Octavia Boulevard, the Market-Octavia Neighborhood Plan, and the Octavia Boulevard housing competition together represent an example of a sequence where planning and development proposals followed rather than preceded a major city-form-giving infrastructure project. The Octavia Boulevard design came first, making available sites for new housing, which were then confirmed by the neighborhood plan, with building types shaped by design guidelines and zoning regulations.

Neither research associates Professor Emeritus Allan Jacobs, Yodan Rofé (Ph.D. Berkeley), nor I had any idea that our work on multiway boulevards would lead to actual design commissions for specific streets, let alone one in San Francisco. With the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, San Franciscans were faced with a choice: retrofit the long despised elevated double-decked Central Freeway or replace it with a surface street. They chose the latter, insisting on a multiway boulevard like that kind that was the subject of our research. Most certainly, Jacobs and I were asked to design the new boulevard because of the research.

Octavia Boulevard opened in September 2005. It is crowned at its northern end by an instantly successful park, Hayes Green that came as part of the design. Basically, the boulevard accommodates high volume through-going traffic from and to the remaining freeway south of Market Street to neighborhoods west of Hayes Valley. Side access roads, for slow-moving local traffic border the central through lanes, separated by medians with closely planted trees. In short, this is a multi-purpose street, one intended for pedestrians, cyclists, very local traffic, and through traffic. It’s complexity represents a major break from largely single purpose, traffic-oriented streets of the last half century.

It was central to the design that Octavia Boulevard be kept as narrow as possible, so that developable land could be left along its eastern side, where the overhead freeway had taken out the buildings that used to face onto the former Octavia Street. Although some of the parcels along Octavia are very narrow, as little as fifteen feet, rebuilding frontage was deemed essential for creating a vibrant urban boulevard.

In a very politically active community, with the freeway coming down and all the changes that would bring about, it made sense to undertake a neighborhood plan. Under the leadership of Amit Ghosh, the City Planning Department prepared the Market-Octavia Neighborhood Plan as part of its Better Neighborhoods initiative. Our firm, Jacobs Macdonald: Cityworks, was fortunate to be a consulting part of that effort, along with Professor Emeritus Dan Solomon and John Ellis of Solomon ETC. The plan places major emphasis on needed affordable housing. Appropriate housing typologies, heights, densities, mixtures with other uses, and parking ratios (less than normal, due to the transit rich location), are all part of the plan. So are designs for street improvements throughout the neighborhood, including possibilities south of Market Street, such as the possible ultimate replacement of the remaining Central Freeway with a boulevard extension. The neighborhood’s central location in the City, with so much travel of all types through it and its proximity to the Civic Center, are all considered, particularly the need to humanize streets and to limit auto parking.

The neighborhood plan, focused particularly on possibilities for the land parcels made available when the freeway and its extensive on- and off-ramps were taken down. The parcels along Octavia Boulevard, because they are so narrow, represent a particular design challenge. To elicit ideas, a design competition for six irregular parcels fronting on the boulevard was organized by the San Francisco Beautiful along with the Mayor’s Office of Economic Development, SPUR, and others. Among the winners were two CED alumni, Amit Price Patel and Kennerly Strong.

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Dr. Elizabeth Macdonald is an Assistant Professor in Urban Design in the Department of City and Regional Planning.
Amit Price Patel graduated from the CED in 2003 with an M.Arch and M.C.P. and tied for first in the Octavia Boulevard San Francisco Prize.
PORTFOLIO: OWEN KENNERLY & ADDISON STRONG
Owen Kennerley, M.Arch. '94, and Addison Strong, M.Arch. '94 of Kennerly Strong Architecture received an honorable mention prize in the Octavia Boulevard San Francisco Prize.