



# SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT

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## Memo to the Planning Commission

HEARING DATE: DECEMBER 5, 2019

*Date:* November 25, 2019  
*Case No.:* 2018-017235CWP  
*Project:* Retained Elements Special Topic Design Guidelines  
*Staff Contact:* Maia Small – (415) 575-9160  
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*Recommendation:* **Adoption of Resolution**

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### PURPOSE OF THIS HEARING

The Planning Commission will be presented with the proposed Retained Elements Special Topic Design Guidelines (RE-STDGs) for adoption (see Exhibit A/Attachment A).

### BACKGROUND

On December 8, 2015, in response to a request from the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC), planning staff presented background and research surrounding façade retention, as several projects had come before them that raised this as a more systematic development proposal pattern. This conversation returned to the Historic Preservation Commission on April 6, 2016, where staff showed more examples for Commission discussion and requested that staff prepare a draft policy for review. At the August 2, 2017 hearing, the HPC reviewed a draft policy and concluded that the retention of façades from otherwise modified or demolished buildings generally did not meet the standards for lessening a significant impact to historic resources and therefore did not qualify as historic preservation practice and thus should be considered more as a potential set of design guidelines to be utilized more broadly in the Department's design review process.

Staff prepared a draft set of guidelines that addressed issues of site design and architecture for any element that might be retained on a site which includes façades, but also mural, spires, walls, or other types of partial construction as described therein.

On January 24, 2019, at a joint Planning and Historic Preservation Commission meeting, planning staff presented a draft set of the Retained Elements Special Topic Design Guidelines for review. These were revised as per Commissions' feedback and then presented at an informational hearing on November 6th, 2019 for final comment from the Historic Preservation Commission (see Exhibit B/Attachment B).

### FRAMEWORK

Much of San Francisco consists of older buildings that provide familiar neighborhood fabric and which establish how neighborhoods feel, express identity, and define their own context. Development projects often seek to remove smaller existing buildings for financial, architectural, and use reasons. While these underbuilt or "soft" sites are commonly ripe for new development and potential higher and better use, their collective loss can feel destabilizing to residents in the broader context of neighborhood change. To address these challenges, the Retained Elements Special Topic Design Guidelines establish methods for

deciding when and how to retain all or a portion of an existing structure in an intentional and sensitive manner to maintain neighborhood character.

### **General Plan Conformance**

The RE-STDGs support the existing policies of the San Francisco General Plan. Under “Conservation,” the Urban Design Element notes that not only “*historic buildings*” but also “*older building regardless of their historic affiliations provide a richness of character, texture and human scale that is unlikely to be repeated often in new development. They help characterize many neighborhoods of the city and establish landmarks and focal points that contribute to the city pattern.*” It notes that: “*Older buildings, too, lend a sense of permanence and pleasant contrast. They are links with past history, and with earlier styles of development and of living. Buildings that endure maintain a continuous culture and may set standards of excellence with which contemporary development can be compared.*”

### **Guideline Development**

The Planning Department, in consultation with the Planning and Historic Preservation Commissions and city stakeholders, has developed this set of guidelines to direct project applicants and design teams to study and explore ways to combine elements of existing structures and new development. One goal of these guidelines is to provide greater clarity on façade retention, which is often mischaracterized as a form of historic preservation. Where the practice of retaining only a façade was once lauded as a preservation success, today we are more aware of how it diminishes history of a building, especially the social and cultural history of San Francisco and its people.

Using the Urban Design Guidelines (UDGs) as a base, these more specific guidelines seek to avoid development where existing building elements are retained in a superficial or inauthentic way. These guidelines instead ask projects to define the deeper relevance of maintaining all or parts of an existing building and to both express harmonious relationships and articulate dynamic associations between an existing structure and its role in a larger development.

### **Applicability**

The Retained Elements Special Topic Design Guidelines apply in instances where visible parts of existing buildings are incorporated into new development in all zoning districts. They work in concert with the UDGs. Consistency with both sets of guidelines is mandatory in the approval process. Should application of the respective guidelines conflict, these Special Topic Design Guidelines supersede the UDGs. These guidelines do not apply to properties identified as City Landmarks or districts under Article 10 or Significant or Contributory Buildings (Category I-IV) under Article 11 of the Planning Code. The application of these guidelines will not achieve conformance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

These guidelines could be applied in three situations:

- project applicants choose to use them voluntarily;
- except as to the Article 10 and 11 buildings specified above, either the Planning or Historic Preservation Commission may require their use by applicants for project approval; or
- planning staff may recommend their use by project applicants on behalf of either Commission, subject to their approval.

### **Design Review**

These guidelines are to be applied during the design review process. Projects demonstrate conformance with design guidelines during design review. Procedurally this occurs during project entitlements per design finding requirements in Code Sections 309, 311, 312, and 329, along with a variety of other designations (Conditional Use authorizations, for example). This work is done prior to Planning Commission approval but can also follow through the application of conditions of approval, Discretionary Review process, post-entitlement revisions, or addendum approvals. The Planning Department is also asked to confirm that projects involving public uses or public land conform to policies and design principles of the General Plan via General Plan Referrals.

### **Historic Resource Demolition**

The Historic Preservation Commission or planning staff may request, in rare cases, application of these guidelines during the partial preservation alternatives development process as part of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) or as part of impact mitigation for a project that proposes demolition of an historic resource. Such an alternative would not be considered rehabilitation per the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. Use of these guidelines would not result in a less than significant impact to individual historic resources for the purpose of CEQA review.

### **Guidelines Structure**

The guidelines begin with advisement, "Weighing the Options," on the decision to retain an element. This analysis, described below, not only uncovers the benefits of retaining existing elements, but recognizes and honors the element's origin and its proper inclusion:

- determining the visual contributions of an existing structure;
- technically evaluating the existing structure for feasible integration;
- determining the ideas found in the existing architecture; and,
- if a new building is proposed in lieu of retention, evaluating its replacement.

The RE-STDGs consist of two parts that parallel the Urban Design Guidelines: Site Design and Architecture. Each section has at least one guideline that directly supports the overall values as defined above. Each guideline is described at the top of the page, followed by a sidebar that explains the rationale for the guideline, a range of means by which one might satisfy that guideline, and illustrations that further describe its application. The range of means describes important parameters and methods by which a project can meet the guideline but is not a prescriptive list. Projects may satisfy the guideline by applying one or all of the means or by suggesting something unique to the project that meets the guideline's intent. Images that represent examples are all San Francisco sites, except on two section frontispiece pages as noted, and express positive features that would meet the indicated guideline.

## **OUTREACH**

Along with and in between the numerous public hearings as described above, Planning Department staff met with San Francisco Heritage three times: October 12, 2018; April 30, 2019; and October 25, 2019; for their input, review, and comment. Planning staff responded by incorporating many comments into subsequent drafts including revised graphics, applicability language, and technical suggestions.

## **FUTURE**

This guideline document joins the set of Special Area and Special Topic Design Guidelines that complements and continues the important work of Urban Design Guidelines to enhance the existing fabric and context of San Francisco. These guidelines offer further ways for new development to honor the diversity of cultures and support inclusive values, both fundamental to the city itself.

## **REQUIRED COMMISSION ACTION**

<b>RECOMMENDATION:</b> <b>Adoption of Resolution</b>
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### **Attachments:**

- Attachment A - Retained Elements Special Topic Design Guidelines - adoption version
- Attachment B - Department Memo Summarizing Historic Preservation Commission Comments during November 6, 2019 Informational Hearing