

CMG Landscape Architecture: San Francisco Civic Center Public Space Plan

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In 2017 the City of San Francisco issued a request for proposals (RFP) for the Civic Center Public Space Plan. The lead consultant, also known as the Prime Consultant--the firm holding the contract with the City and directing the consultant team--could be a planner, architect or landscape architect. In response to the RFP, CMG Landscape Architecture organized a team of primarily local firms and submitted a proposal that included an approach to the project, outline of the planning and design process, and an estimated fee for all services. Three teams were selected by the City to be interviewed, two architecture firms and CMG. Following the interviews the CMG team was selected to be the City's partner in developing a vision for the revitalization of Civic Center.

San Francisco's Civic Center as it is understood today dates back to 1912 when initial city planning ideas by renowned City Beautiful planner Daniel Burnham were realized through a winning plan in a design competition by Bay Area architect John Galen Howard. The plan represented Beaux Arts practices of the time and described rational organization of a district with a new layout of streets, and government, court and cultural buildings. However, implementation of the plan was never fully realized. It developed piecemeal over the past century and remains incomplete. While some city blocks were re-organized and buildings constructed in time for the Panama Pacific Exposition (World's Fair) of 1915, other contributing buildings and public spaces were built in later decades, with the most recent--the new Main Library--not complete until 1996. In the course of the past century, original buildings have become underutilized, and some are now empty because of concern of collapse in an earthquake.

The original plaza that was the public center of the district, and a forecourt at the steps of City Hall was replaced with a "mid-century modern" design, built in the 1950s as the cap to an underground convention hall and parking garage. While the new plaza attempted to re-present organizational principles of the Beaux Arts plan, primarily with attention to axial and symmetrical relationships, it did not provide a particularly habitable nor functional public space. The plaza's center was bisected by a long pool with fountain jets, and rows of pollarded, heavily pruned, trees, that fundamentally undermined its value as a gathering place. Original design ambitions of the new plaza were further diminished by removal of planting and trees around the perimeter shortly after its completion that resulted in an environment that provided little enclosure and wind protection. In the 2000s, the fountain was removed, along with all seating. The lack of utility as gathering space, the unappealing environment, and predominance of individuals exhibiting, for many, antisocial behavior--most visible as encampments and intravenous drug use--provoked the late Mayor Ed Lee to task his Planning Department to organize and implement a process for the rehabilitation of Civic Center; the fourth attempt in as many decades.

In spite of physical failings, since 1916, Civic Center Plaza and the district at large has been the core democratic public space of San Francisco, in our opinion the most important public space in the City. All significant protests and celebrations take place in Civic Center. Most recently and most notably the annual Pride parade and the recent Women's Marches each attract almost 100,000 people to the center of the City. This project, the Civic Center Public Space Plan, is part of a larger effort led by San Francisco Planning, the Civic Center Public Realm Plan project, which will represent a unified vision for long-term improvements to the area's public spaces and streets. The Plan builds on partner projects in the area, including new playgrounds, by the Recreation and Parks Department and The Trust for Public Land, and the Civic Center Commons, an initiative by the Mayor's office of Economic Development that prioritizes bringing more positive and inclusive activity to the area through interactive art installations and play

structures, public space stewardship, new workforce development partnerships, and more frequent programs and events.

The ambition of the project as defined by the Planning Department was uniquely compelling to CMG. We have been focused on urban open space projects in the Bay Area and specifically in San Francisco since the office was established in 2000. Improving San Francisco's social and ecological well-being through landscape design has been the mission of CMG since we began. Providing a vision for the revitalization of the City's Civic Center amounted to an apex of our work in San Francisco because both the challenge and ambitious scope of project are at the heart of our city.

PROJECT PROPOSAL

Civic Center is the most important *civic* space in San Francisco, the heart of the democratic process in the City, and a vital neighborhood open space with unique opportunities and challenges. CMG has developed a vision for Civic Center's three public spaces – Civic Center Plaza, United Nations Plaza, and the block of Fulton Street that connects them – through a community-based process that encouraged participation and conversation. The vision plan presents a public space for all San Franciscans; a ceremonial gathering place that welcomes everyday use and inspires civic pride.

The concept design for Civic Center represents eighteen months of community and City stakeholder input and fulfills the ambitions of the 1912 Beaux Arts plan: cohesion across the Civic Center Landmark District, ceremonial spaces with capacity for large demonstrations and celebrations that commemorate civic life and history, and intimate spaces that create daily destinations by supporting diverse experiences and amenities. Seven public space principles were developed with stakeholders throughout the plan. These principles will serve as touchstones for the development of the design, implementation, and management of the project as it evolves:

- A landmark that celebrates shared history and tradition
- A flexible, accessible, inviting place for all to gather
- The City's cultural hub and political heart
- A source of beauty, delight, and wellness
- The safest place in San Francisco
- A generous space that meets the basic needs of diverse publics
- Designed + managed through an inclusive process that fosters equity

The vision responds to three main challenges of the physical environment at Civic Center: the car-centric, fragmented public realm; a generally uncomfortable and bleak environment; and few provisions for basic needs that would invite people to visit and to linger. Existing playgrounds, a new cafe, ongoing activation and stewardship through the Civic Center Commons Initiative, and a weekly Farmers Market have demonstrated how the addition of specific amenities and events fosters and strengthens community bonds and identity, through shared use and embodiment of civic values. These lessons are extended throughout the district in the Plan, as the vision addresses these challenges through three design goals:

- A Landmark District: Within the overarching Beaux-Arts structure of axial relationships and symmetry, spaces are arranged for performance, recreation and gathering.
- A Flexible, Accessible, Ceremonial Gathering Space: Playful places to see and be seen in frame flexible plazas for events and festivals, in which the diversity of culture unique to San Francisco can be celebrated.

- An Inviting Place that Welcomes Everyday Use: A variety of features and amenities are distributed across the public realm, to invite people from all over the City and all walks of life to enjoy these important public spaces on a daily basis.

The vision plan unifies the public realm through an expanded plaza footprint, creates multiple locations for civic gatherings connected by a generous civic promenade, actively engages adjacent civic and cultural institutions, and incorporates existing and new program uses that support vital public life at all hours of day and night. Creating an elegant oasis that honors the Beaux-Arts setting, the vision weaves together art, ecology and commerce in ceremonial and neighborhood spaces that commemorate San Francisco's history and civic life. Within the overarching Beaux-Arts structure of axis and symmetry, spaces are arranged for performance, recreation and gathering. Playful places to see and be seen frame flexible plazas for events and festivals, in which the diversity of culture unique to San Francisco can be celebrated. A variety of features and amenities are integrated to invite people from all over the City and all walks of life to enjoy these important public spaces on a daily basis. Most significantly, the vision plan is the graphic device that represents multiple interests and voices, and describes a path forward to revitalization of Civic Center.

PROJECT PROCESS

CMG led a team of ten consultants on this inter-agency effort spearheaded by the San Francisco Planning Department, which included eight City departments and engaged over sixty community organizations. City departments, in addition to Planning, included the Recreation and Parks Department (RPD), Municipal Transportation Agency (MTA), Department of Real Estate, Department of Public Works (PW), Mayor's Office of Economic Development (MOED), SF Arts Commission, SF Public Utilities Commission (PUC). Other City agencies participated at various points in the process including leadership from the adjacent Public Library and Asian Art Museum—both City institutions—and the city's district supervisors, City Manager and Mayor. Planning coordinated City engagement with the consultant team through CMG. Weekly meetings were held between CMG and the Planning Department's project leaders. At the culmination of each of three phases of work, the planning and design team presented to the agency staff of each City department participating in the project. Material would be revised based on staff review and comment, and then presented to the City department Directors. Agency staff had also reported to, and advised their directors based on their initial review of material.

As the project advanced from analysis to the proposal of a concept design, the City Manager and Mayor reviewed material and made comments that informed the final graphic material. Multiple City voices reflected the multiple ownership and managerial jurisdictions the Civic Center district falls under. For example, Civic Center Plaza is controlled by RPD, the subterranean convention hall is owned and managed by Real Estate, while the parking garage is "owned" by RPD but is managed by MTA. The process on the part of the planning and design team often seemed as political as it was a creative and visioning exercise because of the need to capture and reconcile different and sometimes conflicting department goals. Iterative design plans, each a representation of varied goals, were useful tools to confirm the planning team was listening to multiple constituencies inside the government agencies and outside.

CMG selected a team of consultants familiar with the City and well regarded for their individual areas of professional expertise. Additionally, the City of San Francisco requires a percentage of the total contract amount--the amount of money paid to the consultant team--to be for services provided by Small Business Enterprises (SBE). Small Business Enterprises are defined as firms based in San Francisco that earn less than a specified amount of money per year. Additional merit for consideration by the city is

achieved if the SBE is owned by women or a racial minority. The CMG consultant team consisted predominantly of SBE. We are fortunate to have local firms considered best-in-class that met the SBE criteria. Where there was not a local SBE that could provide necessary services, firms of national reputation and expertise were retained. Notably this included Gehl Architects. The Civic Center Public Space Plan originally began with the Planning Department hiring Gehl Architects to prepare a Public Space Public Life Survey (PSPL). This survey and its recommendations set clear goals for the project relative to what the planning and design should address to increase use of Civic Center and the diversity of its users. On the CMG team, Gehl was present to ensure that the PSPL survey information was utilized fully to inform development of the vision plan.

Civic Center serves diverse users and communities. A quick consideration of these varied communities illustrates the opportunity to address many different interests: residents, families, homeless residents, tourists, a large daily workforce population, protesters and celebrants, concertgoers, museum visitors, and dignitaries. Understanding Civic Center's unique communities and resources is paramount to its improvement as a space that resonates with and is authentic to San Francisco. The process for developing the vision plan has been as important as the vision itself: fostering community trust by maintaining transparency, listening to the concerns from the full spectrum of project stakeholders, and engaging residents who do not feel they have a stake in the vision. The process focused on reaching traditionally underserved communities, particularly bilingual and monolingual constituents, through public workshops, focus groups, meetings with community and institutional stakeholders, and interactive on-site outreach. More than 60 community organizations, and over 3,000 people, have participated in the development of the plan since the project began in April 2017. Stakeholder input directly informed the development of the vision plan.

Our design and engagement approach to Civic Center's public spaces supported community participation by encouraging discourse, interaction, and the sharing of ideas among Civic Center's constituent users and managers. While the many meeting formats and events facilitated engagement and exchange, San Francisco Planning's Groundplay Program, with CMG Landscape Architecture, also developed a Mobile Outreach Station. This mobile installation was deployed in Civic Center at various times to be a venue for conversation with neighbors and users of the district's open space. The Station is a playful interpretation of City Hall, Market Street, and the three public spaces of Civic Center, designed specifically for on-site engagement. It consists of two large rolling display/chalk boards, a large-scale aerial map of the Civic Center public realm, and a City Hall suggestion box. People can walk on the map for a new vantage point of the open spaces. Benches are built into the chalk board walls of the Station to provide places to sit; there is currently no formal place to sit in the entire district. As a lively pop-up venue, the Mobile Outreach Station goals included:

- Encourage civic engagement, and discussion.
- Present Civic Center in a new way, as place with new opportunities.
- Embody the Public Realm Plan's goals and objectives as inclusive and welcoming place.

PROJECT DELIVERY

Working on such a significant civic space in San Francisco, the heart of the democratic process in the City, and a vital neighborhood open space, is a wonderful opportunity and great responsibility. As urbanists working in San Francisco for 20 years, CMG brings unique insight of the political challenges, the community ambitions and suitable solutions for urban public space based on familiarity with planning process and the city fabric, institutions, and culture. Development of both private and public

projects San Francisco is renowned as a difficult task, fraught both in terms of governmental process and negotiation of competing community interests. Even with the best intentions, without listening to specific concerns and demonstrating responsiveness, our guidance and proposals can be rejected. Public space needs to be inclusive. Democracy is for everyone, but to make a place for everyone, we must listen to everyone with hope to understand and be empathetic. CMG has had success in this sphere based on a capacity to listen with Cultural Humility, and represent what we have heard through process and design. Not only did the CMG team regularly meet with the City staff and leadership, but also with variety community representatives in a variety of venues and meeting arrangements. Our team was reliant on our community engagement consultant, Interethnica, and their knowledge of who to meet with. Interethnica had a critical understanding of which community members are respected by others and trusted to represent their communities' interests, and could be effective ambassadors for the project.

Based on our understanding of the history of Civic Center and community aspirations, and City departments' interests and goals, with our partners at the Planning Department we became confident in our understanding of everyone's ambitions and culture with respect to improving Civic Center's public spaces. Our own confidence made us open to conversation with everyone, and capable of having productive discussions. As landscape architects and urban designers, we have found that comprehensive knowledge of the institutional and political, social, cultural and technical context of a project is essential to gain client and community confidence in the planning and design team. This confidence allows for trust in us, that affords effective conversation, the development of recommendations, and allows us to provide guidance for decision making. This position of confidence and trust provides us the opportunity and capacity to lead.

It is not unprecedented for landscape architects to lead large and complex projects in the USA, such as Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York. However it is not common, and the work typically falls to planning or architecture firms that have the management capacity to interface with and lead many parties through a long and complex process. CMG managed the two year project with key collaboration from our client and partners at the SF Planning Department. Instrumental to the success of the project was CMG's Project Manager and designer, Lauren Hackney, who coordinated client and consultant schedules, deliverables and fee while also engaged in all meetings and development of the design. As a team we were surprised by the amount of project management required. While it might have been appropriate to divide management, meetings and design tasks between individuals within CMG, a significant success of the project was to have CMG team leaders engaged in all tasks to facilitate effective and responsive services based on comprehensive and personal understanding of the project's immediate needs as well as the end goal. Certainly project management and extensive process dominated the design exercise. In many respects the process was the project. Built public space must promote social mixing, critical to democracy because it inspires inclusivity and empathy. The process itself must reflect this goal.

Client:

City and County of San Francisco

Project Size:

17 acres

Architect:

Kennerly Architecture + Planning

Civil Engineer:

Lotus Water

Other Consultants:

Community Engagement: InterEthnica

Urban Design: Gehl Studio

Economic Adviser: HR&A

Historic Resources Consulting: Architecture + History

Mechanical Engineers: HRA Consulting

Lighting Design: JS Nolan

Cost Estimation: M. Lee Corporation

Structural Engineering: Structus

Public Agencies

San Francisco Planning Department

San Francisco Recreation and Park

San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development

San Francisco Real Estate Division

San Francisco Department of Public Works

San Francisco Arts Commission

San Francisco Public Utilities Commission

San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency