



February 8, 2023

Ms. Angela Calvillo, Clerk  
Honorable Supervisor Mandelman  
Board of Supervisors  
City and County of San Francisco  
City Hall, Room 244  
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Re: Transmittal of Planning Department Case Number 2022-006075DES:  
429-431 Castro Street / Castro Theatre Landmark Designation Amendment  
Board File No. 220550

Dear Ms. Calvillo and Supervisor Mandelman,

On February 1, 2023, the Historic Preservation Commission (hereinafter “HPC”) conducted a duly noticed public hearing at a regularly scheduled meeting to consider Supervisor Mandelman’s ordinance (Board File No. 220550) to amend the landmark designation of the Castro Theatre (429-431 Castro Street). At the hearing the HPC voted to adopt a resolution to recommend landmark designation amendment pursuant to Article 10 of the Planning Code.

The Commission’s proposed modifications were as follows:

- Include the original upper balcony fixed seats as a character defining feature.

The proposed amendments have been determined to be categorically exempt from environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act Section 15060(c)(2).

Please find attached documents related to the HPC’s action. Also attached is an electronic copy of the proposed ordinance, drafted by Deputy City Attorney Andrea Ruiz-Esquide. If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Aaron D. Starr  
Manager of Legislative Affairs

cc: Andrea Ruiz-Esquide, City Attorney's Office  
Erica Major, Office of the Clerk of the Board  
Jackie Thornhill, Legislative Aide (Supervisor Mandelman)  
Richard Sucré, Planning Department, Preservation Team Lead  
Alex Westhoff, Planning Department, Preservation Planner  
Bos.legislation@sfgov.org  
Board.of.Supervisors@sfgov.org

Attachments:

Draft Article 10 Landmark Designation Amendment Ordinance  
Historic Preservation Commission Resolution No. 1303 (Recommendation)  
Planning Department Executive Summary dated February 1, 2023  
Article 10 Landmark Designation Fact Sheet

[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.**

NOTE: **Unchanged Code text and uncodified text** are in plain Arial font.  
**Additions to Codes** are in *single-underline italics Times New Roman font*.  
**Deletions to Codes** are in ~~*strikethrough italics Times New Roman font*~~.  
**Board amendment additions** are in double-underlined Arial font.  
**Board amendment deletions** are in ~~strikethrough Arial font~~.  
**Asterisks (\* \* \* \*)** indicate the omission of unchanged Code subsections or parts of tables.

Be it ordained by the People of the City and County of San Francisco:

Section 1. CEQA and Land Use Findings.

(a) The Planning Department has determined that the actions contemplated in this ordinance comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (California Public Resources Code Sections 21000 *et seq.*). Said determination is on file with the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors in File No. \_\_\_\_\_ and is incorporated herein by reference. The Board of Supervisors affirms this determination.

(b) Pursuant to Planning Code Section 302, the Board of Supervisors finds that the proposed amendment to the landmark designation of 429-431 Castro Street, situated within

1 Assessor's Parcel Block No. 3582, Lot No. 085 ("Castro Theatre"), will serve the public  
2 necessity, convenience, and welfare for the reasons set forth in Historic Preservation  
3 Commission Resolution No. \_\_\_\_\_, recommending approval of the proposed  
4 amended designation, which is incorporated herein by reference.

5 (c) On February 1, 2023 , the Historic Preservation Commission, in Resolution No.  
6 \_\_\_\_\_, adopted findings that the actions contemplated in this ordinance are  
7 consistent, on balance, with the City's General Plan and with the eight priority policies of  
8 Planning Code Section 101.1. The Board adopts these findings as its own.

9  
10 Section 2. General Findings.

11 (a) On May 24, 2022, the Board of Supervisors adopted Resolution No. 249-22,  
12 initiating amendment of the landmark designation of the Castro Theatre pursuant to Section  
13 1004.1 of the Planning Code. On June 3, 2022, the Mayor approved the resolution. Said  
14 resolution is on file with the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors in File No. 220550.

15 (b) Pursuant to Charter Section 4.135, the Historic Preservation Commission has  
16 authority "to recommend approval, disapproval, or modification of landmark designations and  
17 historic district designations under the Planning Code to the Board of Supervisors."

18 (c) Ordinance No. 355-77, enacted in 1977, designated the Castro Theatre (then 429  
19 Castro Street), as Landmark No. 100. That ordinance, which is incorporated herein by  
20 reference but amended in accordance with Sections 3 and 4, required that the particular  
21 features to be preserved include those "included in the [the Landmarks Preservation Advisory  
22 Board] resolution," which it "incorporated herein and made a part hereof as though fully set  
23 forth". The referenced resolution, Resolution No. 152 of the Landmarks Preservation Advisory  
24 Board, stated "That the said Landmark should be preserved generally in all of its particular  
25 exterior features as existing on the date hereof and as described and depicted in the

1 photographs, case report and other material on file in the Department of City Planning Docket  
2 LM 76.10," but it did not list those features in any detail. Moreover, those features refer only to  
3 the building's exterior. The resolution did not include any of the building's interior character-  
4 defining features as part of the landmark designation.

5 (d) The Landmark Designation Fact Sheet prepared for this landmarking amendment  
6 was authored by Planning Department Preservation staff. All preparers meet the Secretary of  
7 the Interior's Professional Qualification Standards for historic preservation program staff, as  
8 set forth in Code of Federal Regulations Title 36, Part 61, Appendix A. The report was  
9 reviewed for accuracy and conformance with the purposes and standards of Article 10 of the  
10 Planning Code.

11 (e) The Historic Preservation Commission, at its regular meeting of February 1, 2023,  
12 reviewed Planning Department staff's analysis of the historical significance of the Castro  
13 Theatre set forth in the Landmark Designation Fact Sheet dated February 1, 2023.

14 (f) On February 1, 2023, after holding a public hearing on the proposed landmark  
15 designation update and having considered the specialized analysis prepared by Planning  
16 Department staff and the Landmark Designation Fact Sheet, the Historic Preservation  
17 Commission recommended amending the landmark designation of the Castro Theatre under  
18 Article 10 of the Planning Code by Resolution No. \_\_\_\_\_. Said resolution is on file with  
19 the Clerk of the Board in File No. \_\_\_\_\_.

20 (g) The Board of Supervisors hereby finds that the Castro Theatre has a special  
21 character and special historical, architectural, and aesthetic interest and value, and that its  
22 designation as a Landmark will further the purposes of and conform to the standards set forth  
23 in Article 10 of the Planning Code. In doing so, the Board hereby incorporates by reference  
24 the findings of the Landmark Designation Fact Sheet.  
25

1           Section 3. Amendment of Landmark Designation.

2           (a) Pursuant to Section 1004.3 of the Planning Code, the Landmark Designation for  
3 429-431 Castro Street (Castro Theatre), Assessor's Block No. 3582, Lot No. 085, is hereby  
4 amended as specified in Section 4 of this ordinance.

5           (b) Appendix A to Article 10 of the Planning Code is hereby amended with respect to  
6 Landmark No. 100, to indicate that Landmark No. 100 has been amended by this ordinance.

7           (c) In the event there is a conflict between the landmark designation in this ordinance  
8 and the landmark designation in Ordinance No. 355-77, the provisions of this ordinance shall  
9 prevail.

10  
11           Section 4. Required Data.

12           (a) The description, location, and boundary of the Landmark site consists of the city  
13 parcel located at 429-431 Castro Street (Castro Theatre), in Assessor's Parcel Block No.  
14 3582, Lot No. 085, in San Francisco's Castro/Upper Market neighborhood.

15           (b) The characteristics of the Landmark that justify its designation are described and  
16 shown in the Landmark Designation Fact Sheet and other supporting materials contained in  
17 Planning Department Record Docket No. 2022-006075DES. In brief, the Castro Theatre is  
18 eligible for local designation as it is associated with events that have made a culturally and  
19 historically significant contribution to the broad patterns of San Francisco history and  
20 architecturally it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of  
21 construction and represents the work of an architect of merit. Built in 1922 – a century ago –  
22 the Castro Theatre is the oldest and longest continually operating single-screen movie house  
23 in San Francisco, and the most ornate of San Francisco's extant movie palaces. It is  
24 considered the flagship theater of the Nasser Family, San Francisco's oldest movie business  
25 family. An early work of renowned Bay Area architect Timothy Pflueger, the Castro Theatre

1 was the first theatre he designed and is considered one of his most iconic pieces of work. The  
2 theatre anchored early commercial development in the Eureka Valley neighborhood, now  
3 known as the Castro. Since the mid-1970s, the Castro Theatre has maintained a deep  
4 tradition of LGBTQ programming, including the world's largest and longest-running LGBTQ  
5 film festival.

6 (c) The particular features that should be preserved, or replaced in-kind as determined  
7 necessary, are those shown in photographs and/or described in the Landmark Designation  
8 Fact Sheet, which can be found in Planning Department Record Docket No. 2022-  
9 006075DES, and which are incorporated in this designation by reference as though fully set  
10 forth herein. Specifically, the following features are character-defining and shall be preserved  
11 or replaced in kind:

12 (1) Exterior form, massing, structure, architectural ornament, and materials of  
13 the Castro Theatre, identified as:

- 14 (A) Overall form and massing;
- 15 (B) Concrete construction;
- 16 (C) Use of the Spanish-Colonial style on the theater's stuccoed west  
17 façade;
- 18 (D) West façade vertical blade sign profile, lettering, neon lighting, and  
19 banding;
- 20 (E) Central west façade marque profile, lettering, neon lighting, and  
21 banding;
- 22 (F) Central bay arched mullioned wood window;
- 23 (G) Two-leaf, mullioned windows in flanking bays;
- 24 (H) Tile-clad freestanding ticket booth in recessed arcade with poster  
25 cases, glazed tile art, and unglazed tile walkway;

1 (I) Glazed wood entry doors (five pairs);

2 (J) Presence of storefronts flanking theatre lobby entrance; and

3 (K) West façade glazed tile bulkheads.

4 (2) The character-defining interior features of The Castro Theatre are those  
5 depicted in photos and written description in the Landmark Designation Fact Sheet, all of  
6 which have been accessible to the public, including:

7 (A) Lobby space featuring coffered ceiling, wood paneled doors to  
8 auditorium and to office space, mirrors, and chandeliers;

9 (B) Stairs to the mezzanine on both north and south sides of the lobby;

10 (C) Mezzanine balcony with stepped floor and presence of seating;

11 (D) Vast interior auditorium volume with raked floor, aisles, and  
12 presence of seating;

13 (E) Cast-plaster auditorium ceiling;

14 (F) Classically inspired sgraffito murals;

15 (G) Organ screens on stage return walls;

16 (H) Corinthian-pilaster framed proscenium;

17 (I) Art-deco metal auditorium chandelier;

18 (J) Presence of stage with organist lift;

19 (K) Mezzanine lobby space featuring wall niches, a barrel- and rib  
20 vaulted ceiling with chandeliers, and stenciled borders;

21 (L) Ramps from mezzanine lobby to mezzanine; and

22 (M) Art-deco drinking fountain in lobby against glazed tile wall.

23  
24 Section 5. Effective Date.

25 This ordinance shall become effective 30 days after enactment. Enactment occurs



1 when the Mayor signs the ordinance, the Mayor returns the ordinance unsigned or does not  
2 sign the ordinance within ten days of receiving it, or the Board of Supervisors overrides the  
3 Mayor's veto of the ordinance.

4  
5 APPROVED AS TO FORM:  
6 DAVID CHIU, City Attorney

7 By: /s/ Andrea Ruiz-Esquide  
8 Andrea Ruiz-Esquide  
Deputy City Attorney

9 n:\legana\as2022\1800206\01651639.docx



# LANDMARK RESOLUTION RECOMMENDATION RESOLUTION NO. 1303

**HEARING DATE: FEBRUARY 1, 2023**

**Record No.:** 2022-006075DES  
**Project Address:** 429-431 Castro Street  
**Zoning:** Castro Street Neighborhood Commercial (NCD) Zoning District  
65-B Height and Bulk District  
**Block/Lot:** 3582/085  
**Project Sponsor:** Planning Department  
49 South Van Ness Avenue, Suite 1400  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
**Property Owner:** Bay Properties Inc.  
PO Box 330235  
San Francisco, CA 94133  
**Staff Contact:** Alex Westhoff - 628-652-7314  
[Alex.Westhoff@sfgov.org](mailto:Alex.Westhoff@sfgov.org)

RESOLUTION TO RECOMMEND TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS LANDMARK DESIGNATION AMENDMENT OF THE CASTRO THEATRE, ASSESSOR'S PARCEL BLOCK NO. 3582, LOT NO. 085, ARTICLE 10 LANDMARK NUMBER 100, CONSISTENT WITH THE PURPOSES AND STANDARDS OF ARTICLE 10.

1. WHEREAS, on May 10, 2022, Supervisor Mandelman introduced a proposed Resolution under Board of Supervisors (hereinafter "Board") File No. 220550 to initiate the Landmark designation amendment process for the Castro Theatre, 429-431 Castro Street, Assessor's Parcel Block No. 3582, Lot No. 085; and
2. WHEREAS, on May 23, 2022, the Board of Supervisors at its Land Use and Transportation Committee meeting recommended unanimously to Recommend to the full Board approval of the Resolution to initiate Landmark designation amendment (Board File No. 220550); and
3. WHEREAS, on May 24, 2022, the Board voted unanimously to adopt the Resolution to initiate Landmark designation amendment, and on June 3, 2022, Resolution No. 249-22 became effective (Board File No. 220550); and
4. WHEREAS, Department Staff, who meet the Secretary of Interior's Professional Qualification Standards, prepared the Landmark Designation Fact Sheet for the Castro Theatre, which was reviewed for accuracy and

conformance with the purposes and standards of Article 10; and

5. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission, at its regular meeting of February 1, 2023, reviewed Department staff's analysis of the Castro Theatre historical significance pursuant to Article 10 as part of the Landmark Designation Executive Summary dated February 1, 2023, and recommended Landmark designation amendment through this Resolution; and
6. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds that the amended Landmark designation for the Castro Theatre is in the form prescribed by the Historic Preservation Commission and contains supporting historic, architectural, and/or cultural documentation; and
7. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds that the amended Landmark designation of the Castro Theatre is proper for its architectural merit given it is an exceptionally fine example of 1920s theatre design and represents a major work by prominent San Francisco architect Timothy Pfleuger; and
8. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds that the amended Landmark designation of the Castro Theatre is also proper for its association with the film industry as the oldest and longest continually operating single-screen movie house in San Francisco, and one of San Francisco's few remaining movie palaces; and
9. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds that the amended Landmark designation of the Castro Theatre is also proper for its Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) historical significance as an internationally renowned cinematic hub for countless film festivals and movie premieres, drawing global attention to diverse topics surrounding LGBTQ identity, culture, history, politics, and more; and
10. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds that the Castro Theatre meets one of the Historic Preservation Commission's four priority areas for designation: property types associated with under-represented social and/or cultural groups; and
11. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds that the amended Landmark designation of the Castro Theatre advances the objectives outlined in Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) Resolution No. 1127, adopted in July 2020, otherwise called *Centering Preservation Planning on Racial and Social Equity*, which states goals for how the Commission and the Planning Department can develop proactive strategies to address structural and institutional racism and center their work and resource allocation on racial and social equity, focused on preservation; and
12. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds that the Castro Theatre meet the eligibility requirements of Section 1004 of the Planning Code and warrants consideration for Article 10 landmark designation; and
13. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds that the boundaries and the list of character-defining features, as identified in the Landmark Designation Fact Sheet, should be considered for preservation under the proposed landmark designation as they relate to the Castro Theatre's historical significance and retain historical integrity as follows:

- Exterior form, massing, structure, architectural ornament, and materials of the Castro Theatre, identified as:
  - Overall form and massing;
  - Concrete construction;
  - Use of the Spanish-Colonial style on the theater's stuccoed west façade;
  - West façade vertical blade sign profile, lettering, neon lighting, and banding;
  - Central west façade marque profile, lettering, neon lighting, and banding;
  - Central bay arched mullioned wood window;
  - Two-leaf, mullioned windows in flanking bays;
  - Tile-clad freestanding ticket booth in recessed arcade with poster cases, glazed tile art, and unglazed tile walkway;
  - Glazed wood entry doors (five pairs);
  - Presence of storefronts flanking theatre lobby entrance; and
  - West façade glazed tile bulkheads.
  
- The character-defining interior features of The Castro Theatre are those depicted in photos and written description in the Landmark Designation Fact Sheet, all of which have been accessible to the public, including:
  - Lobby space featuring coffered ceiling, wood paneled doors to auditorium and to office space, mirrors, and chandeliers;
  - Stairs to the mezzanine on both north and south sides of the lobby;
  - Mezzanine balcony with stepped floor and presence of seating;
  - Vast interior auditorium volume with raked floor, aisles, and presence of seating;
  - Cast-plaster auditorium ceiling;
  - Classically inspired sgraffito murals;
  - Organ screens on stage return walls;
  - Corinthian-pilaster framed proscenium;
  - Art-deco metal auditorium chandelier;
  - Presence of stage with organist lift;
  - Mezzanine lobby space featuring wall niches, a barrel- and rib vaulted ceiling with chandeliers, and stenciled borders;
  - Ramps from mezzanine lobby to mezzanine; and
  - Art-deco drinking fountain in lobby against glazed tile wall.; and

14. WHEREAS, the Historic Preservation Commission finds one additional character defining feature should be considered for preservation under the proposed landmark designation as it relates to the Castro Theatre's historical significance and retains historical integrity, specifically, the original upper balcony fixed seats (dating from 1922); and
15. WHEREAS, the proposed designation is consistent with the General Plan priority policies pursuant to Planning Code, Section 101.1 and furthers Priority Policy No. 7, which states that landmarks and historic buildings be preserved, and will serve the public necessity, convenience and welfare pursuant to Planning Code, Section 302; and
16. WHEREAS, the Department has determined that landmark designation is exempt from environmental review, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15308 (Class Eight - Categorical); and,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends to the Board of Supervisors approval of landmark designation amendment of the Castro Theatre, Assessor's Parcel Block No. 3582, Lot No. 085 consistent with the purposes and standards of Article 10 of the Planning Code.

I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was adopted by the Historic Preservation Commission at its meeting on February 1, 2023.



Jonas P. Ionin  
*Commission Secretary*

AYES: Black, Foley, Johns, So, Nageswaran, Matsuda  
NAYS: None  
ABSENT: None  
RECUSED: Wright  
ADOPTED: February 1, 2023



# LANDMARK DESIGNATION AMENDMENT RECOMMENDATION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**HEARING DATE:** February 1, 2023

**Continued from October 5, 2022 and December 7, 2022**

**Record No.:** 2022-006075DES  
**Project Address:** 429-431 Castro Street  
**Landmark:** No. 100  
**Zoning:** CASTRO STREET NEIGHBORHOOD COMMERCIAL (NCD) ZONING DISTRICT  
65-B Height and Bulk District  
**Block/Lot:** 3582/085  
**Project Sponsor:** Planning Department  
49 South Van Ness Avenue, Suite 1400  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
**Property Owner:** Bay Properties Inc.  
PO Box 330235  
San Francisco, CA 94133  
**Staff Contact:** Alex Westhoff - 628-652-7314  
[Alex.Westhoff@sfgov.org](mailto:Alex.Westhoff@sfgov.org)

**Recommendation:** Recommend Landmark Designation Amendment to the Board of Supervisors

## Property Description

429 Castro Street (The Castro Theatre) is located on the east side of Castro Street between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Streets (Assessor's Block 3582; Lot 085). The theater occupies roughly 100 feet of frontage on Castro Street on a generally rectangular parcel approximately 15,550 square feet and is 57'6" tall. The theatre is one story over basement, plus mezzanine and upper balcony, totaling 23,488 gross square feet of floor area.

## Project Description

The Historic Preservation Commission is requested to make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors regarding amendment of the Landmark Designation of 429-431 Castro Street, known as the Castro Theatre

(Landmark No. 100) to include both exterior and interior character defining features, and to capture the property's full historical significance. The Landmark designation amendment refines the building's statement of significance to acknowledge the building's important role as the longest running single-screen movie theater in San Francisco and for its association with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) history. The Landmark designation amendment was initiated by the Board of Supervisors.

On May 10, 2022, Supervisor Mandelman introduced a proposed resolution under Board of Supervisors (hereinafter "Board") File No. 220550 to initiate landmark designation amendment process for the Castro Theatre, 429-431 Castro Street. At the Land Use Committee of the Board Hearing on May 23, 2022, the committee voted unanimously to Recommend to the full Board approval of the Resolution to initiate the Landmark Designation amendment. On May 24, 2022, the Board voted unanimously to approve the Resolution, and on June 3, 2022 with the Mayor's Signature, Resolution 249-22 became effective. On July 19, 2022 Supervisor Mandelman introduced a proposed resolution under Board File No. 220861 to extend by 90 days the prescribed time within which the Historic Preservation Commission may render its decision on the proposed landmark designation amendment. On July 26, 2022 the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to adopt the resolution and on August 4, 2022 with the Mayor's Signature, Resolution 361-22 became effective. On November 8, 2022, Supervisor Mandelman introduced a proposed resolution under Board File No. 221150 to extend by six months the prescribed time within which the Historic Preservation Commission may render its decision on the proposed landmark designation amendment. On November 15, 2022, the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to adopt the resolution and on November 17, 2022 with the Mayor's Signature, Resolution 495-22 became effective.

## Compliance With Planning Code

### Article 10 of the Planning Code

The executive summary and analysis under review was prepared by Department preservation staff, who meet the Secretary of the Interior's professional qualifications. The Department has determined that the subject property meets the requirements for eligibility as an individual landmark pursuant to Article 10 of the Planning Code. The justification for its inclusion is explained in detail in the attached Landmark Designation Fact Sheet, and briefly in this Executive Summary.

**Significance:** Built in 1922, 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. The theatre 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. Countless independent movies have premiered at the theatre, drawing global attention to diverse topics surrounding LGBTQ identity, culture, history, politics, and more.

The 2016 Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco, written by Donna J. Graves and Shayne E. Watson for the San Francisco Planning Department, provided a detailed historical context of the Castro neighborhood's LGBTQ significance. This context statement was used as a basis to assess the Castro Theatre's historical context, particularly as it related to broader trends and events pertinent to LGBTQ history both locally

and nationally/globally. To further augment this context, Planning Department staff conducted additional research, including review of a selected bibliography, compiled by Gerard Koskovich (Public Historian and founding member of the GLBT Historical Society). Other referenced context statements included the Eureka Valley Historic Context Statement (Elaine B. Stiles, 2017) and the San Francisco Neighborhood Movie Theater Non-Contiguous Multiple Property Historic District Context Statement (Andrew Murray and Katie Tom, 2006).

**Underrepresented Landmark Types:** The proposed landmark designation amendment addresses a previously identified underrepresented landmark type: specifically, a property associated with underrepresented racial/ethnic/social groups. The proposed landmark designation amendment recognizes the Castro Theatre for its association with LGBTQ history.

To date, only eight of San Francisco's designated Landmarks are recognized for their association with LGBTQ history. These Landmarks are:

- Landmark No. 227: Castro Camera Shop and Harvey Milk Residence (573-575 Castro Street), and
- Landmark No. 241: Jose Theater/NAMES Project Building (2362 Market Street), and
- Landmark No. 264: Twin Peaks Tavern (401 Castro Street), and
- Landmark No. 287: Paper Doll (524 Union Street), and
- Landmark No. 291: Japanese YWCA (1830 Sutter Street), and
- Landmark No. 292: Lyon-Martin House (651 Duncan Street), and
- Landmark No. 295: San Francisco Eagle Bar (396-398 12<sup>th</sup> Street), and
- Landmark No. 307: Site of Compton's Cafeteria Riot (Intersection of Turk and Taylor Streets).

**Integrity:** Castro Theatre (429 Castro Street) maintains a high level of integrity. See Page 3 of attached Landmark Designation Fact Sheet for further analysis.

**Character-Defining Features:** Exterior and interior character-defining features of Castro Theatre (429 Castro Street) are identified in the attached Landmark Designation Fact Sheet on Page 4.

**Boundaries of the Landmark:** The proposed Landmark encompasses Castro Theatre (429 Castro Street) (Assessor's Block No. 3582, Lot No. 085).

**General Plan:** The Urban Design Element of the San Francisco General Plan contains the following relevant objectives and policies:

#### OBJECTIVE 2

CONSERVATION OF RESOURCES THAT PROVIDE A SENSE OF NATURE, CONTINUITY WITH THE PAST, AND FREEDOM FROM OVERCROWDING.



#### Policy 4

Preserve notable landmarks and areas of historic, architectural or aesthetic value, and promote the preservation of other buildings and features that provide continuity with past development.

Designating significant historic resources as local landmarks will further continuity with the past because the buildings will be preserved for the benefit of future generations.

**Planning Code Section 101.1** – Eight Priority Policies establishes and requires review of permits for consistency with said policies. On balance, the proposed designation is consistent with the priority policies, and furthers Policy Number 7, which states that landmarks and historic buildings be preserved.

## Landmark Designation Procedures

### Action by Historic Preservation Commission.

The Historic Preservation Commission on February 4, 2009, by Resolution No. 001, adopted the National Register Criteria as its methodology for recommending landmark designation of historic resources. Under the National Register Criteria, the quality of significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, feeling, materials, workmanship, and association, and that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of an architect of merit, or that possess high artistic values, or represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or properties that have yielded, or may likely yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Article 10 of the Planning Code.

Section 1004 of the Planning Code authorizes the landmark designation of an individual structure or other feature or an integrated group of structures and features on a single lot or site, having special character or special historical, architectural or aesthetic interest or value, as a landmark. Section 1004.1 also outlines that landmark designation may be initiated by the Board of Supervisors or the Historic Preservation Commission and the initiation shall include findings in support. Section 1004.2 states that once initiated, the proposed designation is referred to the Historic Preservation Commission for a report and recommendation to the Board of Supervisors to approve, disapprove or modify the proposal.

Pursuant to Section 1004.3 of the Planning Code, if the Historic Preservation Commission approves the designation, a copy of the resolution of approval is transmitted to the Board of Supervisors and without referral to the Planning Commission. The Board of Supervisors shall hold a public hearing on the designation and may approve, modify or disapprove the designation.

Section 1004(b) requires that the designating ordinance approved by the Board of Supervisors shall include the location and boundaries of the landmark site, a description of the characteristics of the landmark which justify its designation, and a description of the particular features that should be preserved.

If the Historic Preservation Commission approves the proposed designation recommendation, a copy of the resolution of approval is transmitted to the Board of Supervisors, which holds a public hearing on the designation and may approve, modify or disapprove the designation (Section 1004.3). If the Historic Preservation Commission disapproves the proposed designation, such action shall be final, except upon the filing of a valid appeal to the Board of Supervisors within 30 days (Section 1004.4).

## Public/Neighborhood Input

As of the time of publishing this case report, the Planning Department received nearly 700 public comment letters which have expressed support for expanding the Landmark designation of the Castro Theatre to include the interior. Over 600 of these utilized a form letter template from the Castro Theatre Conservancy's website – "Save the Castro Theatre". These letters also included members of the Historic Preservation Commission, Planning Commission, and Board of Supervisors as recipients. The Board of Supervisors staff also transmitted over 35 letters of support for the May 2022 Landmark Designation Amendment. No letters of opposition to the landmark designation were received from members of the public.

## Issues & Other Considerations

- Interior Character-Defining Features: Inclusion of interior features as character-defining is warranted as these features relate to the Castro Theatre's architectural, historical and cultural significance. Of San Francisco's six extant movie palaces, the Castro Theatre retains the highest degree of integrity regarding its interior and exterior. The ground and upper story lobbies remain intact with few changes since the original period of significance. Furthermore, the vast auditorium is highly decorated with ornate features including its ceiling, proscenium, rondel and sgraffito murals, chandelier, and organ screens. Additionally, the distinctive configuration of the seats, aisles, raked floor and stage are linked to the theatre's cultural identity as the setting where notable directors, actors, musicians, writers, community leaders and more have made substantive contributions to LGBTQ community building.
- Integrity: The Castro Theatre maintains a high level of integrity, regarding both its interior and exterior, to convey its historical and cultural significance. The Castro Theatre has occupied the subject property from 1922-present and thus retains full integrity regarding location. The exterior has been subject to few alterations. The blade sign and current marquee were installed in 1937 though still within the first period of significance. The two storefronts have been altered though remain in the same location to convey the presence of storefronts per Pflueger's original design. Character-defining interior features have generally been well-preserved. Thus, the theatre has retained high degrees of integrity in design, materials and workmanship to convey its significance as one of San Francisco's few remaining, and the most intact, of the movie palaces. Regarding setting, while there have been significant changes to surrounding buildings since the first period of significance, the commercial character of the surrounding Castro Street corridor has been retained. While the neighborhood more recently underwent extensive streetscape improvements, other physical aspects of the neighborhood such as topography remain the same and thus the property retains integrity in setting. Given few interior alterations, the theatre retains a high degree of integrity in feeling and association as the longest

continually operating single screen movie palace in San Francisco, and one of the world's most renowned movie theatres for LGBTQ programming.

- Property Owner Input: Pursuant to Article 10, Section 1004.2 of the Planning Code, the City must provide written notice to the property owner 10 days prior to the recommendation hearing, during which the HPC considers whether to recommend landmark designation to the Board of Supervisors.

The Assessor's Summary identifies Bay Properties Inc. as the property owner. The hearing notice was mailed to Bay Properties Inc. on September 15, 2022 for the hearing originally scheduled for October 5, 2022. In January 2023, comment letters were received from representatives of both the Nasser family (the property owners), and Another Planet Entertainment (the sponsors), both of which were addressed to the Historic Preservation Commission President. The letters discussed the venue's recent financial challenges, and proposed plans to both revitalize the physical theatre space and diversify the programming and types of events. Both letters discouraged the inclusion of the seats as character defining features in the landmark designation amendment.

- Proposed Project: Unrelated to this designation amendment, the Department has received a proposed project at the Castro Theater (see Record No. 2022-005675COA/CUA).

## Environmental Review Status

The Planning Department has determined that actions by regulatory agencies for protection of the environment (specifically in this case, landmark designation) are exempt from environmental review, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15308 (Class Eight - Categorical).

## Basis for Recommendation

The Department recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission recommend the landmark designation amendment of Castro Theatre (429 Castro Street) for its association with Eureka Valley commercial development, the film entertainment industry, and San Francisco LGBTQ history; as well as for its architectural merit. Built in 1922, the Castro Theatre is the oldest and longest continually operating single-screen movie house in San Francisco, and one of San Francisco's few remaining movie palaces. An early work of renowned Bay Area architect Timothy Pflueger and his first theatre, the Castro Theatre's interior and exterior are highly stylized. For over one-hundred years the Castro Theatre has been under continuous ownership of the Nasser family, San Francisco's oldest movie business family. The theatre anchored early commercial development in the Eureka Valley neighborhood, now known as the Castro. The Castro Theatre's mid-1970s shift in programming is deeply emblematic of the Castro neighborhood's evolution into one of the world's best known LGBTQ enclaves. It has since served as home to countless film festivals and movie premiers, drawing global attention to diverse topics surrounding LGBTQ identity, culture, history, politics, and more.

## Attachments

Draft Resolution Recommending Landmark Designation  
Exhibit A – Landmark Designation Fact Sheet – Castro Theatre

Exhibit B – Draft Landmark Designation Ordinance

Exhibit C – Original Landmark Designation Report dated October 20, 1976

Exhibit D – Environmental Determination

Exhibit E – Maps and Context Images

Exhibit F – Drawings for the New Castro Theatre, 1920-1921 (courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)

Exhibit G – Board of Supervisors Resolution No. 249-22

Exhibit H – Board of Supervisors Resolution No. 361-22

Exhibit I – Board of Supervisors Resolution No. 495-22



## ARTICLE 10 LANDMARK DESIGNATION FACT SHEET



Castro Theatre, 429 Castro Street (2019)  
Image Source: Page & Turnbull

Historic Name:	The Castro Theatre
Address:	429-431 Castro Street
Block/ Lot(s):	3582/085
Parcel Area:	15,489 sq ft

Zoning:	Castro Street Neighborhood Commercial (NCD) Zoning District
Year Built:	1922
Architect:	Timothy Pflueger
Prior Historic Studies/ Other Designations:	<p>1976 : Department of City Planning surveyed the building</p> <p>1977 : Designated as Article 10 San Francisco City Landmark Number 100</p> <p>2004 : <i>Sexing the City : The Development of Sexual Identity Based Subcultures in San Francisco, 1933-1979</i> Historic Context Statement identified the property as a site of significance to GLBT History</p> <p>2006 : Identified in the California Register-Eligible San Francisco Neighborhood Movie Theater Historic District (Discontiguous)</p> <p>2013 : Identified as Contributor to the California Eligible Castro Street Commercial Historic District</p> <p>2015 : <i>Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History</i> in San Francisco identified the property for its Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) association</p> <p>2017 : <i>Eureka Valley Historic Context Statement</i> identified the property for its association with Eureka Valley History</p>
Prior HPC Actions:	The Landmark Preservation Advisory Board (precursor to the Historic Preservation Commission) recommended landmark designation of the Castro Theatre in 1976. This led to the Castro Theatre being designated as City Landmark Number 100 in 1977. The landmark designation was limited to preservation of its exterior features.
Significance Criteria:	<p><i>Events:</i> Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.</p> <p><i>Architecture/Design:</i> Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, and/or represents the work of an architect of merit.</p>
Periods of Significance:	1922-1937, 1976-2004
Statement of Significance:	Built in 1922, 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. The theater 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 theater he designed and is considered one of his most iconic pieces of work. The theater 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. Countless independent movies have premiered at the theater, drawing global attention to diverse topics surrounding LGBTQ identity, culture, history, politics, and more.

Assessment of Integrity:	<p>The seven aspects of integrity as defined by the National Park Service (NPS) and the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) are location, design, materials, workmanship, setting, feeling, and association.<sup>1</sup></p> <p>The Castro Theatre maintains a high level of integrity in both its interior and exterior which conveys its historical and cultural significance. The Castro Theatre has occupied the subject property from 1922 to the present and thus retains full integrity regarding location. The exterior has been subject to few alterations. The vertical blade sign and current marquee were installed in 1937 though still within the first period of significance. The two storefronts have been altered though they remain in the same location thus conveying the presence of storefronts per Pflueger's original design. Character-defining interior features have generally been well-preserved. Thus, the theater has retained high degrees of integrity in design, materials and workmanship to convey its significance as one of the few remaining and the most intact of San Francisco's movie palaces. Regarding setting, while there have been significant changes to surrounding buildings since the first period of significance, the commercial character of the surrounding Castro Street corridor has been retained. While the neighborhood more recently underwent extensive streetscape improvements, other physical aspects of the neighborhood such as topography remain the same and thus the property retains integrity in setting. Given few interior alterations, the theater retains a high degree of integrity in feeling and association as the longest continually operating single screen movie palace in San Francisco, and one of the world's most renowned movie theater for LGBTQ programming.</p>
--------------------------	---

---

<sup>1</sup> "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation," National Register Bulletin, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1995, p. 44.



Character-Defining Features:	<p>Exterior:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall form and massing</li> <li>• Concrete construction</li> <li>• Use of the Spanish-Colonial style on the theater's stuccoed west façade</li> <li>• West façade vertical blade sign profile, lettering, neon lighting, and banding</li> <li>• Central west façade marque profile, lettering, neon lighting, and banding</li> <li>• Central bay arched mullioned wood window</li> <li>• Two-leaf, mullioned windows in flanking bays</li> <li>• Tile-clad freestanding ticket booth in recessed arcade with poster cases, glazed tile art, and unglazed tile walkway</li> <li>• Glazed wood entry doors (five pairs)</li> <li>• Presence of storefronts flanking theater lobby entrance</li> <li>• West façade glazed tile bulkheads</li> </ul> <p>Interior:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lobby space featuring coffered ceiling, wood paneled doors to auditorium and to office space, mirrors, and chandeliers</li> <li>• Stairs to the mezzanine on both north and south sides of the lobby</li> <li>• Mezzanine balcony with stepped floor and presence of seating</li> <li>• Vast interior auditorium volume with raked floor, aisles, and presence of seating</li> <li>• Cast-plaster auditorium ceiling</li> <li>• Classically inspired sgraffito murals</li> <li>• Organ screens on stage return walls</li> <li>• Corinthian-pilaster framed proscenium</li> <li>• Art-deco metal auditorium chandelier</li> <li>• Presence of stage with organist lift</li> <li>• Mezzanine lobby space featuring wall niches, a barrel- and rib vaulted ceiling with chandeliers, and stenciled borders</li> <li>• Ramps from mezzanine lobby to mezzanine</li> <li>• Art-deco drinking fountain in lobby against glazed tile wall</li> </ul>
------------------------------	--



## Statement of Significance Summary

### Significance Criteria

The Castro Theatre is eligible for designation as a San Francisco Landmark for association with significant historic events (Criterion A) and architecture (Criterion C).

**Events: Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history (National Register Criterion A).**

#### *Eureka Valley Neighborhood History*

The Eureka Valley Historic Context Statement was adopted by the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission in 2017. The Castro Theatre aligns with the Context Statement theme “Becoming a District of the City (1906-1941)” as an anchor for early and continued neighborhood commercial development in the Eureka Valley neighborhood (now known as the Castro).

#### *Film Entertainment*

The Castro Theatre is one of only six extant San Francisco movie palaces, and the only one which has continually operated as a movie theater since it opened, now over 100 years ago. These highly stylized venues were constructed between World War I and the Great Depression to celebrate the film industry which was quickly gaining foothold as one of the most popular forms of entertainment at the time. The Castro Theatre was the first and finest major theater built by the Nasser family, San Francisco’s oldest multigenerational movie business family, and is considered their flagship theater. Of these six remaining palaces, the Castro Theatre is the most intact.

#### *LGBTQ History*

The Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco was adopted by the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission in 2016. This 400+ page document includes subthemes outlining events and trends associated with the development of San Francisco’s LGBTQ communities. The Castro Theatre’s historical and cultural significance is strongly related to the following four subthemes:

- **Evolution of LGBTQ Enclaves and Development of New Neighborhoods (1960s to 1980s)**  
Social, political, and cultural changes associated with LGBTQ migration, organizing, and activism in San Francisco from the 1960s through the 1980s led to the emergence of new queer neighborhoods and changes to existing enclaves.
- **Gay Liberation, Pride, and Politics (1960s to 1990s)**  
Conceptualizing gay rights, and organizing for them, evolved and became more complex in the 1960s to the 1980s. Homophile activists had worked on the premise that rights would be gained by arguing that sexual behavior was a private matter and only one small part of their identity; in all other ways they were the same as straight people—and should therefore be equal to them.
- **Building LGBTQ Communities (1960s to 1990s)**  
Advances in gay liberation helped further the growth of LGBTQ communities, including both the associated physical spaces and the events and traditions that shaped them. The growing spectrum of activities and institutions including sports, visual arts, music, film, literature, education, religion, sex-based, and more were reflective of San Francisco’s diverse and expanding LGBTQ communities.

- **San Francisco and the AIDS Epidemic (1981 to 1990s)**

The AIDS epidemic is among the most significant events to shape the LGBTQ history of the 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The social, psychological, and financial costs are stunning, and the epidemic has wrought enormous changes in medical research, healthcare delivery, and gay culture. Killing a significant number of gay and bisexual men and transgender women, the toll of the disease underscored major issues associated with homophobia and discrimination, medical research, and the provision of healthcare in the U.S. It also brought to the fore the ability of communities to rally in the face of discrimination and death. The San Francisco model of HIV/AIDS care, which utilized medical facilities and community-based organizations to mobilize compassionate and respectful treatment, became a global standard.

**Architecture/Design: Structures that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; or that represent the work of an architect of merit; or that possess high artistic values (National Register Criterion C).**

The Castro Theatre represents an early and distinctive work of renowned Bay Area architect; Timothy Pflueger. It was Pflueger's first theater and was constructed early in his career.

### Overview

Built in 1922, the Castro Theatre's historic and cultural significance is multi-layered. Located near the geographic heart of the Castro, the theater has long served as an economic and social anchor for the neighborhood, once known as Eureka Valley. Under the continuous ownership of the Nassers, San Francisco's oldest movie business family, the theater is the City's longest operating single-screen movie palace. Its ornate and largely unaltered exterior and interior represent an early and iconic masterpiece of renowned Bay Area architect Timothy Pflueger. Since 1976 the theater has served as a haven for the LGBTQ community, drawing both local patrons and international audiences alike. Home to myriad long-running film festivals, countless independent movies have premiered at the theater, drawing global attention to diverse topics surrounding LGBTQ identity, culture, history, politics, and more.

The Castro Theatre's historical significance is discussed in relationship to specific associations, under National Register of Historic Places criteria, as follows.

### Criterion A – Events

#### ***Eureka Valley Historical Associations: Becoming a District of the City (1906-1941)***

Eureka Valley, now commonly known as the Castro, is a landlocked neighborhood near the geographic center of San Francisco. In the early part of the twentieth century, Eureka Valley was developing as a suburban district of the city, well connected by transit. However, through the 1906 earthquake and fires, World War 1, and the economic boom of the 1920s and the Great Depression, the neighborhood transitioned to a self-sustaining urban district. Local amenities included a developed commercial district, as well as neighborhood recreation and entertainment venues.<sup>2</sup>



1939 photo of Castro Street looking south from Market Street.  
Image Source: Image Source: OpenSFHistory / wnp4.1284

Eureka Valley was largely spared from direct effects of the Great 1906 Earthquake and Fires. While this catastrophe devastated much of the city, the fire stopped several blocks east of the neighborhood allowing it

---

<sup>2</sup> Elaine B Stiles, *Eureka Valley Historic Context Statement*, December 2017, page 80.

to remain fairly intact. However, the post-1906 boom did largely impact the neighborhood. Eureka Valley was amongst San Francisco's western neighborhoods which grew denser as earthquake refugees settled in the area.<sup>3</sup>

Along with the residential development boom, the early twentieth century also saw the neighborhood's most intensive period of commercial development. While 18<sup>th</sup> Street had served as the primary commercial corridor in the neighborhood through the 1910s, Market Street began to see commercialization around this time. This commercialization further continued along Castro Street between 18<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets, where the Castro Theatre now lies.

The development and operation of the theater is credited as being central to the broader neighborhood development, contributing to the boosting of nearby home real estate values.<sup>4</sup> The building anchored the northern portion of the Castro Street commercial corridor, linking commercial growth on Market Street with the major commercial intersection of Castro and 18<sup>th</sup> Streets.<sup>5</sup>

The construction of the Castro Theatre reflects the growing urbanity of the Eureka Valley neighborhood. Its construction, along with the development of two major Castro Street bank branches and a handful of automotive related businesses, reflect the establishment of Eureka Valley as an identifiable district within San Francisco.<sup>6</sup> The Castro Theatre is recognized as the most prominent extant theater in the district.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 82.

<sup>4</sup> Curbed SF, "The Epic History of the Castro Theatre, a San Francisco and LGBTQ Landmark." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sf.curbed.com/2016/6/22/12004316/san-francisco-pride-castro-theater-history-pictures>.

<sup>5</sup> Stiles, *Eureka Valley Historic Context Statement*, page 89.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pages 89-90.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 90.

**Film Entertainment History Associations: San Francisco Movie Palaces (1915-1930)**

In photographer's Ave Pildas's 1980 book, *Movie Palaces*, he states:

*"The end of World War 1 (1918) saw the beginning of an unparalleled flamboyance. There was money to spend, things to buy, and the freedom to dream. The decade of the twenties was a time to exploit affluence, and the Movie Palace stood out as a shrine to this indulgence."*

The Castro Theatre (429 Castro Street), constructed in 1922 by Timothy Pflueger, is one of San Francisco's six extant movie palaces, all of which were built between 1912 and 1931.<sup>8</sup> The Castro Theatre has been under continuous ownership by the Nasser family who have operated movie theater throughout San Francisco for over one-hundred years, now spanning several generations. The family's involvement with the San Francisco movie theater industry began in 1907. Lebanese immigrant Abraham Nasser turned the family's neighborhood market on Collingwood and Eighteenth Streets into a storefront nickelodeon by night, called the Liberty. For five cents, patrons could watch moving pictures on a blank wall, sitting on folding chairs.<sup>9</sup> As the endeavor proved to be financially viable, Nasser put his seven sons in charge of running the nickelodeon.<sup>10</sup>



The Nasser's first theater at 4200 18<sup>th</sup> St.  
(circa 1909)  
Image Source: OpenSFHistory / wnp67.0053

Nickelodeons are considered the first permanent movie theaters and are associated with San Francisco film entertainment from 1900-1915. At the turn of the century, vaudeville was the most popular form of entertainment. In 1896, however, a motion picture projector premiered at a music hall in New York, which quickly led to vaudeville companies displaying motion pictures between regular acts. Movies started quickly gaining a foothold in the U.S., and surpassed vaudeville in popularity. Early movie theaters were developed as modifications to existing retail storefronts or vaudeville theater.<sup>11</sup> The concept of the nickelodeon began with two theater owners in Pittsburgh, who showed movies throughout the day in their storefront theater, charging an admission of only five cents.<sup>12</sup>

Nickelodeons became quite popular, with an estimated eight thousand theaters throughout side streets of the United States by 1908, with as many as 26 million people a week attending nickelodeons around this time period.<sup>13</sup> However, safety concerns surrounded these establishments, including lack of ventilation and fire

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Murray and Katie Tom, *San Francisco Neighborhood Movie Theater Non-Contiguous Multiple Property Historic District Context Statement (Discussion Draft)*, April 2006, page 16.

<sup>9</sup> Theresa Poletti, *Art Deco San Francisco, The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), page 37.

<sup>10</sup> Aidin Vaziri, "How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature". *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Murray and Tom, *San Francisco Neighborhood Movie Theater Non-Contiguous Multiple Property Historic District Context Statement (Discussion Draft)*, page 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, page 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

hazards from flammable silver nitrate film, leading to stricter building code requirements. This included a requirement to construct projection booths with fire-resistant materials.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to safety concerns, society was also losing interest in nickelodeons, partially due to middle- and upper-class attitudes that nickelodeons were associated with working-class and poor people whose cultural expressions they saw as disorderly and disreputable. Along with the end of World War I came a time of increased societal opulence. Grander movie palaces were being developed throughout the world circa mid-to late 1910s and increasing in popularity in the early 1920s.<sup>15</sup>

Nickelodeons were generally constructed by building contractors, and were modest in scale, with small seating capacities, few features, and simple interior and exterior design.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, movie palaces were often constructed by more prominent architects and designers with the intent to showcase film in a highly stylized environment where the ambiance itself was part of the entertainment. The high merit of architectural and interior design was a concerted attempt to mirror the fantasy realm of the screen.<sup>17</sup> To support a luxurious movie going experience, movie palaces included features such as lavish lobbies and auditoriums, powder rooms, restrooms, and smoking lounges. Additional amenities included symphony orchestras, printed programs, and uniformed hospitality staff to ensure patrons' needs were met.<sup>18</sup> Ticket prices were higher generally 10 to 20 cents, though remained affordable to the middle class.<sup>19</sup>

In 1910, the Nasser family closed the Liberty and opened the original Castro Theatre, in the building that is now Cliff's Variety Store (485 Castro Street). This theater seated 600 and featured both films and vaudeville performances.<sup>20</sup> By 1920, the family also owned two small theaters in the Mission District.<sup>21</sup> Given the growing audience, the family was interested in expanding the Castro Theatre, and were able to obtain a loan from Humboldt Bank to do so. At the time Eureka Valley, was a booming neighborhood with Market Street serving as a streetcar corridor from the financial district and thus an expanding network of potential theater patrons.

Three of Abraham Nasser's sons, William, Elias and George, had gotten Timothy Pflueger's name from Humboldt Bank and approached him about the design of the Castro Theatre as it exists today. Pflueger was not a well-known architect at the time, only having passed his California architecture licensing exam in June 1920, and shortly after becoming a partner with J.R. Miller, for whom he previously had been working as a draftsman.<sup>22</sup> The Castro Theatre was thus an early initial focus and Pflueger's first movie theater.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Poletti, *Art Deco San Francisco, The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger*, page 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, page 39.

<sup>16</sup> Murray and Tom, *San Francisco Neighborhood Movie Theater Non-Contiguous Multiple Property Historic District Context Statement (Discussion Draft)*, April 2006, page 13.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Levin, *Castro Theater – Final Case Report*, October 1976, page 2

<sup>18</sup> Murray and Tom, *San Francisco Neighborhood Movie Theater Non-Contiguous Multiple Property Historic District Context Statement (Discussion Draft)*, April 2006, page 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, page 8.

<sup>20</sup> Curbed SF, "The Epic History of the Castro Theatre, a San Francisco and LGBTQ Landmark." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sf.curbed.com/2016/6/22/12004316/san-francisco-pride-castro-theater-history-pictures>.

<sup>21</sup> Poletti, *Art Deco San Francisco, The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger*, page 37

<sup>22</sup> Poletti, *Art Deco San Francisco, The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger*, page 27-32.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, page 37.



The Castro Theatre opened to the public on June 22, 1922.<sup>24</sup> With the *San Francisco Chronicle* opening advertisement describing it as “one of the finest monuments to motion pictures in America”.<sup>25</sup> The grand opening was a sold-out event, attended by then-Mayor Sunny Jim Rolph Jr. Among other features, the event included the screening of Paramount’s race car flick *Across the Continent*.<sup>26</sup>

Starting with the opening night, live music was central to the theater’s regular programs. A San Francisco Symphony Orchestra violinist was chosen to conduct the new Castro orchestra. Music equipment included a Knabe piano and a Robert Morton orchestral organ.<sup>27</sup> In 1950 the original organ was replaced by a C.G. Conn 651 organ (not extant). The incorporation of organ music into the movie-watching experience which continues today is thus deeply tied to the Castro Theatre’s long history.



Above: 1922 opening advertisement.  
Image Source: San Francisco Chronicle

<sup>24</sup> San Francisco Theatres, “The Castro Theatre: history and exterior views.” Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sanfranciscotheatres.blogspot.com/2017/08/castro-theatre.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Curbed SF, “The Epic History of the Castro Theatre, a San Francisco and LGBTQ Landmark.” Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sf.curbed.com/2016/6/22/12004316/san-francisco-pride-castro-theater-history-pictures>.

<sup>27</sup> Gross, “Departure to Roman Design Followed in San Francisco House”. *Motion Picture News*, Nov-Dec 1922., page 2346.

A small fire in early 1937 led Pflueger to make some minor interior changes, largely aesthetic.<sup>28</sup> These include restoration of the auditoriums sgraffito murals (extant), installation of new seats and lighting fixtures, a new sound system, and the installation of a Pflueger-designed massive central metal Art Deco light figure (extant) replacing the original chandelier.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the existing neon vertical blade sign and the current marquee were installed.<sup>30</sup>

For its first few decades, the Castro Theatre filled its role as a neighborhood movie theater, drawing families from the neighborhood as recurring customers. Popular movies of the times were shown, with films of interest to both adults and children. During the Great Depression, the management offered free dishes with admission as an incentive at a financially challenging time. During the 1950s-1960s however, patronage dropped, likely due to the introduction of television, and the theater faced financial struggles.<sup>31</sup> The decline in population of the city and neighborhood was also a factor in the sparser attendance during this era.



Above: 1922 Opening Night Photo. Below: 1922 Photo of Ground Floor Lobby with internal windows (non-extant).

Image Source: OpenSFHistory / wnp27.4923 and wnp5.50469

<sup>28</sup> Levin, *Castro Theater – Final Case Report*, October 1976, page 2

<sup>29</sup> Page and Turnbull, *The Castro Theatre: Site and Construction Chronology*, 2022, page 1.

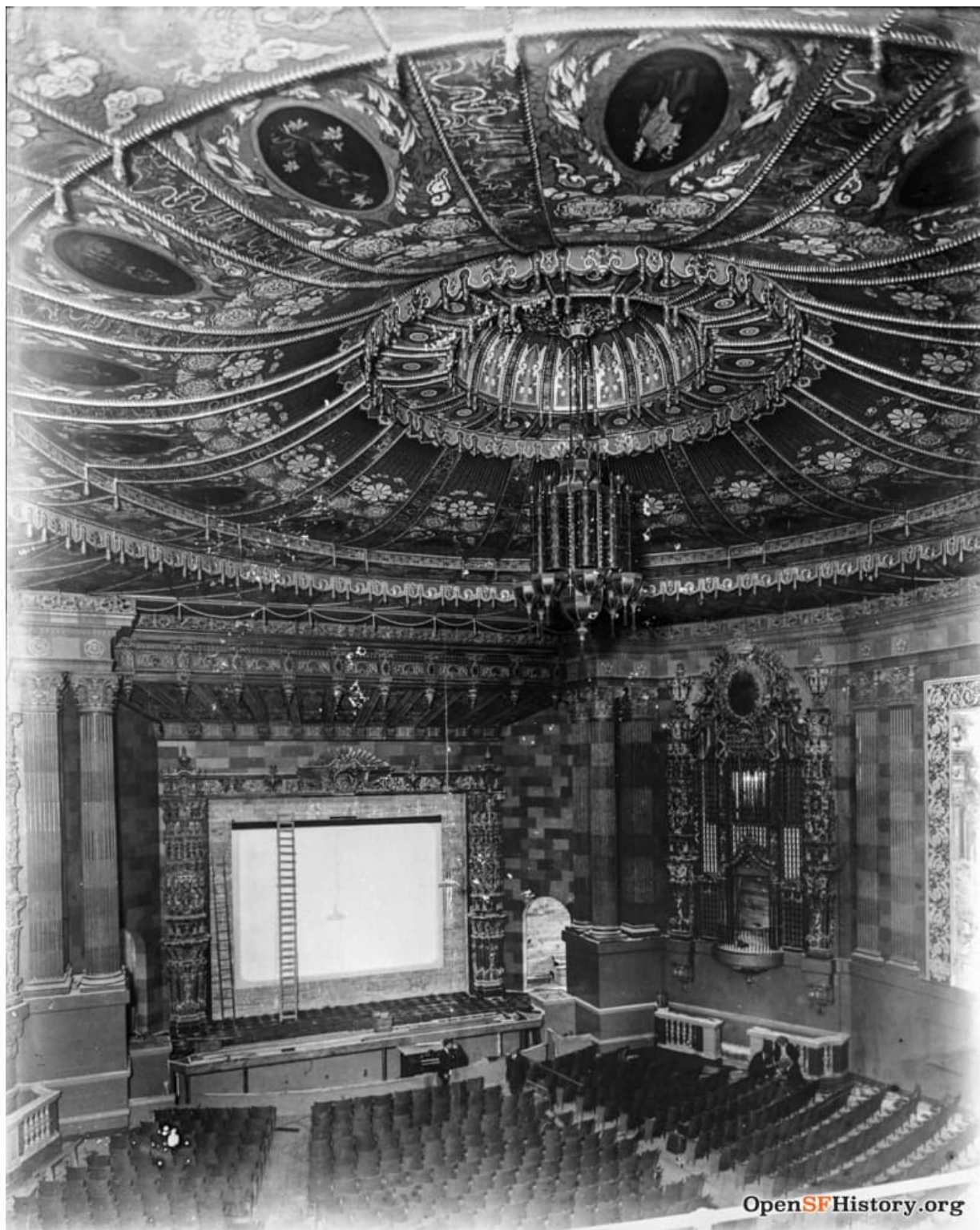
<sup>30</sup> Vaziri, "How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature". *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Guthmann, "75, Castro Theatre Still Making Memories". *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 18, 1997.





Above: 1922 Second Floor. Below: 1922 View from balcony  
Image Source: OpenSFHistory / wnp5.50470 and wnp5.50468



1922 View of screen and original proscenium  
Image Source: OpenSFHistory / wnp67.0013

The following is a list of San Francisco's extant movie palaces<sup>32</sup>:

Theater	Address	Date of Construction	Architect
Alexandria	5400 Geary Boulevard	1912	Reid Brothers
Alhambra	2330 Polk Street	c. 1926	Timothy Pflueger
Castro	429 Castro Street	1922	Timothy Pflueger
El Capitan	2353 Mission Street	1928	William Crim
El Rey	1970 Ocean Avenue	1931	Timothy Pflueger
New Mission	2550 Mission Street	1916	Reid Brothers

While the buildings on the above list remain extant, most now house non-theater uses, with the Castro and New Mission being the only exceptions. However, the New Mission Theatre did close in 1993 and became a furniture store. Due to community lobbying, the building was protected from demolition, and it was purchased and significantly rehabilitated by the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, who reopened it as a multi-screen movie theater in 2015. Thus, the Castro Theatre is the only one of San Francisco's movie palaces which has continually operated as a theater since it was erected.

Of the six movie palaces remaining in the city, the Castro has been the least altered with respect to both its interior and exterior. While the Alexandria's interior retains sufficient integrity, the feeling of a single-screen theater was partly lost due to modifications including interior remodeling.<sup>33</sup> Exterior changes to the Alhambra include the removal of the free-standing ticket booth, the addition of modern glass doors enclosing the former exterior lobby, and alterations to the ground level façade include granitized marble facing.<sup>34</sup> El Captain's interior was completely demolished when the building was converted to a parking lot.<sup>35</sup> El Rey's exterior alterations include the loss of its original neon signage and some sheet metal ornament.<sup>36</sup> Lastly, the New Mission Theatre is no longer a single screen movie theater as the original auditorium has been divided. Given the minimal alterations since the 1937 vertical blade sign and marquee installation, the Castro Theatre can be considered the most intact of San Francisco's extant movie palaces since its period of significance.

<sup>32</sup> Murray and Tom, *San Francisco Neighborhood Movie Theater Non-Contiguous Multiple Property Historic District Context Statement (Discussion Draft)*, April 2006, page 16.

<sup>33</sup> San Francisco Planning Department, *Final Mitigated Negative Declaration: 5400 Geary Boulevard*, November 24, 2010, amended May 27, 2011, page 48

<sup>34</sup> Vincent Marsh with edits by the Landmark Preservation Board Staff, *Alhambra Theater Final Case Report*, June 1995, page 5.

<sup>35</sup> Sam Scott with edits by the Landmark Preservation Board Staff, *El Captain Theater and Hotel Final Case Report*, May 1995, pages 3-5.

<sup>36</sup> San Francisco Planning Department, *El Rey Theater Landmark Designation Report*, January 2017, page 40.



### **LGBTQ Cultural Associations**

*"The Castro Theatre has really been the Radio City Music Hall for gay people. It was a cult temple for people who love movies and pageantry. It was a tribe." – John Waters (2022)* <sup>37</sup>

Details on the Castro Theatre's significance in relationship to the four identified LGBTQ Historic Context Statement subthemes is described below:

- **Evolution of LGBTQ Enclaves and Development of New Neighborhoods (1960s to 1980s)**

The United States National Park Service's 2016 *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* identifies the Castro neighborhood as one of the best-known American LGBTQ neighborhoods, and one that is used to measure what is or is not an LGBTQ neighborhood.<sup>38</sup> From the 1960s onward, the Castro emerged as a place of belonging for LGBTQ people, albeit in a context of external oppression and internal conflicts.<sup>39</sup> Prior to the large influx of gay residents, the neighborhood was a predominantly Irish-Catholic community. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, families began to leave the neighborhood to purchase homes in the Sunset District and Bay Area suburbs, as a result of the GI Bill offering World War II service members access to home mortgages.<sup>40</sup> Shortly afterwards, gay people began inhabiting the neighborhood in large numbers.

Openly gay merchants are known to have operated in the neighborhood as early as the 1950s. In the early 1960s more gay bars, restaurants, and other LGBTQ-oriented businesses began opening in the neighborhood.<sup>41</sup> The 1970s saw a larger influx of gay people, particularly gay men, with some migrating from the nearby Haight-Ashbury, as well as Polk Street which was had previously served as a San Francisco LGBTQ epicenter. In 1972, the Twin Peaks Tavern bar at Market and Castro rebranded itself as one of the first gay bars in the country with picture windows, a symbolic step towards burgeoning LGBTQ acceptance as patrons could now be publicly seen by outsiders.<sup>42</sup> The neighborhood's Victorian homes were being restored by new community members, thus improving its architectural and aesthetic character. Along with the demographic change came the neighborhood name change from the official "Eureka Valley" to "the Castro", inspired by the theater's iconic red vertical blade sign.<sup>43</sup> By the mid-1970s the Castro was established as gay San Francisco's cultural, economic, and political hub.<sup>44</sup> By 1980, an estimated 17 percent of San Francisco's population identified as lesbian or gay and the number of Castro gay businesses grew exponentially, in addition to LGBTQ non-profit and political associations.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Tony Bravo, "Will the Castro Theatre Remain an LGBTQ Landmark as New Management Takes Over". *SF Chronicle Datebook*, February 11, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Jen Jack Gieseke, "LGBTQ Spaces and Places", in Megan E. Springate, ed., *LGBTQ America : A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer History* (National Park Service), 2016, page 14-13.

<sup>39</sup> Gerard Koskovich and Jen Reck, *Castro LGBTQ Cultural District, CHHESS Report: History & Heritage Section (Draft)*, June 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Donna J. Graves and Shayne E. Watson, *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco*, March 2016, page 170.

<sup>41</sup> Koskovich and Reck, *Castro LGBTQ Cultural District, CHHESS Report: History & Heritage Section (Draft)*, June 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Gary Kamiya, *Cool Gray City of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), page 320-321.

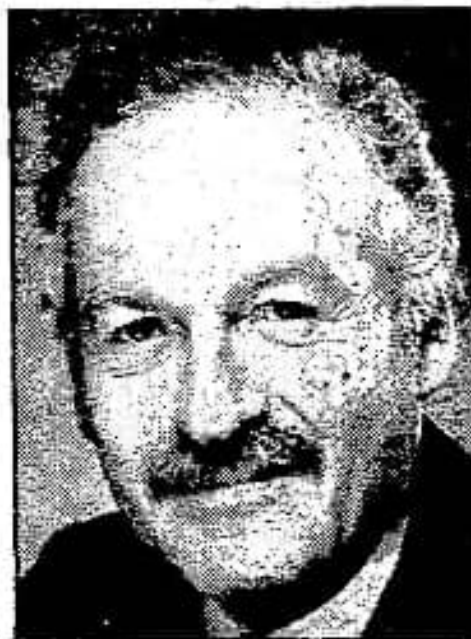
<sup>43</sup> Scott Jordan Harris. *World Film Locations: San Francisco* (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Koskovich and Reck, *Castro LGBTQ Cultural District, CHHESS Report: History & Heritage Section (Draft)*, June 2022.

The Castro Theatre's mid-1970s shift in programming is deeply emblematic of the Castro neighborhood's evolution into one of the world's best-known LGBTQ enclaves and forms the basis for extending significance to Criteria A.

By the late 1960s the Castro Theatre was failing as a neighborhood second-run movie house. However, shifting neighborhood demographics with the influx of LGBTQ+ populations offered a new clientele and thus opportunities for economic and cultural revival of the space. Programs such as Hollywood classics, independent film premieres, and occasional live shows were introduced to appeal to a largely gay audience. The year 1976 was pivotal as the theater shifted to featuring films of a more experimental and artistic nature. This shift was driven by Mel Novikoff's Theater Company leasing the venue from the Nassers who had been running the theater since its 1922 opening.<sup>46</sup> Novikoff (1922-1987) was a San Francisco film exhibitor, known as a pioneer in specialty films and purveyor of art house cinema. Starting in 1961, Novikoff served as manager of other San Francisco movie theaters including the Surf Theatre in the Outer Sunset, the Clay and the Lumiere. Collectively theaters under Novikoff's management, including the Castro, were known as the Surf Theaters chain.<sup>47</sup> Under his direction, began a new era of film programming for the Castro Theatre which included foreign films, film festivals, and specialty first runs. Films targeted specifically to LGBTQ viewers were now being shown for the first time.<sup>48</sup>



Mel Novikoff.  
Image Source: San Francisco Chronicle, 1988.

Along with the programming shift came a concerted effort by Novikoff to address deferred maintenance of the physical fabric of the theater which had largely been untouched since Pflueger's 1937 remodel. Interior peeling paint, as well as dust and cigarette smoke covering interior murals and cameos were among the contributors to the theater's then derelict condition.<sup>49</sup> Novikoff's improvements included a \$20,000 investment in refurbishments and updates. Novikoff also spearheaded the original landmarking endeavor as a means to protect the building from threatened demolition. Novikoff enlisted Harvey Milk as an ally in the effort, just prior to Milk being elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.<sup>50</sup> This led to the 1977 designation of the Castro Theatre as San Francisco Landmark number 100 for its architecture and design,

<sup>46</sup> Steven Levin, *Castro Theater – Final Case Report*, October 1976, page 1.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Stack, "Surf Theaters Sold to Regency Owner". *San Francisco Chronicle*. March 29, 1988.

<sup>48</sup> Curbed SF, "The Epic History of the Castro Theatre, a San Francisco and LGBTQ Landmark." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sf.curbed.com/2016/6/22/12004316/san-francisco-pride-castro-theater-history-pictures>.

<sup>49</sup> San Francisco Theatres, "The Castro Theatre: history and exterior views." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sanfranciscotheatres.blogspot.com/2017/08/castro-theatre.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Gary Morris, "The Church of Camp : San Francisco's Castro Theatre." *Bright Lights Film Journal* (September 1, 1996). Accessed June 30, 2022 via <https://brightlightsfilm.com/church-camp-san-franciscos-castro-theatre>.

and as the first and finest major theater built by the Nassers, San Francisco's oldest movie-business family.<sup>51</sup>

Another pivotal event under Novikoff's management was the installation of the Wurlitzer pipe organ (not extant). Building of the organ began in 1979 by Ray Taylor and his sons, and took three years to install. The organ remained privately owned, but provided music preludes before community events and film screenings.<sup>52</sup> Relatedly, David Hegarty has served as senior staff organist since 1978.<sup>53</sup> The original organ has also since been removed and currently an even larger hybrid digital/pipe Organ has been developed for the theater and is pending installation.<sup>54</sup>

Starting in 1976, programming of Hollywood classics such as *The Women*, *Gone With the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* (all released in 1939) attracted gay audiences to the Castro Theatre. In many cases patrons arrived in costumes mimicking or mocking film characters, often as a critical statement about outdated attitudes towards gender, race and class seen in response to the films. Movie goers often further expressed these attitudes through laughter, booing, hissing, or reciting dialogues throughout the films.<sup>55</sup>

Such practices also shaped the perceptions of non-LGBTQ audience members. Author Rebecca Solnit frequented the Castro Theatre as a teenager in the 1970s, recalling "The gay men in the dark with me educated me over the years about reading the sexual subtexts and preposterous elements of movies, about how to enjoy the homoeroticism of Westerns, the spectacle of over-the-top femininity, the endless supply of unlikely plot twists and overwrought emotions. They taught me with sniggers and murmurs and sighs up and down the rows."<sup>56</sup>

Novikoff's refurbishment drew attention, including a request from then Mayor George Moscone that San Francisco International Film Festival organizers show films for a second night at that year's 21<sup>st</sup> annual event.<sup>57</sup> This festival is now considered the longest running film festival in the Americas, featuring more than 150 films from more than 50 countries for two weeks in the spring, with the Castro Theatre continuing as a primary venue.<sup>58</sup> Other film festivals which made their homes at the Castro Theatre include the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, Berlin and Beyond, and Noir City.<sup>59</sup>

The San Francisco Jewish Film Festival (established 1980) is a three-week-long annual film festival and is the oldest Jewish film festival in the world,<sup>60</sup> with the Castro Theatre serving as its primary venue since 1988. The festival's programming has consistently sought to advance representation of groups

---

<sup>51</sup> Curbed SF, "The Epic History of the Castro Theatre, a San Francisco and LGBTQ Landmark." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sf.curbed.com/2016/6/22/12004316/san-francisco-pride-castro-theater-history-pictures>.

<sup>52</sup> "David H. Hegarty, Organist" Accessed July 24, 2022 via <https://davidhegarty.com/>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Jay Barmann, "Castro Theatre's Massive New Hybrid Organ May Get Installed in Time for Cinemas to Reopen". *Hoodline*, January 25, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Koskovich, personal communication with Alex Westhoff, August 24, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010), page 30.

<sup>57</sup> Vaziri, "How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature". *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> SF Tourism Tips, "San Francisco Film Festivals 2022: Explore the Talent and Creativity of Today's Independent Filmmakers". Accessed July, 7, 2022 via <https://www.sftourismtips.com/san-francisco-film-festivals.html>

<sup>59</sup> San Francisco Theatres, "The Castro Theatre: history and exterior views." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sanfranciscotheatres.blogspot.com/2017/08/castro-theatre.html>.

<sup>60</sup> "AJFF Slips to No. 2". *Atlanta Jewish Times*, August 23, 2016.

misunderstood in mainstream cultural production around Judaism, including Soviet Jews, Jewish women, gay Jews, Jews of color, and Palestinians.<sup>61</sup> Also noteworthy is the San Francisco South Asian Film Festival, now considered the oldest South Asian Festival in the U.S., which has featured films at the Castro Theatre since it premiered there in 2003.<sup>62</sup>

The Castro Theatre revival, along with the establishment of the Castro Street Fair in 1974 and the relocation of gay Halloween festivities from Polk Street and North Beach to the Castro in 1976, are credited as being pivotal in solidifying the neighborhood's gay identity and contributing to making the neighborhood an internationally recognized center for LGBTQ community-building and cultural production.<sup>63</sup> The Castro has since served not only as a beacon to San Francisco Bay Area gays, but also as a key destination for LGBTQ tourism, with both the neighborhood and the Castro Theatre highlighted for this reason in hundreds of travel guides published in numerous languages since the 1980s.<sup>64</sup> Since the 1970s, the Castro Theatre itself has had notable representation in nonfiction and fiction books; doctoral dissertations and master's theses; and film and pop culture. These materials circulate among local, national, and international audiences, establishing the theater as a symbol of the neighborhood, and further solidifying the Castro in the global spotlight as an LGBTQ enclave.<sup>65</sup> The theater even appears as a cover illustration on at least 10 books published between 1996 and 2020.<sup>66</sup>

The exceptional frequency and range of such representations make the Castro Theatre one of the most widely recognized movie theaters anywhere in the world.



1982 Castro Halloween photo  
(with Castro Theatre in background).  
Image Source: OpenSFHistory/wnp72.8556

- **Gay Liberation, Pride, and Politics (1960s to 1990s)**

As one of San Francisco's most iconic and longest operating queer cultural spaces, the Castro Theatre has been an important venue for the advancement of LGBTQ liberation in many ways. Its prominent location in the Castro neighborhood was key to its importance as a community gathering space. In 1978

<sup>61</sup> Peter L. Stein, "Why San Francisco is Home to the World's Oldest Jewish Film Festival". *Forward*, July 26, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> 3rd i Films, "3rd International South Asian Film Festival", Accessed July 7, 2022 via: <https://www.thirdi.org/>

<sup>63</sup> Graves and Watson, *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco*, page 170.

<sup>64</sup> Gerard Koskovich, *Castro Theatre: LGBTQ Intangible Cultural Heritage - Selected Bibliography*, 2022, page 1.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.





Castro Theatre on the one-year anniversary of the assassination of Supervisor Harvey Milk & Mayor George Moscone, November 27, 1979. Photo Credit: Daniel Nicoletta

when Harvey Milk and George Moscone were assassinated, the Theatre was closed and the marquee lettering read “In Remembrance of Moscone and Milk”. The first candlelight march to City Hall was held, with the theater’s outdoor foyer serving as the meeting location.<sup>67</sup>

Countless films have been shown at the Castro Theatre on topics related to LGBTQ culture, history, politics and activism. For example, the 1981 Frameline festival opening night featured the world premiere of *Greetings from Washington D.C.*<sup>68</sup> This was a short documentary about the 1979 first national march on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights.<sup>69</sup>

Additionally, the theater has been home to many fundraising events for organizations helping to advance LGBTQ equality. For example, in 1977 “Moon Over Miami” was held to help Florida’s gay community during anti-gay activist Anita Bryant’s Save our Children campaign.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore in 1978 a dance event

<sup>67</sup> Edward Guthmann, “75, Castro Theatre Still Making Memories”. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 18, 1997.

<sup>68</sup> Vaziri, “How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature”. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>69</sup> IMDB, “Greetings from Washington D.C.”. Accessed June 29, 2022 via <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0219717/>

<sup>70</sup> Phyllis Burke, *Family Values: A Lesbian Mother’s Fight for Her Son* (New York City: Vintage Books, 1994), page 56.



was held as a benefit the Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative, the failed California ballot proposition which sought to ban gay and lesbian people from serving as public school teachers.<sup>71</sup>

For the annual Castro Halloween party in 1989, the Castro Theatre management gave the anonymous queer cultural activist network Boy With Arms Akimbo/Girl With Arms Akimbo permission to use the poster cases to display its street art series "Continuity of Courage: 69/79/89". This series drew parallels between the bravery of LGBTQ people during the Stonewall Riots, the White Night Riot and the Castro Sweep Police Riot when the SFPD invaded the Castro on October 6, 1989. In addition to the poster cases, merchant window space, light poles, newsboxes and other spaces within the public realm were used to showcase the art. The Castro Theatre had been closed at the time as it had suffered damage from the Loma Preita earthquake.<sup>72</sup>

In addition, the theater has hosted memorial services for significant LGBTQ community members, including Vito Russo (1946-1990), author of *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981) and celebrated AIDS activist; Frameline programmer Mark Finch (1961–1995); drag performer Arturo Galster (1959–2014); and rainbow-flag designer Gilbert Baker (1951–2017).<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, a portion of Russo's ashes were placed at the theater in the 1990s after his death.<sup>74</sup> Specifically a group of his friends including Oscar-winning San Francisco filmmaker Rob Epstein and Allen Sawyer, who served as manager of the Castro Theatre from 1976 to 1982, inserted the ashes behind the soundproofing along the back wall of the balcony, to the right facing the projection booth at about eye level.<sup>75</sup>

- **Building LGBTQ Communities (1960s to 1990s)**

As a cultural, economic and social hub in the heart of San Francisco's Castro neighborhood, the theater has served as a cornerstone for local LGBTQ communities and for queer visitors from around the world. Furthermore, through offering a safe space for LGBTQ-themed entertainment, including films with international distributions, it has supported the development of LGBTQ culture and communities globally.

San Francisco's first gay film series, in the 1970s was organized by Bern Boyle and held at UC Extension's theater (55 Laguna Street).<sup>76</sup> After this venue discontinued renting to the organizers, the series was moved to the Gay Community Centers (32 Page Street and 330 Grove Street), with the first official gay film festival in the U.S. held at the Grove Street center in 1977.<sup>77</sup> Films showcased at the festival were developed at Harvey Milk's camera store, located at 573 Castro Street, less than two blocks from the Castro Theatre.

---

<sup>71</sup> Edward Meade Smith, "Dance Comes to the Castro". *Bay Area Reporter*, September 14, 1978.

<sup>72</sup> Gerard Koskovich, "Remembering a Police Riot: The Castro Sweep of October 6, 1989" in Winston Leyland, ed., *Out in the Castro, Desire, Promise, Activism* (San Francisco, Leyland Publications, 2002).

<sup>73</sup> Gerard Koskovich and Jen Reck, *Castro LGBTQ Cultural District, CHHESS Report: History & Heritage Section (Draft)*, June 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Edward Guthman, "Opening Some Doors For 'Closet' / At premiere, film makers credit Lily Tomlin's help". *SF Gate*. March 16, 1996.

<sup>75</sup> Allen Sawyer, personal communication with Gerard Kosovich, August 17, 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Curbed SF, "The Epic History of the Castro Theatre, a San Francisco and LGBTQ Landmark." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sf.curbed.com/2016/6/22/12004316/san-francisco-pride-castro-theater-history-pictures>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Frameline was established in 1977 as a nonprofit in support of LGBTQ film distribution, promotion, and funding. Frameline notably hosts the annual LGBTQ film festival, now the world's largest and longest-running LGBT film exhibition.<sup>78</sup> The Castro Theatre has served as the primary venue for the festival.<sup>79</sup> Just a few years after inception the festival became international in scope with 1981's festival accepting foreign entries.<sup>80</sup> Since its inception, Frameline has acquired titles from filmmakers throughout the world, with a collection of around 4,000 films, showcasing a vast spectrum of topics pertinent to LGBTQ identity, culture, history, politics, and more.<sup>81</sup>

As the Castro Theatre is arguably the best-known theater in the world for LGBTQ-themed movie programming, a number of notable films have made their local, national, or international premieres at the venue. Programming has reflected the diversity of the LGBTQ community, with films covering topics specific to queer people of color, transgender people, lesbians, queer youth, and LGBTQ elders.<sup>82</sup> Particularly notable films which have premiered at the Castro Theatre include (but are not limited to):

- **Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives**  
*Mariposa Film Group (December 1977)*

The Mariposa Film Group was a San Francisco-based collective who created this film considered the first feature-length documentary about gay and lesbian identity.<sup>83</sup> The film includes interviews of 26 gay men and women from across the United States. Over half of the interviewees and around 1,600 patrons attended the premiere, which served as a benefit for Save Our Human Rights Foundation.<sup>84</sup>

- **What Ever Happened to Susan Jane?**  
*Marc Huestis (February 1982)*

A low-budget indie film which became a camp classic. Featuring drag queens and a new wave



1997 exterior shot promoting the 21<sup>st</sup> Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and *Valley of the Dolls* screening with Barbara Perkins.  
Photo Credit: Max Kirkeberg Collection.

<sup>78</sup> Online Archive of California, "Frameline Film Festival Collection". Accessed June 30, 2022 via: [https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8nc65qz/entire\\_text/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8nc65qz/entire_text/)

<sup>79</sup> Graves and Watson, *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco*, page 271.

<sup>80</sup> "5<sup>th</sup> Gay Film Festival". *Bay Area Reporter*, April 23, 1981, page 25.

<sup>81</sup> Online Archive of California, "Frameline Film Festival Collection". Accessed July 23, 2022 via: [https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8nc65qz/entire\\_text/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8nc65qz/entire_text/)

<sup>82</sup> Koskovich, personal communication with Alex Westhoff, June 30, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> Graves and Watson, *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco*, page 270.

<sup>84</sup> "'Word is Out' Premieres", *Bay Area Reporter*, December 8, 1977, page 6-7.

soundtrack, the plot includes a suburban housewife visiting San Francisco to track down a high school friend who has immersed herself in San Francisco's alternative culture of the 1980s.<sup>85</sup>

- **The Times of Harvey Milk**

*Rob Epstein (November 1984)*

The film covered Harvey Milk's political career and the assassination of Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone. The film was the recipient of several awards including a 1985 Academy Award for best documentary, making it the first gay-themed film to win the documentary Oscar.<sup>86</sup> It had been invited to major international film festivals around the same time, though the West Coast premiere took place at the Castro Theatre as a benefit for the Shanti Project, an HIV/AIDS nonprofit, and the Harvey Milk Film Project.<sup>87</sup>

- **Tongues Untied**

*Marlon Riggs (March 1990)*

Credited as the first film specifically exploring African-American gay male identity, the film journeys through Rigg's own life. From a childhood damaged by surrounding homophobia, to coming to age in the face of a predominantly white gay community, to the creation of a black gay community. House music, voguing, poetry reciting, and other cultural phenomena of the time are woven into the evocative and critically acclaimed production.<sup>88</sup>

- **The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert**

*Stephan Elliott (April 1994)*

A contemporary twist on the road movie, this Australian comedy follows the adventures of a troupe of drag queens as they take their tour bus across the Outback. A surprise worldwide success, the film won the 1995 Academy Award for best costume design. Priscilla received a triumphal world premiere at the San Francisco International Film Festival at the Castro Theatre, a venue chosen by the distributor and the director to help create international attention for the film and for Australian filmmaking.<sup>89</sup>

- **No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon**

*Joan E. Biren (February 2003)*

The first full-length feature film about pioneering lesbian civil rights activist couple Del Martin (1921–2008) and Phyllis Lyon (1924–2020). The film was shot in San Francisco and covers their important stories as well as those of associated people and events which helped support their milestone achievements in LGBTQ civil rights activism. Lyon and Martin, director Joan E. Biren and

---

<sup>85</sup> Michael Lasky, "Film Clips: Whatever Happened to Susan Jane?" *Bay Area Reporter*, February 11, 1982.

<sup>86</sup> IMDB, "The Times of Harvey Milk". Accessed June 30, 2022 via <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088275/>

<sup>87</sup> "This Week". *Bay Area Reporter*, October 25, 1984.

<sup>88</sup> Cary Alan Johnson, "Not in Knots", *Gay Community News*, February 25-March 3, 1990.

<sup>89</sup> Daniel Mangin, "The Queer Skinny," *Bay Area Reporter*, April 28, 1994.

others associated with the film attended the premiere.<sup>90</sup>

- **Milk**

*Gus Van Sant (October 2008)*

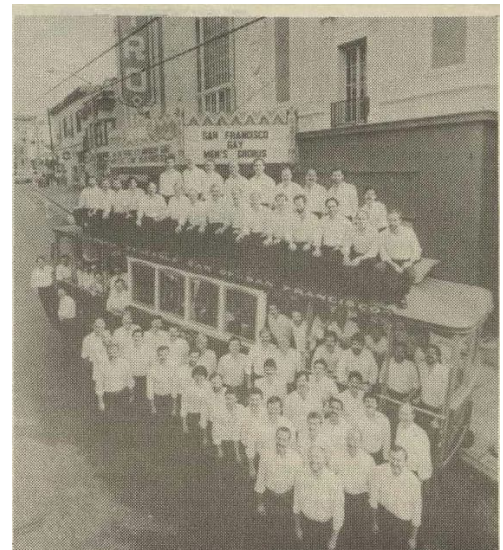
A biopic about the life and murder of Supervisor Harvey Milk (1930–1978), starring Sean Penn, who attended the premiere event. The film was shot on Castro Street in January of that year with street and storefront features temporarily decorated to regain their 1970s appearance.<sup>91</sup> As the theater is shown in the movie, the film crew made exterior improvements including façade repainting and neon restoration.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to film, the Castro Theatre has supported myriad other types of events. Through offering affordable rental to nonprofit fundraisers and community performers, the theater has served as a crucial venue for the production of queer culture and for the creation of distinctively queer audiences. Early productions include drag artiste Mavis in the Toad Hall Show in 1977.<sup>93</sup> The annual Christmas Eve “Home for the Holidays” concert of the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus has taken place at the Castro Theatre since 1990.<sup>94</sup>

In February 1984, disco legend and Cockettes cast member Sylvester (1947–1988), a Castro neighborhood resident, performed two concerts at the Castro Theatre on the same night, billed as a ten-year retrospective. While Sylvester was a Los Angeles native, he had made San Francisco his home in the 1970s and became known for his falsetto voice and flamboyant persona. Sylvester had not performed at a major local venue for nearly two years, and his was one of the few live concerts booked at the Castro Theatre for many years. Supporting him was a fourteen-piece orchestra and four vocalists including Jeanie Tracy and Marsha Wash.<sup>95</sup> Both women had begun their careers as backing vocalists for Sylvester, and went on to achieve individual recognition through later solo projects and



2008 Milk showing. Poster reads: "See the film on Castro St. where it all began!"  
Photo Credit: Max Kirkeberg Collection Collection.



The Gay Men’s Chorus outside of the Castro Theatre on Christmas Eve. Image Source; Bay Area Reporter, December 16, 1993.

<sup>90</sup> Zak Szymanski, “Lyon and Martin to Grace the Silver Screen”. *Bay Area Reporter*. January 23, 2003.

<sup>91</sup> Steven Winn, “‘Milk’ world premiere benefit at Castro Theatre”. *SFGate*. October 29, 2008.

<sup>92</sup> Vaziri, “How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature”. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>93</sup> Koskovich and Reck, Castro LGBTQ Cultural District, CHHESS Report: History & Heritage Section (Draft), June 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Joshua Gamson. *The Fabulous Sylvester* (New York: Picador, 2005), pages 232-233.



collaborations. The show included disco classics and gospel ballads. The performance received two standing ovations with two encores.<sup>96</sup>

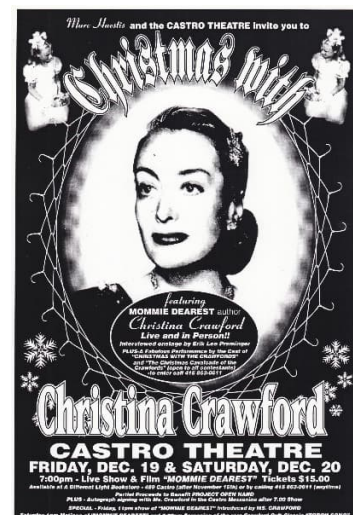
In 1994 filmmaker and event producer Marc Huestis began his long tenure of celebrity events at the Castro Theatre.<sup>97</sup> His programming lasted over two decades, earning him the title “The Impresario of Castro Street”.<sup>98</sup> The general format of Huestis’s events consisted of a live drag-show curtain raiser followed by a major Hollywood classic film, then a Q and A session with a star from the film. A few notable events included a 1997 showing of *Valley of the Dolls* with Barbara Perkins<sup>99</sup> and the 1997 Christmas with Christina Crawford event with a book signing and film showing of *Mommie Dearest*.<sup>100</sup> Dozens of other Hollywood actors participated in Huestis’s events including Linda Blair, Debbie Reynolds, Karen Black, Patty Duke, and Tony Curtis.<sup>101</sup> The events sometimes were fundraisers for charities including AIDS organizations.<sup>102</sup>

John Waters, who once called the Castro Theatre “the Radio City Music Hall for gay people,” was also booked by Huestis.<sup>103</sup> Waters’s previous visits to the theater included the acceptance of a Frameline Award for actor and drag icon Divine in 1988 after Divine passed away.<sup>104</sup> Huestis orchestrated the first ever John Waters X-Mas, a comedy show which took place on December 13, 1996. Waters was quite pleased with the event and a second John Waters X-Mas was held in 2003 also at the Castro Theatre. Waters went on to host John Waters Christmas events in other U.S. cities. Including a 2018 17-city tour, which used the Great American Music Hall as its San Francisco venue.<sup>105</sup>

Mel Novikoff passed away in 1987. To honor his contributions to the film industry, the San Francisco International Film Festival named an award after him, for individuals or institutions who have deeply enhanced knowledge and appreciation of world cinema.<sup>106</sup> Shortly



Sylvester at the Castro Theatre.  
Image Source: Bay Area Reporter, 1984



1997 Christmas with Christina Crawford Ad.  
Event Poster by Rex Ray.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Vaziri, “How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature”. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>98</sup> Koskovich, personal communication with Alex Westhoff, June 30, 2022.

<sup>99</sup> Marc Huestis, *Impresario of Castro Street* (San Francisco: Outsider Productions, 2019), 204-205.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 214-217.

<sup>101</sup> Marc Huestis Presents, “Marc Huestis Presents”. Accessed June 30, 2022 via <https://marchuestispresents.com/the-events/>

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Huestis, *Impresario of Castro Street*, 196-202.

<sup>104</sup> Edward Guthmann, “75, Castro Theatre Still Making Memories”. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 18, 1997.

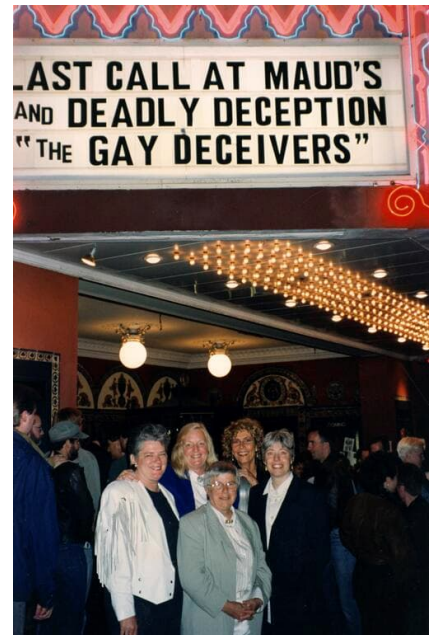
<sup>105</sup> Huestis, *Impresario of Castro Street*, 196-202.

<sup>106</sup> SFFILM, “SFFILM to Honor Celebrated Film Scholar Annette Insdorf with Mel Novikoff Award at 2018 San Francisco International Film Festival”. Accessed August 20, 2022 via <https://sffilm.org/sffilm-to-honor-celebrated-film-scholar-annette-insdorf-with-mel-novikoff->

after Novikoff's death, Blumenthal Theatres assumed the Castro Theatre lease with programmer Anita Monga.<sup>107</sup> Continuing Novikoff's tradition of art-house showings, Monga is credited with transforming the Castro into one of the most profitable independent cinemas in the United States. Under Monga a long list of films premiered at the theater, with a prevailing number of LGBTQ-themed movies. From the late 1980s and 90s, such films included *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1991), *Swoon* (1992), *Last Call at Maud's* (1993), *Sex Is...* (1993), *Totally F\*\*\*ed Up* (1993), *The Celluloid Closet* (1996), and numerous others.<sup>108</sup> Monga's extensive efforts put the theater at the forefront of New Queer Cinema, a term coined in the 1990s to describe the burgeoning movement in queer-themed independent film making.<sup>109</sup>

In 2001, the Nasser family resumed direct operation of the theater, with upgrades including new auditorium seats in movie-palace style, new projectors, new sound systems, bathroom refurbishments, and an expanded stage. The changes were carried out with respect for the original style and function of the space. As a result, the venue continued to retain a high degree of integrity, though adapted in a manner to support the contemporary events and needs.

The orchestra continues to mark the Castro Theatre as a classic movie palace. The raked floors and sloping aisles are original; although the stage alterations and new seats were installed later, they fall within the second period of significance identified in this landmark designation. Through in-person testimonials, public historian Gerard Koskovich has documented the linkages of these features with the intangible cultural heritage of the space, and how the configuration lent to community building, audience participation, cultural production, and personal meaning for theatergoers. Direct exchanges were regularly made between the stage and house and numerous directors, actors, musicians, writers and community leaders took their places on the seats before being called up to the stage for events.<sup>110</sup> In some cases, celebrities made their appearances from the back of the house, descending down



1994 Showing of *Last Call at Maud's*, a documentary film about a long-running Cole Valley lesbian bar, with former Maud's staff. Image Source: SF History Center, SF Public Library.



Drag icon Divine at the Castro Theatre in 1981, after having ridden a motorcycle down the aisle. Image Source: Bay Area Reporter.

award-at-2018-san-francisco-international-film-festival/

<sup>107</sup> Vaziri, "How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature". *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>108</sup> Gary Morris, "Celluloid Solace, Born Again at the Castro Theatre". *Bay Area Reporter*, June 27, 1996.

<sup>109</sup> Eve Oishi, "New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut". by B. Ruby Rich, *Women's Studies*, 43:5, 2014.

<sup>110</sup> Gerard Koskovich, "Castro Theatre Defining Characteristics: Raked Orchestra Seating & Aisles. Compiled, Introduced and Annotated by Gerard Koskovich" (San Francisco, 2022).

the aisles. Koskovich further notes the importance of the space with associated features as “the setting where countless LGBTQ people from San Francisco and around the world have experienced safety, belonging and shared culture in a crowded public place, in some cases for the first time in their lives.”<sup>111</sup>

Monga was fired by the Nassers in 2004, though they continued the then long-established traditions of LGBTQ-themed film showings and other events. Given both Novikoff’s and Monga’s creative vision and leadership, 1976–2004 represents a particularly significant period of time for the theater. Over this nearly thirty-year period, the theater transitioned from a failing second-run neighborhood movie house to an unparalleled internationally renowned cinematic hub. LGBTQ-themed events including but not limited to films, prevailed during this time period, anchoring the Castro Theatre’s relationship with the Castro neighborhood and placing it in the global spotlight as one of the world’s most universally recognized queer cultural spaces. Thus 1976–2004 is identified as a second period of significance of this landmark designation, specifically for its LGBTQ cultural association.

While 2004 was identified as the end period of significance date for this landmark designation, many of the long running traditions, such as the film festivals and LGBTQ programming, continued under the Nassers’ management. The Castro Theatre still plays an unparalleled role as a significant cultural space for San Francisco LGBTQ communities, as well as other communities. Should the landmark designation be revised in the future a later period of significance end date could be considered.

In more recent years, programming has further diversified to feature events including comedy shows, drag events, sing-alongs, and other community activities.<sup>112</sup> In 2011, locally renowned drag icon Peaches Christ moved “Midnight Mass,” a cult film series, to the Castro Theatre after the closure of the original venue, the Bridge Theatre in the Richmond. Peaches Christ further introduced other performances including local drag personalities and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* contestants.<sup>113</sup> Corporate events have also utilized the Castro Theatre as a venue, such as the Lesbians Who Tech conference.<sup>114</sup>

- **San Francisco and the AIDS Epidemic (1981 to 1990s)**

The AIDS epidemic represents a watershed period of evolution within San Francisco’s LGBTQ communities. San Francisco was among the first American cities to face the AIDS crisis, with public health authorities first reporting gay and bisexual men with symptoms of the then-unknown disease in 1981. As the City’s gay epicenter, the Castro neighborhood experienced the full brunt of the pandemic in ways unparalleled in much of the rest of the world. In addition to the unprecedented toll of deaths from the disease, AIDS hysteria in most parts of the United States further reinforced homophobia and discrimination, jeopardizing gay men’s access to housing, employment, health care and more. Federal response to the epidemic at the time was completely lacking, making the importance of local organizing critical.

The Castro Theatre served as an important space for the LGBTQ community through the AIDS epidemic for several reasons. Firstly, it offered a space for AIDS-related programming, including but not limited to AIDS-themed films. Often distributed internationally, films which premiered at the Castro Theatre helped educate the public both locally and globally about the epidemic. Secondly it offered a safe space for the

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid,

<sup>112</sup> Vaziri, “How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature”. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Lesbians Who Tech, “San Francisco Summit 2022”. Accessed September 3, 2022 via <https://lesbianswhotech.org/sanfrancisco2022/>

LGBTQ community, providing entertainment to those affected by the disease, friends and family members, at a very dark time. In the midst of grief, depression, and justified anger in reaction to AIDS, the Castro Theatre offered a place of respite and belonging.<sup>115</sup> The theater served as a haven for community members to safely congregate at a time where homophobia was particularly rampant.<sup>116</sup> Thirdly, for decades a countless number of the venue's events have served as fundraisers for AIDS related organizations, which were of utmost importance given the lack of federal resources made available. Lastly the venue has served as a space for memorials.

In 1985, one of the biggest gay film events in the Castro's history was the world premiere of Arthur Bressan's *Buddies*. This film was the first dramatic movie about AIDS.<sup>117</sup> Set in New York City, the plot follows a burgeoning platonic friendship of two gay men, one of whom is dying of AIDS.<sup>118</sup> *Buddies* premiered as part of a benefit for the Shanti Project, a local support organization for people with AIDS<sup>119</sup>. Later AIDS related films to premiere at the Castro Theatre included the 2011 documentary *We Were Here*.<sup>120</sup>

### Criterion C – Architecture/Design

The Castro Theatre was Timothy Pflueger's first cinema project and is one of his best-known designs. Created shortly after he obtained his architectural license, the theater represents a harbinger of Pflueger's incorporation of an eclectic assemblage of styles, an approach which continued through his career. The predominantly Spanish Colonial style exhibited by the Castro Theatre represents the most popular design style adapted for theatres contemporary to this time period in California.<sup>121</sup> At the time, it was one of the most lavish theaters in a San Francisco neighborhood, costing \$300,000 to build and containing 2,000 seats.<sup>122</sup> The theater was one of San Francisco's earliest dedicated to moving pictures, instead of vaudeville. Pflueger's intention was to create an interior more reminiscent of the outdoors, as a break from the generally pretentious feeling of vaudeville theatres.<sup>123</sup> Pflueger specifically stated, "The thought that dominated was that this should not be the usual interior, very often oppressive and stuffy, but rather to have this airy refreshing atmosphere of the great outdoors. With this in mind, we set out to create an 'exterior' instead of an 'interior' [based on] the Roman amphitheatre."<sup>124</sup>

The success of the Castro Theatre project paved the way for the architectural firm of Miller & Pflueger to undertake other high-profile cinema commissions, many from the Nasser Brothers who hired the firm to design all of their theaters. These included the Alhambra in San Francisco (1926); theaters in Tulare, Oroville,

---

<sup>115</sup> Koskovich, personal communication with Alex Westhoff, June 30, 2022.

<sup>116</sup> Reed Cowan, "As Castro Theatre Turns 100, Longtime Organist Looks Back At Loss and Life." *CBS Bay Area*. June 12, 2022.

<sup>117</sup> Curbed SF, "The Epic History of the Castro Theatre, a San Francisco and LGBTQ Landmark." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sf.curbed.com/2016/6/22/12004316/san-francisco-pride-castro-theater-history-pictures>

<sup>118</sup> IMDB, "Buddies", Accessed July 1, 2022 via <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088864/>

<sup>119</sup> Kevin J. Harty, "All the Elements of a Good Movie: Cinematic Responses to the AIDS Pandemic" in Emmanuel S. Nelson, ed., *AIDS: The Literary Response* (New York City: Twayne Publishers), 1992): page 115.

<sup>120</sup> kamiya

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Poletti, *Art Deco San Francisco, The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger*, page 37

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, page 42

<sup>124</sup> Poletti, *Art Deco San Francisco, The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger*, page 37-45



and Chico (1926–1927); the El Rey in San Francisco (1931); the Paramount in Oakland (1931); the Alameda Theater in Alameda (1932); and the remodeling of the New Mission Theater in San Francisco (1932).<sup>125</sup>

Pflueger's unique design approach incorporated a flamboyant period-style aesthetic with influences including Chinese, Persian, Moorish, Mesoamerican and more.<sup>126</sup> At least 26 of Pflueger's major buildings are extant throughout California, with 17 in San Francisco, in addition to private residences, nightclubs and cocktail lounges.<sup>127</sup> Twenty of his buildings have been designated historic through National Register, Historic American Building Survey, local government listings, or both.<sup>128</sup> Pflueger's other notable projects include San Francisco's Pacific Coast Stock Exchange, the Pacific Telephone Building in the South of Market neighborhood, San Francisco City College, George Washington High School, Roosevelt Jr. High School, and major buildings for the 1939–1940 Treasure Island Fair.<sup>129</sup> Pflueger was also involved in the design of the San Francisco Bay Bridge, the San Francisco Art Institute, and the San Francisco Museum of Art.<sup>130</sup> Lastly other hospitality-related projects included the Bal Tabarin (now Bimbo's) and portions of hotels including the Fairmont, the St. Francis, and the Mark Hopkins (specifically the iconic "Top of the Mark").<sup>131</sup>

## Property Description

Adapted from the original 1976 Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board Case Report, the theater's interior and exterior is described below.<sup>132</sup> Since then the property has undergone few alterations in respect to character defining features.

### *Exterior*

The theater occupies roughly 100 feet of frontage on Castro Street. Although the entire bulk of the auditorium is carried out to the sidewalk, the width of Castro Street and the proximity of the theater to the sweeping intersection of Market, Castro and 17<sup>th</sup> streets plays against its considerable mass and prevents it from appearing overscaled in relation to the much smaller buildings surrounding it.

The Castro Street facade of the building is the only ornamented portion of the exterior; the bulk of the building, which is not particularly visible from the street, is unfinished concrete. This is a common arrangement in theater construction.

The symmetrical facade is divided vertically into three roughly equal portions, the center one of which, framing the entrance, is the most elaborate. The major element of the design is a large-mullioned window nearly as high as the building itself. The window is functional at mezzanine level and blind above, but through concealed fixtures it can be illuminated throughout its entire height. This large window is flanked by two smaller ones at mezzanine level. Both are functional.

---

<sup>125</sup> [https://citypln-m-extnl.sfgov.org/Commissions/HPC/7\\_20\\_2022/Commission%20Packet/2022-005865CRV.pdf](https://citypln-m-extnl.sfgov.org/Commissions/HPC/7_20_2022/Commission%20Packet/2022-005865CRV.pdf)

<sup>126</sup> United States Department of the Interior, *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Pflueger, Timothy L., House*, April 2022, section 8 page 12.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Levin, *Castro Theater – Final Case Report*, October 1976, page 1-2.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, page 1.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, page 2.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, page 2-4.

The area around the large window is decorated with a shallow relief which is developed into a peak somewhat higher than the remainder of the wall. The effect is strongly suggestive of 18<sup>th</sup>-century cathedrals in Mexico. The side portions of the facade are each conceived as a single panel topped by additional shallow relief. There is no overhanging cornice, and several decorative finials, visible in early photographs, were removed during Pflueger's 1937 renovations. The facade is painted a very light buff, save for the two panels, which are pale pink. This is the original color scheme.

The first story consists of several storefronts, which have been altered from their original design. The theater entrance, which is set deeply back from the sidewalk, creates a street foyer. Save for its painted finish, this foyer space stands as built, featuring an island-type (free-standing) ticket office. Decorated poster cases adorn the exterior façade as well as interior foyer walls. The wall areas surrounding the poster cases as well as the base of the ticket office are finished in glazed art tile. A blue tiled bulkhead runs along the wall of the exterior façade and foyer. The doors are oak with glass windows, and the paving is

unglazed red-orange clay quarry tiles with red-orange terra cotta tones and a dark blue glaze on the ornament tiles marking the intersecting points on the grid. In 2014 Castro Street underwent significant streetscape improvements which included sidewalk widening. Tiles and paving to match were incorporated into the streetscape design outside of the Castro Theatre for a continuous ground appearance to match the historic tile grid and design, from the curb to foyer space.

The current marquee and vertical blade sign both date from Pflueger's 1937 renovations. The vertical blade sign stands nearly forty feet tall, and is attached to the right edge of the leftmost bay. The north and south



Illuminated Vertical Blade Sign and Marquee.  
Image Source: SFNeon.org, 2013

facing sides are identical. The vertical blade features red with blue and gold trim; the word “Castro” appears vertically in white, though outlined with yellow neon tubing illuminated at night, currently with the letters flashing in succession to spell out the theater name. The trim is adorned with blue neon along both vertical edges, plus a yellow neon diamond at the bottom and decorative yellow and red neon in a flower-like shape at top.

The marquee stands roughly twelve feet above grade and projects roughly twelve feet from the front façade. The west-facing main portion of the marquee is nearly 30 feet in length, with the north-facing and south-facing sides projecting outward at a roughly 45-degree angle to form a trapezoidal shape. Centered at the top of the west-facing side is the name Castro in white lettering. All street-facing sides are decoratively painted in red, yellow and blue with a zig-zag pattern at much of the top. The west side includes two lines and the south and north sides three lines each for adjustable lettering to announce current film showings, events, or other pertinent information. The marquee is illuminated with varying neon lights including blue, red, and yellow. Dozens of incandescent light bulbs are fixed along the underside of the marquee, which are generally illuminated at night.

#### *Interior*

The interior layout of the Castro is typical of theaters of its general age and size, particularly those built on small sites: all public amenities—foyers, lounges, stairs, etc.—are worked into the spaces beneath the rear of the balcony or behind the balcony. This arrangement limits somewhat the space which can be devoted to these amenities, but it represents the most efficient use of the land. Upon entering the Castro Theatre, one passes into a small foyer extending the full width of the building. This space is quite shallow, being just large enough to serve the seats on the main floor. Staircases at both ends lead from this foyer into the mezzanine and balcony areas. The foyer is fairly plain, with a beamed treatment given to the central portion of the ceiling, mirrors on the wall communicating with the auditorium and wood doors set in archways serving the auditorium, restrooms, manager’s office and exits. An art deco style water fountain is installed against decorative tile along the northern portion of the west wall.

The stairways from this foyer become ramps at the mezzanine level; these then serve the balcony. The ramps are at the sides of the building, and the space between them is occupied by a mezzanine lounge running the full width of the building and featuring windows to the street. The ceiling is slightly vaulted and decorated with stencils. The ceiling is adorned with three chandeliers.

The auditorium, consisting of over 1,400 seats upholstered in red velvet, is laid out with a main floor (approximately 800 seats) and a single balcony (approximately 600 seats). The seating constitutes a defining characteristic of the space as a historic cinema, configured in classic movie palace fashion in gently curved rows. On the orchestra (main floor) level, the seats are affixed to a raked concrete floor overlaid with wood. An aisle runs along each side wall, and two further aisles divide the seating into left, center and right sections. Seating in the balcony is affixed to banked tiers and similarly divided into three sections, but with no aisles at the outside. The sweep of the seating across the orchestra and the balcony not only creates a visual ambience which immediately marks the space as a grand movie theater but also provides excellent sight lines for viewing films and live performances. The stage includes a set of steps on both sides, and a central platform for the organ, which is elevated from the pit below, with a hydraulic lift.

The proscenium opening is framed by pairs of gilt corinthian columns against gilt corinthian pilasters, topped by a highly decorated lintel from which the curtains hang. The columns and pilasters stand on tall square bases the fronts of which are decorated with painted roundels portraying bust-length images of women with Grecian style hair and clothing, perhaps evoking muses. The opening here is the outermost of the two prosceniums, the screen having been moved forward to accommodate widescreen processes. The area behind the current screen consists of a small, almost square, highly ornamented proscenium; walls which continue the splay of the organ screens; and a heavy beamed ceiling sloping down from the outer opening. The moving of the screen, done about two decades ago, was done with a minimum of damage to this area.

Immediately flanking the present proscenium are ornamental perforated "jali" plaster organ screens with a small balcony at the base of each. Atop each grill is a massive medallion, a motif repeated over each of the side exit doors at the balcony aisle.

The major portion of each side wall of the orchestra level is taken up with a large mural showing a pair of colonnades and a fountain in exaggerated perspective. When such designs are used in theaters and in other places, they are traditionally painted on canvas in a studio, then bonded to the wall. Here, the murals are executed in sgraffito, a wet-plaster process similar to fresco, and have retained their color very well. Spotlights on the balcony rail illuminate these murals at all times.

The Castro Theatre's ceiling is an extraordinary affair designed to resemble the interior of a pavilion-style tent. The swags, ropes, tassels, and fabric panels which would be present in cloth canopy are all recreated in polychromed plaster to a very convincing and highly theatrical effect. The entire surface of the canopy is decorated with slightly Asian-inspired designs in muted shades, primarily green, orange, and copper leaf. From the top of the canopy hangs a large art deco lantern, originally provided with parchment light diffusers, but now adorned with sheet metal reflectors. This fixture in its present form dates from the 1930s, but its character is in keeping with the original work.

The tent ceiling and the sgraffito panels extend to a point defined by the balcony cross-aisle. From this point back, the character of the house changes. The rear of the balcony is a simple box, with a flat ceiling slightly higher than the tent. The walls are treated with black acoustic material likely installed in the 1970s; visible in places under the material is pegboard paneling installed earlier but likewise well after the theater opened. The ceiling is painted in colors and patterns similar to those used in the tent. Although this area was painted in the 1930s, the designs are not markedly different from those on the tent. The ceiling is lit by "umbrella" type fixtures.

Although a number of small details in the auditorium and balcony differ from the original design, the overall effect is that of a 1920s theater. All work has been done with great sympathy, making the Castro the finest extant example of movie palaces from its period in San Francisco.

### **Property History**

Prior to the erection of the Castro Theatre, the site was occupied by the Matear House, an expansive building with verandahs.<sup>133</sup> Pursuant to the 1899 Sanborn map, it was a two-story wood-framed residential building. The lot width at the time was roughly 80 feet, and irregularly shaped with a roughly 80 feet depth at the north

---

<sup>133</sup> Stiles, *Eureka Valley Historic Context Statement*, page 30.

and roughly 90 feet at the south. The building was setback over 20 feet from the front property line, with side setbacks as well. Two small accessory structures were sited at the rear of the lot.

According to the 1913–1915 Sanborn maps, a development in roughly the same location with a similar layout existed onsite, suggesting it is the same building. However, the northern portion of the parcel now appears to be subdivided from the rest and improved with a three-unit residential building. Otherwise the lot appears to be merged with the lot previously to its rear, thus L-shaped with a 120 foot maximum lot depth. The adjacent lot to the south where the parking lot for the Castro Theatre currently is located, generally appears unimproved with the exception of a few small one-story structures.

The 1950 Sanborn map depicts the Castro Theatre as it exists today. Since the building's 1922 construction, there have been few exterior alterations. Notable exceptions include the 1937 marquee replacement and blade sign installation. Telecommunication antennas and related equipment were installed on the roof in the early 2000s, with some modification since. Other known exterior work has generally been limited to repair and maintenance, including a 2001 reroofing.



## Bibliography

### Books and Reports

Burke, Phyllis. *Family Values: A Lesbian Mother's Fight for Her Son*. New York City: Vintage Books, 1994.

Gamson, Joshua. *The Fabulous Sylvester*. New York: Picador, 2005.

Giesecking, Jen Jack. "LGBTQ Spaces and Places", in Megan E. Springate, eds., *LGBTQ America : A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer History* (National Park Service)), 2016.

Goldsby, Jacky. "What It Means to Be Coloured Me" in Tessa Boffin & Jean Fraser, eds., *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs* (London: Pandora), 1991.

Graves, Donna, and Shayne Watson. *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco*. Prepared for the City and County of San Francisco, March 2016.

Harris, Scott Jordan. *World Film Locations: San Francisco*. Chicago: Intellect Books, 2013.

Harty, Kevin J. "All the Elements of a Good Movie: Cinematic Responses to the AIDS Pandemic" in Emmanuel S. Nelson, ed., *AIDS: The Literary Response* (New York City: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

"How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation," National Register Bulletin, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1995, 44.

Huestis, Marc. *Impresario of Castro Street*. San Francisco: Outsider Productions, 2019.

Kamiya, Gary. *Cool Gray City of Love*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Koskovich, Gerard. "Castro Theatre Defining Characteristics: Raked Orchestra Seating & Aisles. Compiled, Introduced and Annotated by Gerard Koskovich" (San Francisco, 2022).

Koskovich, Gerard. *Castro Theatre: LGBTQ Intangible Cultural Heritage—Selected Bibliography*, August 10, 2022. Accessed via:

[https://www.academia.edu/84428314/Castro\\_Theatre\\_LGBTQ\\_Intangible\\_Cultural\\_Heritage\\_Selected\\_Bibliography](https://www.academia.edu/84428314/Castro_Theatre_LGBTQ_Intangible_Cultural_Heritage_Selected_Bibliography)

Koskovich, Gerard. "Remembering a Police Riot: The Castro Sweep of October 6, 1989" in Winston Leyland, ed., *Out in the Castro, Desire, Promise, Activism* (San Francisco, Leyland Publications, 2002).

Koskovich, Gerard, and Jen Reck. *Castro LGBTQ Cultural District, CHHESS Report: History & Heritage Section* (Draft), June 2022.

Levin, Steven. *Castro Theater – Final Case Report*. Prepared for the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board, October 1976.

Lipsky, William. *Images of America: Gay and Lesbian San Francisco*. San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2006.

Marsh, Vincent, with edits by the Landmark Preservation Board Staff. *Alhambra Theater Final Case Report*, June 1995, page 5.

Murray, Andrew, and Katie Tom. *San Francisco Neighborhood Movie Theater Non-Contiguous Multiple Property Historic District Context Statement (Discussion Draft)*. San Francisco Board of Supervisors Office of the Legislative Analyst, April 2006.

Page and Turnbull. *The Castro Theatre: Site and Construction Chronology*, 2022.

Pildas, Ave. *Movie Palaces*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1980.

Poletti, Therese. *Art Deco San Francisco, The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.

San Francisco Planning Department. *El Rey Theater Landmark Designation Report*, January 2017.

San Francisco Planning Department. *Final Mitigated Negative Declaration: 5400 Geary Boulevard*, 2010, amended May 27, 2011.

Stiles, Elaine B. *Eureka Valley Historic Context Statement*. Prepared for the City and County of San Francisco, May 2017.

United States Department of the Interior. *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Pflueger, Timothy L, House*, April 2022.

### Correspondence

To augment research conducted for this Landmark Designation Fact Sheet, Gerard Koskovich (public historian and founding member of the GLBT Historical Society) consulted with Planning Department staff and community members, in addition to reviewing and editing the draft document. Specific cited correspondence includes:

- Gerard Koskovich, personal communication with Alex Westhoff (SF Planning Department staff), June 30, 2022.
- Dan Nicoletta, personal communication with Gerard Koskovich, August 24, 2022
- Allen Sawyer (Castro Theatre manager ((1976 to 1982))), personal communication with Gerard Koskovich, August 17, 2022.

### Newspapers & Periodicals & Archival Research

"5th Gay Film Festival," *Bay Area Reporter*, April 23, 1981.

"AJFF Slips to No. 2," *Atlanta Jewish Times*, August 23, 2016.

Barmann, Jay. "Castro Theatre's massive new hybrid organ may get installed in time for cinemas to reopen," Hoodline, January 25, 2021.

Bravo, Tony. "Will the Castro Theatre Remain an LGBTQ Landmark as New Management Takes Over". *SF Chronicle Datebook*, February 11, 2022.

Cowan, Reed. "As Castro Theatre Turns 100, Longtime Organist Looks Back at Loss and Life," *CBS Bay Area*. June 12, 2022.

Gross. "Departure to Roman Design Followed in San Francisco House," *Motion Picture News*, November-December 1922.

Guthmann, Edward. "75, Castro Theatre Still Making Memories," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 18, 1997.

Guthmann, Edward. "Opening Some Doors For 'Closet' / At Premiere, Film Makers Credit Lily Tomlin's help," *SF Gate*, March 16, 1996.

Johnson, Cary Alan. "Not in Knots," *Gay Community News*, February 25-March 3, 1990.

Johnson, G. Allen. "Exclusive: 'The Matrix Resurrections' to hold U.S. premiere at San Francisco's Castro Theatre," *San Francisco Chronicle Datebook*, December 3, 2021.

Lasky, Michael. "Film Clips: Whatever Happened to Susan Jane?" *Bay Area Reporter*, February 11, 1982.

Mangin, Daniel. "The Queer Skinny". *Bay Area Reporter*, April 28, 1994.

Mangin, Daniel. "Tribute to a Gay Titan: Castro Memorial Honors Vito Russo," *Bay Area Reporter*, December 6, 1990.

Morris, Gary. "Celluloid Solace, Born Again at the Castro Theatre," *Bay Area Reporter*, June 27, 1996.

Oishi, Eve. "New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut by B. Ruby Rich," *Women's Studies*, 43:5, 2014.

Scott, Sam, with edits by the Landmark Preservation Board Staff. *El Captain Theater and Hotel Final Case Report*, May 1995, page 3-5.

Smith, Edward Meade. "Dance Comes to the Castro," *Bay Area Reporter*, September 14, 1978.

Stack, Peter. "Surf Theaters Sold to Regency Owner," *San Francisco Chronicle*. March 29, 1988.

Stein, Peter L. "Why San Francisco Is Home to the World's Oldest Jewish Film Festival," *Forward*, July 26, 2021.

Szymanski, Zak. "Lyon and Martin to Grace the Silver Screen," *Bay Area Reporter*, January 23, 2003.

"This Week," *Bay Area Reporter*, October 25, 1985.

Vaziri, Aidin. "How the Castro Won Its Landmark Stature," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2022.

Winn, Steven. "'Milk' World Premiere Benefit at Castro Theatre". *SFGate*, October 29, 2008.

"'Word is Out'" Premieres," *Bay Area Reporter*, December 8, 1977.

## Websites

3rd i Films, "3rd I International South Asian Film Festival", Accessed July 7, 2022 via: <https://www.thirdi.org/>

Curbed SF, "The Epic History of the Castro Theatre, a San Francisco and LGBTQ Landmark." Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sf.curbed.com/2016/6/22/12004316/san-francisco-pride-castro-theater-history-pictures>



“David H. Hegarty, Organist” Accessed July 24, 2022 via <https://davidhegarty.com/>

IMDB, “Buddies”, Accessed July 1, 2022 via <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088864/>

IMDB, “Greetings from Washington D.C.”. Accessed June 29, 2022 via <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0219717/>

IMDB, “The Times of Harvey Milk”. Accessed June 30, 2022 via <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088275/>

Lesbians Who Tech, “San Francisco Summit 2022”. Accessed September 3, 2022 via <https://lesbianswhotech.org/sanfrancisco2022/>

Marc Huestis Presents, “Marc Huestis Presents”. Accessed June 30, 2022 via <https://marchuestispresents.com/the-events/>

Morris, Gary, “The Church of Camp : San Francisco’s Castro Theatre”. Bright Lights Film Journal (September 1, 1996). Accessed June 30, 2022 via <https://brightlightsfilm.com/church-camp-san-franciscos-castro-theatre>

Online Archive of California, “Frameline Film Festival Collection”. Accessed June 30, 2022 via: [https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8nc65qz/entire\\_text/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8nc65qz/entire_text/)

San Francisco Theatres, “The Castro Theatre: history and exterior views”. Accessed June 18, 2022 via <https://sanfranciscotheatres.blogspot.com/2017/08/castro-theatre.html>

SFFILM, “SFFILM to Honor Celebrated Film Scholar Annette Insdorf with Mel Novikoff Award at 2018 San Francisco International Film Festival”. Accessed August 20, 2022 via <https://sffilm.org/sffilm-to-honor-celebrated-film-scholar-annette-insdorf-with-mel-novikoff-award-at-2018-san-francisco-international-film-festival/>

## Photos

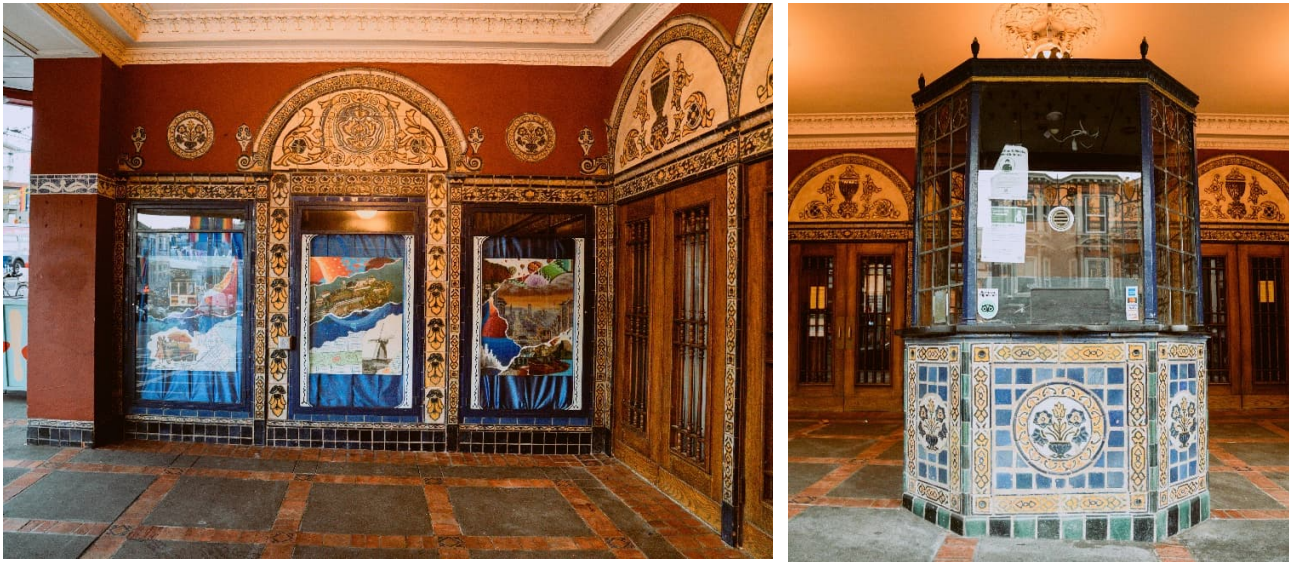


Vertical blade sign and marquee, northern elevation  
Image Source: SF Planning Department, 2022





Front façade, from northwest. Image Source: Page and Turnbull, 2019



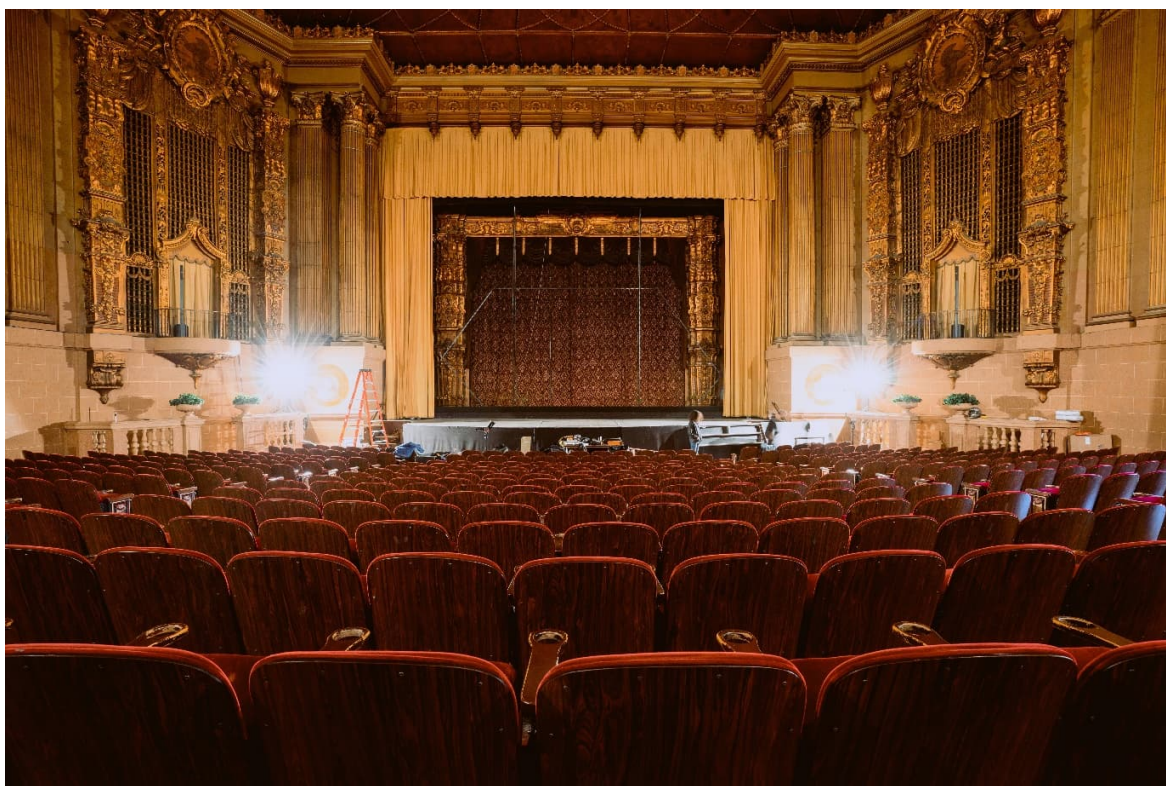
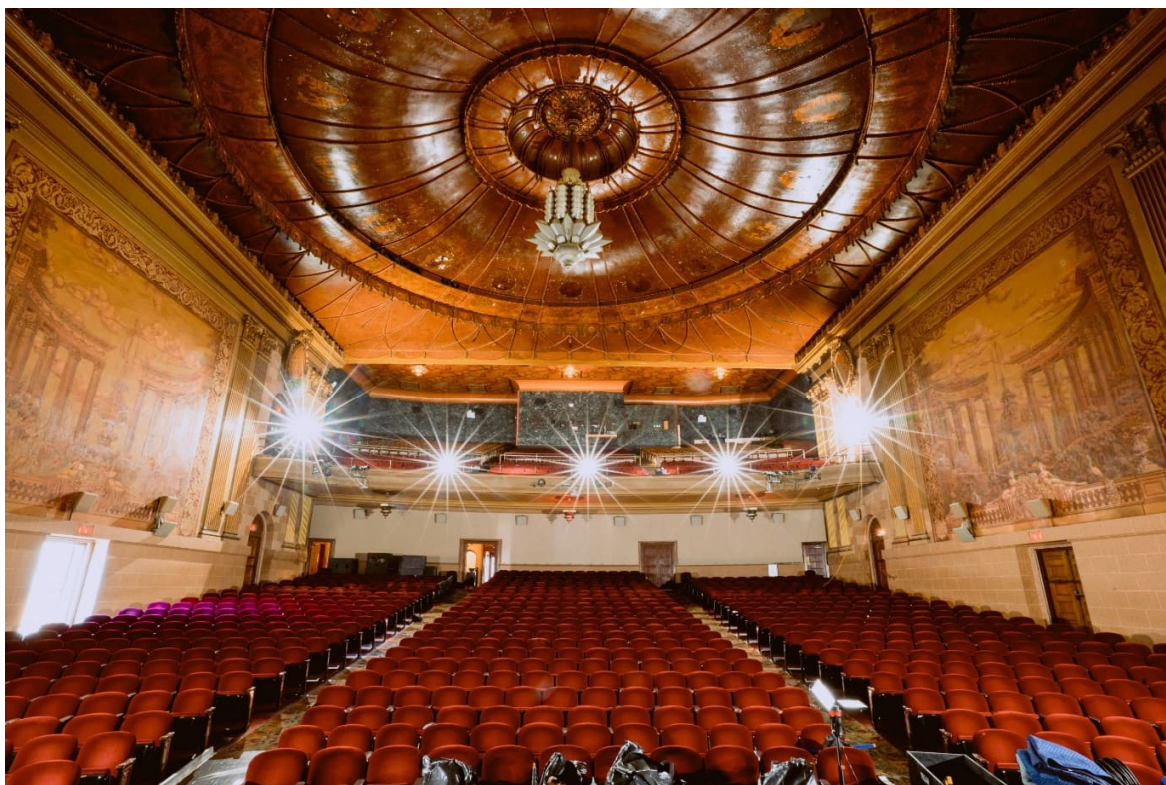
North interior vestibule wall (left), outside ticket booth (right). Images Source: Page and Turnbull, 2022





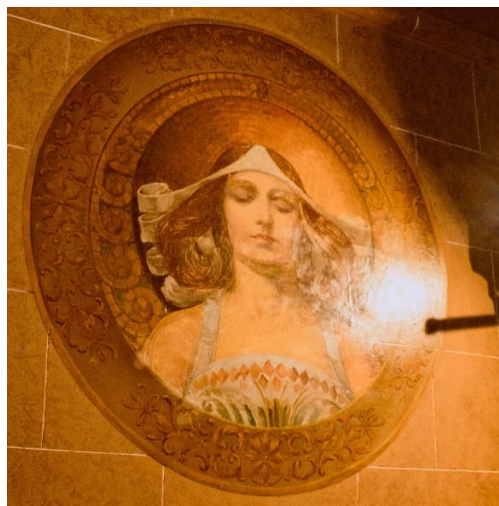
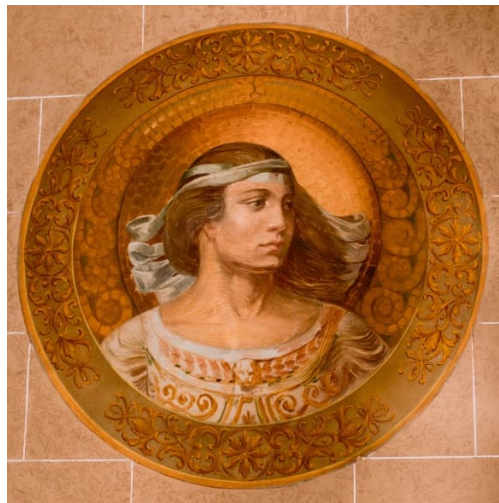
Upstairs lobby (top), downstairs lobby (bottom). Both looking northward.  
Images Source: Page and Turnbull, 2022





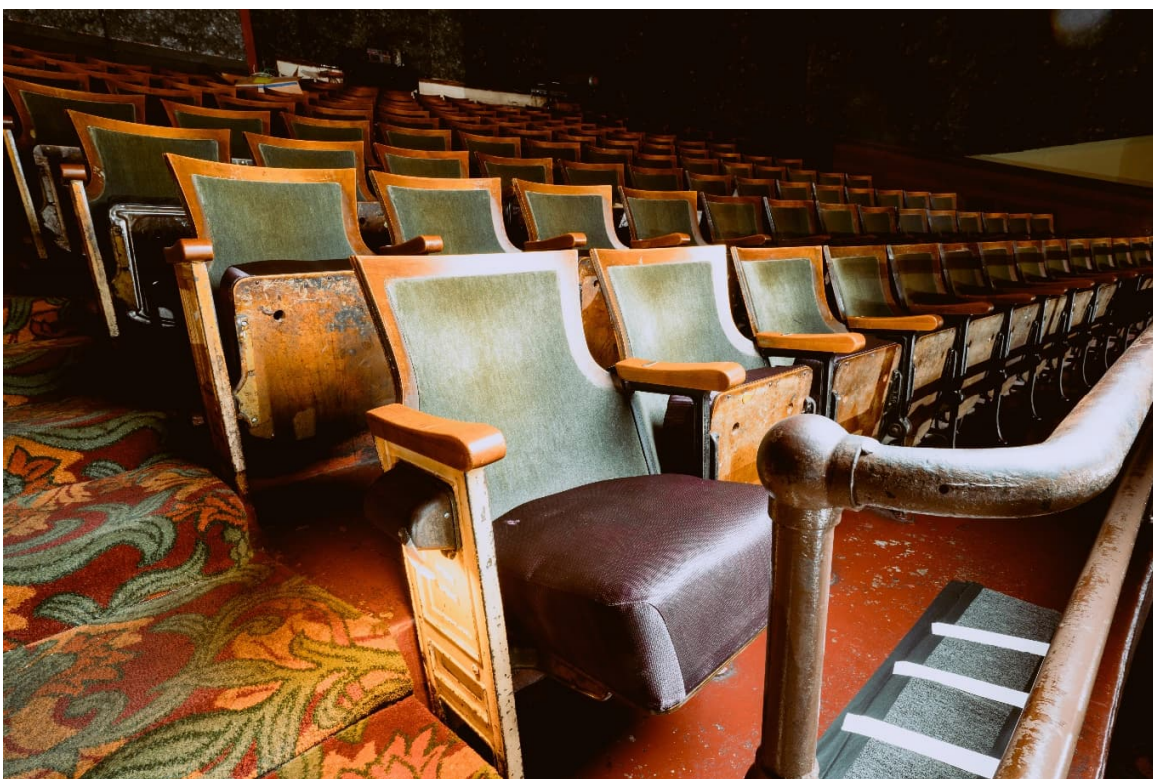
Main auditorium. View from stage (top), view from audience (bottom)  
Images Source: Page and Turnbull, 2022





Main auditorium canvas paintings and sgraffito murals. Images Source: Page and Turnbull, 2022





Balcony Seating. Images Source: Page and Turnbull, 2022