of San Francisco’s rise in trade and commerce from the 1860’s through the 1930’s. Today, the pattern of piers and bulkhead buildings, interspersed with open water along the City’s edge, provides a unique urban form that contributes to the City’s identity. The contrast of built form with public open spaces and the natural setting of the Bay, the interplay of diverse uses within a compact area, and the architectural style and scale of buildings, creates an exciting and renowned urban experience. This Design & Access Element seeks to preserve these qualities that are unique to the...
San Francisco waterfront by expanding and protecting public access and open space, views, and historic resources as the waterfront continues to evolve.

Above: view of the waterfront and Downtown San Francisco from south of the Bay Bridge. Upper right: new South Beach neighborhood and The Embarcadero roadway. Lower right: a fireboat at Pier 22/2
Evolution of San Francisco’s Shoreline

The following figures illustrate how San Francisco’s shoreline has evolved over the past 150 years. Starting in the 1850’s, the waterfront edge and adjacent inland properties were shaped to accommodate maritime industry. As technological innovations transformed the shipping and transportation industries, the waterfront edge was altered accordingly. More recently, increased use of the shoreline and adjacent areas north of China Basin for residential and commercial uses and public recreation has led to additional changes in the shoreline. The waterfront will continue to accommodate maritime needs, provide opportunities for public recreation and enhancement of the Bay and provide new commercial recreation uses that draw people to the shore. These future physical changes will be guided by policies in this Design & Access Element which are based on an understanding of how the waterfront has evolved, why its form is unique to San Francisco, and how it can be enhanced.

1852 Shoreline
The San Francisco shoreline as it existed two years after California’s official admission into the United States (solid line), compared to the 1997 shoreline (dotted line).

1908 Shoreline
Between 1852 and 1908, the Gold Rush and an explosion of shipping and trading activity led to Bay fill for a harbor and supporting warehouse district. An initial seawall was completed in the Northern Waterfront and a second, longer seawall was begun. By 1908, just two years after the Great Quake, twenty-eight piers were in operation.
1931 Shoreline
Between 1908 and 1931, the Port undertook major harbor improvement and “beautification” projects. The second seawall was completed, new “finger” piers and bulkhead buildings were constructed, and the Beltline railway system was expanded along the entire length of the waterfront. By 1931, forty-nine piers and twenty-one ferry slips were operating along the waterfront. Through the end of World War II, the Port of San Francisco was the dominant West Coast shipping port.

1969 Shoreline
By 1969, the number of piers was reduced to 45, mainly because some “finger” piers were combined into larger piers to meet modern warehousing and shipping needs. The ferry slips at the foot of Market Street were removed because commuters preferred to travel by automobile—a mode of transportation which was encouraged by the construction of the Bay Bridge and the Embarcadero freeway.

1997 Shoreline
By 1997, the number of “finger” piers was further reduced, making way for a new recreational retail center at Pier 39, the Pier 7 public access pier, views of the Bay along the Embarcadero Promenade north of the Bay Bridge, and a small boat marina in South Beach. These changes in the shoreline were regulated, in part, by BCDC, which was created in 1965 to regulate Bay fill. The northern waterfront today contains a mix of maritime support, passenger cruise, fishing, ferry and excursion, office, and retail uses. Most cargo operations have moved south to modern cargo terminals at Piers 80 and 94-96.