USING THE STATE HISTORICAL BUILDING CODE

YOU DON'T HAVE TO DESTROY A BUILDING IN ORDER TO SAVE IT!

If you own an historic or an architecturally valuable building in San Francisco, you may be able to bring it "up to code" and retain historic elements, with the help of the State Historical Building Code (SHBC).

WHAT IS THE STATE HISTORICAL BUILDING CODE?
Recognizing that strict interpretation of existing building codes often destroys important features of older buildings, the California Legislature created an advisory board to prepare a code with the flexibility to preserve the integrity of historic buildings. The resulting State Historical Building Code went into effect in 1979, for use at the discretion of enforcing agencies. Since July 1, 1985, the Code has been mandatory for all agencies and jurisdictions in California, when dealing with qualified historic buildings.

WHAT BUILDINGS QUALIFY FOR USE OF THE SHBC?
The State Historical Building Code applies to "any structure, collection of structures, and their associated sites deemed of importance to the history, architecture, or culture of an area, by an appropriate local or state governmental jurisdiction." In San Francisco, at present, the Code applies to approximately seventeen thousand structures. This number includes designated State and City Landmarks, properties on the National Register of Historic Places, buildings in existing and proposed historic districts, those listed in the Downtown Plan and area plans of the San Francisco Master Plan, buildings in the 1968 Here Today survey and buildings which the Department of City Planning rated in its 1976 city-wide survey.

WHAT IS THE CODE'S INTENT?
The intent of the State Historical Building Code is slightly different from that of the Uniform Building Code (UBC), which generally governs new construction throughout the country. The intent of the UBC is the protection of life and property, in that order. Codes have also served to achieve other socially desirable goals, such as energy efficiency or accessibility for handicapped citizens. Uniform codes have achieved this by prescribing certain ways of constructing new buildings so that walls are fire-resistant, for example, and properly insulated, or requiring doorways wide enough for wheelchairs to pass through.

The Uniform Building Code requires 42" high guardrails. The State Historical Building Code allowed retention of 30" high rails that are part of the original fabric at the Old Trocadero Roadhouse in San Francisco's Stern Grove.

While the first priority of the SHBC remains the safety of building occupants, its second priority is preserving the historical and architectural features of the building. Alteration of a structure in preparation for a change of use for that structure typically must comply with the UBC. However, if compliance with the UBC would result in destruction or loss of historic fabric, the SHBC offers an alternative.

WHAT IS THE BASIS OF THE SHBC?
The State Historical Building Code is performance based rather than prescriptive. A prescriptive code gives builders fairly exact instructions. "Every corridor serving an occupant load of 10 or more shall be not less..."
used to join structural members, and wood lath has fallen out of favor with modern plasterers. Compliance with the UBC would require replacing such historic materials with modern materials. The State Historical Building Code, however, permits repairs to existing structures using these older materials, often in combination with modern materials or construction methods, where that will result in preserving the authenticity of the historic structure.

The SHBC recognizes that some materials and methods of construction have "stood the test of time" in an historic structure and proven their claim to continued use in the building's restoration or renovation. According to the code, "Any method or material that is (or is similar to) the historic fabric of a structure that may have been dropped from present codes, was a known type of construction in the past, has served a useful purpose in the structure, and was a part of the historic structure ... may be used or re-used in the structure."

Archaic materials (that is, older materials no longer in general use) have often posed problems for engineers assessing the structural strength of a building for seismic resistance or its resistance to the spread of fire. Modern construction materials are rated for their structural and fire resistant properties as tested under laboratory conditions. The standardized production of many modern materials makes this testing highly predictable of how materials, when used in actual construction, will perform in a real-life emergency. A wall constructed of 2x4 studs covered with 5/8" gypsum board on both sides will have properties very similar to those of any other similarly constructed wall.

Many historic materials never underwent such testing, and while they may perform as well as modern materials, there has been no rating to authorize alternativestandards or to assure reasonably equivalent performance of these materials. The SHBC provides a list of materials as "archaic" and states, "The SHBC does not compromise life safety."

HOW DOES THE SHBC ENSURE BOTH SAFETY AND PRESERVATION?

Construction materials and methods of construction are obvious ways in which modern and historic buildings differ. Very few adobe buildings, for example, are constructed today. Mortise and tenon joints are rarely made, and adobe brick is no longer used as a building material. The SHBC allows substitution of automated fire sprinklers above each opening to provide the equivalent fire safety. In this way, the developer will be able to retain the original wood frame windows in the conversion of this brick warehouse to live-work space.

Because the west wall of this building at 255 Bryant Street is less than 20' from the property line, the UBC requires 3/4-hour fire-rated window assemblies. The SHBC allows substitution of automatic fire sprinklers above each opening to provide the equivalent fire safety. In this way, the developer will be able to retain the original wood frame windows in the conversion of this brick warehouse to live-work space.
At the Hotel La Rose, in Santa Rosa, corridor walls of thin lath and plaster and wood wainscoting did not conform with UBC requirement that such walls must resist the spread of fire for at least one hour. The SHBC permitted retention of the historic corridor walls by backing the original materials with one-hour fire-rated gypsum, applied between the studs from the guest room side. Two layers of fire-rated gypsum on the guest room wall, sprinklers in the corridor and fire-retardant paint on the wainscoting completed the fire-rated assembly.

HOW CAN YOU USE THE SHBC?

First, you need to find out if your building is among the, currently, seventeen thousand in San Francisco which qualify for use of the State Historical Building Code. You can do so at the Zoning Counter of the Department of City Planning. You may also seek assistance from the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board and The Foundation for San Francisco's Architectural Heritage.

Once you have established that the SHBC applies to your building, you or your representative (your architect or structural engineer) must request approval to use the State Historical Building Code from the Bureau of Building Inspection. With a check for $108 to cover the fee, submit two sets of drawings and a full statement of the conditions to which the code would apply. The Bureau will require sufficient evidence or proof to substantiate all claims you make concerning those conditions and the appropriateness of the specific design solution, as governed by the SHBC. They may seek an opinion or ruling from the SHBC Board, before making a decision.

Remember, the State Historical Building Code is mandatory for all qualified historic structures. Although the Bureau of Building Inspection does enjoy some latitude in the SHBC's interpretation, it does not have the option to use it or not. If you believe your effort to use the code is overruled without good cause, appeal the case to the SHBC Board, which is the final arbiter of its application.

—L.B., R.M. & D.A.

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WHERE TO GET ASSISTANCE

To obtain a copy of the State Historical Building Code send $6 to:

SHBC Board
C/o Office of the State Architect
400 P Street, 5th Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 445-7627

To consult a copy of the SHBC or apply to use the code go to:

Bureau of Building Inspection
450 McAllister Street, Room 103
558-6133

To find out if your building qualifies for use of the SHBC call or go to:

Zoning Counter
Department of City Planning
450 McAllister Street, 5th Floor
558-6377

Or contact:

Landmarks Board
Department of City Planning
450 McAllister Street, 4th Floor
558-6345

San Francisco Heritage
2007 Franklin Street
441-3000

To obtain a copy of the structural engineer's "Blue Book," send $48 to:

SEAOC
2550 Beverly Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90057
(213) 385-4424

The SHBC allowed exemption from the UBC handrail specifications in this restoration at Old Oakland, ensuring preservation of the stairway's graceful proportions and decorative newel post.