

SUBSCRIBE

Sign In

LOCAL SPORTING GREEN ELECTION 2020 BIZ+TECH FOOD CULTURE DESK DATEBOOK US & WORLD

# EMBARCADERO'S NEW HOMELESS Navigation Center a compassionate work of design

**John King** | Jan. 10, 2020 | Updated: Jan. 10, 2020 7:56 p.m.



A large main central courtyard is featured at the Embarcadero Navigation Center.

Photo: Photos by Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

It's a sad sign of the times that some of San Francisco's most creative

**1 Article Remaining**

Get unlimited digital access for only **95 cents**

SUBSCRIBE

**SUBSCRIBE** Sign In

LOCAL SPORTING GREEN ELECTION 2020 BIZ+TECH FOOD CULTURE DESK DATEBOOK US & WORLD

problem — the clean and safe common reality of men and women living on the streets.

That dynamic plays out in San Francisco's new Navigation Center on the Embarcadero, where three immense tents frame a courtyard behind 8-foot-high fences. This assemblage shares a triangular block with a parking lot and a 22-story condominium tower.



John Blanchard / The Chronicle

**1 Article Remaining** | Get unlimited digital access for only **95 cents** **SUBSCRIBE**

SUBSCRIBE Sign In

LOCAL SPORTING GREEN ELECTION 2020 BIZ+TECH FOOD CULTURE DESK DATEBOOK US & WORLD

...are aiming for concrete and practical designs, in a way that creates dignified living spaces," said Patricia Solis, an architect with San Francisco Public Works. "We're trying to gather insight from all the lessons we've learned, which are numerous."

## Unlimited Digital Access for 95¢

Read more articles like this by subscribing to the San Francisco Chronicle

SUBSCRIBE

San Francisco has opened 10 Navigation Centers since 2015, and all but two remain open. Their purpose is to provide round-the-clock refuge for homeless men or women who have been evaluated by outreach workers beforehand. Along with beds and storage space, there are social services to, ideally, transition clients into stable living situations.

The newest center isn't only the biggest, with 200 beds, it's by far the most visible — three rounded fabric tents rising along the Embarcadero at Beale Street just south of the Bay Bridge. It's so visible, in fact, that neighbors sued the city to block its construction.

The naysayers failed, and it opened in late December. Thirty residents have moved in so far.

You enter beneath a smart-looking canopy that extends nearly to the


---

1 Article Remaining | Get unlimited digital access for only 95 cents SUBSCRIBE

SUBSCRIBE

Sign In

LOCAL SPORTING GREEN ELECTION 2020 BIZ+TECH FOOD CULTURE DESK DATEBOOK US & WORLD

 **Did you know** you can access  
The Chronicle's photo archives?

 VIEW GALLERY

**Crowds arrive early on opening day of  
the Golden Gate International  
Exposition. Feb. 18, 1939.**

...cessions from the elements while they  
wait to go in; the tilt means that no  
drainpipe or gutter is needed. The door  
swings open slowly, automatically, so that  
someone in a wheelchair will have no  
problem entering.

I describe the portal in such detail because it  
embodies how the architects have tackled  
the design dilemma inherent to ad hoc

sanctuaries like this. They need to create a contained environment  
that's secure yet soothing. Durable enough to withstand damage from  
troubled residents, yet also offering comfort to people seeking to get  
themselves back on their feet.

That balancing act continues when the door closes. Outside the glass  
doors of the first tent there's a triangle of bare asphalt, evidence of the  
site's former use as a parking lot. Benches and potted trees will be  
added soon.

"This is going to be like the Garden of Eden when we're done," said  
center director Tony Chase of nonprofit manager Five Keys. His ardor  
extends to the men and women selected to live there: "We don't call  
them clients, we call them guests. Case managers are 'care managers.'  
We want to make this experience as pleasant as possible."

1 Article Remaining

Get unlimited digital access for only **95 cents**

SUBSCRIBE



**SUBSCRIBE** [Sign In](#)

[LOCAL](#) [SPORTING GREEN](#) [ELECTION 2020](#) [BIZ+TECH](#) [FOOD](#) [CULTURE DESK](#) [DATEBOOK](#) [US & WORLD](#)

in between the structures is an asphalt clearing that serves as the courtyard and includes a large sandbox where dogs can play. There are some tables and chairs, and metal poles that will be outfitted with sail-like canopies.

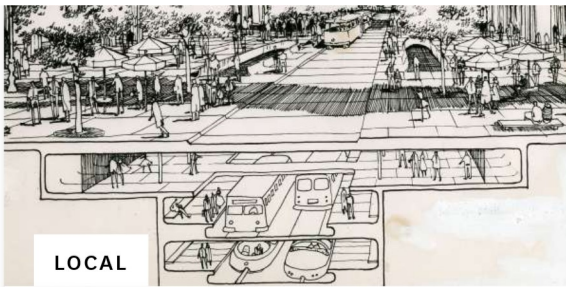
The initial plans included a colorful upgrade to the courtyard asphalt and planter boxes similar to those at the Central Waterfront Navigation Center in Dogpatch, but the final budget didn't allow for such niceties. The money instead went to locks for the storage boxes that residents slip under their beds and industrial-capacity water heaters in the detached rectangle holding the residents' shared bathrooms.

Where other centers made do with the modular bathroom trailers you might find at a construction site, the facilities here were custom designed. The goal was to build to the standards of what might politely be called a demanding clientele, yet not feel dehumanizing.

SUBSCRIBE

Sign In

LOCAL SPORTING GREEN ELECTION 2020 BIZ+TECH FOOD CULTURE DESK DATEBOOK US & WORLD



LOCAL

BY JOHN KING

## A visionary plan to rid SF's Market Street of cars — in 1963



LOCAL

BY JOHN KING

## At north edge of SF's Presidio, new park connects people to bay

The extra-large water heaters are one touch, ensuring that hot water doesn't go cold when a procession of residents take showers. Motion-activated faucets are another, so that water doesn't run ad infinitum. The floors are covered in epoxy, helping with traction, and they slant slightly toward multiple drains so puddles don't form.

As for rods that hold the shower curtains, they're thick metal bolted into place.

"You could do a chin-up on them," said Charles Bloszies, the local architect who worked with G&G Builders on the construction documents for the center.

The customization makes things hardier. It also allows residents to feel a bit more like they're guests, to use Chase's word. The shower stalls, for instance — each is accompanied by a changing area, also

1 Article Remaining

Get unlimited digital access for only 95 cents

SUBSCRIBE

SUBSCRIBE

Sign In

LOCAL SPORTING GREEN ELECTION 2020 BIZ+TECH FOOD CULTURE DESK DATEBOOK US & WORLD

So is dignity and humanity.”

This extends to the communal sleeping areas within the spacious volumes of the tents fabricated by Sprung Structures, which more commonly makes event tents and greenhouses. The first Navigation Centers didn’t have partitions between beds; subsequent ones did, but barely. Now they’re 5 feet long and nearly as high.

Seeing a large navigation center amid a scenic corner of the city is jarring. It’s also reality. To the extent that a facility like this can take a few people off the street and, with determined luck, help restart their lives, it’s a change for the better.

John King is The San Francisco Chronicle’s urban design critic. Email: [jking@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jking@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@johnkingsfchron](https://twitter.com/johnkingsfchron)

### Sign up for Breaking News alerts

Get critical updates on the biggest stories in the Bay Area.

SIGN  
UP

By subscribing, you agree to our [Terms of use](#) and acknowledge that your information will be used as described in our [Privacy Policy](#).

1 Article Remaining

Get unlimited digital access for only 95 cents

SUBSCRIBE

SUBSCRIBE Sign In

LOCAL SPORTING GREEN ELECTION 2020 BIZ+TECH FOOD CULTURE DESK DATEBOOK US & WORLD

Your California Privacy Rights  
Interest Based Ads  
Terms of Use  
Careers  
Advertising

NEWSROOM

Ethics Policy  
Correction Policy  
Visual Ethics Guidelines  
Anonymous Sources Policy  
Endorsement Process  
News Tips

CONTACT

Customer Service  
FAQ  
Newsroom Contacts  
Homepage Redesign Feedback

CCPA

Do Not Sell My Info

SERVICES

Profile  
Subscriber Services  
e-edition  
App  
Archives  
Membership  
Store  
Subscription Offers  
sfgate.com

HEARST newspapers

1 Article Remaining | Get unlimited digital access for only 95 cents SUBSCRIBE