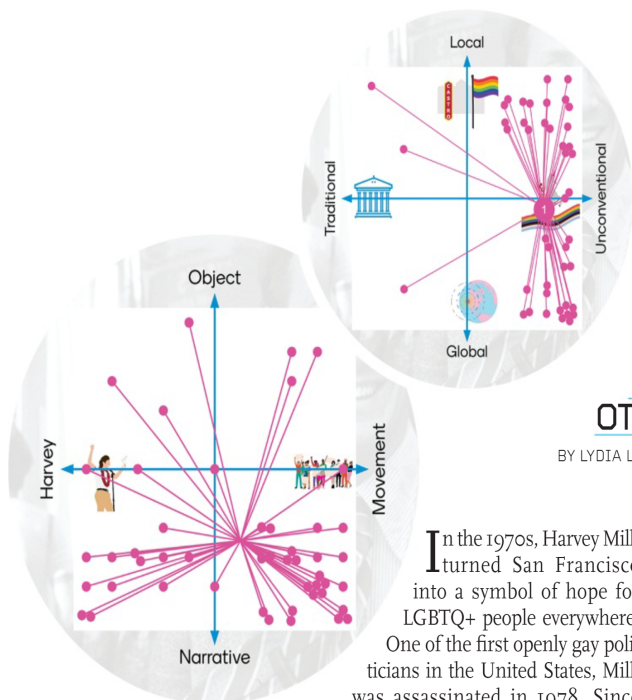


THE BACK / **BACKSTORY**

REVIVE  
AND REBOOT

A NEW DESIGN FOR  
SAN FRANCISCO'S HARVEY MILK  
PLAZA MAY SUCCEED WHERE  
OTHERS HAVE FALLEN SHORT.

BY LYDIA LEE



**ABOVE**  
SWA incorporated strong neighborhood feedback about community values.

**BELOW**  
The memorial could expand beyond the plaza proper.

In the 1970s, Harvey Milk turned San Francisco into a symbol of hope for LGBTQ+ people everywhere. One of the first openly gay politicians in the United States, Milk was assassinated in 1978. Since then, the city has been without a substantive memorial to one of its most iconic figures. After a four-year effort to redesign a tiny memorial plaza next to a transit stop failed to gain traction, the San Francisco office of SWA has restarted the process by surveying the community about the kind of memorial it wants. “We

had to back up and ask these fundamental questions about how to memorialize Harvey,” says SWA’s Daniel Cunningham, the project manager and design lead.

To many, the existing Harvey Milk Plaza has always felt like a placeholder. At the time of Milk’s assassination, the below-grade light rail stop was already under construction. Located in the heart of the Castro District, where Milk lived and worked, the area around the station became a place for community gatherings. It wasn’t until 1985 that the plaza got its official name and a bronze plaque bearing a faint resemblance to Milk.

quent revisions—ran into a buzz saw of criticism. The original idea for a slim amphitheater was panned for relocating the station entrance away from the main intersection. It was subsequently modified into a parapet and then a sculptural canopy that would protect the station escalators, but the structure obscured views of an important building.

Earlier this year, the Friends of Harvey Milk Plaza started anew by selecting SWA—which had designed memorials to shooting victims in El Paso, Texas, and Newtown, Connecticut—from a short list of four firms, culled from an original 17. With the past four years in mind, SWA kicked things off with an outreach campaign, assisted by a public engagement firm called Civic Edge Consulting. It asked community members whether they wanted more of a memorial to Milk or a narrative about the movement (the latter, as it turns out) and other such questions. The response to its initial ideas, which include a small pedestal and an interactive digital beacon, has been positive. If all goes according to plan, the firm hopes to start on construction documents by the end of the year. ●



COURTESY FRIENDS OF HARVEY MILK PLAZA & SWA GROUP