SUSTAINING SAN FRANCISCO'S LIVING HISTORY

Strategies for Conserving Cultural Heritage Assets

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Francisco Heritage
September 2014
Executive Summary

Culture is not only economically beneficial to cities; in a deeper sense, it’s what cities are for. A city without poets, painters and photographers is sterile... It doesn’t contain the mirrors of its own inner workings, in the form of creativity, criticism or cultural memory. It’s undergone a lobotomy.

- Rebecca Solnit, in a conversation with Nato Thompson, October 21, 2013

For generations, San Francisco has been home to a thriving collection of local businesses, nonprofits, and cultural traditions that reflect the city’s history, culture, and people. Annual rituals such as the Cherry Blossom Festival in Japantown and Carnaval in the Mission District showcase living traditions in public spaces. Long-operating businesses foster civic engagement and pride as neighborhood gathering spots. Arts and community centers offer opportunities for youth and adults to study cultural traditions and innovate in multi-generational environments. Many of the city’s cultural signifiers, from public art to historic buildings, embody the social and artistic movements that have occurred in San Francisco. These places have the power to bring people together, provide a sense of continuity with the past, and lend the city a rich and layered identity.

Amid unprecedented economic pressures, mainstays of San Francisco’s cultural landscape – our cultural heritage assets – are increasingly imperiled by skyrocketing rents and encroaching new development. Others are at risk because of ongoing challenges that have nothing to do with the current boom cycle, such as leadership succession and diminishing numbers of traditional arts and craft practitioners.

Our Goals

With this report, San Francisco Heritage advocates a conservation-driven, incentive-based response to the loss of cultural heritage assets in San Francisco, both in the short and long-term. We aim to:

1. Define the problem and identify challenges to conserving local cultural heritage assets;
2. Summarize existing efforts to conserve San Francisco’s cultural heritage assets;
3. Create a common language that will advance citywide public policy and neighborhood-level cultural heritage conservation initiatives; and
4. Provide useful examples of strategies and case studies that can be employed by communities, nonprofits, academic institutions, foundations, and City agencies.

Despite their effectiveness in conserving architectural resources, traditional historic preservation protections are often ill-suited to address the challenges facing cultural heritage assets. Historic designation is not always feasible or appropriate, nor does it protect against rent increases, evictions, and other factors that threaten longtime institutions. Informed by recommendations from Heritage’s June 2013 Community Summit,
“Sustaining San Francisco’s Living History,” as well as domestic and international case studies, we present a range of new strategies for communities to employ, in conjunction with existing preservation tools, to stabilize and protect significant uses.

**Existing Cultural Heritage Conservation Initiatives in San Francisco**

Neighborhoods, nonprofits, and City agencies are already experimenting with new tools for conserving San Francisco’s cultural heritage assets, albeit absent a coordinated citywide policy or program. Examples of ongoing efforts include:

» The *Japantown Cultural Heritage and Economic Sustainability Strategy*, adopted in 2013, is the first City policy document to officially endorse a holistic approach to neighborhood cultural heritage conservation. The Planning Department broadly defined “cultural heritage resources” to include “both tangible and intangible elements” that help define the beliefs, customs, and practices of a particular community and used a new “Social Heritage Inventory Form” to document the buildings, public spaces, artwork, businesses, institutions, and cultural activities that define the community.

» In 2014, lower 24th Street in the Mission District was officially named the “*Calle 24 SF Latino Cultural District*.” The final legislation recognizes significant Latino-based organizations, family-owned businesses, murals, festivals, cultural movements, landmarks, parks, and public plazas that contribute to the district’s strong Latino and Chicano identity.

» The proposed “*SoMa Pilipinas* Social Heritage Special Use District” and LGBTQ Social Heritage Special Use District would utilize urban design elements, zoning tools, and economic incentives to protect certain uses (but not necessarily existing buildings). Neither proposal has been finalized for adoption.

» The *Legacy Bars & Restaurants* initiative, launched by San Francisco Heritage in 2013, invites the public to experience the history of the city’s most legendary eating and drinking establishments. “Certified” businesses must have achieved longevity of 40 years or more, possess distinctive architecture or interior design, and/or contribute to a sense of history in the surrounding neighborhood. A Legacy Bars & Restaurants logo, decal program, and online map heighten the visibility of Legacy...
Selected Case Studies

As illustrated by 16 case studies in the 52-page report, some of the world’s great cities have passed legislation and allocated significant resources to recognize and sustain their tangible and intangible cultural heritage, often working in tandem with nonprofit organizations and private foundations. The following examples provide models for San Francisco as it grapples with how to stabilize cultural heritage assets and secure the properties that house them.

» **Bares Notables (Buenos Aires):** “Bares Notables” is an official designation program for bars, cafes, billiard halls, and confectioneries whose enduring impact on the city’s history and architecture makes them worthy of preservation. To qualify, businesses must have distinctive architectural features, occupy a special place in the neighborhood’s identity, and/or contribute to a sense of history. The City provides grants for conservation projects at designated establishments and distributes window decals indicating certified status. The Ministry of Culture and #54Bares (a citizens’ group) promote the initiative through an online map, social media, smart phone application, tours, and special events.

» **“Assets of Community Value” Designation Program (London):** In response to the rapid disappearance of the city’s pubs, the Mayor of London directed borough councils to work with local community groups to list distinguished pubs as “Assets of Community Value,” thereby tightening planning procedures. Any building or parcel can be listed based on its “social interest,” defined as sustained use for cultural, recreational, and sporting purposes. Over 100 pubs have been designated under the program since 2013.

» **“Community Right to Bid” Acquisition Program (London):** The “Community Right to Bid” program places a six-month moratorium on any proposed sales of “Assets of Community Value” to grant community groups time to develop takeover proposals and bids when the property goes to market.

» **Community Arts Stabilization Trust (San Francisco):** The nonprofit CAST was established in 2013 to permanently secure space for arts organizations in the Tenderloin and Mid-Market. With a $5 million seed grant from
the Kenneth Rainin Foundation, CAST acquired two properties in its first year: The Luggage Store Gallery at 1007 Market Street and 80 Turk Street, the future home of CounterPULSE. CAST has entered into long-term leases with each organization, including an option to buy in 7 to 10 years, combined with technical assistance to help build their financial and organizational capacity.

» “Vital’ Quartier” Program (Paris): The goal of the Vital’ Quartier program, administered by the Paris planning agency SEMAEST, is to preserve commercial diversity amid exceedingly high real estate and rental costs. Since 2008, SEMAEST has purchased hundreds of properties for lease to local businesses for specific uses such as bookstores, artisans, and bakeries. The agency will then sell the property to the tenant or a real estate subsidiary with a covenant to maintain the use. SEMAEST also offers a variety of services to help priority uses succeed, including technical training, marketing assistance, and access to credit.

» “Association Center” Property Tax Exemption (New York): To secure downtown space for nonprofit tenants, the New York City Industrial Development Agency (NYCIDA) partnered with Silverstein Properties to create the city’s first and only “Association Center” in 1992 at 120 Wall Street. Through state legislation authorizing NYCIDA to support not-for-profit civic facilities, the building owner was granted an exemption from real estate taxes that would typically be passed on to tenants as part of the rent. As a result, prospective nonprofit occupants of 120 Wall Street have the choice of renting or buying space at below-market rates. The “Association Center” provides a model for how government-sponsored incentives can help secure long-term space for nonprofit tenants through targeted property tax relief.

» Alliance for California Traditional Arts: The nonprofit ACTA launched its Apprenticeship Program in 1998 to sustain the state’s traditional arts and cultures. ACTA contracts with master artists to provide qualified apprentices with one-on-one training and mentoring. Each team must produce a public offering, such as a performance or exhibit, to prove the acquisition and development of traditional skills. Nearly 500 master artists and apprentices have participated in the program, representing a wide range of crafts and art forms, including Afro-Latin percussion, Chicano muralism, and Filipino kulintang.

About San Francisco Heritage

For over forty years, San Francisco Heritage has been leading the civic discussion about the compatibility of rapid change and protecting our past. Built on its activist underpinnings, SF Heritage has been instrumental in establishing the preservation protections that have allowed our city to evolve and flourish. SF Heritage is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) membership organization with a mission to preserve and enhance San Francisco’s unique architectural and cultural identity.

To read the full report, visit sfheritage.org/cultural-heritage-assets.pdf.
Strategies for Sustaining San Francisco’s Living History

1. Develop a consistent methodology for identifying and documenting cultural heritage assets
   A. Encourage the development of historic context statements that include cultural and social themes
   B. Inventory cultural heritage assets through culturally-specific processes
   C. Include policies in the proposed Preservation Element of the City’s General Plan that advance conservation of cultural heritage assets

2. Support neighborhood cultural heritage conservation initiatives
   A. Issue a Mayoral Directive prioritizing conservation of cultural heritage assets
   B. Ensure that neighborhood conservation initiatives underway in Japantown, Western SoMa, and the Mission District are implemented
   C. Provide financial, design, and technical services to community groups wishing to promote neighborhood identity based on cultural heritage
   D. Advance cultural heritage conservation through Community Benefit Agreements

3. Support mentoring and leadership training programs that transmit cultural knowledge to the next generation
   A. Utilize partnerships to foster apprenticeship, training, and leadership succession programs to ensure the longevity of cultural heritage assets
   B. Fund youth educational programs that expose future generations to cultural heritage assets

4. Develop financial incentives and property acquisition programs for owners and stewards of cultural heritage assets
   A. Expand City and/or nonprofit property acquisition programs for owners of identified cultural heritage assets
   B. Institute tax benefits for cultural heritage assets and the owners of buildings in which they operate

5. Promote cultural heritage assets through public education and, when desirable, sustainable models of heritage tourism
   A. Encourage the development of heritage and cultural trails
   B. Establish a voluntary citywide heritage tourism program that focuses on neighborhood cultural heritage assets

6. Establish a citywide “Cultural Heritage Asset” designation program with targeted benefits

Although Marcus Books/Jimbo’s Bop City was declared a City Landmark in January 2014, the designation could not prevent the eviction of the business and its owners.