

Tenderloin and its SROs — making of a historic district

Reviving bid to get neighborhood listed on National Register

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

THE Tenderloin is unique. "It has the largest number of historic SROs in the world," says Tenderloin Housing Clinic Director Randy Shaw, who plans to nominate a portion of the neighborhood for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as the Tenderloin Hotel and Apartment District.

"The listing will increase property values and pride in the neighborhood," he said. "It'll give owners financial incentives to improve their properties. I can't imagine any owners not supporting it."

The major perk is the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive — not a deduction but a straight federal tax credit equal to 20% of the rehabilitation cost.

The historic district boundaries would be the west side of Mason, the east side of Polk, O'Farrell Street and Golden Gate Avenue, 23 blocks containing more than 300 properties, many of them single-room occupancy hotels.

Shaw's project isn't new. He was part of an effort in the Eighties when a group of architectural preservationists tried to establish a historic district in the area bounded by Taylor, Turk, Larkin and Bush, 28 blocks plus irregular extensions into 24 adjoining blocks.

In their 130-page nomination application, Bay Area architectural historian Anne Bloomfield wrote that the San Francisco Apartment Hotel Historic District was "perhaps the country's only large, virtually intact, architecturally consistent densely packed inner-city residential area. For blockfront after blockfront the apartments and hotels march along at nearly even cornice lines, breasting similar windows and fire escapes above the sidewalk jumble of signs and storefronts, agreeing on the

form of dress and the vocabulary of ornament, justified by the great numbers and broad social mix of people they house."

The application inventoried 860 properties, and 86% of them "contributed" to San Francisco's architectural heritage, the surveyors said. Few were architectural stunners, but all had period details typical of early 20th century architecture — cornices, decorative spandrels, brick or galvanized iron facades, graceful metalwork, Art Deco ornamentation, marble entries. Their sheer numbers gave the area historical value and made each building worth preserving.

The city Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board approved the nomination and passed it on to the State Historical Landmarks Commission, whose approval was the penultimate step for a National Register listing.

But the timing was off, recalled Brad Paul, who in the early 1980s was director of NOMPC, the North of Market Planning Coalition, and part of a growing preservation community of property owners and nonprofits, including Shaw and the nascent Tenderloin Housing Clinic.

"We were in the middle of trying to get the city to rezone the Tenderloin," Paul said. "We asked the state commission to hold off its vote for six months or a year and, surprisingly, they agreed to wait. We weren't at all opposed to the historic district designation, just to the timing."

That rezoning petition — asking the city to drop the Tenderloin's 400-foot height limit to 80 feet to protect it from encroachment of high-rise hotels and office buildings — was filed by Realty House West, owner of the Cadillac Hotel, the friars who owned St. Boniface Church, and the Rev. Cecil Williams on behalf of Glide Memorial Methodist Church. The city took three years to approve the rezoning.

"We all were so busy that we just never got back to the commission — the ball got dropped," Paul said.

While the proposed historic district listing evaporated for the central and lower Tenderloin, its upper reaches, above Post, finally were listed on the National Register in 1991. Called the Lower Nob Hill Apartment Hotel District, it stretches roughly along Post from Jones to Polk, Sutter from Taylor to Polk, and Bush from Stockton to Larkin.

Then, in 1998, the Lower Eddy/Leavenworth Task Force contacted Anne Bloomfield and asked what it might cost to revive the project to get the Tenderloin listed. She wrote back: \$6,000. Paul, then staff to the task force, doesn't recall the details, but believes the idea was probably one of several potential projects being floated and that members weren't fully behind it.

PROJECT RESURFACES

Shaw was a young housing activist when the '83 survey was being conducted, and he remembers how amazed and pleased everyone was when the state commission agreed to defer its vote.

"Without the new zoning in place, I think we were concerned that the district listing and financial incentives might lead to speculation in the Tenderloin," Shaw said. "I don't think any of us remembers exactly why we didn't go back to the state commission later on."

The idea for a historic district re-emerged last year, Shaw said. He and Sam Dodge, program director of the Central City SRO Collaborative, were talking about the idea of creating a museum in the Tenderloin similar to the Tenement Museum on New York's Lower



PHOTOS BY MARK ELLINGER
TNDC's Ambassador Hotel, 55 Mason, built in 1922 by architects Earl B. Scott and K. McDonald, features quoining at the corner, ornamental lintels over windows, block moldings supporting the deeply projecting cornice, and horizontal belt courses, moldings that separate sections of the building.

East Side, carefully restored apartments of five real immigrant families that lived in the building from the 1870s to the 1930s.

"We talked about tours of the Tenderloin, with plaques on buildings giving historical information," Shaw said.

In doing research, he rediscovered the historic district survey of '83. At the same time, his search for funds for historic tours led him to the city's Historic Preservation Fund Committee.

Two of its seven members are G.G. Platt, a staunch preservationist in a pro-development era, who was kicked off the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board in 1980, and Richard Hillis, director of the Mayor's Office of Economic Workforce Development, which monitors the \$2.5 million fund.

The largesse is from the settlement of a lawsuit that two preservation groups filed against the Redevelopment Agency and the developers of the new Westfield center. The suit claimed that in demolishing part of the

Emporium, they violated the California Environmental Quality Act and the Westfield project's final EIR. Westfield paid off, and the committee distributes grants of less than \$25,000 to preservation projects citywide, including surveys of structures with historic merit and nominations to local, state and federal historic registers.

"Since the notice of funding availability was posted in May, we've received a half-dozen proposals," Hillis said. "So far, only one has been funded, a \$25,000 request to start the application process for a Mission Dolores Historic District. The committee also has decided to give the Planning Department \$300,000 a year for three years to survey the entire city."

When Shaw approached the committee with the idea of tour funding, members sensed there were bigger fish to fry and encouraged him to apply for a grant to nominate the historic district.

THC is the lead sponsor in the nomination, but Shaw credits Platt and Hillis with paving

the way to get the project off the ground.

"They have been absolutely indispensable," Shaw said.

In late November, Shaw had several irons in the fire. He was drafting the funding proposal. He'd obtained the property owners' list from the North of Market Community Benefits District and was preparing a letter to them, touting the historic district's advantages. CBD Manager Elaine Zamora says her board supports the proposal. Shaw also is waiting to hear from the state Office of Historic Preservation.

"The 1983 survey is public information, so we know we can use what applies for the new survey, but we don't know if it can just be reactivated," he said. That means the scope of the work to be done is unknown.

"We don't know how much to request in the grant proposal until the state tells us what's involved, but it certainly will not be more than \$25,000," Shaw said.

Hillis thinks the nomination process will be smooth. "Things do seem to be aligned," he said. "But perhaps the real beauty of this is that the owners and activists who stopped this almost 25 years ago are now trying to make it happen. It works out great."

'THE TIME IS RIGHT'

Almost every one of the 300 properties in the proposed Tenderloin Hotel and Apartment District is already considered a historic resource, Shaw said, based on surveys conducted by the Junior League in its 1968 publication "Here Today," the S.F. Planning Department in 1976 and San Francisco Architectural Heritage in the early 1980s. In 1970, the Board of Supervisors officially adopted the League's historical findings on 2,500 S.F. properties, some of which are in the proposed district.

"For years, the property owners have had to meet historical code requirements but they've been getting none of the financial incentives," Shaw said.

The requirements come from the State Historical Building Code, established in 1979. Owners of historic buildings who want to rehab or restore them must include life-safety upgrades — for occupancy, egress, fire protection and more — plus retain historic materials and character, at least on the facade.

But unless the building is a designated city landmark or is listed on the National Register, owners get no financial perks.

If the Tenderloin buildings get listed, owners who fix up their properties can apply for the 20% federal tax credit, a program established in 1976 to reward and encourage preservation. To qualify, buildings have to be income-producing and rehabbed according to standards set by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The State Historical Building Code also gives owners of historic properties some flexibility because their aging buildings don't fit neatly into building codes designed for modern construction. Even a slight slackening of codes can translate into dollars in the owners' pockets.

Historic San Francisco districts, unlike individual properties listed on the National Register, currently aren't eligible for perhaps the biggest boon: the 1976 California Mills Act, which can reduce a historic building's property taxes by up to 50% if the owner agrees to maintain and preserve it for at least 10 years. The 10-year contract between the owner and the city can be transferred if the property is

sold, and it is automatically renewed for another 10 years if contract standards are met.

But the exclusion of districts may change soon, says Rachel Force, member of the Planning Department's historic resources survey team: "The Mills Act, as a state law, is dealt with differently by different localities. There's an effort being made [in S.F.] right now to expand the eligible properties to include contributors to city historic districts and National Register districts."

This is all good news to Shaw, who admits that his worries 25 years ago about speculation in the Tenderloin have almost vanished, primarily because nonprofit developers have become successful entrepreneurs, creating affordable housing for families and individuals.

"Things have stabilized," he said. "The time is right for the historic district." ■



Incised brick around the windows, foliage on a projecting molding above dentils and decorative metal grillwork on the fire escape define the Empress Hotel, 144 Eddy.

Getting listed on National Register

IF Shaw's nomination succeeds, the Tenderloin will become the city's 24th historic district on the National Register of Historic Places. Notable others include the Civic Center, Telegraph Hill, Russian Hill, Alcatraz, and the Market Street Theatre and Loft District, added to the National Register in 1986. It comprises only 20 buildings — 982-1112 Market, 973-1105 Market, 1 Jones and 1-35 Taylor.

The Historic Preservation Act of 1966 established the nation's official list of districts, sites, buildings, structures and objects worth preserving. The National Park Service, under the secretary of the Interior, administers the National Register. To be eligible, the nominee must be associated with significant people or events; be distinctive artistically or architecturally; or be able to yield important historical information. The register today has more than 80,000 listings.

Anyone can submit a nomination; the process starts with extensive documentation and submitting a list of all affected property owners to the state Office of Historic Preservation. San Francisco nominations are kicked back to the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board for a hearing. Landmarks then sends it for approval to the state Historical Resources Commission; if the state approves, the nomination goes to the National Park Service and, finally, to the Keeper of the Register — currently Janet Mathews, also the Park Service associate director of cultural resources.

At least 30 days before the commission vote, the Office of Historic Preservation sends a mailing to property owners, posts a notice in local papers and holds informational meetings with owners. Those who object to the listing have to submit a notarized statement that becomes part of the nomination package commissioners vote on. Owners in a nominated district get one vote, regardless of the number of properties they own.

If 51% of the owners in a district object, the National Register listing is dead in the water. But if the Keeper determines that the district is eligible for national listing, despite owners' objections, the district automatically gets listed on the California Register of Historical Resources. Owners who want to alter their property in a historic district might face additional Planning Department reviews — to "protect" it as a historic resource. If the alterations are significant, they may even have to pay for an environmental impact report. ■

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Original Joe's on the left and the Hotel Warfield at 118 Taylor flank an apartment building with a triangular pediment and balusters on the parapet, rounded arches and decorative metal grillwork on the fire escape.



Under the wide projecting cornice of the Admiral Hotel, 608 O'Farrell, are garland reliefs, projecting cartouches above four of the windows, and a belt course that separates the top story.