

One firm. *One set of words.*

Everything here is built from what CKD already says, on the boards of 3 September and on your own website. Nothing has been invented. This is the document the whole studio pulls from for proposals, the website, LinkedIn, and the conversation at the end of a site visit.

STATUS

**Draft for your
reaction**

SOURCE

Your words

OWNER

Everyone at CKD

COMPANION

The readout

01 · THE PLATFORM

Four layers, *not one line*

A brand is not a single sentence. The mistake most firms make is picking one line and then trying to force it to do four different jobs. These four sit on top of each other, they never compete, and each has a place it belongs.

LAYER 1 · THE BELIEF

Everybody deserves a little bit of green.

Amy's, word for word, and the room marked it to keep. She first said it to her mother when she chose this career, and told us on 3 September that her mother reminded her of it years later. It is not a positioning line and it should never be asked to sell anything. It is the reason the firm exists.

LIVES ON: THE ABOUT PAGE · THE 40TH · THE WALL OF THE STUDIO

LAYER 2 • THE POSITIONING LINE

Designing how people live and work together, outside.

Your existing website line with one word added. Every person in the room independently reached for "outside the building" as the definition of the work, and the published version is the only one that never contains it. Without that word the sentence could describe an architecture firm, an office designer or a consultancy. With it, the job is unmistakable in six words.

LIVES ON: THE HOMEPAGE • PROPOSALS • THE LINKEDIN BANNER • SOQ COVERS

LAYER 3 • THE EXPLAINER

We design the things you never think about, so somebody is always looking out for you.

Mark's, near enough verbatim, about six months into the job. It requires no prior knowledge, uses no jargon, and makes the listener feel the value rather than work it out. This is the one every single person at CKD should be able to say without thinking about it.

LIVES ON: SOCIAL • TEAM BIOS • DINNER PARTIES • SITE VISITS • CONFERENCES

LAYER 4 • THE DESCRIPTOR

Woman-owned landscape architecture studio in Oakland, designing public space across the Bay Area.

The factual one, for places where the reader wants credentials rather than character. Amy's own summary was "we do a lot of public work and design for the urban communities in the Bay Area." Woman-owned is in there deliberately, see the note below.

LIVES ON: BOILERPLATE • RFP COVERS • LINKEDIN ABOUT • DIRECTORY LISTINGS

Two notes on the choices

On "sustainably." Your current line ends with it. Our recommendation is to keep it in the body copy and take it off the front. Amy told us the Bay Area has regulations that push every firm in that direction, which makes it difficult to use here as a point of difference. It is table stakes in this market rather than a claim. If you would rather keep it at the front, the line becomes *"Designing how people live and work together outside, sustainably."* Both work. This is your call, not ours.

On "woman-owned." We looked at how thirteen peer firms describe themselves. Two mention being woman-owned and neither builds anything on it. Your site states it once and moves on. It is a genuine differentiator, it is a scored criterion in a good deal of public procurement, and right now it is sitting unused.

02 · MOTTO, VISION, MISSION

The short versions, *for the wall*

Two of these face outward and two face inward. Keeping them separate is what stops the internal story going stale and the external story going corporate.

PIECE	THE WORDS	WHERE IT COMES FROM
Motto external	Everybody deserves a little bit of green.	Amy, and already half-published on your site as "add green space to underserved neighborhoods."
Vision external	A Bay Area where the good green space is not only in the places that can afford it.	Stated as a change in the world rather than a change in the firm. Drawn from the room marking "underserved communities" as a principle to keep.
Mission external	We design everything outside the building, so the people who use it every day are looked after.	Amy's definition joined to Mark's explainer. The line for proposals and the about page.
Mission internal	Get in early enough to matter, and design for the person who will be there on a Tuesday.	"Get in early" is Amy's own test for good work. The person on a Tuesday is Mark's everyday user. It also quietly tells the studio which projects to want.
Vision internal	A studio worth owning, handed to the people who built it.	Amy said it to the team herself at the close: "we're looking to make this into a firm that you guys would want to take on."

On "Engage. Entice. Enrich." These are still good and we are not replacing them. One observation worth sharing: across four hours and three recordings, nobody said them once. Our suggestion is to move them rather than retire them. They describe a design process, engage the community, entice people into the space, enrich the place, so they belong on a how-we-work page. They do not work as the brand idea because they are not in anybody's mouth.

03 · WHAT CKD IS

What you stand for, *and what you are not*

Both columns came out of the room. The right one matters as much as the left, because a brand that will not rule anything out cannot mean anything.

THIS IS US

Public work, and proud of it

In from the first line on the site plan

Designing for the person using the space, not only the person paying

Comfortable with real constraints: bond budgets, live campuses, review cycles

Small, senior and hands-on. Three generations in one studio

Woman-owned, and becoming employee-owned

Interdisciplinary by nature, where all the disciplines meet

THIS IS NOT US

A signature style stamped on every site

A star architect with a name on the door

Arriving at the end to put plants around a finished building

Work you never visit because it is on the other side of the country

Growth for its own sake. The studio has a deliberate ceiling

Selling sustainability as a differentiator in a market that regulates it

The clearest statement of the right-hand column came from Monty, unprompted: *"I'm happy to work for a firm that doesn't have a star architect running it. Somebody with a big ego who's wearing a cape. It's more important in this industry to do really good, functional design that's beautiful, rather than have some unique, bespoke symbol that you leave behind as a breadcrumb of your existence."*

Three stories that *carry the argument*

A platform is only worth the evidence behind it. These three came out of the session and each does a specific job. Use them.

Concord: public value inside a private project

Monty on the Willow Shopping Center: *"there were play areas there that you didn't have to go shopping to enjoy. You could use it just as part of the community without shopping."*

What it proves. That the community mission does not switch off on private work. This is the story to tell a developer who assumes a public-sector firm will not understand commercial goals, and the story to tell your own team when they worry that private work means abandoning the mission.

8th Street against the other one: why direct contact matters

On 8th Street CKD sits in the meetings with the city, hears the requirements first hand, and delivers what was actually wanted. On another project where all communication routes through the architect, the client believed the work was at 100 percent design development while the city believed it was at 90 percent construction documents.

What it proves. That access is not a nicety, it is a delivery risk. This is the argument for writing direct client contact into scope, and it is a genuinely persuasive thing to say in a pitch.

Mountain House: the community actually shapes it

Amy: *"we started out at the master planning level, working with the community, talking to them, finding out what they wanted, what they needed in their area, and being able to provide a design that meets their needs."* Started 2022, roughly two years to go.

What it proves. That "community engagement" at CKD is a working method rather than a line in a proposal. It is also the clearest live example of getting in early.

The gap. Every one of these is told in CKD's voice. Not one is told in a client's voice, because we have no client quotes at all. Two or three would strengthen this section more than anything else we could write.

05 · MARKET STRUCTURE

One studio, *two practice areas*

This is organising structure, not a headline. It exists so the right story reaches the right buyer without confusing either. We looked at how comparable firms handle this and the pattern is consistent: the strongest ones keep a single brand with clearly named practice areas underneath, rather than splitting into separate identities.

PRACTICE AREA

Public Place

School districts, cities, counties, public agencies and public healthcare. The 38-year record, the certifications, the bid-ready practice. K-12, civic and justice, parks and recreation, affordable housing, streetscape and plaza.

What the private side lends it: design ambition. Proof CKD does not do generic.

PRACTICE AREA

Private Space

Housing developers, private healthcare and senior living, hospitality and wineries, mixed-use and selected commercial, and the architects who bring CKD in. Growing deliberately and selectively.

What the public side lends it: trust. Thirty-eight years of bond budgets, regulation and public schedules means a private project is in safe hands.

One caution worth stating plainly, because Keith raised it himself on the day: private developer work generally comes with less public engagement. That is a real trade and it should be managed rather than ignored. The Concord story is the proof it can be managed well.

Four audiences, *four registers*

Same idea underneath, different words on top. If somebody at CKD reads only one part of this document, it should be this one.

AUDIENCE ONE

The elevator pitch

A stranger at a party. Ten seconds. No context. The test is that they ask a follow-up question.

SAY THIS

"We design the things you never think about. The bench with shade on it, the path to the bus, the schoolyard. Everything outside the building. If you never notice it, we did our job."

- **Do not open with the words "landscape architecture."** Every person in the studio reported the same two failures. They hear "architect" and ask what buildings you do, or they hear "landscape" and ask about a plant in their garden. Lead with what it does. Name the profession second, if they ask.
- **The shade on the bench is the detail that lands.** Keep one small, physical, specific example in. Abstractions do not survive a party.
- **Stop after the last line.** The pause is what makes them ask.

AUDIENCE TWO

Clients and buyers

Districts, cities, counties, developers, and the architects who bring you in. People with a budget and a process.

SAY THIS

"CKD designs everything outside the building. Thirty-eight years, woman-owned, based in Oakland, mostly public work across the Bay Area. Where we add the most value is early, while you are still deciding where the building sits and how people move through the site, rather than at the end once the budget is set."

- **Lead with the early-involvement argument.** It is Amy's, and it is the one that changes what they buy rather than who they buy it from.
- **With a private buyer, use the public record as a trust signal.** Bond budgets, regulation and public schedules for 38 years means their project is in safe hands.
- **With a public buyer, use the private work as an ambition signal.** It proves CKD does not do generic.
- **Say woman-owned out loud.** It is scored in plenty of procurement and almost nobody in the peer set claims it.
- **Do not oversell sustainability to a Bay Area buyer.** They are regulated into it too. It reads as table stakes.
- **Name the constraint work as a strength.** Live campuses, review cycles and the new state water rules are exactly what most firms quietly avoid.

AUDIENCE THREE

Peers and allies

Architects, planning departments, regulators, ASLA and AIA rooms. People who refer work, sit on panels, and judge submissions.

SAY THIS

"We are the studio that takes the projects with real constraints. Public budgets, live campuses, community process, and now the new state water rules. We are usually the ones asking what the community actually needs before anybody draws anything."

- **Your ally list is wider than you use.** Architects, yes, but also planning departments and regulators. Monty made the sharpest point of the afternoon here: the regulations themselves are an ally, as shade tree requirements and entitlements become steadily more favourable to landscape architects.
- **You already have a conference topic.** The new state water-use law forcing finished-level planting drawings at concept stage is specific, current, technical and frustrating for everybody in the room. Amy told us specificity is what gets a submission accepted. That is the submission.
- **Do not be modest about the record.** Peers respect the constraint work more than the photography.
- **Correct the tree question.** Monty's answer is the right one and everybody should have it, see below.

AUDIENCE FOUR

Internal, and building the culture

The team, recruiting, and the story about where the firm is going.

SAY THIS

"You are not here to tell people how great CKD is. You are here to tell them what you find interesting about this work. If people know who you are, they will trust what we make."

- **That is Keith, almost verbatim,** and it is the best internal brand instruction anyone gave all day: *"I don't want this to be how you sell CKD. It's how you communicate who you are. It's not for you to tell people how great CKD is. It's to tell them how interesting you are."*
- **The asset you are not using is the passion.** Keith named it himself at the close: *"the passion that you guys bring for landscape architecture right now, we are not tapping into that."* That is the brief for everything internal.
- **The recruiting line is the ownership story.** Very few small studios can honestly say they are building a firm the team will one day own. None of your peers say it publicly.
- **Give everybody the same three sentences before the next industry event.** That single page is what turns sending the team to ASLA from a cost into a win.

07 • THE TWO QUESTIONS

What you get asked *every single time*

Both of these came up repeatedly in the session. Everyone should have the same answer ready.

"SO DO YOU PLANT THE TREES?"

Monty already wrote the answer and it is perfect: "*Did the architect build your house? Did the electrical engineer do your wiring?*" Then follow with what you do: "We decide where it goes, what survives there, how people move past it, and who it is for."

"WHAT IS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE?"

Do not define the profession. Describe the result. "Everything outside the building. Where the paths go, where people gather, what grows, how you get from the car park to the front door without getting wet or lost." If they want the category afterwards, they will ask.

08 · WORDS

Yours, *and everyone else's*

Words CKD owns

These came off your boards, repeatedly, from more than one person. Use them freely.

community

everything outside the building

underserved

public work

the people using the space

green

gathering

tangible

early

looked after

we don't build buildings

Words to avoid

Not because they are untrue, but because every firm in the category says them, so they carry no information. We checked thirteen peer firms and these appear almost universally.

innovative

sustainable

collaborative

placemaking

award-winning

holistic

thoughtful

bespoke

timeless

curated

solutions

One of these is worth a specific note. Your current homepage headline is "**Innovative landscape solutions.**" It uses two of the most crowded words in the category and says nothing a competitor could not also say. Replacing that headline with the positioning line is the single highest-value change available on the site.

09 · BOILERPLATE

Three lengths, *ready to paste*

For proposals, submissions, directories and press. Copy them exactly, so CKD reads the same everywhere.

SHORT · 25 WORDS

Cupples Keller Designs is a woman-owned landscape architecture studio in Oakland, designing public space across the Bay Area. Everything outside the building, for the people who use it.

MEDIUM · 60 WORDS

Cupples Keller Designs is a woman-owned landscape architecture studio in Oakland, founded in 1988. We design everything outside the building, schools, parks, civic plazas, healthcare campuses, streetscapes and housing, across the Bay Area. We work best when we are involved early, while the shape of a site is still being decided, and we design for the people who will use the space every day.

LONG · 110 WORDS

Cupples Keller Designs is a woman-owned landscape architecture studio in Oakland, California, founded in 1988. We design everything outside the building: schoolyards, parks and recreation, civic and justice, healthcare campuses, streetscapes, plazas and housing. Most of our work is public, which means we are used to real constraints, bond budgets, live campuses, community process and long review cycles, and we are comfortable in all of them. We work best when we are brought in early, while a site is still being shaped, rather than at the end. Whoever is paying for a project, we design for the people who will be there on an ordinary Tuesday.

10 · PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

How to write up *a project*

Four sentences, in this order, every time. It works for the website, a submission, a LinkedIn post and an award entry, which means writing it once does four jobs.

1. **Who it is for.** The people who use it, not the client who paid. "Two thousand students, and the neighbourhood that uses the yard at weekends."
2. **What was in the way.** The real constraint. Budget, a live campus, a water regulation, a site nobody wanted. This is the sentence most firms leave out and it is the one that earns trust.
3. **What you did about it.** One decision, not a list. The specific move a landscape architect made that somebody else would not have.
4. **What it is like now.** Concrete and human. Shade where there was none. A route that takes four minutes instead of eleven. Somewhere to sit and eat lunch.

Leave out: the size in acres unless it matters, the plant list, the phrase "we were tasked with," and any adjective from the avoid list. **Put in:** one number that is easy to picture, and one thing you can only know by having stood there.

Argue with it

This is draft one and it is meant to be marked up. The two things that would help most:

AMY

The line, and whether sustainably stays

Both versions are in section 01. It is your call and there is no wrong answer, only a trade.

EVERYONE

Client quotes

Section 04 is the weakest part of this document and it is entirely because every story in it is told in your voice rather than a client's. Two or three remarks that stuck with you would fix it.

Once this is agreed, it stops being a document and becomes the thing everybody pulls from. That is the point of it. [The session readout is here](#) if you want the evidence behind any of it.