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**“If we continue to give people reasons to come down, they will. Not only for a chess tournament, but maybe it’s paired with cocktails or dinner afterwards.”**

*Robbie Silver, Downtown SF Partnership*



Photos by Felix Uribe / Special to The Chronicle

Players compete in the Mechanics' Institute Tuesday night chess tournament, which is regaining popularity.

## Chess ritual may help check downtown loss

Players are coming back for Mechanics' Institute tradition

By Chase DiFelicantonio

Inside the Mechanics' Institute Chess Room in downtown San Francisco, Christian Brickhouse's hands dance and flutter over the chessboard as he replays his most recent match. He plucks a piece from its perch as he plays both sides of the board, showing how he fended off his opponent's Scotch Gambit opening to go on the attack, the review performance a common post-match ritual for serious players.

“This is where it gets away from him,” Brickhouse says of his opponent, his tone giddy as he displays how he managed to gain control of the center of the board and force his challenger to resign in defeat.

Cheaper pandemic-reduced rent, not chess, brought Brickhouse to San Francisco from his native South Bay, where he is a Stanford graduate



The quiet belies the charged atmosphere as chess players go head to head in the Mechanics' Institute Tuesday night tournament.

student. But the pandemic revived his childhood interest in the game while he was stuck in his Mission Bay apartment. Like many people sheltering in place, Brickhouse began playing online. Now, he hops an S.F. Muni Metro train most Tues-

days to head downtown and play live games in the Chess Room.

“I probably wouldn't be in this area at all” without those tournaments, he said.

While the city's economic center

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## FROM THE COVER

# Chess' appeal moves players to come back

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continues to be a more barren version of its pre-pandemic self and as Mayor London Breed has wrangled with companies over ordering their employees back to downtown offices instead of working remotely, events like these chess tournaments point to ways of bringing people back downtown organically without resorting to mandates or overhyped, one-off events.

The Chess Room also illustrates the change in how people use downtown destinations. Before the pandemic, more area workers would come into the institute's Chess Room on their lunch break or after work, said Kimberly Scrafano, the executive director of the Mechanics' Institute. The institute is a cultural bastion founded in 1854 and houses a library, literary events and the Chess Room, which is the oldest continuously operating chess club in the nation.

"There are fewer people downtown," Scrafano said. "People come in more for events but are not in the city every day."

She said the tournament and classes, especially for younger people, have driven interest, but the drop in foot traffic downtown has put a damper on even those draws.

Still, the attraction of an event like the tournament is visible in the crowded annex where Brickhouse is sitting. After the forced isolation of the pandemic, shouldering into shared spaces like the Chess Room alongside like-minded people comes with great appeal.

The Chess Room annex is a small, lively area, its walls and tables cluttered with golden trophies and faded pictures of past masters. This is where players decamp and discuss strategies after matches. Next door is the main room, where the tournament games take place — dozens of players sitting in silence as they go head to head.

By 6:30 on this particular Tuesday evening, the tables are mostly full of players in the near silent main room. The only noises are the dry tick of clocks being reset and the plop of felt-bottomed chess pieces hitting the boards, accompanied by the soft footfalls of players pacing between moves.

A teenage boy with a shock of coiffed red hair frowns down at a board. An older man flitting around the room with a white goatee and camo-patterned hat and pants surveys the games, his sweater emblazoned with the words "Chess Ninja."

Decades ago, in its heyday, the Chess Room was packed with a cross section of San Franciscans from all walks of life, dropping in for games over the board, said Chess Room Coordinator Paul Whitehead.

"When I joined the club in 1972, there were waiters from the Palace Hotel; there were doctors," Whitehead said of the



Photos by Felix Uribe / Special to The Chronicle

**The Tuesday night tournament: Before the pandemic, downtown workers dropped in to play at lunchtime and at day's end.**



**The staircase at the Mechanics' Institute, which was founded in 1854 and houses a library and literary events.**

players.

It's been a long time since downtown workers reliably crowded the Chess Room on their lunch break. During a recent Tuesday noon hour, the room was mostly empty except for a few people hovering around the boards and passing through the slanting afternoon light to use the restroom, mirroring the once-bustling but still sleepy Sutter Street outside.

"This place was nuts," when he first joined, Whitehead said. "(It was) packed with people all day and night long, and the club was open like to 11 (p.m.)"

The pandemic has taken its toll on the institution in other ways. Games and lessons moved online, and the Tuesday night marathon tournaments started coming back only last year.

"Even after (COVID-19), very few people have come back," said longtime regular player Tony Lama, on the sidelines of the tournament, his tan jacket, bushy white eyebrows and

clutched book of chess literature completing the picture of a devoted player.

"I don't know if it's because there are no office people," Lama said.

Elliott Winslow is another longtime Chess Room devotee who lives in Alameda but is drawn downtown for the tournament play. He holds the rank of international master, the second-highest rating behind grandmaster, but has fewer challenging opponents to face nowadays.

"There are fewer people overall," Winslow said. "We don't know what's happened to them. If they've died or moved away."

But Lama and Winslow are exemplars of the power that an event like the tournament has to create a sense of place out of what would otherwise be an empty room.

Lama said he lives nearby on Van Ness Avenue and no longer plays in the competitive tournaments. But he comes to watch the hushed, methodical tourna-

ment play, and compares notes with other players — the dozens of people whose presence turns the quiet Chess Room into a space humming with tension.

The majority of the players are men and boys, although there are a few women and girls. Most striking is the age gap between some players, with retired players pitted against young people yet to attend high school.

"Kids and adults love to play," said tournament director Abel Talamantez, reclining with his hands clasped behind his head in the Chess Room's office as players trickled in ahead of a Tuesday evening tournament. He said players are drawn not just to the competition but to the social opportunities chess affords.

That theory was borne out before the tournament even started. A young man hovering uncertainly near the entrance to the main room said he had just learned to play a few weeks ago and it was his first time there.

The young man, who would only give his first name, Joshua, said he worked on Market Street and was looking to face down an opponent in person, a much different experience than playing online.

That kind of organic draw to downtown is what Robbie Silver, the executive director of Downtown SF Partnership, the nonprofit community benefit district in the area, has been trying to spin up since the pandemic sent office workers home and took with them much of the economic lifeblood of the area.

Silver said his group has been in talks with the Mechanics' Institute, among other

businesses and groups, about ways to attract people downtown and keep them there, be it through light shows, street music or public art.

"We have a number of privately owned public spaces in alleys and back streets," Silver said. "What if we did a chess tournament outdoors?"

"If we continue to give people reasons to come down, they will," Silver said. "Not only for a chess tournament, but maybe it's paired with cocktails or dinner afterwards."

Back in the annex, Brickhouse, the Stanford student, is resetting the board to go over his tournament win from last week, mostly from memory. One table over, Lama is walking through a recent game while behind him a wizened player with white hair and a cane is schooling a younger man in the finer points of the Trojan War. A smiling portrait of longtime world champion Magnus Carlsen, who has said he will not defend his title next year, looks down from on high.

As Brickhouse re-creates the endgame of last week's match, he muses on how dead Mission Bay and downtown were when he moved to the city in December 2020. But with the tournaments back in person, there's more of a spark energizing the area.

If he worked downtown would he come into the Chess Room on his lunch break to play a casual game?

"Yeah," Brickhouse said after a moment of consideration, "I probably would."

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