

Neighbors pull out stops for cable car

Proposal to turn terminus into destination spot

By John King | Tuesday, October 26, 2021

California Street cable car unrolls a vivid sequence of San Francisco sights: Nob Hill mansions and Chinatown shops, views north to the bay and south into a tumble of towers and hills.

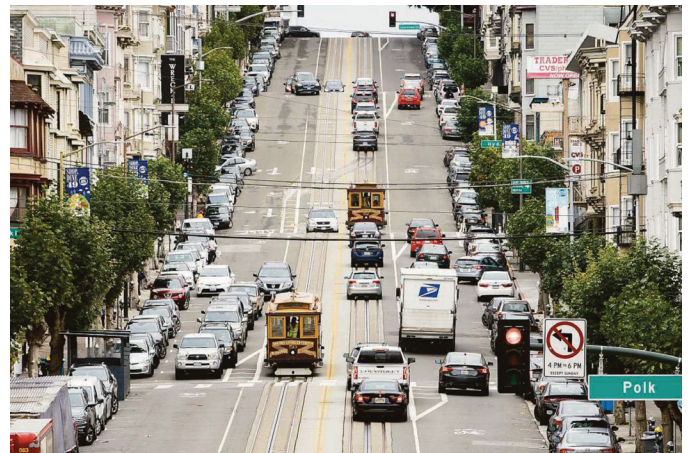
Only to leave you at a glorified bus stop on a drab block with two lanes of traffic on either side.

That, anyway, is the scene for as long as anyone can remember on the California Street cable car line, which dates back to 1878. But now, with cable cars locked into lore as a constant attraction in a changing city, a handful of Polk Street neighborhood organizations are exploring ways to make it into something more.

"It's very much driven by the fact that this could be such a place," said Zoe Astrachan, co-founder of Interstice Architects, a small firm that's been in the Lower Polk area for six years. "We're not looking to do anything overcomplicated, but to make a pretty big change."

The effort is a variation of what goes on across the city: Community groups shape ideas and then see if they have enough traction to gain support and funding from City Hall.

In this case, the starting point is the westernmost spot where residents and visitors can catch those little cars that climb halfway to the stars.



The California Street cable car line passes great sights but ends in a drab terminus near Van Ness Avenue. (Photos by Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle)



Zoe Astrachan (left) and Andrew Dunbar created a conceptual design to upgrade the line's terminus to draw visitors to the Polk Street shops.

The terminus, located just east of Van Ness Avenue, consists of a narrow median that holds a bus shelter and a cryptic, tall wooden box that contains sand used by cable car drivers to improve the traction for the brakes and cables when needed. A small traffic direction sign is set square in the middle of the median's access ramp.

The conceptual design drawn up by Interstice would replace this with a wider and longer median, removing one lane of eastbound automobile traffic in the process. The shelter would make way for a tilted canopy wide enough to cover the new platform. There would be wider sidewalks and generous newstreet trees on either side.

The aim of all this, suggested Interstice co-founder Andrew Dunbar, is to turn the westernmost spot on San Francisco's cable car system into a "green moment"—something that is comfortable and more pedestrian-friendly indicator, as well as a visible oasis that would serve to signal, in a sense, that you're part of something special.

The \$35,000 study was funded by the Lower Polk Community Benefit District, which sees another purpose—to raise the prominence of the Polk Street commercial blocks that, yards away, stretch to the north and south. There are destinations such as Swan Oyster Depot around the corner, but also no shortage of empty storefronts.

"We have a real untapped potential if this terminus becomes something that people find attractive, that they want to visit," said Chris Schulman. He's executive director of the benefit district, which is funded by local property owners.

Other aspects make the transformation worth pursuing, he hastened to add.

"We also want to create a safe resource for residents" who use the cable cars in their daily lives, Schulman said. "This would be a tangible improvement."

The plan, which designers estimate would cost somewhere between \$5 million and \$10 million to build, evolved from online community workshops that coincided with the early months of the coronavirus pandemic.



A rendering of a conceptual design to upgrade the existing drab terminus of the California Street cable car line. Interstice Architects.

Schulman admits he initially heard complaints about misplaced priorities—beautification of a transit stop when residents and businesses are hurting.

But proponents emphasize that conceptual visions are a way to embark on the process of getting agencies on board. If an idea wins favor at an official scale, it can be incorporated into upcoming capital improvements efforts—as has been the case with an alley improvement effort nearby that gained city support after Interstice and another community group, Lower Polk Neighbors, released it in 2016.

With an eye to practicality, Interstice held meetings with representatives from Public Works and the Municipal Transportation Agency as the conceptual design for the terminus evolved. More elaborate visions—such as an actual turnaround a la the one at Powell and Market streets—were soon discarded.

The transportation agency said in a statement Thursday that whatever the merits of such a makeover, "we do not have bandwidth or resources to move forward right now."

That's to be expected, proponents say.

"We know that this is a major project that will take a number of years," Schulman said. "But you have to start with a vision before getting something done."

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