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Rincon Hill on the rise

Slender towers, wide walkways would transform area



Heller Manus & Arquitectonica

An artist's rendering for 300 Spear St. at Rincon Hill features towers of 35 and 40 stories.

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The Rincon Hill plan that San Francisco's City Planning Commission is scheduled to vote on this Thursday can be viewed as a visionary blueprint for a new type of neighborhood, or a barn door installed after too many horses have trotted away.

In truth, it's a little bit of both. But the proposed transformation of this former industrial district tucked against the Bay Bridge offers what San Francisco hasn't seen in more than a decade: farsighted planning that allows for the sort of growth that can enrich the city as a whole.

Make no mistake, the skyline would be altered by the effort to forge a neighborhood of 5,300 apartments and condominiums in

a once-remote backwater that in 1990 had just 300 residential units. Towers as high as 550 feet would climb on selected sites in the 12-block district between the Embarcadero, Second Street, Folsom Street and the approach to the bridge.

As many as five towers would go near the stubby crest of Rincon Hill, marked now by the 175-foot-high Bank of America clock tower, a sentimental landmark but a structure robbed of any historic integrity in past renovations.

In a worst-case scenario, the result would be a wall of concrete and glass blocking views to and from the bay. But the plan lays a blueprint for a Rincon skyline that's dramatic, but not overwhelming. The towers will have slender dimensions, less than half



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the width of a typical office tower.

They also will be placed at least 115 feet apart — allowing views through the neighborhood from the ground.

And it's on the ground that the plan looks most promising.

The goal is a neighborhood that, as it matures, feels like a neighborhood

— unlike today's gray terrain where, once people step outside their condos, there's nothing to do but watch commuters rumble along streets designed for warehouse deliveries.

Spear, Main and Beale streets south of Folsom Street would each lose a traffic lane to allow for 32-foot-wide sidewalks lush with trees and greenery. Benches and other seating would help create the feel of linear parks.

Parking for the towers must go underground, with only one space allowed per every two units. This allows the streets to be lined with shops and housing rather than raised garages and nudges future residents toward transit use.

Also, the Sailor's Union Building at First and Harrison streets would be renovated to include a community center. A park is planned for 4 acres owned by Caltrans next to the Bay Bridge at Fremont and Harrison streets.

There's also a desire to spawn housing at all income levels.

City law already requires housing developers to make a set number of units available to lower-income residents somewhere in the city. The twist at Rincon is that developers who choose to build those units off-site must place them within the larger South of Market neighborhood.

And who would foot the bill? Developers. The plan calls for a fee of \$14 per square foot of residential construction. This would raise \$30 million if all the housing that the plan makes room for actually gets built.

The charge is steep. But it's the most effective way to create a varied and vibrant neighborhood, not just towers that offer views to their residents and nada to everyone else. The payoff for developers is a district where people want to live.

So far, of course, this rosy world exists only on paper. That's why it's critical to view the Rincon Hill plan — assuming it is approved by the Planning Commission and then the Board of Supervisors — as the first step in a long journey.

For instance, it's not enough for planners to imagine a cozy realm of colorful shrubs where asphalt now exists; city departments such as Public Works and Parking and Traffic must agree to changes that favor pedestrians, not cars.

The danger is that bureaucratic resistance could derail the improvements.

Mayor Gavin Newsom needs to make

sure the departments work together — with the clear message that a freshly approved neighborhood plan should be honored, not ignored.

This isn't to say the plan for Rincon Hill is spotless.

For starters, it took too long. Work began in 1999, as the idea of vertical living a la New York spread to cities across North America. But long-range planning was a low priority during Willie Brown's two terms as mayor. Rincon Hill remained in limbo while developers lobbied for extra height on a case-by-case basis.

That bit of history explains the biggest change between the plan the commission will vote on and the draft released last fall: A 400-foot tower would be allowed on the east side of Fremont Street.

Planners wanted heights to stay low on that block as visual relief. But the Planning Commission was sympathetic to complaints from affected landowners that they deserve some height, too — so one tower is permitted if the owners combine their sites.

One tower is better than two on cramped Fremont Street. But none would be better still.

Another stumbling block — this one well intentioned — is the 4-acre park next to the Bay Bridge approach.

With all due respect to landscape architects, it's hard to imagine the space flourishing as anything except a dog run — and the estimated cost to buy the land and make it a park is \$12.5 million. It'd be better to put some of that money into creating pocket parks in quieter areas such as Guy Street, one spot in the neighborhood where cars rarely go.

And parks are needed — because Rincon Hill's time has come.

Construction on one large project already is starting — two 35- and 40-story towers at 300 Spear St., one block from the Embarcadero.

Developer Tishman Speyer Properties hired Miami's Arquitectonica last year to massage the approved design with the original architect, local firm Heller Manus. The new version has curving walls of metal and glass; it looks more like Miami Beach or Chicago's Lake Point Tower than San Francisco, but the sleekness could help the 640 units slide into place a bit more smoothly than the earlier version.

Close behind, two even taller towers could be approved this summer for the clock tower site at First and Harrison streets.

The project proposed by Urban West Associates of San Diego puts 720 units in 45- and 55-story towers around a central courtyard sure to include a loud fountain to muffle nearby freeway noise.

The heights discussed seem like a neck-straining extreme — but the design by Chicago architects Solomon Cordwell Buenz has the potential to be the best of the Rincon lot. The towers are clean and sharp, with a lean grid of aluminum panels accenting the vertical drama.

That's the other challenge: to make sure buildings don't just look good on paper.

Interim Planning Director Dean Macris has stressed that the city needs to emphasize architectural quality — and to make sure that when buildings move from the drawing board to reality, they're not stripped of design flourishes and high-quality materials.

It's exactly the message that developers and architects need to hear. And Rincon Hill is the perfect place to start driving it home.