Putting it in Context: Purpose, Process, and Importance of Historic Contexts

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Office of Historic Preservation
Benicia Local Government Workshop
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Learning Objectives

1. Learn about historic contexts
2. Compare the different types and ways to organize historic contexts
3. Learn how to prepare a historic context
4. Learn how to use a historic context
5. Understand the reasons for completing a historic context
Historic Contexts: What are they?

Historical context is the political, social, cultural, and economic setting for a particular idea or event. In order to better understand something in history, we must look at its context—those things which surround it in time and place and which give it its meaning. In this way, we can gain, among other things, a sense of how unique or ordinary an event or idea seems to be in comparison to other events and ideas.
Historic Contexts: What are they?

More specifically for our purposes, the National Register of Historic Places defines a historic context as:

“An organizing structure for interpreting history that groups information about historic properties which share a common theme, common geographical location, and common time period. The development of historic contexts is a foundation for decisions about planning, identification, evaluation, registration, and treatment of historic properties, based on comparative significance.”

National Register Bulletin 15A
Historic Contexts: What are they?

“Patterns or trends in history by which a specific occurrence, property or site is understood and its meaning within history or prehistory is made clear.”

National Register Bulletin 15
What is a Historic Context?

In plain language, a historic context tells the stories that explain:

• How
• When
• Why

The built environment developed or looks the way it does.
What is a Historic Context?

- Historic Contexts are a fundamental tool for the identification of historic resources and determining their significance.
- Body of information about related properties organized by theme, place, and time.
Ways to Organize Historic Contexts

By Theme, Geography, or Chronology
Examples of types of Historic Contexts


Prepared by
The California Department of Transportation
Sacramento, California
2011

WATER CONVEYANCE SYSTEMS IN CALIFORNIA

Historic Context Development and Evaluation Procedures

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December 2000

Thematic-statewide
Thematic-statewide
Types of Historic Contexts

- Thematic-statewide
- Thematic-local
Types of Historic Contexts

Geographically based - local

SUNSET BUILDERS RESIDENTIAL TRACT
Historic Context Statement
1925-1950

PEBBLE BEACH
HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT
PEBBLE BEACH, MONTEREY COUNTY, CALIFORNIA
Prepared for
MONTEREY COUNTY

Draft – Not for Public Review
Pending review by the Department’s Survey Advisors Group.

September 30, 2012

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REVISED DRAFT

Geographically based - local
Types of Historic Contexts

San Francisco
Modern Architecture and Landscape Design
1935-1970

Historic Context Statement

FINALE DRAFT

September 30, 2018
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Chronologically based-national

Chronologically based-local
Steps for developing a historic context

• Identify the concept, chronological period, and geographical area of the historic context
• Assemble the information about the historic context
  – Collect information about the prehistory or history of the geographical area
    • Including information on previously identified properties
  – Assess for bias in historic perspective, methodological approach, or an area of coverage
• Synthesize information and consider:
  – Trends in settlement and development
  – Aesthetic and artist values
  – Research values
Steps for completing a historic context

Define property types
- Identify property types
- Generalize about locational patterns or where they are likely to be located
- Characterize the current conditions

Establish significance criteria
Putting it all together

Identify the concept, chronological period, and geographical area of the historic context

- Civilian Conservation Corp Buildings and Structures
- 1933-1942
- Statewide

Assemble the information about the historic context

- Include information about previously identified properties
- Assess for data gaps or bias
Putting it all together

Synthesize information and prepare a written narrative which includes:

- Important patterns, events, persons, architectural types and cultural values
- Develop a historical overview but don’t limit it to only an overview

Define property types:

- Form
- Function
- Associations
- Events
- Physical Characteristics

Examples:

- Residential
- Commercial
- Carnegie Libraries
- Railroad related buildings and structures
- Water storage facilities
Putting it all together

Establish significance criteria

- Any Italianate style residence within the city limits is eligible for the Happy City Register
- Any building designed by architect Sparky McSparkerson is eligible for the Happy City Register
- Any building associated with Bubba White Jr. is eligible for Happy City Register because he is super important
Notes about putting it all together

- Not just a historical overview
- Adds information about common themes, places, and time to historic development

Context: Residential Development and Suburbanization, 1850-1980
Theme: Early Residential Development, 1880-1930
  Sub-Theme: Early Single-Family Residential Development, 1880-1930

- Focus on property types rather than on individual buildings
  - Connects history with built environment
- A historic context is a specialized form of historical writing with specific goals and requirements.
Applying the historic context to evaluations of historic properties

Every evaluation “must place a property in its historic context to support that property’s significance. Historic context means the information about the period, the place, and the events that created, influenced, or formed the backdrop to the historic resources. The discussion of historic context should describe the history of the community where the property is located as it relates to the history of the property.”

Applying the historic context to evaluations of historic properties

- The portion of the prehistory or history of the local, state, or nation the property represents
- Whether the portion of the prehistory or history is significant
- Whether the property has relevance and importance in illustrating the historic context
- How the property illustrates that history
- Whether the property possesses the physical features necessary to convey the aspect of prehistory or history
Examples
Headquarters Administration Building, Big Basin State Park
What is the historic context(s) and is the building significant?

Facts:
• Located in Big Basin State Park, the 1st State Park in California
• Constructed in 1936
• Built by a CCC crew
• Designed by Daniel Hull

Potential Context:
• Big Basin State Park
• CCC in California
• Architecture designed by Daniel Hull
• Park Rustic style architecture
What is the historic context(s) and is the building significant?

Eligible within these historic contexts:

- Big Basin State Park
- CCC in California
- Architecture designed by Daniel Hull
- Park Rustic style architecture

- Eligible under Criteria A for its association with the CCC in the National Park Service-California State Park cooperative program
- Eligible under Criterion C as a significant example of Park Rustic architecture
El Teatro Campesino
El Teatro Campesino

Facts:
• Located in San Juan Bautista
• Built in 1944 as a warehouse and used as a spinach packing plant
• Later used as bow and ribbon factory
• 1980 the building was purchased by Luis and Lupe Valdez and converted into a theater

Potential Contexts:
• Agriculture
  – Local or statewide
• Manufacturing
  • Local or statewide
• Theater
What is the historic context(s) and is it significant?

Eligible within these contexts:

- Agriculture
  - Local or statewide
- Manufacturing
  - Local or statewide
- Theater

- Eligible under Criterion A for its association with the Chicano theater movement
- Eligible under Criterion B for its association with Luis Valdez, the father of Chicano theater
Why should I prepare a historic context?

Difficult to determine significance without a historic context
Why should I prepare a historic context?

• First step to identifying historical resources
• Identification of historic resources helps determine which of those resources should be preserved
• Facilitates environmental reviews (CEQA and other land-use decisions)
  – Surveys in areas prone to development
  – Sorts out historic and non-historic properties
• Determinations of historic resources are not arbitrary and should they be contested, the local jurisdiction has an administrative record how they arrived at their conclusion.
Frequently asked questions

• It seems like a really big task to write an entire history of our town/city/history. Where do we start?
• How do we find money to have a consultant prepare a historic context?
• Can we use grad students to write this for us?
• What about archaeology?