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Downtown CBD selects S.F. design firm to sketch revitalization plans for FiDi

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Design firm Sitalab urban studio has been chosen to develop comprehensive, actionable ideas to revitalize the Financial District and boost its engagement outside of the 9-to-5 office crowd that remains slow to return to offices there.

Selected by the Downtown Community Benefit District, San Francisco-based Sitalab will begin its outreach to stakeholders this month and by May or June next year present recommendations to the mayor's office on target issues and projects the city could address downtown with additional funding. The neighborhood covered by the CBD — a 43-block zone encompassing most of the Financial District and Jackson — is looking to gather momentum while still largely bereft of office workers.

Sitalab, involved with several projects around the city and with Google in the South Bay, was chosen unanimously by the CBD's ad-hoc committee after it reviewed nine responses — originating from firms around the Bay Area, London, New York and Los Angeles — to its request for proposals in June for a project lead on the CBD's "public realm action plan." Robbie Silver, appointed CBD director in June 2020, said this is its cornerstone project.



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Laura Crescimano, principal of SiteLab urban studio

“Not only do they have comprehensive experience, they showed a true and invested interest in revitalizing San Francisco,” Silver said. “We really appreciated their approach and methodology to the community engagement process,” which he added, is adapted to realities of the pandemic that make “open house” type events difficult — instead encompassing smaller in-person focus groups, booths at community events, and various online tools.

The firm has become a popular choice for developers seeking to reimagine large urban areas. Sitelab designed the master plan for the second phase of 5M, the SoMa project that includes more than 850 new residential units and a new office tower, and is also designing the \$3 billion overhaul at Pier 70. The San Francisco firm, founded in 2012 by Laura Crescimano and Evan Rose, is also involved with several massive Bay Area projects for Google: Downtown West, an 80-acre project and the largest ever for downtown San Jose, a “city within a city” integrating the downtown core to land west of highway 87; and master-planning efforts on Google’s 120-acre North Bayshore project in Mountain View expected to include more than 7,000 residential units.

“The hope is we produce a visionary document to the mayor’s office helping us prioritize short and long-term improvements for future funding needs,” Silver said. “I didn’t want some 50-page document to sit on my shelf and collect dust,” he added, saying a key priority is to involve city entities including the mayor’s office and the San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency as “technical advisers” so that the proposals forwarded are “realistic and feasible.”

Sitelab has also enlisted two sub-consultants of its own for the project: John Bela, founder and principal at Bela Urbanism + Design, and Bay Area-based transportation consultant Fehr & Peers.

Asked about the opportunities Sitelab sees for downtown, Crescimano declined to provide concrete direction on where the group's recommendations could lead, saying "part of the process is we're not coming in with preconceived notions."

The eventual report, she said, "will be in some ways a series of provocations to push things forward and find out more. At the end

of six to eight months it won't be 'this is a remake of downtown, ta-da.' It will be, 'Here are some exciting and thoughtful steps we can take to change our sense of downtown and what's possible.'"

In addition to Sitelab's principal, Crescimano also serves on San Francisco's Waterfront Design Advisory Committee and previously was on the board of directors for the American Institute of Architects San Francisco.

Sitelab is contracted for about \$165,000 in funds from the CBD to produce its eventual report. Silver said it's been decades since the city has attempted a community engagement process or developed an action plan rethinking, for instance, downtown's back streets and thoroughfares.

"We want to move away from 'Financial District' and 'FiDi' as that illustrates people walking around around in suits from 9 to 5," Silver said. "Downtown San Francisco should be a playground for workers, visitors and residents alike. There's so many layers of rich history to discover. We want to create a downtown that's everyone's neighborhood."

The Downtown CBD, one of 17 such organizations in San Francisco, was created in January 2020. It's funded by a special assessment levied on property owners in the neighborhood, generating nearly \$4 million in assessment revenue annually. It had assets at the end of 2020 of \$5.4 million. About three quarters of the organization's budget is spent on providing cleaning and safety services to member businesses in the form of sanitation workers and "safety ambassadors."

This summer the organization installed more than two dozen containers, called TerraCycles, for collecting cigarette butts, and trash cans equipped with sensors that communicate their fill status to collection crews in real time. Starting last month the CBD extended cleaning and security services for local businesses, from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m., as a way to encourage employers and pedestrians, and soon plans to install pedestrian sensors so that like Union Square's Business Improvement District it can monitor foot traffic trends more accurately.

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