

# HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIC CENTER

The Civic Center Landmark District has national significance as the closest manifestation of the “City Beautiful” movement in the Western United States. Designed in the Beaux-Arts style, the district is rooted in the Classically-inspired architecture popularized in the United States by the 1893 World’s Fair: Columbian Exposition held in Chicago. The idea for a central district anchored by City Hall first arose in 1899, but was not publicly accepted. In 1905, architect Daniel Burnham submitted an ambitious city plan which was initially well-received however, it was never realized. When Mayor James Rolph, Jr. was elected in 1912, he promised to build a new city hall and finalize the plans for a civic center. He chose a group of local architects, led by Bay Area architect John Galen Howard, to design and oversee construction. Designed to grandly house San Francisco’s cultural and government functions on a monumental scale, the Civic Center Landmark district is one of the most complete examples of the City Beautiful movement in the United States.

The district contains a strong sense of visual unity achieved through the materials, proportions, and rhythm of the buildings. The grand buildings surround a central open plaza and are unified by the Beaux Arts style, rusticated based as the ground floor, and horizontal bands of vertically proportioned elements. Civic Center expanded between 1915 and 1933 to include 15 city blocks, eight major buildings, many secondary buildings, three unrealized sites, and one open plaza. The Civic Center Landmark District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, designated a National Historic Landmark District in 1987, and designated as a local landmark in 1994.

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM

The preservation of significant historic and cultural properties is a vital component of planning and managing the built and natural environment in San Francisco. Landmarks and landmark districts are unique and irreplaceable assets to the City and its neighborhoods. Landmark districts are regulated by Article 10 of the Planning Code. Since 1967 San Francisco’s Historic Preservation Program has identified and protected a wide range of the City’s rich history as depicted in its buildings, districts, places, structures, or objects.

As staff to the Historic Preservation Commission, the Planning Department’s preservation planners work with property owners, city departments, and the general public to promote the preservation of these resources through incentives, long-range preservation planning efforts, public outreach, and technical assistance.



The locator map above shows the Landmark Districts found throughout the City of San Francisco.

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This guide highlights a small selection of the area’s historical buildings. To learn more about landmark districts and historical buildings, visit [sfplanning.org](http://sfplanning.org).

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# HISTORIC WALKING TOUR GUIDE

## CIVIC CENTER LANDMARK DISTRICT

**15 BLOCKS 61 PARCELS DESIGNATED IN 1996**  
  
*The Civic Center historic district consists of monumental institutional buildings flanking a central open space, as well as nearby large-scale commercial and apartment buildings. Civic Center institutional buildings are unified by a Beaux Arts Classical design, described as “American Renaissance.”*





# **1 ORPHEUM THEATER BUILDING** **1182-1192 Market Street** **SF Landmark #94**

This building was designed as a vaudeville theatre in 1926, by West Coast theater-architect, B. Marcus Priteca. Originally known as the Pantages Theatre, it was designed in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, as one of many theaters that once lined this area of Market Street, which was known as the "Great White Way."



## **2 OLD FEDERAL BUILDING** **50 United Nations Plaza**

This building was built in 1936 in the Renaissance Revival style. It was designed by architect Arthur Brown Jr., who designed the nearby Opera House and Veterans' Building. With his partner John Bakewell Jr., Brown also designed City Hall.



## **3 OLD SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY** **200 Larkin Street**

This building was designed in 1916 by architect George Kehlman in the Italian Renaissance Revival style. The symmetrical facade is composed of a central paired column arcade grounded by a rusticated base and capped by an upper-story entablature.



## **4 SAN FRANCISCO CITY HALL** **400 Van Ness Avenue** **SF Landmark #21**

San Francisco City Hall is considered one of the country's finest examples of the French Renaissance Revival architecture. Completed in 1915, it was designed by architects John Bakewell Jr. & Arthur Brown Jr. Brown, along with interior designer Jean-Louis Bourgeois, studied at the renowned École des Beaux Arts in Paris. City Hall is also a National Historic Landmark.



## **5 WAR MEMORIAL COMPLEX** **301-401 Van Ness Avenue** **SF Landmark #84**

The complex is comprised of two buildings, the Opera House and Veterans' Building, and one landscape, Memorial Court. The courtyard was designed as a memorial to San Francisco veterans, by prominent landscape architect, Thomas Church. The idea for these twin buildings was conceived in 1918 by local community groups. Construction and opening ceremonies occurred in 1932. On June 26, 1945, the buildings were the site of the signing of the Charter for the United Nations.



## **6 HIGH SCHOOL OF COMMERCE** **135 Van Ness Avenue** **S.F. Landmark #140**

This building was designed in 1926 by City Architect John Reid, Jr. during San Francisco's "Golden Age of Schools." It exhibits an exuberant Spanish Colonial Revival design with Churrigueresque detailing, which was inspired by the Mission and Spanish Colonial Revival styles that became popular after 1915 Panama-California Exhibition in San Diego. The building is sheathed in terra cotta and decorated with interspaced green and pink diamond-shaped tiles, while the main entrances is flanked with grotesque figures representing medieval men of learning.



## **7 PUBLIC HEALTH BUILDING** **101 Grove Street**

This building was built in 1932 in the Italian Renaissance Revival Style by Supervising City Architect Samuel Heiman. The exceptionally well designed building artfully turns the corner and helps to bridge the gap between more grand buildings in the Civic Center complex.



## **8 EXPOSITION AUDITORIUM** **99 Grove Street**

The Exposition Auditorium was constructed in 1915 for the Panama-Pacific Exposition. Designed by the architecture firm of Howard, Meyer and Reid, the facade is dominated by the monumentally-scaled arched windows and paired columns capped by large cartouches. Due to its exaggerated classical elements, historians have described the building's style as "exuberantly Beaux Arts."