





# Secret gardens

In 1985, San Francisco's lawmakers laid down a forward-thinking town-planning decree from which travelers and residents alike now reap considerable benefits. Tucked away within the city's privately owned buildings are public parks, terraces and greenhouses - glorious hidden spaces filled with redwoods and sculptures, paintings and palm trees

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By **Megan McCrea**  
Photography **Daria Hutchinson**



## A shaft of sunlight drifts gently through the redwoods,

their needles glowing green against a robin's-egg blue sky. Nearby, ferns rustle on a murmur of a breeze, and a cross-legged woman meditates in the shade. Oddly enough, this serene spot – home to sparrows and chickadees, prehistoric palms and lush beds of clover – sits just one block off of Montgomery Street, the powerful, thumping heart of San Francisco's Financial District. This is Redwood Park, nestled at the foot of the Transamerica Pyramid, and it is corporate San Francisco's gift to the city.

Here, tall trees frame a postcard-perfect plaza, complete with a sun-flecked fountain, jumping children immortalized in bronze and precisely pruned hedges. A woman walks her dog around the perimeter; a man unfolds his copy of the *San Francisco Chronicle*; a worker naps in the shade.

At first blush, the park feels removed from the frantic bustle beyond its gates, where 300,000 office workers make calls, send emails and rush to meetings. But in fact, this park is as classically San Francisco as a loaf of Wharf-made sourdough.

A stroll around the plaza provides a crash course in the city's history. Mark Twain Alley, which leads from Sansome Street into the plaza, takes its name from the famed scribe, who spent some cold summers here in the 1860s. Plaques around the square – and inside the Pyramid's lobby – honor other colorful characters who walked these cobbles: Emperor Norton, a 19th-century citizen who dubbed himself "Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico"; James Casey, a city supervisor who shot newspaper editor James King; and Bummer and Lazarus, two dogs so bonded that their two tails were said to wag as one.

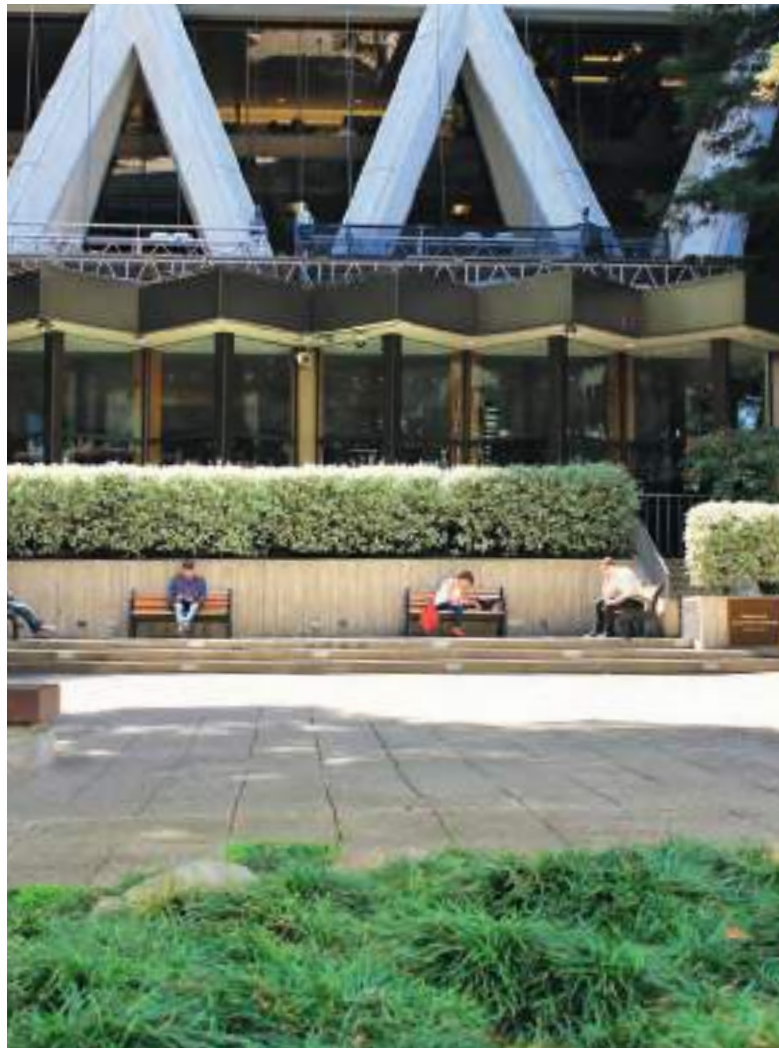
For a truly mind-bending experience, visitors can walk up the ramp on the park's western side, next to the Pyramid itself – the architecture firm Heller Manus has an office inside. Firm president Jeffrey Heller loves the view: "Our office looks right onto the garden, and that's kind of perfect. We see people walking around, enjoying the space. And on Thursdays in the summer, they have concerts in front of our window." While the busy designers can look outside

for a visual treat, passersby can look *inside* for one. There, in the middle of the office, sits a scale model of Downtown San Francisco, complete with its own miniature Transamerica Pyramid.

Such undercover oases abound in San Francisco: it's simply a matter of knowing where to look. In fact, there are over 70 such POPOS – "privately owned public outdoor open spaces" – scattered throughout the city. These POPOS come in all shapes and sizes, from a 100sqft "snippet" to a five-storey greenhouse, dotting the Financial District (FiDi) and South of Market (SoMA) neighborhoods. The POPOS can be situated anywhere: atop hotels, between skyscrapers, even underground. And beyond their unusual locations, they offer all manner of surprises, from unusual plants to amazing views, incredible art to spontaneous entertainment.

SPUR (San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association) aims to





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**  
The Crocker Galleria is home to two POPOS; the Crocker Galleria's SE rooftop garden; towering redwood trees at the Transamerica Redwood Park; people soaking up the rare San Francisco sunshine at the Transamerica Redwood Park

help connect the public with these spaces. Ben Grant, SPUR's urban design policy director, serves as head POPOS ambassador, leading forums that introduce people to these secret city parks. What's the best thing about POPOS? "A good city has a rich diversity of public spaces, and a sense of discovery," he explains. "POPOS create another layer of discovery."

Though San Francisco's history stretches back centuries, the POPOS themselves are relatively new – oases that have sprung up not despite, but because of, all of the concrete around them. After all, most of the area's major parks – Union Square,

HIDDEN  
GEMS OF THE  
POPOS



For a one-stop encapsulation of the ideas behind POPOS – history, architecture, botany, art – it's hard to beat the Citigroup Center at **1 Sansome**. The greenhouse is built into the shell of the 1912 London-Paris Bank building, a classical building with archways, columns and white marble. Palms reach toward the intricate glass ceiling and, in one recess, there's a tall, proud Art Deco maiden reminiscent of Lady Liberty herself. **1 Sansome St**



Color abounds at **101 California**, an open plaza adorned with neat rows of planters that are brimming over with flowers. Bonus: from July to September, there are periodic midday concerts here featuring jazz trios, Latin bands and more. **101 California St**



The tiny snippet at **600 California** might not look like much, but it holds a mini-museum of treasures. Golden Art Deco doors – which opened on to a hand-

## “Preservationists rallied to fight the forces that they feared would destroy the character of the city they loved”

### BELOW

The 100 First Street POPOS – complete with ample bench seating, unique water features and numerous planters – is one of the city's most expansive and popular green spaces

Portsmouth Square, Yerba Buena Gardens – hover shyly around the edges of downtown, leaving an unbroken sea of asphalt, concrete, glass and steel, stretching all the way from the Embarcadero to Union Square.

As downtown construction ramped up in the 1950s and '60s, city planners worked to preserve open space by offering developers an incentive. That is, the builders could construct larger buildings if they also created public open space within or around them. The city's first postwar high-rise, the Crown Zellerbach headquarters, was developed this way. Envisioned as a “tower in a park”, the sleek black edifice rises up out of a cobbled plaza. Ferns climb the stone walls; willow and olive trees fringe the square's winding paths.

Once this plaza was completed, others followed suit. Over the next 25 years, 45 POPOS rose up around downtown: a tidy plaza at 555 California Street, where stalks of bamboo sway beneath the massive Bank of America building; or the London-Paris national bank building (now Citigroup) with its rarefied greenhouse, where palm trees rise above floors of marble. And at 555/575 California, between two skyscrapers, a river burbles over square stones that look straight out of Mesoamerica.

But as the number of POPOS climbed, so too did San Francisco's growth rate, stirring fears about development. While businesses and government officials cheered the influx of skyscrapers, preservationists rallied to fight the forces that they feared would destroy the character of the city they loved. In 1985, the two sides struck a deal, in the





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form of the Downtown Plan.

Masterminded by city planners and passed by the Planning Commission, the new law allowed for growth south of Market, while limiting development in certain areas north of Market, such as North Beach and Chinatown. “A lot of people refer to it as ‘grand bargain,’” Grant explains. “It allowed the Financial District to grow, but it also protected adjacent neighborhoods, open spaces and the city’s historic fabric.” The sweeping proposal mandated setbacks to preserve sunlight, established protections for historic buildings, and required that 1% of the budget for new large constructions be set aside for public art. The plan also decreed that, in every new development, builders would have to make one in every 50sqft of office area an open space, enshrining the POPOS into law.

Some public spaces, like Transamerica’s Redwood Park, sit at ground level, visible to the naked eye. Other spaces lie off the beaten path, or sometimes even overhead. Walking past Crocker Galleria, a light-filled, European-inspired shopping mall, an ordinary passerby might guess that the place is historic. But a park? Hardly.

But Crocker Galleria actually houses two POPOS up on the roof. A small sign on the third floor in the far corner, reading “Roof Terrace”, leads to one of the spaces, a tidy roof deck. Surrounding the roof on all sides, stately buildings – in hues of beige, rose, cream, gold and black – conjure daydreams of San Francisco’s storied past. Vine-covered trellises shade park benches, artfully arrayed bonsais grow in planters along neat gravel paths and the car horns

operated elevator in the 1930s – shine outside the front lobby. Around the corner, a large steel sculpture, featuring arches and a trestle, marks the entrance to the POPOS itself, which also features a massive bronze monolith and a modernist fountain.  
**600 California St**



Given its height and location, the 15th-floor terrace at **343 Sansome** provides bird’s-eye views of the city, including an Instagram-ready angle for a photo of the Transamerica Pyramid. And it’s easy to stay on schedule here thanks to the sundial, which centers on a colorful tiled obelisk depicting the four seasons, by noted Bay Area sculptor Joan Brown.  
**343 Sansome St**



For a time travel-esque experience, head to the POPOS at **555 Mission**. Here, three huge stone heads – which somehow call to mind both Easter Island and Gremlins – rise out of the concrete plaza, silhouetted against a living wall. Across the way stands an equally fascinating 36ft-high tower, built with multicolored human figures. **555 Mission St**

For an updated map of the POPOS, check out the **San Francisco Planning Department’s** website: [sf-planning.org/privately-owned-public-open-space-and-public-art-popos](http://sf-planning.org/privately-owned-public-open-space-and-public-art-popos)  
For an older list that includes descriptions, see **SPUR’s** list: [spur.org/sites/default/files/migrated/anchors/popos-guide.pdf](http://spur.org/sites/default/files/migrated/anchors/popos-guide.pdf)



below sound like they're a million miles away. Grant describes such rooftop POPOS as "secret gardens", attributing their special quality to this feeling of being unknown.

With the Downtown Plan still in full effect, the POPOS just keep coming. San Francisco's booming, and as new arrivals move to the city, cranes punctuate the SoMA skyline. All that construction means a whole lot of POPOS – and the newest spaces truly outdo themselves. The 17th-storey roof deck at the new Hampton Inn, for instance, rewards visitors with sweeping views, from the glittering bay to City Hall's iconic blue-and-gold dome. Meanwhile, the lobby of LinkedIn's much-vaunted SoMA office is really a POPOS by any other name. It's an indoor park, with blond wood walls standing in for trees, graffiti paintings for sculptures and luxurious armchairs for benches. In fact, even SPUR just built its own POPOS.

"As a civic organization, we wanted to make a space that was open to the public," explains Allison Arieff, editorial director for SPUR's magazine *The Urbanist*. "And we did it without even having to be asked!" Visitors to the glassy indoor-outdoor space – opened in April – can browse the photo gallery, lounge street-side at a café table or visit St. Clare, the haute in-house coffee shop, where baristas whip up cortados, macchiatos and sweet Thai iced coffee.

As San Francisco continues to boom, so too does the need for open spaces. "As the city gets denser, and we live more of our lives in public space, the POPOS become even more important to the city's livability, richness and complexity," confirms Grant. The good news? Fourteen new buildings are going up in SoMA's Transbay District, so San Francisco's due for a massive influx of new POPOS, including a planned 5.5-acre park atop the Transbay Terminal.

When these parks, plazas and snippets open, they're almost guaranteed to have a serious fanbase. That's plain to see, from looking around the plaza at 300 Post, a Zen-like space tucked between the Grand Hyatt hotel and the brand new Apple Store, steps away from Union Square. Along the hotel side of the plaza sits Laura Kimpton's huge rainbow *LOVE* statue. "I grew up playing in that courtyard as a child," Kimpton explains. "So I jumped at the chance to display my art there."

A group of teens snaps selfies perched on the "L". To their right, a man surveys the plaza's gigantic living wall. And to the left, near the street, a father, mother and child examine the intricate reliefs on the famous sculpture by Ruth Asawa surrounding a fountain, pointing excitedly each time they identify a familiar landmark rendered in bronze. The Golden Gate Bridge. The Chinatown Gate. The Transamerica Pyramid. A perfect miniature of San Francisco.



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## FOLLOW THE LEADER

For years, architectural historian Rick Evans has led walking tours in San Francisco, his favorite city in the world. On the 2.5-hour **Architecture Walking Tour**, he takes travelers through the Financial District, showcasing landmark buildings, as well as four of his favorite POPOS. He unspools San Francisco history – and talks about the city's future – along the way. \$40; [architecturesf.com](http://architecturesf.com)