



67<sup>2009</sup>

# Materials and Details

**SLA** URBAN GARDEN IN NØRRESUNDBY, DENMARK • **HERZOG & DE MEURON** PLAZA DE ESPAÑA, TENERIFE • **MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH ASSOCIATES** TEARDROP PARK, NEW YORK • **D.I.R.T. STUDIO** URBAN OUTFITTERS HEADQUARTERS, PHILADELPHIA • **CMG** MINT PLAZA, SAN FRANCISCO • **AGENCE TER VACHE NOIRE** ROUNDABOUT, FRANCE • **MAYSLITS KASSIF** TEL AVIV PORT, ISRAEL • **HASELL** NICHOLSON STREET MALL, MELBOURNE • **LA DALLMANN** CROSSROADS PROJECT, MILWAUKEE • **MCGREGOR+COXALL** WINNER OF THE TOPOS LANDSCAPE AWARD 2009



Jaime Gross

# MINT PLAZA in San Francisco

A once derelict urban space in downtown San Francisco today serves as a vibrant plaza catering for the needs of local people. The design also provides a prototype for a city-wide solution to stormwater management.



Gray terrazzo-style pavers cover the L-shaped plaza. A steel arbor structures its north side. 100 orange chairs allow visitors to find their favored spot to sit.

Just three years ago, this stretch of Jessie Street in downtown San Francisco was a gritty back alley, populated by parked cars, pigeons, and the down-and-out. On one side of the street sat a Vietnamese sandwich shop and a budget SRO hotel; on the other hulked the granite and sandstone Old Mint, a Greek Revival building that dates from 1847. The building was one of the rare survivors of the earthquake and fires that devastated the city in 1906; then, it served as a gathering place for the community in the disaster's aftermath. The building currently sits empty, awaiting 60 million dollars in funding to transform it into a history museum.

Today, the neighborhood has a new beacon: Mint Plaza, an L-shaped pedestrian plaza filling the footprint of the once neglected alley. Hugging the Old Mint's north and west-facing facades, the 18,000-square foot plaza (1,670 square meters) provides much-needed public space in an inner city neighborhood that sorely lacks it otherwise. The sandwich shop and SRO hotel are still there, but they now share plaza frontage with popular restaurants, cafes, and newly renovated live-work lofts and office spaces. The project was spearheaded and funded by a local developer, Martin Building Company, which owns five buildings abutting the publicly owned plaza.

Mint Plaza was designed by CMG Landscape Architecture, a San Francisco firm founded in 2000 that has quickly become integral in shaping all scales of the public realm in the Bay Area. Early on in the Mint Plaza project, the design team held a series of public workshops to gather community input, as well as engender sustained neighborhood ownership of the new project. Although San Franciscans are better known for contention than consensus, what emerged from those meetings was a desire among residents, workers, and business owners for "a space that was flexible and could function in lots of different ways," says Scott Cataffa, who served as project manager. "They wanted farmer's markets,





A native oak tree marks the plaza's eastern entrance. A grove of ginkgos forms a counterpart at the western end. Wooden benches border the rain gardens.

outdoor concerts, dance lessons, sculpture.” To encourage this civic vitality, Martin Building Company helped found a non-profit organization, Friends of Mint Plaza, which will program and maintain the plaza in perpetuity.

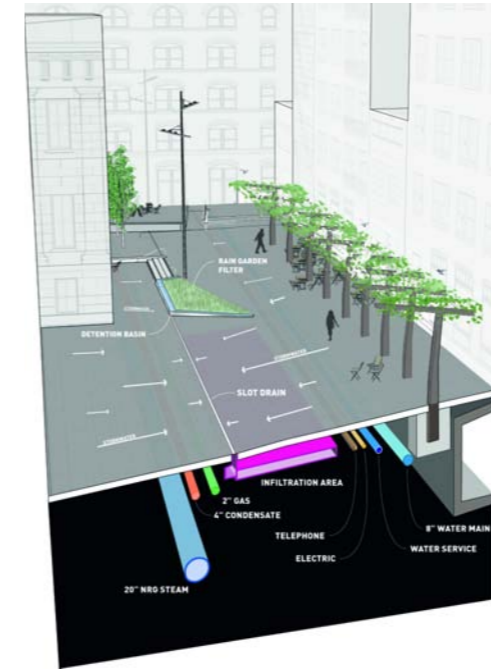
The designers envisioned a democratic zone that welcomed everyone, with wall-to-wall paving, active edges, and an open plan whose character was defined by its users rather than by form or style. Such accessibility was critical, the designers felt, to balance some of the gentrifying economic forces inherent to the project. Willett Moss, the principal on the project, describes the approach as “thick urbanism”: integrative, inclusive design that fosters a richer, more diverse urban ecology.

The resulting design is as humane as it is iconic. Warm gray terrazzo-style concrete pavers provide a neutral backdrop for plaza activity. A statuesque native oak tree anchors the plaza's eastern entrance. A grove of ginkgos at the western end creates an inviting place to gather, their lime green foliage seducing passersby from a distance. But the brightest jolt of color – and the clearest expression of the plaza's accessibility and flexibility – comes from the one hundred orange chairs scattered about, allowing visitors to shape their own experience, whether gathering with a group of friends, or finding a solitary spot in the sun or shade.

The plaza's field of paving subtly shifts and tilts, suggesting rather than defining zones for dining, performance and passage. The articulated planes also serve a critical role in the plaza's stormwater management systems. Like many older cities, San Francisco is served by an aging sewer system that combines both storm and sanitary flows. During large storm events, the flow exceeds treatment plant capacity and untreated effluent is discharged directly into San Francisco Bay. By retaining and infiltrating flows on site – up to a 100-year storm event – the plaza design serves as a prototype for a distributed, city-wide solution to stormwater management and treatment. The planar grading directs stormwater into either rain gardens planted with native reeds, which filter first-flush pollutants before allowing the water to percolate through the sandy soil, or into discreet slot drains that lead to a sub-grade infiltration basin. The infiltration basin employs a purposely low-tech system based on sanitary leech field technologies to achieve a low cost, easily replicated model for stormwater management in dense urban environments.

A steel arbor runs along the north side of the plaza, entwined with flowering trumpet vines that bring green into the heart of the plaza without taking up much space or light. The arbor's strong sculptural form establishes a distinct identity for the urban landscape. It also drops the scale of the buildings and structures of the

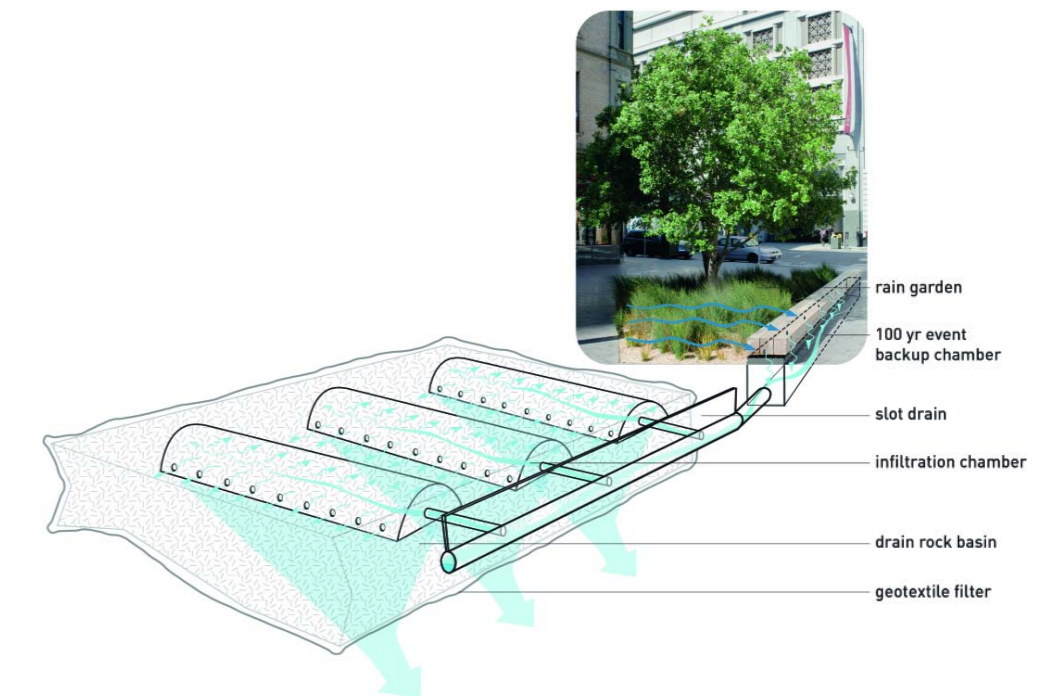
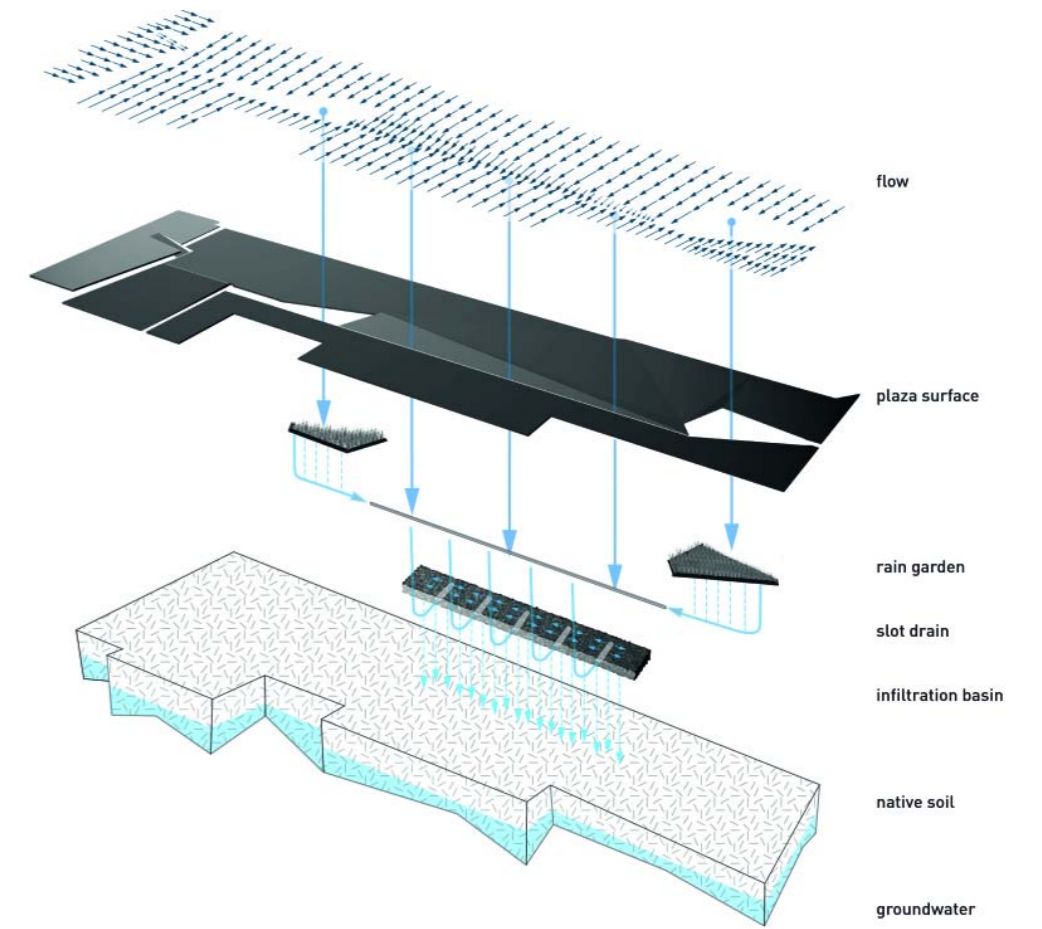
MINT PLAZA, SAN FRANCISCO, USA  
 Client: Martin Building Company for the City of San Francisco  
 Landscape architects: CMG Landscape Architecture; San Francisco; Willett Moss, Chris Guillard, Scott Cataffa, Margot Lystra, Erik Hanson, John Bela, Danielle Meyer  
 Collaborators: Ephram Hirsch (structural engineer), Sherwood Design (civil engineer)  
 Completion: 2008  
 Area: 18,000 square feet (1,670 square meters)  
 Costs: 2 million US dollars



otherwise largely open space, funneling pedestrians through in the mornings, and sheltering café tables in the afternoons and evenings, when the ground-floor bistro is open. At night, three 40-foot tall mast lights (12 meters) throw dramatic pools of light onto the concrete pavers, transforming the plaza with a playful effect.

The opportunity to walk or sit beneath the arbor, to pass through pockets of light and dark, and to arrange the chairs to one's liking, creates an endless variety of experience for the visitor – a feature of landscape architecture that Moss thinks is too frequently dismissed or overlooked. “A visitor's sensory encounter in a space is a critical function of design,” says Moss. “In order for a public space to be meaningful, it has to be memorable. Novelty and variety and a sense of physical engagement – how your body understands a space – are what embeds a place in your memory, and makes you want to return.”

As an urban stage, the new square attracts a vibrant and diverse cast – and plenty of repeat visitors. This project offers proof that with the right mix of pragmatism, invention, and community investment any derelict urban space can become a catalyst for future growth, and a model for smart development. Mint Plaza's flexible design ensures that it will stay relevant to this community, even as their neighborhood continues to evolve.



The paving directs stormwater into either rain gardens or slot drains that lead to a sub-grade infiltration basin. Native reeds in the rain gardens filter first-flush pollutants.