

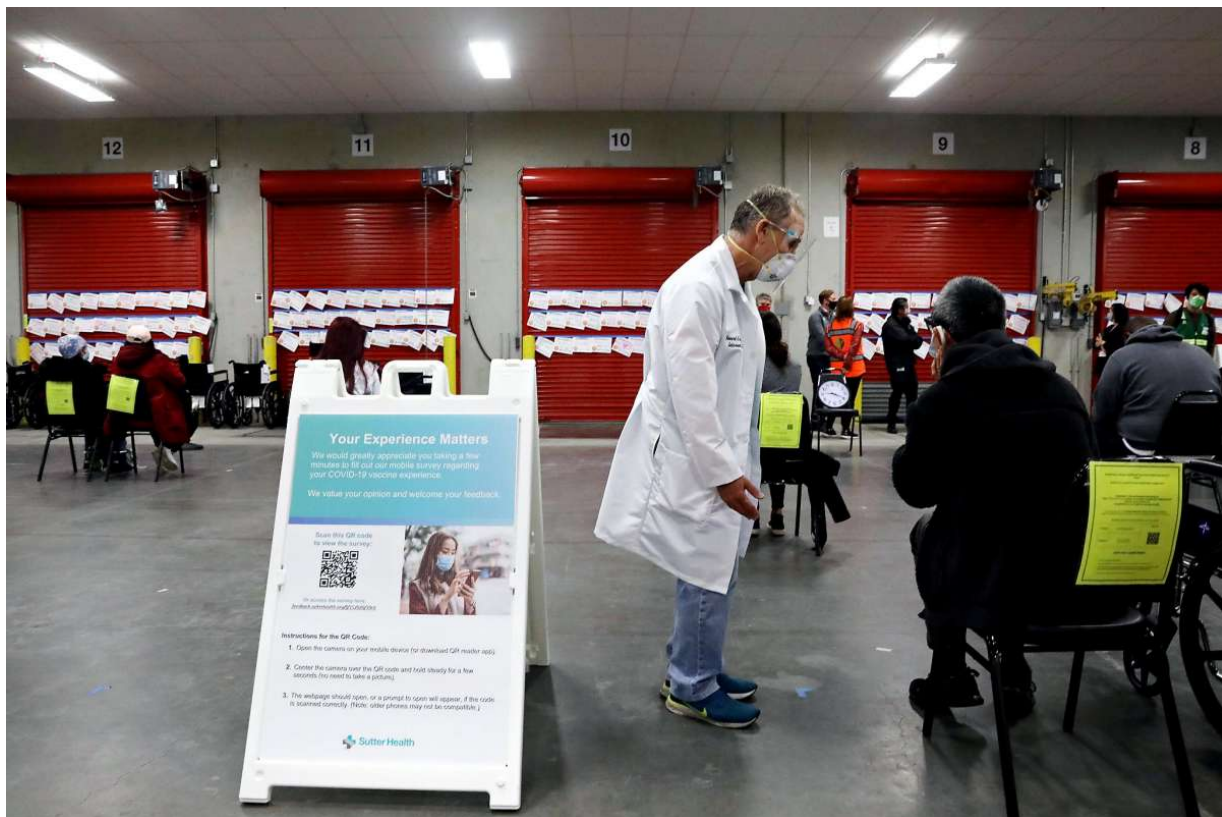
LOCAL

From empty shells to vaccination hubs: Why vast urban buildings can be essential in the pandemic

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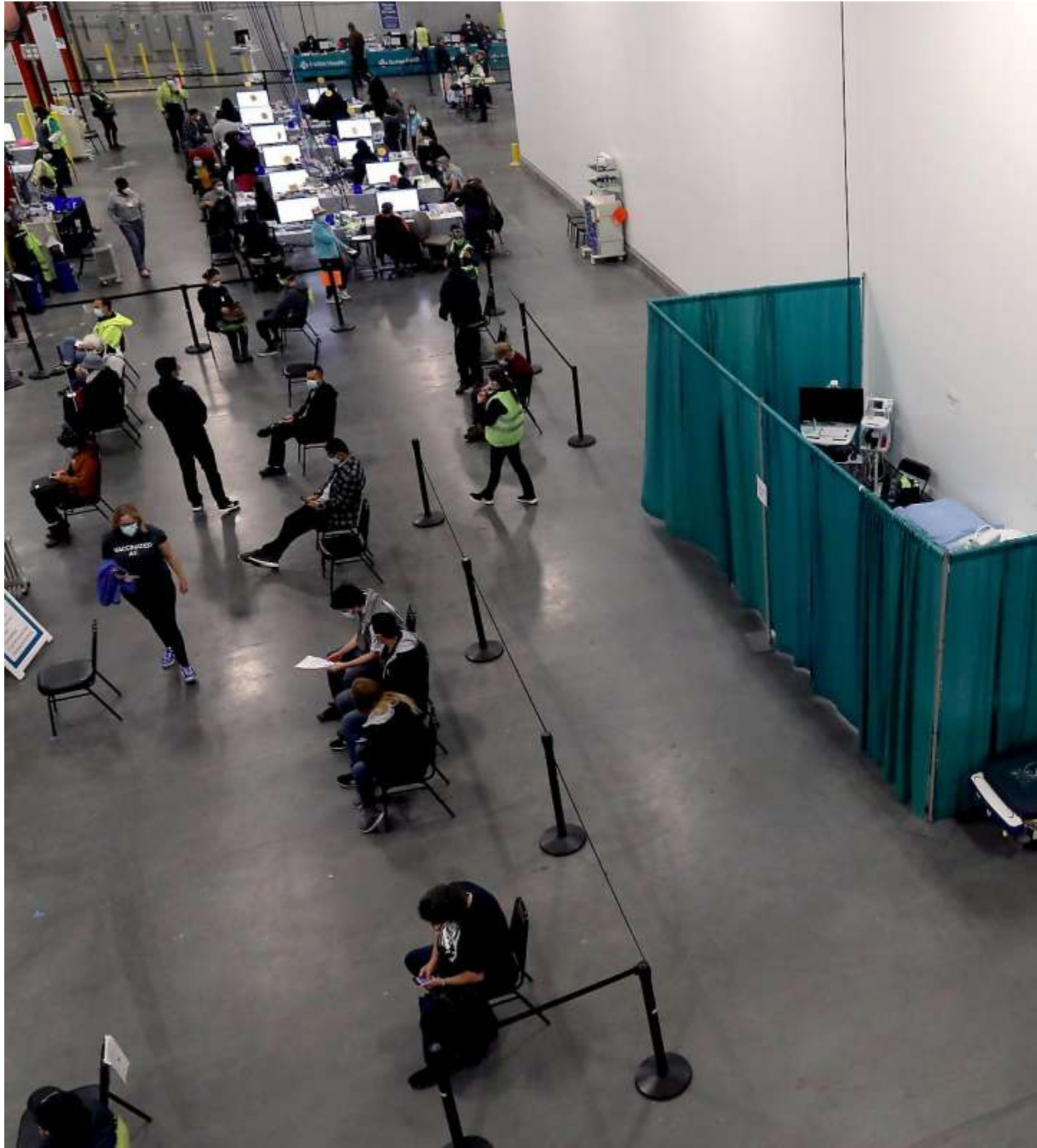
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Dr. Howard Edelstein, a Sutter Health infectious disease and internal medicine specialist, works in the observation area at a vaccination hub in a formerly vacant produce warehouse in the Bayview district.





Here's a Bay Area trivia question that could only be asked in 2021: What do a produce market, an airport parking garage and at least two convention centers have in common?

The answer is an easy-to-miss sign of these strange pandemic times: They're large urban structures that have been pressed into service to combat the spread of COVID-19.

Each holds a mass vaccination center that uses empty space as a choreographed and meticulously planned venue. There's also a subtext that holds true throughout the evolution of cities: Once a building exists, it can live lives that nobody involved in its creation had planned.

"What's great is how fast we're able to turn things around when there's a need," said Elizabeth Brott, Sutter Health's principal architect. "A public health crisis, we can go in and make just about anything happen."

Sutter is putting the vaccine into peoples' arms in perhaps the oddest pandemic pop-up of all — a vacant produce warehouse in San Francisco's Bayview district has been transformed into a vaccination center equipped to give as many as 1,000 shots a day.

The warehouse built in 2014 includes large coolers, which are ideal for storing medical supplies. There's ample outdoor parking. Ventilation is no problem, since one wall is punctuated by 29 loading bays with roll-up doors.

On the other hand, the coolers sit in the middle of the vast space, so mapping an effective layout was tricky — especially since extra-wide aisles were needed along the perimeter so people can evacuate quickly if there is a fire. The lack of heating required space heaters for the individual vaccination stations as well as for the 60 staff and volunteers on the scene each day. That meant boosting the structure's electrical capacity.

"There were elements we had to work around," conceded Brott, who is pleased with how the space has functioned since the Feb. 15 opening.

This also was the case with the long-term-parking garage at San Francisco International Airport that San Mateo County is now using.

The garage is meant to hold 3,109 cars, but there's been little demand in the past year because of the pandemic's impact on air travel. Couple seven floors of space with easy freeway access, and the mammoth concrete box made sense as a drive-through vaccination center.

When SFO offered the garage, San Mateo County said yes. Airport staff restriped paving and removed wheel stops from parking spaces to allow 12 vaccination service lanes on each floor. County technicians installed Wi-Fi.

"Large concrete structures aren't great for reception," pointed out Jon Walton, director of the county's Information Services Department. That's an obstacle for the more than 50 staff members who would use laptops to review or update information from each car-bound visitor at several stops along the way.

The real-time makeover at Moscone South convention center didn't involve utility upgrades, since the facility reopened in 2019. However, the subterranean exposition hall where Kaiser Permanente chose to set up shop is where the city has been storing COVID-related supplies; the huge structure already had been recast last February to serve as San Francisco's emergency operations center.

"You can't believe how much we had to clear out" in terms of everything from personal protective equipment to supplies for the city's neighborhood "education hubs," said Mary Ellen Carroll, executive director of the city's Department of Emergency Management.

"Within 48 hours we had it done," she added with pride.

These aren't the only such unusual cases of making a structure or setting meet the medical need. The Oakland Coliseum's huge parking lot is the Bay Area's best-known vaccination site. Kaiser Permanente Arena in Santa Cruz, usually home to the Golden State Warriors' farm team, now is being operated by the venue's sponsor as a facility involved in much different types of shots.

“A large single-level linear space seems to be the ideal locale” for serving people being offered the lifeline of vaccination, said Ed Chan, an East Bay area manager for Kaiser Permanente. That medical provider now operates a vaccination hub in downtown Oakland’s Marriott City Center, using space that usually holds the Oakland Convention Center.

As many as 3,000 patients arrive daily for appointments, with those in cars helped by volunteers waving flags on adjacent streets. Once inside, all steps in the process are arranged in a horseshoe-like loop that concludes in a spacious area by the exit. There, people who received their shots are observed for 15 minutes.

The common thread in all this is that buildings, once they exist, are open to reinterpretation. This is nothing new — think of the brick industrial structures converted to loft housing in the 1970s and ’80s — but such flexibility is key to cities being able to adapt from one era to the next.

Or moving beyond a crisis that, literally, can be a matter of life and death.

“Marriott provided blank space for us to work with,” said Rita Ng, chief physician at Kaiser’s Oakland Medical Center.

That’s the other message here: No matter how much we tout the virtues of density, or pedestrian-scaled fine-grain neighborhoods, it helps for urban centers to include a few structures and spaces that in regular times seem overbearing.

The Oakland Coliseum is touted by many people as an ideal site for mixed-use development. Understandably so. But that plateau-scaled parking lot comes in handy when you’re fighting a pandemic.

Similarly, convention centers located in downtown areas can loom as land-consuming shells. But the same centrality that makes Moscone enticing to conference-goers makes it convenient for people coming from throughout the city.

With diligence and luck, our need for vaccination hubs will soon pass: “Everyone will be thrilled to return Moscone to the purpose for which it was built,” Carroll said.

What will remain is the reality that urban landscapes have hidden potential we tend to ignore — sometimes, until we have no other choice.

Editor’s note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly described the status of the produce warehouse at the SF Market in the Bayview. Though vacant, it remains intended for use as a warehouse. Also, the warehouse coolers in the center of the space are being used to store medical equipment used by workers.

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