

SQUARE FEET

The Warriors Get a New Home, and New Neighbors

Chase Center, in San Francisco's Mission Bay, seeks to anchor more than an N.B.A. franchise.



A pavilion outside Chase Center, a \$1.6 billion basketball arena in San Francisco that opened in September. Jason Henry for The New York Times

By Brian Libby

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Before the Chase Center opened in September in San Francisco's Mission Bay, developers knew the \$1.6 billion basketball arena had to be more than the home of the Golden State Warriors. They wanted it to be a community gathering space, too.

"If you go to Chase Center, you're not just going to one place," said René Bihan, a principal at SWA Group, the arena's landscape architect. "You're going to start in one place and wind up in another one and go through several different experiences when you get there."

Those experiences include a farmers' market and neighborhood events, as well as an interactive installation by the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson consisting of five polished spheres facing one another, creating a hall-of-mirrors effect.

"Who wants to see yourself from all angles?" the Warriors' president, Rick Welts, asked facetiously.

Yet that is very much the intent of the arena: a four-sided urban site with no visible back of the house. Chase Center includes parking for 900 vehicles, all underground, freeing space for additional structures. Two office buildings on the site will be occupied by the ride-sharing company Uber as part of its headquarters in Mission Bay. A hotel is also planned, along with Thrive City, a dining and retail complex created in a partnership with Kaiser Permanente to promote health and wellness in the neighborhood.



"Seeing Spheres," an interactive installation by Olafur Eliasson at Chase Center. Jason Henry for The New York Times

“The most expensive part of the project, relatively, is what’s below us,” Mr. Welts said, referring to the underground component, which was reinforced to protect it from the nearby San Francisco Bay.

“We had to construct a giant watertight enclosure below the arena. But it made it possible to have all 360 degrees on the street active.”

Chase Center and its broader development reflect the changing economics of sports. The project did not receive any public funding, which increased the importance of other revenue-producing sources, including real estate development and a heightened focus on concerts and other live entertainment.

“We’re seeing a trend since the Great Recession that, with some notable exceptions, cities have been much less willing to open up a

pocketbook and fund a stadium or arena,” said Michael Leeds, a Temple University economics professor and co-author of “The Economics of Sports.” “You’re not going to cover expenses just 50 nights a year with basketball. So you really need something for the other 300-plus nights that’s going to bring in some revenue.”

The Warriors initially planned to build their arena on another site to the north, Pier 30-32, which offered postcard views of the Bay Bridge. But after it became clear that an Army Corps of Engineers easement would substantially delay groundbreaking, the team shifted its focus to Mission Bay, buying land from the software company Salesforce, which had planned a headquarters campus there.



A public park being built across Terry A. Francois Boulevard. Jason Henry for The New York Times



Cutouts of Golden State Warriors players outside the arena. Jason Henry for The New York Times

Mission Bay, a district of about 300 acres, was created in the 1870s with fill. It was long an industrial area of rail yards and warehouses, but by the 1980s, it had become “kind of a no man’s land,” said John Rahaim, the city’s planning director. After removing the railroad tracks, the city bequeathed about 43 acres to the University of California, San Francisco, for a research campus.

The university presence helped create an economic engine around biotech, but it “didn’t create the vitality it might have had the land developed more organically,” Mr. Rahaim said.

Despite those drawbacks, the neighborhood has been growing. Not only have companies like Gap and Uber built headquarters in Mission Bay, but housing is on the increase. Mission Rock, a 28-acre mixed-use community set to begin construction in 2020, will add about 1,200 housing units less than a mile from the San Francisco Giants’ baseball stadium, Oracle Park. But so far, there has been a scarcity of retail in Mission Bay.

“We saw the Chase Center as a chance to rethink it a little bit and change that paradigm,” Mr. Rahaim said.

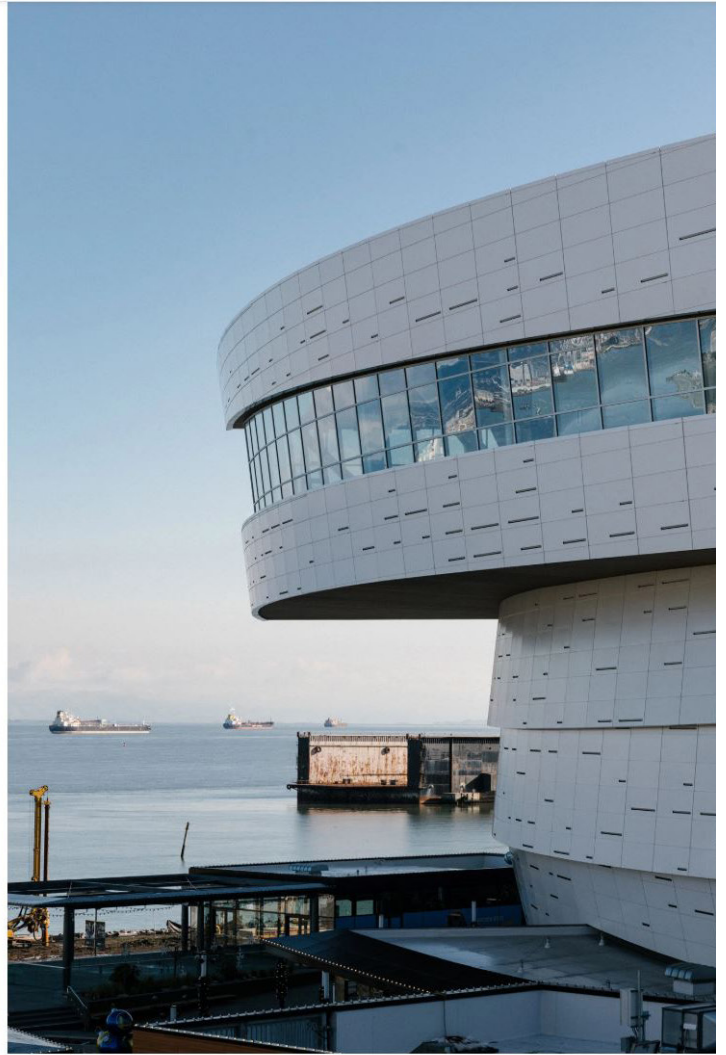
Part of the solution is Thrive City, an area that stretches from the development’s waterside edge at Terry A. Francois Boulevard, where a city park is under construction, to Third Street, the more urban western boundary. There, in a public plaza beside the arena that can accommodate up to 2,000 people, visitors can watch Warriors games on a large video board or patronize an array of ground-floor restaurants set to open over the next year.

Peter Guber, a Warriors co-owner, once said he would consider the project successful only if the neighbors hung out in its plaza on nonevent days, said Mr. Bihan of SWA.

“The most important thing is that people absorb an experience that sticks with them when they leave,” Mr. Bihan said.



The Third Street entrance to Thrive City, a retail and dining complex. Jason Henry for The New York Times



Ground-floor restaurants set to open over the next year. Jason Henry for The New York Times

Chase Center is designed to be as conducive to concerts as it is to basketball games. For example, the arena's video scoreboard, the largest in the N.B.A., lifts mechanically into the ceiling, after which two horizontal doors close over it. This offers visitors a better view of the stage.

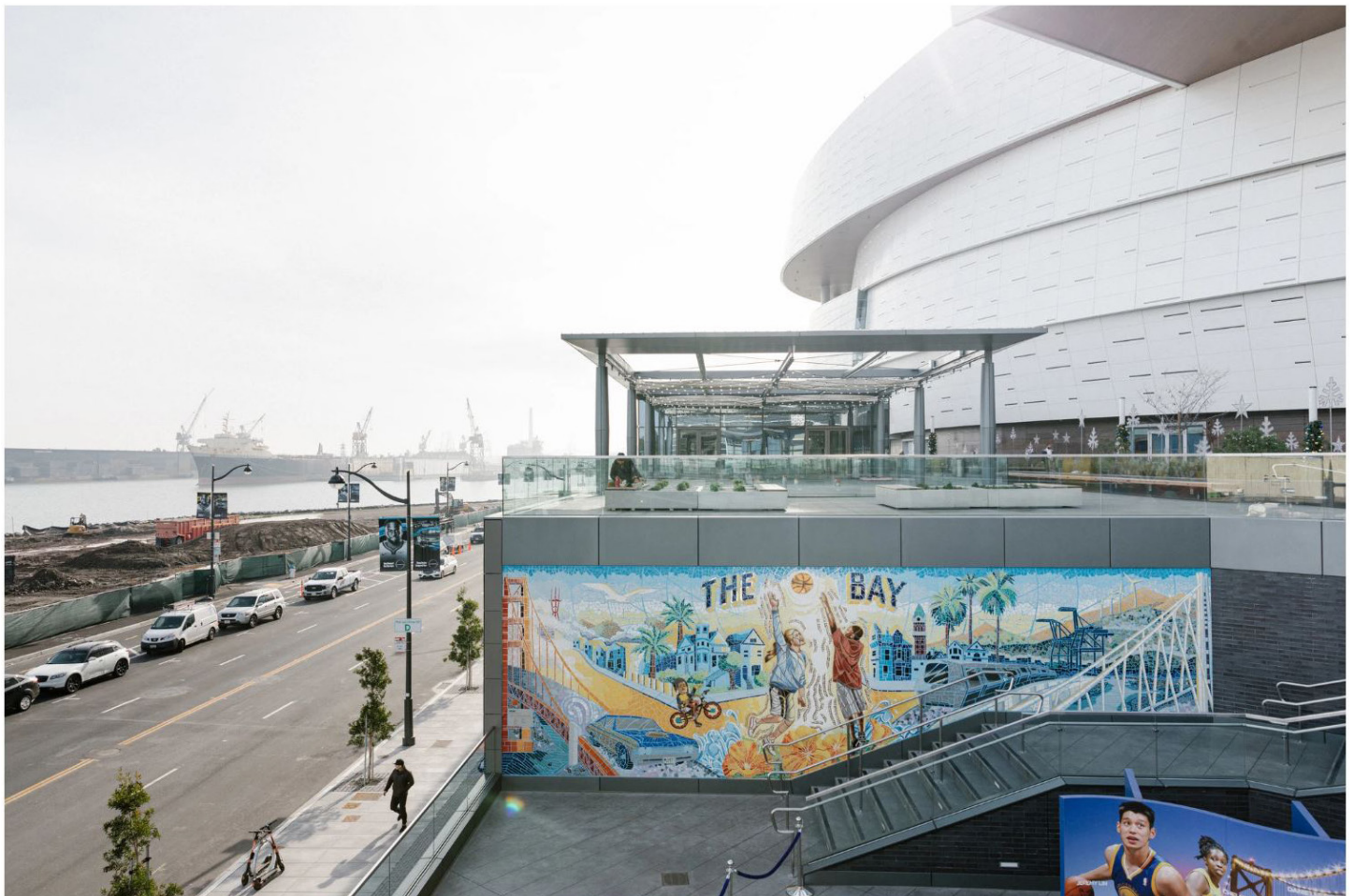
Representatives of other N.B.A. teams reacted to the disappearing video board with both wonder and bafflement, said David Manica, founder of Manica Architecture, which designed the arena along with the architecture firm Gensler.

“Owners would say, ‘That’s an amazing idea,’ but every time the conversation got to cost, feasibility and what it took structurally, nobody could fathom being able to do that,” he said.

Yet Mr. Manica believes the disappearing scoreboard increases operational efficiency and, therefore, revenue potential. “It was expensive,” he said, “but it allows them to hold more events in a shorter amount of days.”

The Chase Center’s underground garage is reserved for Warriors players, staff and premium season-ticket holders, and a large garage across the street is not available during Warriors games or concerts. There is also not a direct subway connection. But about one-third of Chase Center attendees are taking mass transit, according to the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, easing traffic concerns.

“All indications are that it’s working shockingly well,” Mr. Rahaim said.



Chase Center was privately financed, which increased the need for other sources of revenue. Jason Henry for The New York Times

Even skeptics so far seem pleasantly surprised. “It hasn’t been Armageddon,” said Mark Christiansen, a co-leader of the Mission Bay Alliance, which opposed the arena largely because of traffic concerns. “Just some low-level gridlock.”

More transit options are coming to Mission Bay, including a city ferry terminal and a new bus connection to the area’s rapid transit system.

But the district’s infrastructure has not been tested at full capacity, said Clare Hansen Shinnerl, senior associate vice chancellor for campus life services at the University of California, San Francisco.

“In some ways, we’ve been a little lucky,” she said, noting the decline in attendance for Giants games in 2019, down by an average of more than 8,000 from its 2016 peak.

Despite a dismal record this year after injuries to star players like Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson, the Warriors have routinely sold out the Chase Center’s 18,064 seats.

“I can’t wait to see all the elements when they’re fully formed,” Mr. Welts said. “That’s the whole idea. You can curate your trip each time with different experiences.”