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Downtown SF Partnership and SITELAB urban studio Unveil Vision to Reimagine Downtown San Francisco

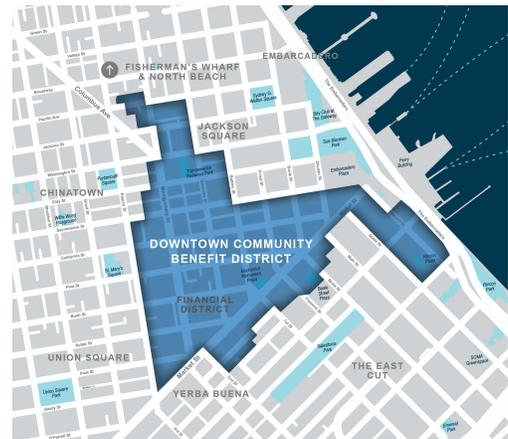
The new Public Realm Action Plan outlines six key concepts and a series of initial strategies to address the challenges and opportunities facing the 43 blocks across San Francisco’s Financial District and Jackson Square Historic District

The PRAP calls for reclaiming space in streets and alleyways to create a pedestrian paradise; bringing downtown’s unique asset of many privately owned public open spaces to their full potential; adding street trees, planters, and sidewalk vegetation in a district with limited public parks, among many others

Downtown SF as more than a workplace, a social destination



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San Francisco, CA (July 19, 2022) – The Downtown SF Partnership, the community benefit district that oversees 43 blocks across San Francisco’s Financial District and Jackson Square Historic District, and SITELAB urban studio, a leading strategic urban design firm, today released ‘Downtown SF Public Realm Action Plan’ (PRAP), a comprehensive plan that includes physical, programmatic, and organizational recommendations to reimagine the future of downtown San Francisco. The PRAP serves as a visioning framework to influence change in the downtown area and identify public realm improvement opportunities.

Read the full Downtown SF Public Realm Action Plan [HERE](#). View images and key concepts from the PRAP [HERE](#).

The PRAP outlines six replicable public realm concepts and pilot programs, leaning on urban design as a means of economic recovery, to reimagine downtown San Francisco as a pedestrian-centric, more vibrant and culturally rich area. This includes creating and utilizing privately-owned public open spaces, increasing access to nature, investing in public art, increasing accessibility, walkability and flexible

seating, as well as integrating inclusive community programming into the area.

Recognizing the existing assets of the downtown area, the PRAP is centered on converging public and private investments and activating spaces. The plan identified six 'Action Areas' to apply the concepts in tandem for near-term pilots to be deployed, which will generate momentum and inform iterations for a long-term tangible vision.

To understand what San Francisco residents and visitors wish to experience in downtown San Francisco, the team surveyed over 830 people through in-person and online surveys. Findings then served as a backbone for the **PRAP's key concepts and strategies including:**

Pedestrian Paradise

Downtown San Francisco has historically been the most walkable urban neighborhood in the Bay Area, designed before cars. Today's pedestrian experience does not proactively serve the people despite having the potential to be safer, more comfortable and enjoyable for pedestrians and bicyclists -- reclaiming their original purpose. At the moment, 60% of people who live and work in downtown San Francisco walk or take transit, yet the typical street allocates only 34% to pedestrians. The pedestrian experience feels disjointed with few welcoming places to spend time on sidewalks, a lack in mid-block crossings which often leads to people crossing outside of designated crossings, and minimal bike infrastructure despite being the most transit-friendly destination.

Strategies:

- **Reclaim the Curb** - Reclaim the curb to improve the pedestrian experience and invite people to stay by expanding spaces for people along the street.
- **Street Openings** - Open streets for people by strategically restricting vehicle movements on key streets and alleyways with temporary or permanent closures.
- **Build Better Connections** - Make moving through the district more comfortable and fun by improving biking infrastructure, adding mid-block pedestrian crossing and improving the alleyway network.

Rediscover Public Open Spaces

Downtown San Francisco has limited public parks and tree canopies, increasing the need for alternative, quality 'staying' spaces where people can feel connected to nature. Public open spaces in the district are limited to 2 public plazas and 34 Privately Owned Public Open Spaces (POPOS). Many POPOS are underutilized and are oftentimes unnoticed by pedestrians because 75% have no signage indicating they are public spaces, 22% are closed outside of business hours, 79% offer no public restrooms, and 44% are not directly accessible to the public. Downtown SF Partnership's online survey found that 68% want to see more outdoor areas to eat and gather in downtown San Francisco.

Strategies:

- **Pop into our Public Spaces** - Integrate more active programming from food and pop-up shops to larger events. Playful elements can allow for fun and creative ways to get people moving.
- **Inspired Investments** - Create invitations to stay including providing a wider variety of seating and opening the edges where public spaces meet commercial ground floors by adding seating or removing barriers.
- **Broadcasting Invitations** - Increase wayfinding and signage, incorporate art as a focal point, and create a platform where people can learn more about the District's open spaces and discover upcoming events.

Let's Green

Downtown San Francisco feels disconnected from nature because of its large quantity of impervious surfaces due to too much paving, lack of parks, and anti-biophilic design. 68% of respondents from the Downtown SF Partnership's online survey want to see more green spaces in the downtown area. Some streets have little to no trees or planted vegetation to make the pedestrian experience pleasant and comfortable.

Strategies:

- **Green the Streets** - Add street trees, planters, and sidewalk vegetation to expand the urban landscape in downtown, where no parks exist. Additional opportunities for vegetation include parklets, green walls + roofs, and bioswales.
- **Plazas as Parks** - Transform public plazas and POPOS to expand the need for outdoor spaces and refuge from the city.

Downtown as a Stage

1 in 2 survey respondents want to see more Arts and Events in downtown San Francisco. More events will create traction and momentum towards building energy and capture foot traffic in the city.

Strategies:

- **Make Downtown an Experience** - Activate POPOS, plazas, streets, alleyways, ground floors and sidewalks to host interactive and engaging cultural events organized around art, music, dance, entertainment, and food.
- **Curate a Downtown Canvas** - Cultivate a new wave of place-based art, from murals to installations to sculptures, to attract people to downtown spaces and contribute to the cultural and aesthetic quality of the neighborhood.

Continue Downtown's Story

Downtown SF has a unique identity that is buried by the fact that it is home to offices. While there are more than 30 historically significant landmarks in the district, people are oftentimes unfamiliar with the varied historical gems of downtown San Francisco. There are limited visual cues to indicate that people are within the district, lacking invitation or recognition as a destination.

Strategies:

- **You are Here** - Create a downtown San Francisco placemaking toolkit to expand its branding to include wayfinding, signage, and distinct furnishings that help define downtown San Francisco as a special place and tell its story.
- **Recall the Layered History** - Develop tours and an online guide to share iconic architectural and historic stories with the public.

Re-energize from the Ground Up

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted businesses, disrupted operating hours, increased vacancies, and shifted many businesses to a hybrid work model. However, there is room for growth as residents are finding safer and innovative ways to gather, dine, shop, and work flexibly. 62% of survey respondents said they want more active ground floors adjacent to downtown San Francisco's streets and public spaces. There are vacant ground floors in key intersections, streets, and entrances toward plazas/open spaces that have the potential to be reimagined and reactivated.

Strategies:

- **Targeted Revamp:** Create synergy between the ground floor, streets and open spaces by identifying targeted "zones" that have activity generating potential.
- **Incentive Programs:** Foster opportunity programs, such as flexible ground floor use, to make vacant spaces available for diverse uses and support district growth.

"For far too long, there was little investment in downtown San Francisco because it was assumed that the area took care of itself. Now, as we find ourselves slowly moving beyond the pandemic and into a new future of work, we're faced with the unique opportunity to reimagine downtown as more than just a workplace, as a social destination. We want to make that visible and tangible in the streets. The PRAP demonstrates how urban design can be used as a means of economic recovery. The bones of downtown are amazing, with incredible architecture, walkable streets, a historic waterfront as well as serving as *the* bay area hub for transit, the area is perfectly poised for transformation," said **Laura Crescimano, Co-Founder and Principal of SITELAB urban studio.**

“Downtown San Francisco finds itself at a pivotal moment. As an organization and a city, we can continue operating under a pre-pandemic status quo or we can embrace this opportunity to evolve our practices and places to better serve all who live, work, and play in SF’s urban and economic core. Forward thinking adaptation is the clear choice for us, and with the PRAP, we have laid the groundwork for that people-centric change to become reality,” said **Robbie Silver, Executive Director of the Downtown SF Partnership.**

“San Francisco’s economic recovery relies on the collective efforts of government, non-profit and community organizations, and the private sector. The revitalization of our downtown, a key part of our economic core impacted by the pandemic, benefits when champions such as the Downtown SF Partnership bring together ideas from the larger stakeholder community for economic revitalization and place-making,” said **Kate Sofis, Executive Director of San Francisco’s Office of Economic and Workforce Development.**

“As the legislative architect of the permanent Shared Spaces program and safeguards to ensure PoPo’s are truly publicly accessible, I’m pleased to see this forward-thinking Public Realm Action Plan,” said **Supervisor Aaron Peskin, who represents much of SF’s Downtown.** “Downtown can be a vibrant neighborhood replete with a vital network of alleyways like Belden Place and welcoming groundfloor businesses when we design with the public in mind.”

“This work is essential in reimagining our downtown,” said **Cassandra Costello, Executive Vice President of Public Policy at the San Francisco Travel Association.** “As we work towards our path of recovery, we need to think and act differently in order to continue to attract, surprise, and delight visitors, employees and residents back to the core of our beautiful, world-class city. San Francisco continues to lead the way in innovation as it has done before and will continue to do so in the future.”

“The Jackson Square Merchants Association believes the Downtown SF Public Realm Action Plan puts forth a series of transformative measures that will take downtown San Francisco from a traditional central business district to a signature destination and place of vitality in which to live and work. It is our belief that these initiatives prioritize people and the environment, and help attract people to come downtown and to visit Jackson Square as its historic core. The positive impact of the plan to the small businesses located in Jackson Square is very exciting, and we look forward to its implementation,” said **Michael Velzo, Financial Consultant at Jackson Square Financial.**

In October 2021, in response to COVID-19 and change in work patterns, the Downtown SF Partnership launched its partnership with San Francisco-based SITELAB urban studio to create tactical urbanism interventions paired with a robust community engagement process to develop a public realm action plan to ignite a stronger economic recovery in the area. Amid the development of the PRAP, Downtown SF Partnership launched a number of pilots to activate Downtown San Francisco including Let’s Glow SF, the largest holiday projection mapping event in the U.S that brought together art and technology during the inaugural holiday season and garnered nearly 40,000 attendees, as well as the Battery Bridge Mural Project, a 1,900 sq-ft street mural created by a Peruvian artist from the Mission District.

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About Downtown SF Partnership

The [Downtown SF Partnership](#) is a 501(C)3 non-profit that creates a downtown that you have to see to believe. They are a catalyst in building a vibrant community where business gets done, where people come to explore, where everyone feels welcome and memories are made.

About SITELAB urban studio

Founded in 2012, [SITELAB urban studio](#) is a San Francisco-based strategic design firm focused on using research & visualization to

create great places, through big plans and small interventions. The studio operates at the intersection of analysis and inspiration, with projects that range from strategic planning & programming to urban design and public outreach. Throughout every project, SITELAB transforms information—from spreadsheets to people’s stories (and in most cases, both)—into plans for action. SITELAB urban studio is led by architecture and urban expert Laura Crescimano.