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Tucked-away public spaces need upkeep by owners

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Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Office workers eat their lunch on the One Montgomery's rooftop terrace, which was added in the 1980s and offers weathered and repaired benches.

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The rooftop garden above San Francisco's One Montgomery St. is a strange space indeed, at once cherished and unloved.

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The affection comes courtesy of the Financial District workers who line the wooden benches and concrete ledges at lunchtime, savoring fresh air and sun amid towers of three eras. The neglect is revealed when they leave:

Benches are faded and warped, the painted concrete surface is blotchy and worn.

The culprit isn't a cash-strapped city; the rooftop is one of a dozen-plus downtown spaces that are privately owned yet reserved for public use. Rather, look upon One Montgomery as a cautionary tale. Legislation can mandate the creation of such spaces and even make sure they receive attention. Ultimately, though, only the owners can make sure that they shine.

I mention this because on Thursday, the city's Planning Commission is scheduled to vote on guidelines that would require bigger and bolder

plaques to announce the privately owned public spaces tucked into the downtown landscape since the early 1980s. The updated guidelines are prompted by legislation sponsored by Supervisor [David Chiu](#), who calls the spots "urban oases."

Make no mistake: I'm thrilled that planners and politicians want to make these public spaces known to, you know, the public. After 30 years of requiring such spaces, ramping up awareness is long overdue.

But signs are only part of the issue. An underlying problem is that all too often these (semi-)public spaces are maintained in such a way that it's clear they're viewed as

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obligations rather than assets. Developers followed the rules and wrote the checks, then shifted to autopilot.

That seems to be the case at the rooftop terrace of One Montgomery, a 1908 landmark designed by Willis Polk. It can be reached via elevator from a lobby off the palatial Wells Fargo banking hall at the base, but most people enter by stairs from the adjacent Crocker Galleria shopping arcade.

The terrace was added as part of a 1980s development that included the Galleria, and the design hasn't changed one bit since then. The columned pergola that adorns the southeast corner of the terrace, for instance: *very postmodern*.

And after 30 years of being exposed to the elements, *very decrepit*. Seven of the 16 plaster columns have cracks running up their sides. Several of the quaint wooden benches have slats that are broken or askew.

While this isn't the only space from that era in need of loving care, it's the one that's most madding. Here's a unique setting already embraced, but it could be so much more.

Contrast this with the recent renovations to the spacious plaza at 303 Second St.

When this two-building low-rise opened in 1989, it was positioned as a little bit of suburbia in the city; after all, back then the corner of Second and Folsom was off the downtown map. The large central plaza offered seating and sun. It also was stiff and statuesque.

These days, Second Street is the main pedestrian link between the Financial District and the ever-livelier environs of South Park and Mission Bay. An edgier look was called for.

The plaza now sports broad wooden lounging areas that take their cues from New York's High Line. Pyramid-like landscape features were lowered and topped with miniature meadows ideal for sprawling. They also sprout tall bands of steel that loop above an existing watercourse, a 75-foot-long sculpture by Jon Krawczyk that makes it clear Things Have Changed.

The redesign by Gensler and landscape architects Smith + Smith is part of a larger update of 303 Second for owner Kilroy Realty. What I like is that it shows an awareness of what our corporate spaces can be: enticing places to gather and unwind.

"You want to have shade, you want to have sun, you want various seating options, and you want to have food," says local landscape architect Ken Kay, who has done several Financial District plazas.

You also want owners who care. Or who realize, like Kilroy, that one way to put yourself on the map is to create opportunities for potential tenants and shoppers to enjoy one of the most beguiling big cities on Earth.

Place appears on Wednesdays. John King is The San Francisco Chronicle's urban design writer. E-mail: jking@sfgate.com

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