

REVISED LEGISLATIVE DIGEST

(6/6/2023, Amended in Board)

[Planning Code - Landmark Designation Amendment - 429-431 Castro Street (the Castro Theatre)]

Ordinance amending the Landmark Designation for Landmark No. 100, 429-431 Castro Street (the Castro Theatre), Assessor's Parcel Block No. 3582, Lot No. 085, under Article 10 of the Planning Code, to list the exterior features that should be preserved or replaced in kind, to add interior features to the designation, and to capture the property's full historical significance; affirming the Planning Department's determination under the California Environmental Quality Act; and making public necessity, convenience, and welfare findings under Planning Code, Section 302, and findings of consistency with the General Plan and the eight priority policies of Planning Code, Section 101.1.

Existing Law

Under Article 10, Section 1004 of the Planning Code, the Board of Supervisors may, by ordinance, designate an individual structure that has special character or special historical, architectural or aesthetic interest or value as a City landmark. Unless prohibited by state law, once a structure has been named a landmark, any construction, alteration, removal or demolition for which a City permit is required necessitates a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Historic Preservation Commission. (Planning Code § 1006; Charter of the City and County of San Francisco, § 4.135.) Thus, landmark designation generally affords a high degree of protection to historic and architectural structures of merit in the City. There are currently more than 300 individual landmarks in the City under Article 10, in addition to structures and districts in the downtown area that are protected under Article 11. (See App. A to Article 10.)

Amendments to Current Law

This ordinance amends the Planning Code to amend one of the properties that is currently listed as an individual landmark under Article 10: 429-431 Castro Street, known as the Castro Theatre, situated within Assessor's Parcel Block No. 3582, Lot No. 085, in San Francisco's Castro/Upper Market neighborhood. The Castro Theater originally received landmark designation in 1977 by ordinance No. 355-77. That ordinance incorporated by reference a resolution of the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board describing the historic character and features of the building, but it did not list those features in any detail. Moreover, those features referred only to the building's exterior. The resolution – and therefore ordinance No. 355-77 – did not include any of the building's interior character-defining features as part of the landmark designation.

This ordinance amends that ordinance to list with more detail and specificity the exterior character-defining features to be preserved, and to add interior character-defining features as well. The ordinance finds that the Castro Theatre is eligible for local designation as it is associated with events that have made a culturally and historically significant contribution to the broad patterns of San Francisco history and architecturally it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction and represents the work of an architect of merit. Built in 1922 – a century ago – the Castro Theatre is the oldest and longest continually operating single-screen movie house in San Francisco, and the most ornate of San Francisco’s extant movie palaces. It is considered the flagship theater of the Nasser Family, San Francisco’s oldest movie business family. An early work of renowned Bay Area architect Timothy Pflueger, the Castro Theatre was the first theatre he designed and is considered one of his most iconic pieces of work. The theatre anchored early commercial development in the Eureka Valley neighborhood, now known as the Castro. Since the mid-1970s, the Castro Theatre has maintained a deep tradition of LGBTQ programming, including the world’s largest and longest-running LGBTQ film festival.

As required by Section 1004, the ordinance lists the particular features that shall be preserved, or replaced in-kind as determined necessary.

Background Information

On April 17, 2023, the Land Use and Transportation Committee approved an amendment to the proposed ordinance, which specified that fixed, theatrical auditorium seating configured in the movie-palace style is a character-defining interior feature of the Castro Theatre. On June 6, 2023, the full Board of Supervisors acted to rescind that amendment. As a result, fixed, theatrical auditorium seating configured in the movie-palace style is not a character-defining feature of the Castro Theatre.

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