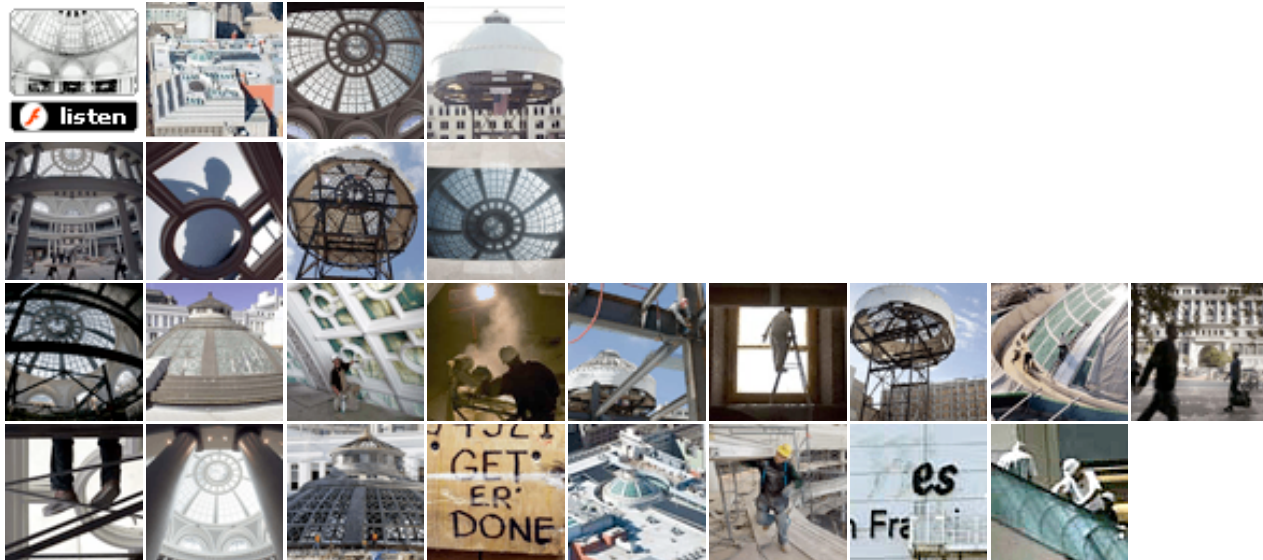


## [A rebirth on Market Street](#) [Expanded Westfield San Francisco Centre](#) [opens this week](#)

- [Carl Nolte, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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If you wait long enough, they say, everything that is old will become new again. Bloomingdale's, the fashionable New York department store, opens this week. It is part of the new, expanded Westfield San Francisco Centre on Market Street, in the space that once housed the old Emporium, one of the oldest established names in the city's retail past.

The Emporium's principal store was in a seven-story neoclassical building designed by architect Albert Pissis and was one of Market Street's defining landmarks until it was closed on its 100th birthday in 1996.

The developers have kept the Market Street facade of the 1896 Emporium and built the center's expansion around the glass dome that was the centerpiece of the old Emporium. Everything else is new.

What the developers have done, said Helen Bulwik, managing director of a retail consulting firm, is to revive the old Emporium space, which for a century anchored the heart of downtown Market Street. "It's a rebirth," she says.

She compares the change to the overhaul of the old Ferry Building at the foot of Market Street, which was transformed three years ago from years of neglect into a mix of shops and a farmer's market. It was an instant hit.

When the Emporium opened in the spring of 1896, it was advertised in newspapers as "The most beautiful store on earth" with 15 acres of floor space, a "grand display of a million-and-a-half dollars worth of all good kinds of merchandise," and a concert by the Emporium orchestra under the dome. The first number was "The Emporium March," composed for the occasion by orchestra leader John Marquardt, followed by 11 other selections, including the thundering "William Tell Overture."

San Francisco was still in the gaslight era, but the Emporium boasted 10,000 electric lights and its own power plant.

"Indeed, the most brilliant and dazzling spectacle ever seen in San Francisco," the store claimed.

Despite all that, the store was not an instant success. Henry Derman was brought in as manager in 1897. His motto was "organize, capitalize, harmonize, systemize, economize, advertize!"

The Emporium had retail space on the first two floors and offices on the rest. The California Supreme Court rented space on the third floor. After Derman came on board, it sent buyers to New York to bring back stylish East Coast goods -- a first for West Coast department stores. So many shoppers showed up at Christmastime that there were fears the floors might collapse.

The great 1906 earthquake did not badly damage the building, but the firestorm that followed destroyed the stock, and all the records, including the accounts receivable. The store reopened that summer in temporary quarters on Van Ness Avenue.

It took 2 1/2 years to rebuild the Emporium. The only remnant of the old Emporium was the facade, and the 1908 Emporium had a brand new glass dome 110 feet high. They are the only elements to survive the Westfield's remodel.

In the Roaring '20s, the Emporium marketed to middle-class San Franciscans. There were definite class distinctions in those days, and many old-line San Franciscans would not shop at the Emporium. For one thing, it was on the south side of the street of Market, which for years was a social dividing line.

Alice Hare, this reporter's grandmother and an old-time San Francisco lady, was shocked when her daughter-in-law took her two boys to see the Emporium Santa Claus one Christmas season. "What kind of Santa," she wanted to know, "would be found South of Market?"

The Emporium was the biggest department store west of Chicago, or so it claimed. There was a flower stand in front; even the street peddlers were genteel. By the main entrance, a blind man named Anthony Barrett sold lavender in little packets from 1910 until his death in 1955.

In 1936, the Emporium was the first big store in San Francisco to install escalators.

After World War II, the store rides on the roof at Christmastime, fondly remembered by generations of San Francisco kids. There was a Ferris wheel, and one year the store even hired a crane and hoisted a cable car to the roof. This was no fake cable car; it was a car that used to run on the old Sacramento Street line. Only the real thing would do for the Emporium.

The company, which for many years was owned by local tycoons, expanded all over the Bay Area. The first branch, opened in 1950, was in the Stonestown Shopping Center. Eventually there were 21 satellite Emporiums, from Santa Rosa to Concord. The most distant was in Salinas.

Before World War II and just afterward, when San Francisco saw itself as the center of its own little world, the city's top stores were I. Magnin, Joseph Magnin, the City of Paris, H. Liebes, the White House and Livingston Bros.

"A gift from I. Magnin had panache. It was where you went to buy a special birthday present or a gift for a child when only the best would do," wrote Pat Steger, a Chronicle reporter who wrote an obituary of the store when it closed in the first week of 1995.

The I. Magnin store was so snooty that some said the "I" in the store's name stood for "intimidating." The old-line San Francisco stores were civic institutions; Herb Caen called Cyril Magnin of Joseph Magnin "the merchant prince." When he died, a street was named for him. A school was named for Raphael Weill, founder of the City of Paris.

The Emporium was hardly in this league, but it had its own San Francisco niche: The store was opened every morning to the sound of a bugle call, and sales ladies not properly dressed were sent home.

Middle-class San Franciscans and working people shopped there. In those days, every San Franciscan, no matter how poor, still wore their Sunday best to go downtown. But then the city changed; families moved to the suburbs. Discount stores sprang up, styles became more casual. The Emporium seemed

out of date, like last year's sport coat.

The store did not survive the corporate shakeouts that rolled through the retail industry in the 1980s and '90s.

It became part of three chains, finally ending up as part of the 82-store Broadway chain. It went through an identity crisis: For a while it called itself The Big E, then it acquired the Capwell stores in the East Bay and became Emporium-Capwell, then The Emporium again and finally just Emporium.

It had a hard time competing with Macy's, said Harry Bernard of Colton Bernard Inc., a retail consulting firm. Then Nordstrom, famous for its service, moved into the San Francisco Centre, which had opened next door. The Emporium's identity was blurred, and its quality slipped. "It had stopped being the queen of Market Street," he said.

"The Emporium didn't stand for anything. It didn't stand a chance," Bernard said.

In 1995, Federated Department Stores, owner of Macy's and Bloomingdale's, bought the Broadway chain, which owned the Emporium. The Emporium was doomed.

There was a lot of nostalgia when it closed. Everybody said it was the end of an era.

Bernard doesn't buy that.

"What happened," said Bernard, "was that wonderful thing called progress."

Except for a brief period when the building housed Macy's furniture department, the store stood empty, like the ghost of Christmas sales past. Finally, in 2002, the developers moved forward with plans to turn the old space into the expanded Westfield San Francisco Centre.

The developers gutted the old building, saving the facade and the dome. And now it will be reborn.

In Helen Bulwik's view, these are the good old days for retail shopping in San Francisco. "Now," she said, "it's better, way better. I would say San Francisco is one of the top five retail locations in the world."

A new destination store, she thinks, will rise from the bones of the old Emporium. "There are no ghosts there," she said. "After all, everything does change."

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