

INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENT #1

WALKING MINI AUDIT

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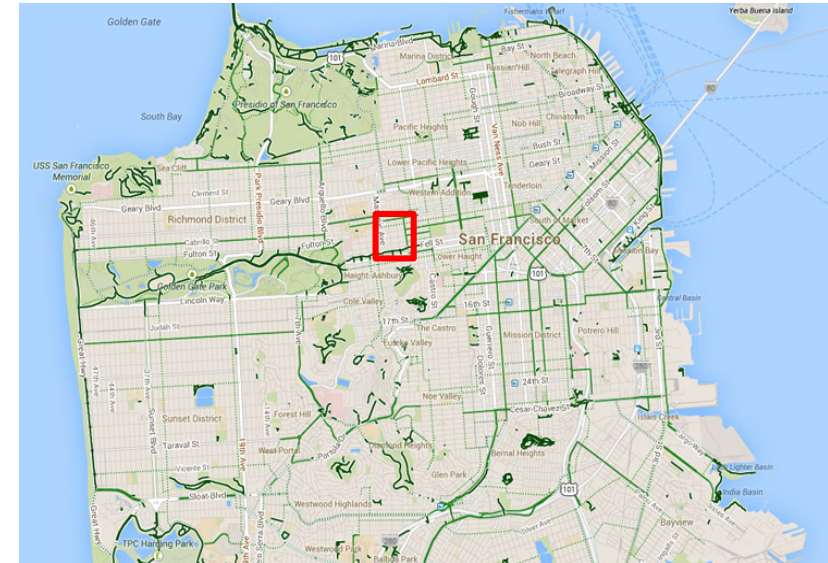


AUDIT ROUTE: PANHANDLE NEIGHBORHOOD, SAN FRANCISCO

I conducted my walking audit in my neighborhood, where I have lived since 2010. I live in San Francisco near the “Panhandle,” a generally residential area, with many Victorian homes. The neighbourhood is bordered on the east and west, respectively, by Divisadero, a predominately commercial street, and Masonic, a busy street that cuts north-south across the city. It extends about six blocks north of the Panhandle park, a thin extension (1 block wide, 8 blocks long) of Golden Gate Park.

The exact name of the neighborhood is sometimes debated. For many years it was called “the Panhandle” or “North of the Panhandle.” It is technically a subsection of Western Addition. More recently this area has been referred to as “NOPA” on city maps, in tourist books, or by realtors, although residents will often refuse to use the acronym.

The debate over the name may reflect sensitivities around gentrification. After World War II, the Western Addition became a population base and cultural center for San Francisco’s African American community. Over time, the economic and demographic makeup of the area changed, with many areas undergoing gentrification, including the Panhandle. The impact is most clear on Divisadero, where many small, Black-owned businesses have been replaced with high-end restaurants and shops. This includes the highly rated restaurant “NOPA,” which opened in 2006 and is widely credited for helping the new nickname for the area stick. Today the median price for a 2BR condo in the Panhandle is \$1.4M and the average rent for a studio apartment is \$2,568/month.



HEALTH ASSETS: WALKABILITY AND TRANSIT

One of the largest health assets in my neighborhood is the walkability and accessibility to multiple modes of transport. The streets follow a traditional grid-like pattern, with 4-way stops or lights at each block. Sidewalks are generally wide and flat, making for easy walking.

Within the 3-4 block radius of my audit, there are four different bus lines. There is ready access to services such as Scoot (rental scooters), Uber, Lyft or taxis that make it easier to be car-free.

Biking is also supported. I observed three "Go Bike" stations (electric-assist bikes available for short term rentals through an App) during my audit, as well as dedicated bike lines on several streets. The Panhandle is part of "the wiggle," which is the flattest route to downtown: critical for bike commuters to avoid the San Francisco hills! Lastly, my audit walk included a recent project that overhauled the busy street Masonic to include a median with trees and dedicated bike lanes.



Panhandle bike path



New bike lane on Masonic

HEALTH ASSETS: ACCESS TO FOOD AND HEALTH-ORIENTED BUSINESSES

The Panhandle is bordered by a major commercial area, Divisadero Street, but there are restaurants, shops and other services sprinkled throughout the entire neighborhood. A major grocery store, Lucky, is at the corner of Fulton and Masonic. There are smaller grocery stores or corner markets, cafes, and a mix of restaurants along Divisadero, although many of these are specialty shops and/or expensive. A farmer's market is held every Sunday on Grove street, between Broderick and Divisadero, all year long.

The neighborhood has a handful of yoga studios and meditation centers. Unfortunately the community acupuncture clinic closed last year.



Yoga and Meditation

Farmers market at Grove and Divisadero

HEALTH CHALLENGES: HOMELESSNESS, SAFETY, EQUITY

The Panhandle is not immune from San Francisco's homeless challenge. The proximity to Golden Gate Park and Haight Ashbury means that it is relatively common to see homeless people sleeping in doorways, on the street, or in the Panhandle. I have had to redirect my children around needles or drugged-out people on the street, within blocks of (or directly in front of) our house. There is also crime in the area, primarily thefts or drug possession.

It is hard to ignore the equity issues in the midst of the gentrification. Homelessness exists side by side with a booming housing market. Many of the residents in the area benefit from rent control laws, but if they were to lose their housing it would be unlikely that they could afford the market rate in the same neighborhood. Further, as the neighborhood continues to evolve, many of the new businesses in the area are higher end and of limited use for daily life.



Chronicle / Mark Costantini



HEALTH OPPORTUNITIES: SOCIAL COHESION

The Panhandle is a typical San Francisco neighborhood consisting of mostly houses with one or more commercial areas within a mile (in my case, Divisadero, but one can also walk to the Haight or Hayes Valley in 15-20 minutes). If desired, daily tasks such as laundry, haircuts or shopping can be done within short walking distance. It is not uncommon to know the people who work in local businesses or see your neighbors out on the streets. I have two children that attend the local elementary school (six blocks from our house), which has significantly increased our connections with the local community.

There are some, but not many, dedicated community gathering spaces. During my audit I was surprised to count up the number of schools, retirement communities or small churches within the four block radius. But there are relatively few gathering spaces other than parks that are designed for general community interaction. Over the years I have observed the success of physical spaces such as “parklets” along Divisadero; these are always full of people. Annual neighborhood events such as “City Streets” where local residents close the streets, barbeque, and have games for kids, or the “Art Walk” along Divisadero, which features local artists, always bring out a good crowd. The ready uptake of these spaces or events suggests that there is an inherent interest and desire for community building.



CONCLUSIONS

- Living in the Panhandle area supports physical health. Multiple modes of active transport, pleasant weather and open spaces make it easy to be outside, and active. In a sense the Panhandle is the “best of both worlds” as it is a relatively quiet residential area near a park that can readily access the City’s transit infrastructure.
- The gentrification and rapid increase in the cost of living creates challenges from an equity standpoint. The community that lives in this area remains diverse, as it is a mix of old and new residents. For many, the high cost of housing is a source of stress. And while there are technically a number of health-supportive businesses in the area, many of these are expensive.
- There are opportunities to promote social cohesion in the neighborhood, which can, in turn, have a positive impact on physical and mental health collectively. Care should be taken to keep the diversity of the neighborhood in mind to ensure that community spaces and/or activities are beneficial to and reflective of the entire community.

