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Secret Geography

Discovering secret geography -- the alleys and small streets, often with shops and restaurants, that are largely invisible from major streets -- you begin to feel ownership over a slice of the city.

By Adam Rogers
Sep 24, 2003



As a recent transplant to San Francisco, I've begun to think that it may well be the most beautiful city in the country. No zealot like a convert, I guess. But I've figured out one of the city's aesthetic tricks--something I've started calling "secret geography," though I'm sure smarter thinkers on urban design have better language. I'm talking about alleys and small streets, often with shops and restaurants, that are largely invisible from major streets unless you're looking for them. They're a more intimate, human-scaled urban experience literally in the shadows of skyscrapers.

My favorite example is Belden Pl., 100 meters of restaurants cutting between Pine and Bush, parallel to Kearny and Montgomery. Walking along Kearny, the only hint that eight high-quality restaurants lurk a few steps away is a neon sign high up along the Bush side of the alley. If you're driving, the sign's nearly invisible. The restaurant fronts are brightly colored, with Spanish-tile faux roofs. Low iron stanchions delimit the narrow sidewalks (more for show, since gates at either end of the alley can block out automobile traffic).

But at night Belden's magic really

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By *Carol Coletta*



Belden Pl., San Francisco



Belden Pl., 100 meters of restaurants cutting between Pine and Bush.

shows. On a recent warm evening, the alley was packed with diners eating outside, family-style tables packed in wall to wall. And above them strings of white Christmas lights glowed. It's a simple thing, but it speaks to cooperation among restaurant owners, who know that diners are as likely to show up at Belden Place to eat at one restaurant as at any other, I imagine. The lights set up a unique, magical space that, despite how crowded

Aug 25, 2005

Cities aren't in decline. The way population change is "measured" by the Census Bureau leaves much to be desired, writes Carol Coletta in this week's Op-Ed. But even if cities were in decline, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success. What is ironic about these estimates and the misleading story of decline that has been spun around them is the fact that cities no longer have to grow big to grow wealthy. For the first time, according to research from CEOs for Cities, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success.

[From NIMBYs To DUDES: The Wacky World Of Plannerese](#)

By Ric Stephens

Jul 26, 2005

Ric Stephens has compiled a list of some of the wackiest -- yet at times quite realistic -- urban planning words, in a vocabulary he has dubbed 'Plannerese.' This week's Planetizen Op-Ed includes a selected glossary of the terms, in addition to 'A Modern Fairy Tale in Plannerese,' which looks at a typical planning issue through the humorous lens of planning jargon.

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Hotaling Pl., San Francisco



Hotaling Pl., at the heart of historic Jackson Square.

Washington that terminates at the foot of the famous TransAmerica pyramid. It's in the heart of a historic district called Jackson Square, two- and three-story brick buildings dating to the 1800s that now house galleries, law offices and antique stores. Hotaling has one of those antique shops, a high-windowed, green and gold storefront. It also has, maybe most notably, the back door to the Bubble Lounge, a popular nightclub.

But instead of hiding this door, Bubble Lounge celebrates it with a banner and two ornamental streetlights. Next door, the Villa Taverna has its own ornamentation-more lights, and an ancient Roman-styled relief above the door (with two brass plaques reading "private club" and "members only"). At the Washington

and popular the restaurants are, still manages to feel special and exclusive. And the night I drank Lillet at Plouf, the lights at the Pine end of the alley were off -- and no one was eating at the tables under the dark bulbs.

A more subtle byway is Hotaling Pl., a narrow lane between Jackson and

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end is Elisabeth Daniel, one of the city's best restaurants. Hotaling is Elisabeth Daniel's gallery and advertisement, with windows displaying the bustling kitchen and an array of fancy glassware. Stanchions topped with tiny horseheads and (more importantly, I think) a wavy pattern molded into the pavement distinguish the alley's space from the streets around it. Walking along Hotaling you're aware at an unconscious level that it's a microcosm, a cool side street that, were it less well-planned, might've been a grimy back alley.

Finally, just a block away from Hotaling is Gold St. It actually forms a T with another alley at mid-block, the wonderfully-named Balance (there's obviously a lot to love about the intersection of Balance and Gold-recently telephone poles there and at Hotaling announced hearings to approve the imminent closure of both alleys for a couple days in October for a wedding reception and a rehearsal dinner).

There's not much on Gold besides a hip restaurant-jazz club built into a historic brick building. The joint has a neon sign and blue lights to illuminate the entrance, and even Zagat, Rosetta Stone for decoding any city's foodie culture, says the bar is a place for locals in the know. That's the power of an alley, the ability to convey the illicit excitement of a speakeasy.

The lesson of secret geography isn't lost on designers of theme parks or so-called "urban entertainment destinations" like Los Angeles' Grove at Farmers' Market or West Palm Beach's CityPlace. Both of them have main thoroughfares, echoing great European streets like Barcelona's Las Ramblas. And both have smaller shops on narrower corridors that mimic side streets (even though they often lead to parking structures).

As a fellow fan of cities pointed out to me in college, side streets reward explorers with discoveries that feel exclusive even though they're actually quite egalitarian -- anyone can walk the streets of a great souk. Even better, in decoding secret geography you begin to feel some ownership over a slice of the city -- and you start to honestly believe that your town is the most beautiful one in the country.

[Adam Rogers](#) is a Senior Associate Editor at [Wired](#) magazine in San Francisco. He was a 2002-2003 Knight Science Journalism Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he focused on urban ecology and design.

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