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Union Square salon owner seeks to revive troubled Maiden Lane: ‘It’s becoming more affordable’



Blake McCall, owner of the Blake Charles Salon on San Francisco's Maiden Lane, wants to bring back the energy the historic street had pre-Covid.

PHOTOGRAPHER: TRACY EASTON



By **Mark Calvey** – Senior Reporter, San Francisco Business Times
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The challenges facing downtown San Francisco are on full display on Maiden Lane, a street that featured high-end shopping pre-Covid is now dominated by empty storefronts.

Blake McCall, owner of the Blake Charles Salon and a member of the marketing committee of the Union Square Alliance community benefit district, wants to change that.

“There’s an opportunity right now, now that rents have dropped, for smaller businesses to come back down to Maiden Lane,” McCall said.

“We want to make Maiden Lane a street that people want to come hang out on and make it lively again,” McColl said. “To me, Maiden Lane is one of the main streets of San Francisco that has that charm and character and we need to bring back some energy to it.”

McCall said he was briefly among those who considered closing up shop and leaving Maiden Lane during Covid, which hit salons especially hard since you can’t get a haircut or manicure over Zoom. The supervisorial district that includes Union Square, Nob Hill and the Financial District has seen sales tax generation fall almost 22% between 2018 and 2022, the latest data available.

Instead of leaving Maiden Lane, McCall doubled down, investing about \$1 million last year into his 9,000-square-foot salon that draws a strong following from the Bay Area’s business community.

His space at Maiden Lane and Grant Avenue has housed a salon since 1985, taking advantage of large windows and natural light that floods the space on the Maiden Lane pedestrian mall that garnered high praise from urbanist Jane Jacobs in 1958.

“Maiden Lane is an oasis with an irresistible sense of intimacy, cheerfulness and spontaneity. It is one of San Francisco’s most powerful downtown magnets,” Jacobs said in Fortune magazine that year.

McCall wants to make it a magnet again as he seeks to “curate” the opening of three or four restaurants and retail establishments at the same time so they can draw more foot traffic, which some see as a significant factor in bringing back Union Square and other parts of the city. Apparently, there’s strength in numbers.

“The micro areas of downtown that have done well have a concentration of businesses, whether it's restaurants or retail together versus a standalone business without the foot traffic,” Robbie Silver, executive director of the Downtown SF Partnership, told me on a recent walking tour highlighting his community benefit district’s efforts to rejuvenate downtown.

The importance of generating stronger foot traffic is behind McCall’s efforts to revitalize Maiden Lane.

“I currently have interest from a wine-bar owner who’s considering opening here on Maiden Lane, which would include a more upscale wine bar with outdoor seating,” McCall said. “I’m talking to a couple restaurant owners right now. But for full transparency, I don’t know whether one single wine bar, for example, opening up on Maiden Lane will ultimately be truly successful.

“I’m really trying to curate four to five businesses, and within those four to five, have a cafe, a wine bar, potentially a restaurant and an art gallery,” said McCall, who sees few options nearby for clients wanting to get a sandwich or salad before their appointments. “Pre-Covid, it wasn’t affordable for small businesses like that to be on Maiden Lane, and now it’s becoming more affordable to have that type of business.”

Conditions on Maiden Lane currently are bleak. Shop windows that once showcased the latest creations from the world’s top designers, now feature for-lease signs. Upper floors on Maiden Lane once were home to fast-growing startups. MuleSoft, now part of Salesforce, once had upper-floor offices at 77 Maiden Lane, also home to McCall’s Blake Charles Salon. Chime currently takes space in the building.

McCall points to signs of hope for Union Square, citing the opening this fall of Peruvian-Japanese restaurant Chotto Matte in the former Macy’s men’s store at Stockton and O’Farrell streets. He sees celebrity chef Tyler Florence’s efforts to open two cafes in the Union Square area as another promising sign.

“I think you have to give people a reason to want to come downtown,” McCall said. “We have to create a vibrant city again, and I think we’re starting to see that shift right now.”



Image: San Francisco Business Times

San Francisco's Maiden Lane once showcased high-end fashion. Today, the street features plenty of space for lease.

MARK CALVEY
