City’s little boxes, but these look pretty good
by John King

It’s a sign of our continued economic torpor that San Francisco’s most engaging new buildings are nine shipping containers slung across two parcels where the asphalt poured for parking lots remains.

And it’s a sign of the disconnect in our society between ideas and implementation that the innovative development dubbed Proxy took nearly two years to reach its present form.

But while it’s here, enjoy an architectural work-in-progress that uses sturdy hollow metal to convey a core truth of big cities: often, what we savor aren’t individual landmarks or buildings so much as the overall sense of place.

The proxy project, a set of shops in repurposed shipping containers in San Francisco’s still-on-the-way-up Hayes Valley, is the work of Oakland architect, Douglas Burnham who made the containers serve as a flexible format for small businesses.

The still-evolving compound lines a block of Octavia Boulevard framed by the shops and cafes of Hayes Street on the north and the small but lively Patricia’s Green on the west. An alleyway runs through it. There’s a car-sharing lot in the back.

The lots are to be filled with housing as part of the transformation of the former Central Freeway path into a landscaped boulevard. But by the time the Board of Supervisors approved a neighborhood development plan in 2008, the recession loomed.

Now’s there’s an alternate reality, one that merges high style with roll-the-dice spunk.

The first customized containers debuted this spring, back to back, one housing artisanal coffee and the other a maker of ice cream by the scoop. A museum shop followed in July with outdoor exhibition space. Last month saw the opening of the largest component so far, a beer garden where five containers are deployed around picnic tables and a transplanted Redbud tree.

The guiding hand in all this is Oakland architect Douglas Burnham, whose firm envelope A+D infused the container forms - most of them roughly 20 feet long and 9 feet high - with a new
purpose. The goal was “flexible urbanism,” composed of simple elements easily revised or removed.

“This is an experiment in a way, to see how cities can adapt to how people today live,” said Burnham, who doesn’t anticipate Proxy being on Octavia past 2015. “The pace of society has really ramped up, and whether that’s good or bad this is an attempt to create a physical framework that can accommodate that.”

If the emphasis is on utility, neither design nor setting were neglected.

Glass ends were added to the spaces filled by Ritual Roasters and Smitten Ice Cream, allowing views to and from Patricia’s Green across the way. Outside Ritual is a clearing of decomposed granite with movable tables and chairs. Smitten opens onto a concrete patio framed by low benches that also serve to corral the toddlers brought here by parents.

As for the beer garden, it makes the most of its minimal elements: the mature Redbud is a visual anchor, a counterpart to the surrounding chain-link fence. A container used to store the picnic tables walls off one end of the site.

The shame is that all this took so long.

Burnham devised his concept in 2009 and it was embraced promptly by officials at the Mayor’s Office of Economic Development, who sought ways to activate the boulevard while construction lagged. But every item on the bureaucratic checklist that followed came with some obstacle to surmount.

“Interim uses don’t fit the structure of the building code,” Burnham explained. “Everything became a negotiation, and every negotiation takes time.”

The same holds true for utility hookups: a full year passed between the application filed for the beer garden, and
the lights coming on last month - barely ahead of autumn rains.

Proxy is still evolving.

The museum outpost along Octavia closes Nov. 20 and will be replaced in the spring by retail kiosks. A containerized art gallery is slated for one now-open spot, a double-height shoptainer on another. Next fall, Burnham hopes to replace the car-share lot with a tented event space.

Already, though, the promise is being fulfilled.

This isn’t about architecture so much as urban place making: you’re less aware of the structures than of the surroundings. The containers aren’t treated as sculptural elements, as is the case recently in other international cities. They’re content to add layers to the landscape, enlarging the Hayes Valley experience without making a fuss.

Skeptics can say the end result is precious, but so is the ever-more-rarefied Hayes Street scene. An interim use like this takes cues from the setting, then follows through in unpredictable ways. Every neighborhood has sites of similar potential. All we need is to find ways for them to happen.