

SMOKESTACKS & GERANIUMS TAKING INVENTORY

Survey of the historic character of San Diego neighborhoods holds promise, with caveats

By: Roger M. Showley, San Diego Union Tribune

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Every neighborhood in San Diego County should so lucky as Mission Hills, Hillcrest, University Heights and Bankers Hill.

They have in hand a historic survey that has identified 4,093 homes and commercial buildings that could be marked for preservation – and a map that pinpoints thousands of trees, light posts, sidewalk stamps and other telling features that give the areas between Mission Valley and downtown their distinctive character.

“I think the survey was very important – significant,” said Councilman Kevin Faulconer, who with Councilwoman Toni Atkins represents Uptown. “There are other council districts that have similar properties and I think it’d be important to have similar surveys done.”

But at the same time, some residents and business owners worry that the survey, four years in the making and headed for City Council approval later this year, also identified 6,882 other properties that appeared to bear no historic value and could be cleared for demolition or radical alteration.

“I don’t think 6,900 homes should just be able to be demolished with an over-the-counter permit,” said Elizabeth Courtier, a Willis Allen real estate agent who specializes in historic properties.

Current city policy is to check every property that is 45 years of age or older when an owner submits a major building or demolition permit and determine from property records and a visual inspection if it might be eligible for historic designation.

Planning and building department officials said the new survey will speed up the review process by quickly determining if an old property is potentially historic or not.

What happens with the Uptown survey – whether it leads to greater preservation or wholesale demolitions – has wider implications in the region, said Leo Wilson, chairman of the Uptown Planners community planning group and chairman of the Community Planners Committee that includes the heads of more than 40 planning groups in the city.

“If you’re not going to preserve your past, what are you worth as a city?” asked Wilson, a third-generation Uptown resident who manages the Palomar Apartments on Sixth Avenue, where Charles A. Lindbergh stayed while planning his trip across the Atlantic in 1927.

The \$150,000 survey, largely financed with state and federal grants, grew out of both general and community plan requirements for historic surveys and a complaint that the 45-year rule was cumbersome to administer.

The Historical Resources Board took testimony on the survey March 22 and expects to forward its recommendations in 60 to 90 days to the City Council. At the same meeting, the board took initial action on another historic district, 114-lot Islenair in City Heights, that was developed east of Euclid Avenue at Thorn Street from 1926 to 1952.

The city hired architect Ione Stiegler, a former resources board member, to survey the 11,104 developed parcels of land in the 4.2-square-mile Uptown area and come up with a list of potential historic sites.

Stiegler spent two years driving past every building, snapping a digital picture and dictating to her ride-along staff a description of what she saw. The information, entered into a laptop spreadsheet that extended 105 columns, formed the basis of Uptown’s historic geography. She had done a less intensive survey in part of the area in 1996.

“For me it was like seeing old friends again that I hadn’t seen in 11 years,” Stiegler said.

Stiegler and her team categorized all the homes into seven architectural groupings and subdivided those into 35 styles. Spanish-themed groups narrowly outnumbered Craftsmen, 1,369 to 1,308, followed by much smaller counts of Victorians, Art Modernes and other styles.

At the same time, using property records as well as drive-by observation, she noted which buildings fell outside the 45-year rule, which



NELVIN C. CEPEDA / Union-Tribune
Barry Hager savored Uptown living on his front steps with wife Hilary and son Dylan, 8.



SOURCE: SanGIS

BRIAN CRAGIN / Union-Tribune

ones were altered beyond recognition of their original, pre-1960 design and which deserved further study for possible designation. "We drove 100 to 200 buildings at a time – and hit one fire hydrant," Stiegler said. "There are so many buildings that I just really love. Whoever was sitting in the back seat got tired of me saying, 'Oh, this has always been one of my favorites!' I said it about so many."

The potential historic sites were grouped by decade of construction with 1920-1929 being the most numerous, 1,545, and by building type; single-family homes comprised 70 percent of the total.

Meanwhile, Vonn Marie May, a cultural landscape specialist and a former resources board member, spent most of 2005 covering the same territory on foot but looking for mature trees, cobblestone walls, period lamp posts, sidewalk builder imprints, views and other features that give character to the spaces between buildings.

"I'm a native and saw areas I've never been in," May said. She logged her findings on a handset device called an ArcPad and after every session, turned it over to information technician Mike Klein in the Planning and Community Investment Department, who transferred the information into a database ready for mapping. The state Office of Historic Preservation is monitoring the project as a prototype for use throughout California.

Among her findings: 3,324 queen palms, the signature Uptown tree, far outnumber fan palms (457) and king palms (226).

The team further identified 23 potential historic districts – although the Hillcrest commercial district is conspicuously absent – and residents have praised the results, since only 129 properties in Uptown currently bear historic status.

"My hope as an Uptown planner is that it'll help us preserve our neighborhood by showing, through all the development we had in the 1990s, we still have a high degree of integrity and have a big story to tell of our area," said Janet O'Day, a Mission Hills resident.

Further aiding such efforts is the online access to all the data compiled by Stiegler, May and other researchers, ranging from a history of the area and a series of 29 oral and videotaped interviews among longtime residents to the searchable property database. The report is available online at the Planning Department's Web site, www.sandiego.gov/planning/index.shtml (historical resources and historic surveys).

But that's where the good feelings end.

The surveyors acknowledge that they gave only a cursory visual inspection to every property and did not research who lived there or whether any important event took place there – key elements in determining a site's historic importance.

Various residents and community activists worry that mistakes were made and need to be corrected.

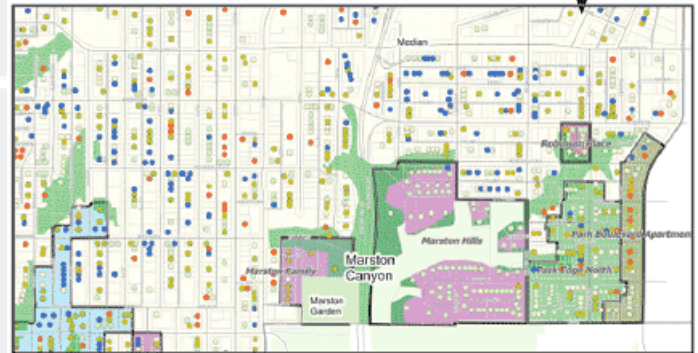
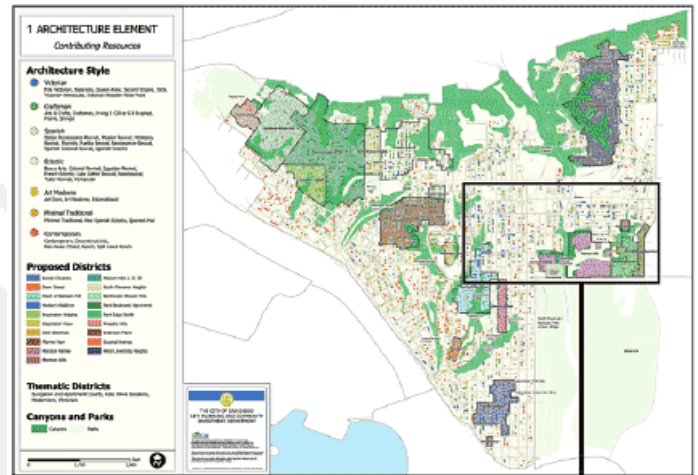
One example is Dartlee Hall, built in 1900 at 3680 Sixth Ave., designed by famed local architect Irving J. Gill and occupied for 11 years by the venerable Wednesday Club, one of the oldest civic organizations in the region. Retired *Union-Tribune* drama critic Welton Jones, an Uptown resident, determined that the Old Globe Theatre used the site during World War II when the Navy occupied its Balboa Park theater, and architect Erik Hanson concluded on a visit that the building was the Gill-designed Wednesday Club venue.

But Stiegler had marked down the property as dating from about 1915 and "under construction," its historic status requiring further review. Realtor Courtier, who is representing the owner in the planned sale of the building, most recently a restaurant, said the example points up the danger of using only visual inspections to determine a property's historic importance.

Diane Kane, who oversees the Historical Resources Board, said any errors spotted by the public will be corrected before issuing the final version of the survey. In the future, she said, regular updates to this and other historic surveys will be made as development and redevelopment progresses.

Mapping a community's roots

A comprehensive survey of the Uptown area of San Diego, which includes Mission Hills, Hillcrest, University Heights and Bankers Hill, identified the architectural style of every house, as well as significant street-side elements such as trees, light posts, bridges and even contractor stamps on sidewalks.



Detail of the inset area focusing on the Marston Canyon area of Hillcrest shows homes as color-keyed dots. Blue dots indicate Victorian style; dark green, Craftsman; light green, Spanish; light yellow, Eclectic, including Colonial, Egyptian, late Gothic and Tudor revival; darker yellow, Art Moderne; orange, minimal traditional; and red, Contemporary.

The survey then came up with proposed historic districts and thematic areas. Taking four years to complete, the profile will enable city planning officials to quickly determine if a property is potentially historic.

SOURCE: City of San Diego

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Barry Hager, a lawyer, president of the Mission Hills Heritage preservation group and resident on Fort Stockton Drive with his wife and two young sons, said the survey is an improvement on the city's previous "hit and miss" approach to checking the historic character of individual properties.

"So, we're going to save some properties that should be saved," Hager said.

But he agreed with Courtier's concern that properties not identified as potentially significant "could be greenlighted for no further study" if their owners apply for renovation or demolition permits.

"I would say it's a mixed bag," he said.

Bruce Coons, executive director of Save Our Heritage Organisation, said the Uptown survey is useful in many ways. But if it is going to be used to automatically clear thousands of buildings for demolition or major alteration, he was not so complimentary: "We need to make sure (the facts are correct) before we adopt it," he said. "Otherwise, we'd better stick with reviewing everything."

Marie Lia, an attorney who represents clients seeking historic designation as well as demolition permits, raised several other concerns about the survey, saying at the very least, all property owners should be notified by mail prior to City Council action.

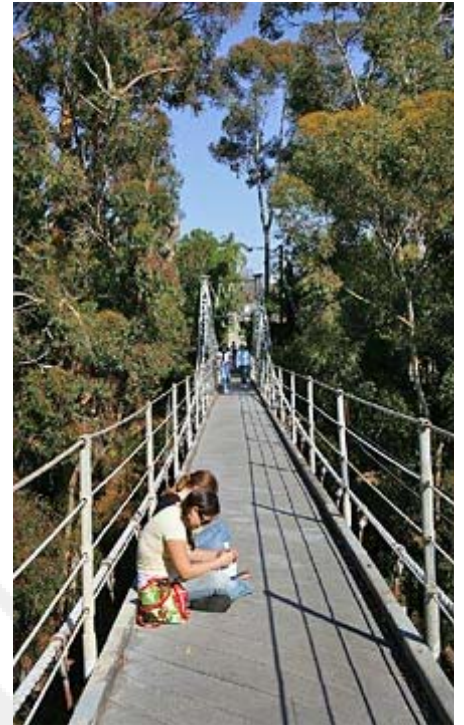
"It'll take years before all the properties can be considered by the Historic Resources Board and it's not clear how the status of those properties will be treated in the interim," Lia said.

Betsy McCullough, the deputy planning director, said many questions have yet to be worked out, including how to correct and update the survey, but she expressed hope that all other neighborhoods will get similar historic surveys as their community plans are updated. However, to do so, she said, the city would have to boost its planning budget to cover the \$1 million cost each plan will cost to rewrite. A proposal is in the works to charge a general-plan fee that would include funds for the historic survey costs.

"It's a good investment in the community because it will give us an indication about what the historic character of the community is and where there may be historic resources we're not aware of," McCullough said. "It may help with historic districts, which everyone agrees is a benefit to the city – cultural tourism, a positive economic benefit."

Smokestacks and Geraniums is an occasional look at the growth and development issues as they relate to historic trends in San Diego. The name is derived from a 1917 San Diego mayoral campaign pitting quick-fix forces against advocates of long-term planning.

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*NELVIN C. CEPEDA / Union-Tribune
The Spruce Street suspension bridge attracts both walkers and students doing homework. A GPS device was used to pinpoint the location of trees, monuments and bridges.*