Can you tell me how envelope+a+d first got involved with the project? And, why you decided to take it on?

We responded to a request for proposals from the San Francisco Mayor’s Office for temporary uses on the vacant/underused lots left over from the removal of the 101 Central Freeway structure. When Octavia Boulevard was created as a surface street extension of the freeway there were several lots created that CalTrans deeded to the City, under the control of the Mayor’s Office. They were looking for a range of options depending on the specificity of each site. Many of these lots have become urban farms, which is a fantastic use. Yet, we were interested in the public presence of the two underused lots along Patricia’s Green, on the east side of Octavia between Hayes and Fell. We felt that the location of these lots would allow us to create a temporary construct that could contribute a vibrant place for both commerce and culture to the heart of Hayes Valley. The project is conceived with a understanding of its temporary nature—that it is just a placeholder until a more permanent structure takes its place. That’s why we gave it the name proxy.

We took on the project because we got excited about the possibility for creating a new model for urban development—a flexible urbanism—which can temporarily transform underused but high-value urban areas into thriving cultural spaces that bring an economic vitality to otherwise fallow sites. As a model, it could be applied to other sites in San Francisco, or to other cities. This larger sense of the potential of the project beyond these two sites makes proxySF’s thoughtfully conceived full-scale urban experiment.

Where are the containers from? Can you explain the design concept?

The shipping containers can come from any one of the many ports along the West Coast, but so far all of ours have come from Southern California. We’re using containers because they are easily transportable, durable and re-usable. When our lease with the City is up, we need to remove all of the above ground improvements. The containers can be craned in and craned out easily and most of them are owned by our vendors, so they will continue to be used (on other sites) long after our occupation of these two sites is over. This ethic of re-use is an important sustainable element of the project.

I should say here that the project is not about shipping containers: just like a brick building isn’t about the bricks. They are one component of the project, which is using a range of temporary structures, from tents, to scaffolding and panelized, tilt-up structures. The containers just happen to be the first things on the site. The project is really about the potential of impermanence. proxy is, at its core, a content machine. The project is tied to the pace of contemporary culture, where content is constantly changing on our computers, televisions and mobile devices. Here events, retail spaces, art and food offerings will be in a constant state of change, with content being curated and occupying the multiple frames (or spaces) that the temporary structures create.

How many containers are there? When will it be totally complete?

Over the two sites, there are twenty-six containers, two tent structures, one panelized tilt-up structure for an art gallery and a range of temporary scaffold volumes that will come and go over time. It will constantly be in a process of becoming and then, it will be gone. We have three food vendors operating now. The Museum of Craft and Design has an exterior installation space and retail store that will be on site through October. Our goal is to have the majority of the food and retail components up and running by Winter 2012. Other structures will follow. As the nature of the project is a temporary habitation that focuses on change, it will be complete when the lease runs out—currently set for Fall 2015.

What specific chefs and vendors are involved?

For the food component, Smitten Ice Cream, Ritual Coffee, and Suppenkuchê’s Biergarten are up and running on site. We are also planning on having a rotating series of chefs through a partnership with La Cocina.

In the “storefront” retail structures along Hayes and Octavia, we will curate a diverse set of designers, brands and services. As these are very short-term inhabitations, we are creating a matrix of compelling people, products, services and organizations and will be focusing on showcasing things not normally offered in brick-and-mortar stores.

We are also reaching out to artists to create temporary public-scaled art pieces that will be incorporated into the project. In time, we plan to have events, outdoor movies, and an art/design gallery.

What do you love about this project? What do you hope it does for the city, or what do you hope will see happen as a result?

proxy is a celebration of our connected culture. The project creates a centralized ever-changing experience in the heart of one of San Francisco’s most popular neighborhoods. Our hope is that the project can change both public and bureaucratic perceptions of what’s possible in San Francisco. We felt that this city—and perhaps all cities—can benefit from the ability to re-interpret its underutilized spaces with vital temporary inhabitations. Urban design doesn’t just have to operate at the 100-year interval of time; but can be more responsive to the possibilities of the present through short-term uses. Our goal would be to effect positive change on the planning, building, and health codes to allow thoughtful proposals for temporary uses to be more easily implemented.
Let's start by introducing your department and what you guys deal with at the City.

We work on larger scale land-use projects in the city that cross department's roles and responsibilities, Octavia Street being kind of an interesting case because it wasn't just building a roof, it was actually negotiating this deal with CalTrans and all the land north of Market Street that the 101 Central Freeway used to sit on.

CalTrans wanted to get rid of it as a part of their domain?

CalTrans probably wanted to build a new freeway. It went back and forth with voter approval both ways: bring the freeway back, don't bring the freeway back, build a boulevard, cross Market Street with the freeway and touch down on Eighth Street, or do what we eventually did. It was a contentious ten-year debate.

And the freeway structure had partly collapsed or had been compromised in the '89 earthquake, too?

It never actually fell, it wasn't stable so they knocked it down. The part between Oak and Fell Streets stayed, and they needed to figure out what to do with the rest of it—rebuild it and stabilize it, or tear it down and build a boulevard. A deal came at a state-level to get the land north of Market Street linked in with our office while CalTrans became responsible for south of Market.

Was CalTrans really interested in getting a freeway in there?

Well, their mission is to get the cars around the city, so they're not necessarily in the business of tearing them down.

I'm just curious about the process for setting up these kinds of plans: how does the Office of Economic and Workforce Development change when a new Mayor gets elected?

It's an interesting department, although we aren't technically an office directly inside the Mayor's Office we work very closely with them on planning stuff—anything from Treasure Island, to the shipyards, to priority Port projects. We serve the Mayor; the department head serves at the pleasure of the Mayor. The planning ideology of the last couple Mayors has been pretty similar.

So they set the tone and then you enact it. Is picking envelope a+d out of the RFP [Request for Proposals] process for uses on these vacant lots also setting a tone? Talk about the ways in which you are able to exercise some autonomy in the design and the process for new plans within the city.

Well, the Mayor set the policy goals for Octavia: to take the excess parcels that we had from CalTrans and use them for affordable housing. The big goal was building 2,000 units of housing, with half designated as affordable housing. The Mayor made that a goal and then we went out and implemented it. We decided with members of the community that Octavia would also be a good place to showcase how more modern design can work within the city. A modern boulevard in the center of this neighborhood is creating a new system for development.

Obviously the idea of proxy could be replicated across the city or in different cities, but what about Hayes Valley was especially conducive to making this happen?

We have a long history with the Hayes Valley community and have developed a good working relationship with them—we love their ideas and they trust what we are doing. Proxy was already being well received because it was taking a vacant lot and turning it into something that really added to the neighborhood, a new system for development.

Right. Or even downtown—something where there is plenty of land and there are developers who want to do something and have good projects, but there's no financing.

So that kind of leads into this question of how do you think the economy has driven the ideas of this project? The "temporary" focus came after the recession…

We hit a big dip in the housing market and we all recognized that it was going to be a while before anything happened. So, we could sit and wait, and park cars on those lots, or we could do something like proxy, for example.

Do you think it will ever really return to that?