



# SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT

**MEMO**

April 18, 2012

President David Chiu, *President of the Board of Supervisors*  
Supervisor Eric Mar, *Supervisor, District 1*  
Supervisor Mark Farrell, *Supervisor, District 2*  
Supervisor Carmen Chu, *Supervisor, District 4*  
Supervisor Christina Olague, *Supervisor, District 5*  
Supervisor Jane Kim, *Supervisor, District 6*  
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Supervisor Malia Cohen, *Supervisor, District 10*  
Supervisor John Avalos, *Supervisor, District 11*  
Ms. Angela Calvillo, *Clerk of the Board of Supervisors*

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**Re: Initiation of Landmark Designation for the Gold Dust Lounge, 247 Powell Street**

Dear President Chu, Honorable Supervisors and Madam Clerk:

On April 4, 2012 the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) voted 5-2 not to initiate landmark designation for the Gold Dust Lounge. The HPC voted to send the Board of Supervisors a letter not only to explain the reasons for the vote but also to explain that despite the HPC's vote, the commissioners recognize the Gold Dust Lounge as a place of social and cultural importance. The loss of the Gold Dust Lounge would be an unfortunate one for San Francisco.

The HPC uses the National Register of Historic Places criteria for the evaluation of sites as potential landmarks. The National Register criteria require that the potential landmark demonstrate significance in one or more of the following four categories: (A) association with important events, (B) association with significant persons, (C) distinctive characteristics of a type of construction or of high artistic value or quality, and/or (D) as a site that is likely to yield important historical information.

The landmark application for the Gold Dust Lounge claimed significance under criteria (A) and (C). Under criterion A, the Gold Dust Lounge, it was argued, is significant for its contribution to nightlife culture in the city as one of the few remaining cocktail lounges in Union Square; and, under criterion (C) the bar is significant as a representative example of a popular bar type.

The majority of Commissioners felt that the case failed to be made in either of these categories of significance. Commissioners noted that under criterion A, while the bar was part of "a broad pattern" of

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San Francisco's nightlife culture, the Gold Dust in and of itself did not make a "significant" contribution to that history. With regard to criterion C, it was thought that the Gold Dust Lounge had changed too much over time to be characteristic of any particular period, and that no particular period in the bar's evolution was of outstanding artistic merit.

The Commission acknowledged that the Gold Dust Lounge as an operating institution is culturally important, but the majority felt this had more to do with the business itself, and not simply the significance of the setting. As Commissioner Wolfram stated, "I'm not sure that the space itself, absent the people in it, absent the drinks behind all the bottles behind the bar, absent the paintings on the walls, absent the kind of live music and the vibe, would really be something that is worthy of a landmark designation." Commissioners were concerned that if the business left and the space was landmarked, the space would lack significance without the business.

Other commissioners felt that the business, the space and the location near Union Square were not so easily separated, and that the business would not be the same in another location or setting. For the minority on the HPC, there was something quintessentially San Franciscan about the Gold Dust's combination of mid-twentieth century pop Victorian decor, piano bar history, clientele from all classes and countries and that the Gold Dust stands apart as something worth preserving. While recognizing that the physical space was not of notable quality as a planned work, the minority felt that the patina of life and use and Gold Dust's status of one of the few left of what was once a ubiquitous institution in the Union Square neighborhood elevated its status to something worth preserving.

The HPC is interested in exploring methods for recognizing sites that may not meet standard landmark designation criteria, but are important in our social and cultural history. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Board of Supervisors, Planning Commission, Planning Department and others in this effort. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely



Charles Edwin Chase, AIA  
President  
Historic Preservation Commission

- Cc: Christopher VerPlanck, Initiation Sponsor  
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