

MYTHS ABOUT HISTORIC PRESERVATION

MYTH: Preservationists are always fighting new development and only care about the past.

FACT: Historic preservationists do care deeply about the past—not to wallow in a bygone era, but to anchor ourselves as we move forward into the future. Historic preservation is not about preventing creative and exciting new architecture and development. It’s about managing change so that we can retain the best of our shared heritage, revitalize neighborhoods, spur economic growth, and create stronger communities. The best preservation projects are forward-looking—demonstrated by projects like the Ferry Building or SOMA’s “Multimedia Gulch,” where scores of industrial buildings have been converted to foster innovation.

MYTH: There has been a dramatic increase in historic preservation regulation in San Francisco over the past 10 years.

FACT: Approved by 57% of voters in 2008, Proposition J established a seven-member Historic Preservation Commission (the HPC) with new authority to make recommendations directly to the Board of Supervisors and issue comments on environmental review documents. Proposition J brought San Francisco in line with other major U.S. cities by establishing the HPC, not just an advisory board. Proposition J also called for a comprehensive overhaul of the City’s preservation program guided by national standards and best practices from other large cities across the country. More than two years after its passage, the City’s preservation ordinance, set forth in Articles 10 and 11 of the Planning Code, remains virtually unchanged. The Board of Supervisors continues to have final say over landmark nominations and project approvals, and retains full discretion to balance competing policy objectives.

MYTH: The Historic Preservation Commission is overreaching, too powerful, and “made up exclusively of advocates for historic preservation.”

FACT: Since being sworn-in in January 2009, the HPC has approved 101 Certificates of Appropriateness and Permits to Alter and denied only one project—making for a **project approval rate of 99%**. The *San Francisco Business Times* observed that the HPC takes a moderate stance, noting that “several projects have gone through the commission without much conflict.”¹ HPC members are appointed by the Mayor subject to confirmation by the Board of Supervisors, with six members required to have professional backgrounds in planning, architecture, historical conservation, and related fields. The HPC can make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors, but the Board retains full discretion to approve or deny landmark nominations and proposed projects.

MYTH: You will not be able to renovate your property if it’s deemed significant in a historic resource survey without burdensome expenses and bureaucracy.

FACT: The HPC has jurisdiction only over City Landmarks and Historic Districts. **Properties in survey areas do not require HPC approval.** Interior modifications, such as bathroom or kitchen remodeling, may proceed without any preservation review whatsoever. New additions are permitted, and no one can be forced to “fix up” their property. Further, the Planning Department maintains a long list of alterations that are categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), such as maintenance and restoration work, adding dormers, installing a garage opening, in-kind

¹ “Preservation Commission takes moderate stance,” *San Francisco Business Times*, June 27, 2010.

window replacement, etc. These exemptions apply to any potentially significant building in the city—including landmarks, buildings in a historic district, or any building over 45 years of age (whether surveyed or not).

MYTH: San Francisco is at risk of being “preserved in amber” because so much of the city has been declared historic.

FACT: Of the 152,880 legal city lots in San Francisco, only 2,115 have been designated as City Landmarks or are part of a local historic district—that amounts to **1.38% of all properties in the city**. In reality, historic resources are regularly demolished in San Francisco: The National Register-eligible Transbay Terminal was razed earlier this year without opposition, and the Planning Commission recently approved the demolition of the North Beach Library, despite the HPC’s vote to recommend landmark status.

MYTH: Landmarking City parks will “freeze them in time” and prevent much-needed upgrades.

FACT: Many City parks are already local, state or national landmarks and that does not hamper their ongoing maintenance and improvement. Alamo Square Park has had numerous upgrades since it became part of the Alamo Square Historic District in 1984—including a playground, picnic tables, benches and lighting, and an ADA accessible pathway. The HPC can review major changes to historic features but does not oversee day-to-day park management. Based on recent battles over individual projects in Golden Gate Park, which is proposed for City Landmark status, HPC input early in design development could help avoid costly CEQA review by preemptively resolving potential impacts to historic resources.

MYTH: Historic preservation restrictions undermine the City’s ability to provide affordable housing for its residents.

FACT: San Francisco includes the largest concentration of historic SRO hotels in the country, with over 700 buildings comprising the Lower Nob Hill Apartment Hotel and the Upper Tenderloin historic districts. These districts were strongly supported by affordable housing developers as a means to provide access to the full range of preservation incentives. Although federal requirements can force tradeoffs and increase costs, the 20% federal rehabilitation tax credit, code flexibility, and other incentives are often used by affordable housing developers to offset these burdens.

MYTH: Neighborhoods identified in surveys as historic are likely to be officially designated as City Historic Districts.

FACT: “Designation” refers to the process of being formally landmarked, which in San Francisco requires the approval of both the HPC and the Board of Supervisors. Historic designation is invariably the result of successful community engagement and consensus building. There is little chance of establishing an historic district without united and organized community support. Indeed, only 11 historic districts have been designated by the City in the last 45 years, and none since the Dogpatch Historic District in 2003.