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Draft Historic Context Statement

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- I. **NAME OF CONTEXT:** The theme, time period, and geographic limits of the study should be stated.

Sexing the City:

The Social History of San Francisco's Sexual Subcultures, 1933-1980

San Francisco has long served as a place for marginalized, sexual minorities to establish their own social, political and cultural institutions relatively free from the harassment common elsewhere. In post-Prohibition San Francisco, zones of nighttime entertainments emerged where even older vice districts had existed and provided the relatively open social environment for sexual and gender transgressions to flourish. With the social and economic upheavals of the Second World War, new cultural formations based on voluntary association rather than family or ethnic ties began to expand. In San Francisco, subcultures united by sexual desire and gender identity organized and began to influence American culture and society in fundamental ways--with calls for a re-examination of citizenship, family structure, and gender expectations. Beginning in the early 1960s, mass media became an increasingly significant vehicle for these subcultures to fashion a sense of community belonging and to attract sexual migrants to the city. In the closing decades of the past century, struggles over urban space have led to intense discussions about the ways race, ethnicity, gender, and class intersect sexuality. In the process, new subcultures bridging a diversity of collective personal experiences have formed resulted in greater levels of cultural sophistication and political engagement. These social changes are woven into the city's fabric of urban villages. Drawing from this rich history, the city's built environment provides excellent opportunities to interpret the growth and diversification of sexual-identity-based subcultures in the past century.

In celebration of these developments, a new historical district should be established and incorporate the significant events and places associated with the growing recognition and legitimation of sexual and gender minorities as full members of American society. Using the built environment to interpret the social history of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender San Franciscans, the district will illustrate how the city has served as a catalyst for national discussions about revaluing categories of gender and sexual difference. In particular, sites of social interaction, political action, and community organizing should be identified, designated and interpreted. Spanning the past seventy years and the entire city, the district will offer residents and visitors alike a greater understanding and appreciation for the progress made and challenges ahead for sexual minorities in American society.

- II. **SYNTHESIS OF INFORMATION:** After data has been collected and analyzed, prepare a written narrative which synthesizes the gathered information. Important patterns, events, persons, architectural types and styles, or cultural values should be identified and discussed with an eye towards evaluating related properties.

General Background

San Francisco, perched on the left coast edge of continent, has long had a legacy of lawlessness and sexual and gender experimentation. Perhaps the most enduring contribution of San Francisco to the social history of sexual minority subcultures has been to forge a political self-consciousness among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender peoples. Scholars have debated how this self-awareness emerged and what social and organizational settings were most instrumental. Among the factors most influential in forging a sense of collective identity and political purpose are: 1) the establishment permissive social spaces (e.g. bars, bathhouses, night clubs), 2) the founding of sexual identity-based political and social organizations (e.g. the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, Society for Individual Rights) and 3) the consciousness raising effect of demonstrations of social and political power, sometimes circulated through mass media (e.g. Compton's Cafeteria riots, the campaign and election of Harvey Milk, and California Hall Incident).

San Francisco's built environment provides numerous opportunities to illustrate these kinds of influences on the formation and social history of sexual minority subcultures. The first same-sex oriented commercial establishment in the city was the Dash¹, a saloon and dance hall featuring female impersonators that opened and closed in 1908 in the notorious Barbary Coast. The repeal of Prohibition, however, was the single-most important event in the emergence of gay and lesbian bars--historically significant social spaces where same sex desire provided the basis for the development of shared identities.

Prohibition and the Growth of Gay and Lesbian Social Spaces

With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, the 1930s saw the rapid growth of nightlife on and near Broadway Street which became the central artery of the city's vice and tourist district--North Beach. Establishments catering to a whole range of desires emerged, reviving the area's earlier association with the adult entertainments of the Barbary Coast. Homosexual and transgender populations defined a vibrant and publicly visible culture that co-mingled with the nighttime entertainments of adventurous tourists and heterosexual residents. The close association of the district with the tourist industry cemented the city's reputation as a 'wide open town' and provided a monetary incentive to continue to promote area as a zone of sexual license. In this climate, a number of bars opened their doors and began attracting gay and lesbian clientele. The first--and longest running--was Finocchio's², a former speakeasy that showcased female

¹ From Stryer and Buskirk. the Dash, 574 Pacific (1908).

² From Boyd, 2003. Finocchio's, 406 Stockton (1929-1937); 506 Broadway (1937-1999).

impersonation and contributed to the city's reputation as a center of bohemian culture. As a venue for gender transgressive performances, Finocchio's became a gathering place for San Franciscans and tourists seeking an alternative to prevailing expectations of gender and sexual conformity. Over the course of seventy years, Finocchio's contributed to the development of the city's vibrant gay, lesbian and transgender public culture. Other nightspots were soon established in North Beach, most notably Mona's³ --the city's first lesbian establishment--and the Black Cat⁴.

Mona's, was originally opened in 1934 by Mona Sargent as hangout for artists and writers, but soon became associated with sexually unconventional 'bohemians'. After moving to 440 Broadway in 1939, the club began to hire and promote male impersonators from New York and Los Angeles. Soon it became a place where "the little girl waitresses look like boys. The little-girls-who-sing-sweet-songs look like boys. And many of the little girl customers look like boys."⁵

Shutdown in the earlier crackdown on prostitution, the Black Cat reopened after the repeal of Prohibition in North Beach and soon became a fashionable destination for homosexuals and thrill-seeking tourists. Building on its long reputation for flaunting convention and cultivating a bohemian flair, the Black Cat served as a popular--although officially 'off limits'--hangout for large numbers of military personnel stationed in the city. In the post-war era, the bar became a social and cultural center for San Francisco's emerging gay community. The bar's straight owner, Sol Stoumen, played an important role in the 1951 California Supreme Court case that prohibited the practice of revoking liquor licenses solely on the basis of catering to homosexual clientele. Jose Sarria, a regular drag performer who charmed the crowd with his campy songs and witty political commentary, encouraged patrons to celebrate their homosexuality and promoted the idea that gays and lesbians so join together and form a more visible presence in society. In the early 1960s, Sarria ran for city supervisor blurring the lines between the theatrical stage and the political arena, as well as making a public declaration for the political mobilization of gays and lesbians.

In addition to North Beach, the Tenderloin was another urban zone where prevailing social mores were relaxed. During the 1920s, the area was known for its thinly veiled speakeasies and so-called 'vice' activities--prostitution, gambling, and drug and alcohol use. After 1933 and the legalization of alcohol, several gay bars emerged in district, including Old Crow, College Inn, and the Pirate's Den⁶.

³ From Boyd, 2003. Mona's, 431 Union (1934-1935); Mona's Barrel House, 140 Columbus (1936-1938); Mona's 440, 440 Broadway (1939-1949).

⁴ From Boyd, 2003. the Black Cat Café, 710 Montgomery (1933-1963).

⁵ Quoted in Boyd 2003 from *Where to Sin in San Francisco*, 1939.

⁶ From GLBT Historical Society, Partial List of Site in Mid-Market Area. Old Crow, 962 Market (1935-1984); College Inn, 970 Market (1930s-?); Pirate's Den, 972 Market (1933-1942).

World War II and the Mobilization of New Desires

World War II was a transformative event for both the city as a whole and its relationship to newly emerging sexual subcultures. The mass mobilization of troops and rapid growth of wartime industries touch personal lives of millions of Americans. Military service and wartime labor drew masses of people away from the familiarity of their customary lives and into new single sex environments where the normal rules for social interaction were sometimes overlooked. For some--who felt the pull of same sex desire--these new social settings facilitated homosexual encounters. As a major military and industrial center for wartime mobilization, San Francisco's existing adult entertainment districts of North Beach and the Tenderloin became important gathering places for gays and lesbians. The number of gay bars and restaurants grew in the city along with the new influx of soldiers and war-related laborers. A cruising strip emerged along Market Street where sailors and men who sought out sex with them mingled. Important gay-oriented sites from this era include: Streets of Paris, Bobby's Three Vet's, and the Silver Rail.⁷ In North Beach, a number of new bars opened during World War II and in the period after to cater to a predominantly lesbian clientele, including: Tommy's Place, 12 Adler Place, Ann's 440, Miss Smith's Tea Room, the Tin Angel, the Copper Lantern, the Anxious Asp, and the Front.⁸

Organizing Sexual Identities in the Post-War Era

While new venues for gays and lesbians to gather and socialize emerged as a consequence of the social changes brought about by World War II, several groups began to organize in San Francisco around the goal of improving the social status of gays and lesbians. By 1956, the two most prominent national organizations dedicated to the improvement of gays and lesbians were headquartered in San Francisco by 1956--the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. The Mattachine Society was founded in Los Angeles in 1950 by a group of homosexual members of left-leaning activists. They developed a radical analysis of homosexuality as an oppressed minority and sought to mobilize homosexuals to work for their emancipation. The first chapter formed in San Francisco in 1953 and the national headquarters relocated to the city in 1956 and began publishing its monthly magazine, *The Mattachine Review*. In 1955, several women came together in the city and formed the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian social and political organization in the United States. The DOB published a monthly journal, *The Ladder*, chronicling major social and political events in the 1950s and 1960s.

Set in motion by the candidacy of Jose Sarria for city supervisor, several more explicitly political organizations formed in the 1960s. The League for Civil Education formed in 1961 and began publishing the city's first gay tabloid, *Citizen*

⁷ From GLBT Historical Society, Partial List of Site in Mid-Market Area. Streets of Paris 54 Mason (1939-1960s); Bobby's Three Vet's, 72 Eddy (1940s-1964); and the Silver Rail, 974 Market (1942-1960).

⁸ From Boyd, 2003. Tommy's Place, 529 Broadway (1952-1954); 12 Adler Place, 12 Adler Place (1952-1954); Ann's 440, 440 Broadway (1952-1962); Miss Smith's Tea Room, 1353 Grant (1954-1960); the Tin Angel, 987 Embarcadero (1954-1960); the Copper Lantern, 1335 Grant (1955-1965); the Anxious Asp, 528 Green (1958-1967); and the Front, 600 Front (1958-1961).

News. The LCE sought to build a gay voting bloc through organizing bar patrons. In 1964, a new spin-off group formed--the Society for Individual Rights (SIR)--and began publishing and distributing to a national audience *Vector*, its monthly new magazine. SIR soon became the largest national organization devoted to homosexual rights. In 1962, the Tavern Guild formed in San Francisco as a response by bar owners to police harassment. The first gay business association in the United States, the Guild fought the discriminatory practices of the police and the liquor board. In the 1969, the Committee for Homosexual Freedom formed, making it the first gay liberation group in the Bay Area. Advocating a more militant approach, the CHF carried out public protests drew inspiration from the many radical, youth-based countercultural movements of the 1960s.

Communities of Resistance

In addition to the emergence of new social spaces and identity-based organizations, several significant demonstrations of political strength can be credited with shaping the city's sexual subcultures. In 1964, Glide Memorial Church, in an effort to reach out to the marginalized members of the community, began a dialogue with the city's homosexual activists over the situation of young male hustlers in the Tenderloin. An outgrowth of those discussions was the Council on Religion and the Homosexual which devoted itself to combating homophobia within mainline churches. At a benefit held on New Years Day, 1965 for CRH, police harassed guests--including liberal, heterosexual ministers--by taking photographs and entered the event without a search warrant. Held at California Hall on Polk Street, the event led to a series of high profile discussions about the unjust treatment of gays and lesbians. With ministers leading the charge against police harassment, the California Hall incident marks a significant improvement in the social standing of gays and lesbians in the city. It brought together bar patrons and political organizers, forced police to rethink their practices of intimidation, and boosted the membership of political organizations like SIR and the Tavern Guild.

Less than two years later, police harassment provoked a more violent response. In August of 1966, Compton's Cafeteria, a Tenderloin all-night restaurant frequented by the neighborhood's poor and often gender-transgressive youth, was the site of an explosive reaction to on-going police harassment. It has been credited as the first known militant resistance to police oppression by members of sexual minority communities in the United States."⁹ Reacting to the hassling of transgender and gender-transgressive patrons (with the permission of the Compton's management) by police, gay and transgender rioters broke the restaurant windows, attacked the officers, damaged squad cars, and set a newspaper stand on fire. Pre-dating the Stonewall Riot by several years, the Compton's Riot illustrates the importance of San Francisco in the struggle for sexual minority rights and highlights the early involvement of transgender people.

⁹ From GLBT Historical Society, Partial List of Site in Mid-Market Area. Compton's was part of a chain of restaurants throughout the city. The Compton's riot occurred at 101 Taylor.

Self-Representation and the Flourishing of a New Culture

In the mid-1960s, with growing strength of gay and lesbian organizations and the mobilization of previously non-politicized bar patrons in response to police harassment, San Francisco became increasingly associated in the minds of most Americans with sexual freedom and gender transgressions. In 1964, a *Life* magazine article entitled "Homosexuality in America" identified the city as a "the capital of the gay world" and featured photos of the interior of two local bars--the Tool Box and the Jumping Frog¹⁰. With its profile raised by national media coverage, San Francisco's sexual minority subcultures began to grow as new migrants arrived seeking relief from the oppressive environments they left behind. From 1960 to the end of the decade, the number of bars catering to gay clientele rose from 53 to 86.¹¹ Coincident with an increasing out-migration of San Franciscans to the suburbs, the new arrivals began to take up residence in new parts of the city that previously had no direct connection to sexual minorities. Bypassing North Beach and the Tenderloin--the centers of adult entertainments and sexual and gender transgression in the 1940s and 1950s--the Polk, the Haight, and South of Market increasingly gained a visible gay and lesbian presence in the 1960s.

Beginning in the early 1970s, the Castro became an increasingly important destination for gay men and lesbians. In 1971, the opening of Castro Camera by Harvey Milk reflected the neighborhood's quickly changing demographics. San Francisco's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender population grew explosively during the 1970s. The Department of Health estimated the glbt population in 1972 to be around 90,000; just five years later the *Chronicle* placed the figure at 120,000.¹² This rapid growth had several significant effects on sexual minority subcultures: 1) numerous new, cultural traditions were established,¹³ 2) the diversity of sexual expression became more evident,¹⁴ 3) the political strength of the San Francisco glbt community resulted in electoral successes,¹⁵ and 4) the intersection of sexuality with identifications based on gender, race, ethnicity and class became increasingly important.¹⁶ The 1970s saw the crystallization of the gay identity movement in San Francisco as the number of gay-oriented

¹⁰ From GLBT Queer Sites database. Tool Box, 399 Fourth (1962-1971); Jumping Frog, 2111 Polk (1960?-1964).

¹¹ From Meeker, 2002.

¹² Stryker and Buskirk, 1996.

¹³ For example, the Castro Street Fair was spearheaded by Harvey Milk and first held in 1974. It just celebrated its 30th anniversary. The San Francisco International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the oldest continuing lesbian and gay film festival in the world, started in 1977. Stryker and Buskirk, 1996.

¹⁴ Society of Janus, a 'pansexual' organization for sadomasochists of all genders and orientations, was founded in 1974. The Bisexual Center was founded in 1976 by Dr. Maggi Rubenstein. The Sexual Freedom League founded in 1967, originating in San Francisco, is considered a precursor to the bisexual movement as well.

¹⁵ Principally, the defeat of the Briggs Initiative (November 1978) and the election of Harvey Milk as SF Supervisor (November 1977).

¹⁶ For example: Achvah Chutzpah, the first Gay Jewish organization in the United States, founded in 1972. Gay Latino Alliance (GALA), founded in 1975. Gay American Indians, first gay American Indian liberation organization, founded in 1975. Asian-American Alliance, active 1979-1980.

organizations exploded, the gay-targeted commercial sector gained strength, numerous gay people swelled the city's population, and the organization of a gay voting bloc paid off with electoral successes. The following decade witnessed several significant challenges to the gay identity movement: 1) the AIDS health crisis, 2) the rise of an antigay political climate with the election of Ronald Reagan, 3) the collapse of internal unity as issues of race, gender, and class became increasingly foregrounded.

III. **PROPERTY TYPES:**

a) Identification

Within San Francisco, a number of places and events serve as important markers to interpret the development of a collective gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender political and cultural consciousness. Three different kinds of places have been instrumental to the emergence of this collective consciousness:

1. Sites of social interaction, including bars, entertainment venues, bath houses, and public festivals;
2. Sites of political action and reaction, such as California Hall, Compton's cafeteria, the Elephant Walk bar, Castro Camera and;
3. Institutional centers dedicated to community development, such as the Daughters of Bilitis, the Mattachine Society, the Society for Individual Rights, the Bisexual Center, the Sexual Freedom League, and the Transsexual Counseling Service, Gay Latino/a Alliance, Asian/Pacific Lesbian and Bisexual Network.

b) Description

The property types are united and defined by their cultural and historical association with the formation of a collective gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identity. They are dispersed throughout the city and include a diversity of architectural styles.

c) Significance

The specified property types are important locations where the development of a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender identity can be interpreted. These sites possess significance in understanding the social, cultural, political and economic history of San Francisco's diverse sexual subcultures. These sites include places where social interaction among sexual subcultures has persisted for an extended period of time in the past, where influential local and national sexual-identity based organizations have conducted activities, and locations where sexual minorities have demonstrated their collective social and political power.

IV. REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS: What attributes, historical associations and level of integrity are necessary to list members of the property type in the National Register of Historic Places? This section should provide specific information that can be used for comparing actual historic properties and for making judgments about their relative significance.

Sites associated with the development of a sense of collective gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identity should be considered for potential inclusion in the Historic District. These sites can take the form of organizational headquarters, commercial establishments with a long history of serving sexual minority clientele, places of protest against homophobia and heterosexism, and venues that have promoted social and cultural identification within and among sexual subcultures. Where possible and appropriate, geographically clustered sites that define urban areas with a strong connection to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender subcultures should be recognized and designated. The primary aspect of integrity should be Association with the social history of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender San Franciscans, followed in descending order by Location, Feeling, and Setting.

Remaining residential and commercial structures from the period of significance associated with sexual minority subcultures should be examined for potential significance stemming from their association with specific events or people within San Francisco's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities. Further contextual research should precede this.

V. GOALS AND PRIORITIES FOR IDENTIFICATION, EVALUATION, REGISTRATION AND TREATMENT OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES:

- a) **GOALS.** A goal is a statement of preferred preservation activities, which is generally stated in terms of property types. For each goal, a statement should be prepared identifying the activities and strategies most appropriate for accomplishing the goal.

The initial goal is to nominate qualified sites associated with formation of San Francisco's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender subcultures for local landmark status. The Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board (LPAB) will initiate discussions with owners of such properties pursuant to initiating nominations.

At the same time, another context statement dealing more with the social history of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender San Franciscans should be prepared in order to support the possible nomination of residential and commercial structures associated with that history as components of a Historic District. The Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board and Planning Department should pursue a grant under the recent state legislation (SB 307) and work with appropriate community groups to develop such a project.

- b) **PRIORITIES.** Once goals have been developed, they need to be ranked in importance. Major cost or technical considerations, general social, economic, political and environmental conditions will affect the ranking of goals. Some properties may be more directly threatened by deterioration, land development patterns, legislative requirements or the public's perception of their safety or worth. These factors should all be considered in setting priorities.

The first priority is to pursue acquiring a grant under SB-307 in order to work on a cultural context statement. Simultaneously, refinement and adoption of the present Context Statement should be undertaken, followed by nomination of appropriate institutional buildings as local landmarks.

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