

Harvey Milk Memorial Plaza – Project Summary

The submitted project is the second phase and further evolution of one of the two winning entries for the Harvey Milk Memorial Design Competition held in 2000. The project is located at the intersection of Castro and Market Streets in San Francisco, at the edge of the Castro neighborhood. The client asked our team in 2002 to prepare a feasibility study for the purpose of funding and design development of the project.

The intent of the original competition was “*to envision the redesign of Harvey Milk Plaza as a landmark civic space that honors the history and significance of Supervisor Milk. This is a major urban design project that encompasses the creation of a public gathering place, multi-modal transit use, a high volume of pedestrian activity, and a significant amount of automobile and truck traffic. A redesigned public space with a memorial focal point in honor of Supervisor Milk (...) will transform the plaza into a city landmark and dynamic “town center” for this neighborhood.*”(excerpt from the competition announcement, page 4, issued in 2000).

Our original competition proposal (*see Plan 1 and 2*) translated the task into a comprehensive design approach that spatially defined the intersection, integrated an extraordinary memorial as the design’s centerpiece, and proposed two well located open spaces as well as an improved traffic and public transportation concept. The memorial consisted of a sunken, linear space on the center divider of Market Street that we regarded as the “seam” between the different spatial conditions along the intersection. Connected to the underground space stood a slim, glazed screen of 60 feet height that served as a voice for the community. It also marked the terminus of Market Street on the west side as counterpart to the historic Ferry Building. On the northwest side of the intersection we envisioned an elevated public park with a view to the busy gateway, and on the southeast side a public plaza for gatherings, events and strolling.

For the more detailed study presented here (*see Plan 3 and 4*), we had to consider concrete physical constraints such as the location of MUNI underground tube, safety in pedestrian crossings, and traffic flow. In addition, we had to respond to concerns articulated by city staff and advocacy groups regarding the safety of the proposed public park and the memorial. The further development of content and technical detailing formed another task.

We developed a scheme that responded to the concerns and constraints while keeping the essential spirit and design elements of the first proposal. Facing this challenge, we believe that the overall design has greatly improved and could be a major contribution to the cityscape if implemented in phases or as a whole.

Referring to Harvey’s legacy, we named the design “Think out of the Box”, a theme that reappears in the design in many ways. The memorial, still located on the center median in an unexpected place, consists of the *Memory Box* and the *Vision Box*. Due to the low depth of the MUNI subway, the underground space is replaced with the *Memory Box*, which is a light filled, linear pavilion. Visitors walk on a slight ramp along acrylic boxes filled with meaningful personal memorabilia that can be brought and taken – a place of exchange and a place that connects the past with the present. Colored boxes that tell the story of Harvey Milk mix up with the exchangeable boxes. At built-in audio stations people can listen to stories and witnesses of gay history while being visually connected to today’s activity surrounding the pavilion. The *Vision Box* is a more worked out version of the screen proposed in the competition design. It offers a display case to the community as a whole and can be used in various ways. It has an installed steel truss that can carry light fixtures, fabrics, posters and objects. We proposed two technical alternatives for the *Vision Box* in order to provide for a range of possible budgets. While the public plaza on the southeast side remains the same, the proposed park on the northwest side is replaced with building infill and a smaller open space on street level. This move responds to the articulated safety concerns, but it also frames the intersection spatially in a better way. The future MUNI stops are located close together on Market Street, with the F-line trolley going along Market and making a turn on Eureka Street. The initially proposed trolley turntable was not feasible due to the topography and the later installed Holocaust Memorial, which is now integrated into the design. Lastly, the numerous pedestrian crossings were reduced to three at safe locations.

The main goal of the design is to create a vibrant, urban place for the Castro that does not require a major reconfiguration of Market Street and can be implemented over time. At its heart is the Harvey Milk Memorial, which challenges our perception of a typical memorial and initiates the development of a unique and multi-layered gateway to the community. The memorial will become a place of identity and evolution – and it will simply *get in the way* of everyday routines – just like Harvey and his visions.

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