

Uptown Tenderloin Approved as National Historic District “Beyond Chron” by Randy Shaw, 2/17/2009

The National Park Service announced last Friday that it has added 33 blocks of the Uptown Tenderloin to the National Register of Historic Places. The federal designation makes the Uptown Tenderloin one of the nation's largest residential historic districts, and represents a milestone in a thirty-year campaign to preserve the community's working-class, historic character. The story of how a community that nearly everyone saw as inevitably becoming an upscale adjunct to downtown and/or Union Square went a different direction began in 1979, when Leroy and Kathy Looper purchased the rundown Cadillac Hotel at 380 Eddy Street. Rather than convert the Cadillac to a tourist hotel, or tear it down to build a highrise---both permitted uses at the time---the Loopers restored the building's historic character and inspired new community groups to organize residents to chart the neighborhood's future. The road was longer and bumpier than expected, but the Loopers' vision has been realized, and the neighborhood's forgotten history reclaimed.

Having worked in the Tenderloin since 1980, I would be lying if I said it has always been easy to remain optimistic about the community's future. The rise of crime and drugs in the mid-1980's, the Reagan Administration's cutoff of badly needed federal housing funds, and city policies that wrecked SRO living conditions halted progress made in the neighborhood from 1979-1986, and for the next at least fifteen years the Tenderloin remained stagnant.

But much has changed in recent years. The creation of a Community Benefits District, a district supervisor and mayor committed to help, and the replacement of many troubled, privately operated SRO's with those that are well maintained and nonprofit managed all made a difference. When preservationists walk through the Tenderloin today, they are astonished at how many historic structures and signage remain.

The Road to a Historic District

In 1983, a building survey of the Tenderloin was conducted with the goal of making the neighborhood a national Historic District. But because community leaders feared that such designation would promote gentrification in the absence of new residential zoning limits---which were pending at the time---the Tenderloin became the first community in the nation to reject a Historic designation.

But when the rezoning was enacted in 1985, the Tenderloin was seeing the first signs of the “trickle down” policies of the Reagan Administration. Rising crime, homelessness, and the imminent savings and loan debacle led activists to forget about the Historic District plans, and work on more immediate concerns.

Unbelievably, it was not until 2005, when I had a conversation with former Central City SRO Collaborative leader Sam Dodge about his visit to New York City's Lower East Side Tenement Museum, that the Historic District idea resurfaced.

Sam and I felt that the Tenderloin's historic SRO's would be of great interest to tourists. We decided to try to get funding to operate Tenderloin History Tours. I learned about money for historic preservation available from a city lawsuit against Bloomingdales, and sent a grant proposal on behalf of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic (which I head) for our History Tour idea to the San Francisco Historic Preservation Fund Committee, which administered the settlement funds.

G.G. Platt, a noted local preservationist, was a member of the Committee. She recalled the efforts to create a Tenderloin Historic District in 1983, and wondered why we were not pursuing that rather than funding for a tour.

Well, the answer was that we had not thought of it. But when Committee leader Rich Hillis of the Mayor's Office of Economic Development suggested that the Clinic implement Platt's idea, we jumped at the opportunity.

The rest, as they say, is history. Platt not only inspired us to create the District, but she recommended that we hire noted architectural historian Michael Corbett to prepare the application papers. Corbett created the most extensive building-by-building assessment of the community ever compiled, and discovered that the true historic name of the neighborhood was the “Uptown Tenderloin.” (link uptown tl to <http://www.beyondchron.org/news/index.php?itemid=5125>).

After a well attended community meeting of property owners and tenants, Corbett submitted the Tenderloin Housing

Clinic's (publisher of Beyond Chron) application for Historic District designation to the state. The State approved the District on July 25, 2008 (link to <http://www.beyondchron.org/news/index.php?itemid=5912>), and the listing has now been approved by the feds.

Strong Community Support

The Historic District has enjoyed incredible enthusiasm from every segment of the Tenderloin. Property owners, who often oppose such districts, could not have been more supportive.

From Elaine Zamora, Director of the North of Market Community Benefits District (CBD), to the entire CBD Board, to the wonderful residents of the historic Alexander Hamilton condominiums (who will now get historic tax credits for their costly waterproofing), to the Indian hotel owners, who are very excited about the District because so many grew up here, property owners joined merchants and residents in supporting the Historic District. TNDC, a major neighborhood owner that has done so much to restore the historic character of its properties, could not have been more enthusiastic.

Leroy Looper always insisted that everyone in the Tenderloin get along, believing we could not move forward if we had the type of fights between owners and activists that slowed progress in other communities. Property owners' strong support for the Historic District can be traced to Looper's original credo.

The community's efforts were also strongly supported by San Francisco Architectural Heritage, and by Rich Hillis and all the members of the Historic Preservation Fund Committee. Its funding for the Clinic's application made the creation of the District possible.

Next Steps

Creating the Uptown Tenderloin Historic District is only the first step in a broader effort to revitalize the community and restore its historic identity. Plans are moving for an Uptown Tenderloin History Museum at the corner of Eddy and Leavenworth, which I will write about in the days ahead. The CBD will soon have banners about the historic district throughout the neighborhood, and there is talk of posters, t-shirts, bus shelter signs, and even Historic District coasters to follow.

Speaking with property owners, I am confident that the Uptown Tenderloin will have more National Register of Historic District plaques on buildings than anywhere else in San Francisco, if not the nation. These plaques will include the building's history, creating great visual interest for those walking down the community's streets.

The Historic District has sparked many people and group to donate their services. They include the Academy of Art, the Art Institute of California—San Francisco, historic postcard collector Glenn Koch, the architecture firm of Perkins & Will, and the Fifth Age of Man Foundation (the special contribution of these two latter groups to the museum project will be discussed in a separate article).

A separate nonprofit, the Uptown Tenderloin, Inc., is being formed to coordinate the museum and other activities. Its website is still under construction but includes the list of properties included in the district can be found. (link "found" to the list).

Leroy Looper is 84 years old, and still going strong (I won't ask Kathy's age but she's going strong too). The Uptown Tenderloin Historic District is a tribute to them and to others who do not let skeptics and cynics deny their dreams, and who go on to make their dreams a reality.

*Randy Shaw is the editor of Beyond Chron and the Executive Director of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, which he helped start in 1980.