

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



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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





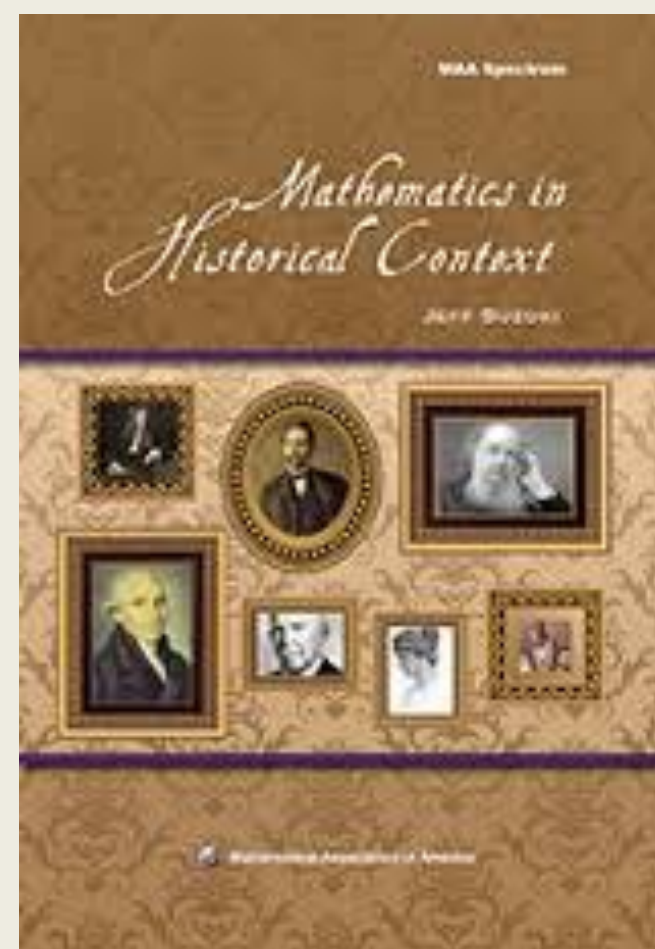
# Historic Contexts: What are they?

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.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Audiences are always changing, as society changes, and what appealed to an audience in 1938 might not appeal to an audience today, in the same way that future audiences might disregard current modern "classics".

- What makes a "classic" film?
- What do audiences always seem to respond to over the years?



## Historical Context: The Red Scare and McCarthy Trials (cont.)

- In February of 1950, a Republican senator from Wisconsin names Joseph McCarthy claimed to have a list of over 200 card-carrying members of the Communist party. By 1951, a new flourish of accusations began and a new wave were subpoenaed to "name names"—to snitch on those who were Communists or believed to be Communist sympathizers. Later, the terms *McCarthy Trials* and *McCarthyism* were coined, which described the anti-Communist movement and trials of the 1950s.



# 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*



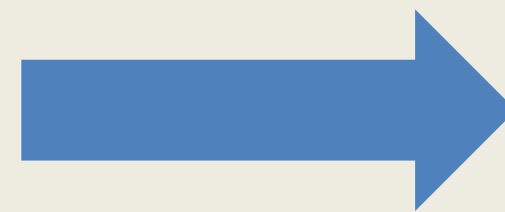


# What is a Historic Context?

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

## Tract Housing in California, 1945-1973: A Context for National Register Evaluation



Prepared by  
The California Department of Transportation  
Sacramento, California  
2011



*Thematic-statewide*

## WATER CONVEYANCE SYSTEMS IN CALIFORNIA

*Historic Context Development  
and Evaluation Procedures*



Prepared Jointly by:

JRP Historical Consulting Services  
1490 Drew Avenue, Suite 110  
Davis, CA 95616

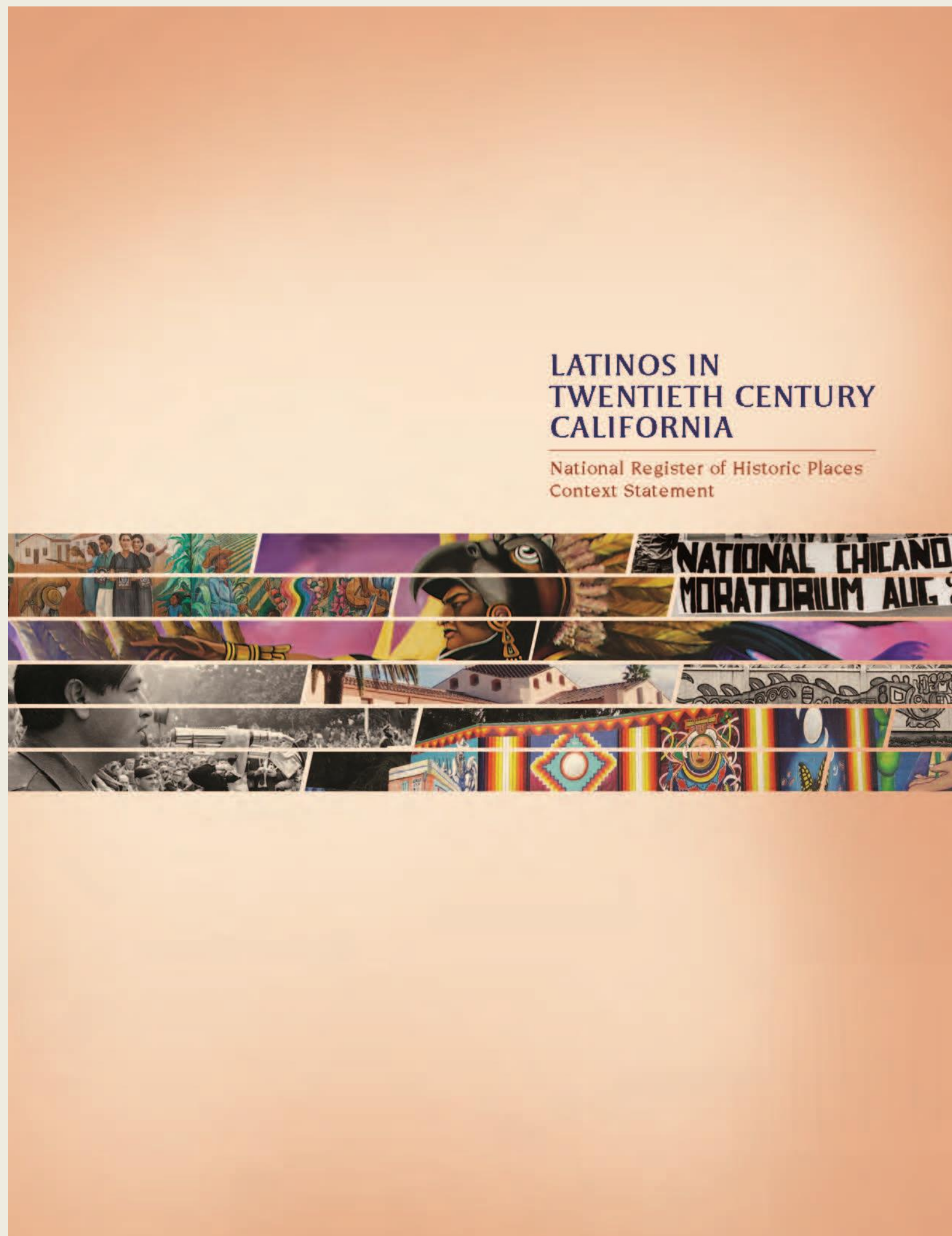
California Department of Transportation  
Environmental Program / Cultural Studies Office  
Sacramento, CA 95814

December 2000

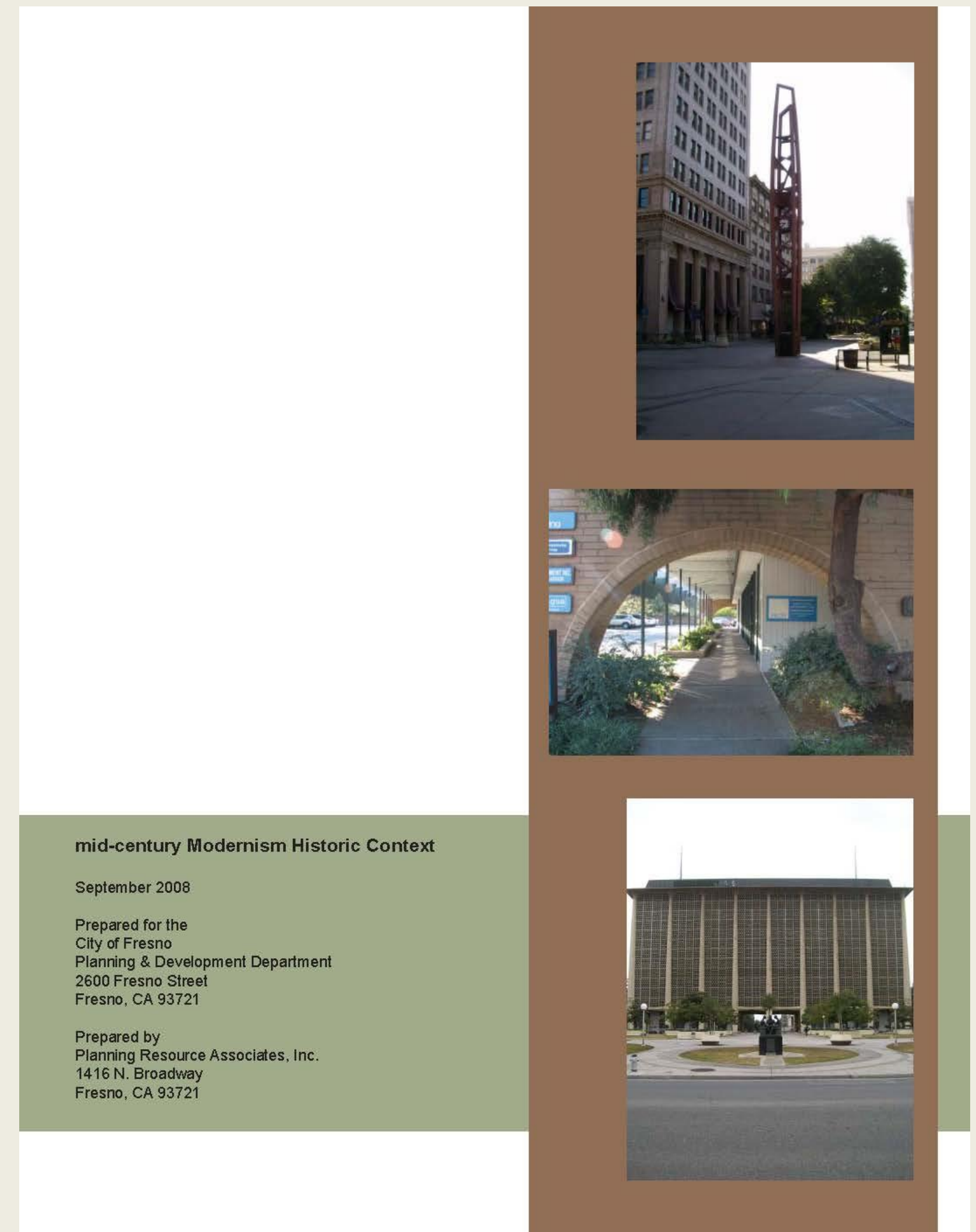
*Thematic-statewide*



# Types of Historic Contexts



*Thematic-statewide*



*Thematic-local*



# Types of Historic Contexts

## SUNSET BUILDERS RESIDENTIAL TRACT Historic Context Statement 1925-1950



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

September 30, 2012

Prepared by Mary Brown, Preservation Planner  
San Francisco City and County  
Planning Department  
1650 Mission Street, Suite 400  
San Francisco, CA 94103

*Geographically based- local*

## PEBBLE BEACH HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT

PEBBLE BEACH, MONTEREY COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Prepared for  
MONTEREY COUNTY



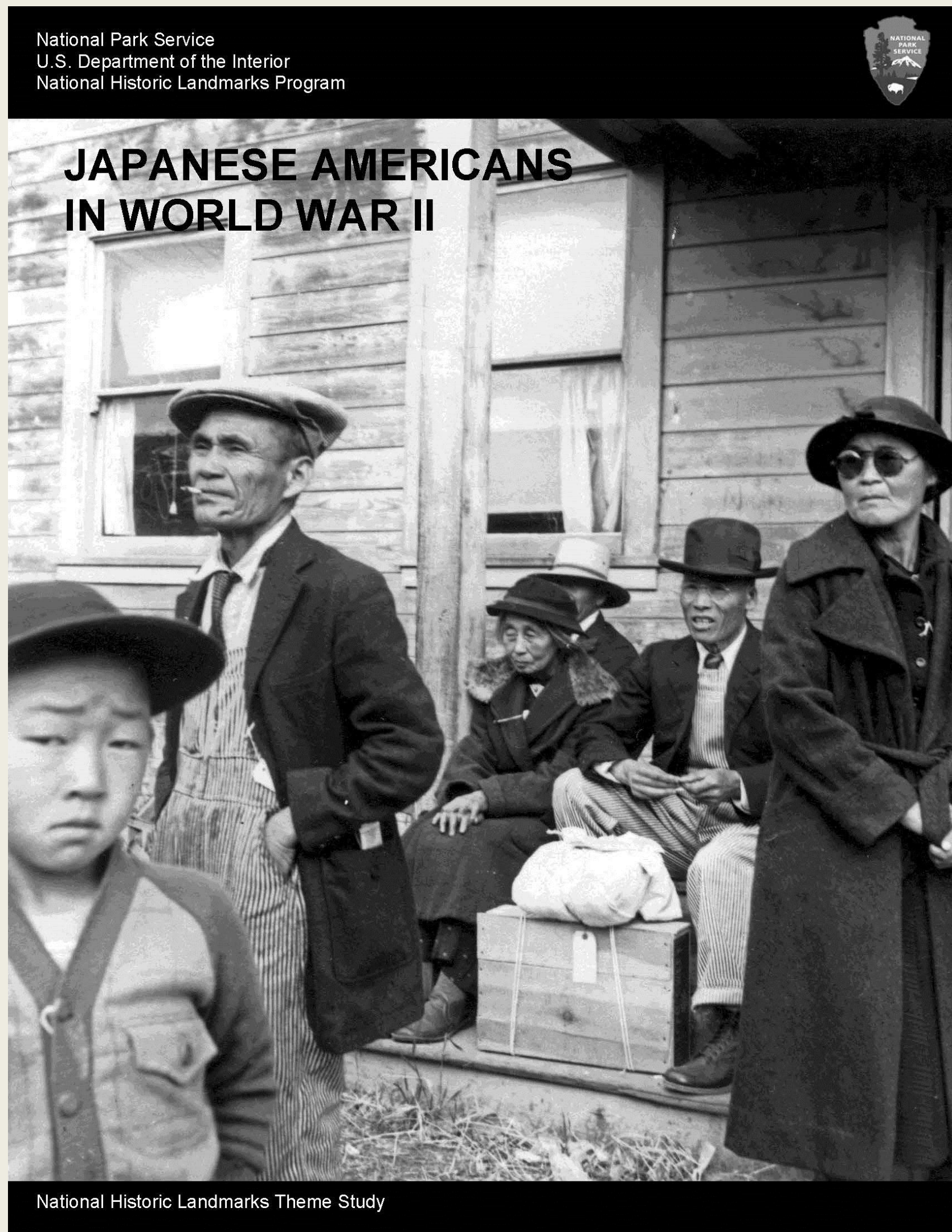
JULY 15, 2013

REVISED  
DRAFT

*Geographically based- local*



# Types of Historic Contexts



*Chronologically based-national*

## San Francisco Modern Architecture and Landscape Design 1935-1970

### Historic Context Statement



FINAL DRAFT

September 30, 2010

Prepared by  
Mary Brown, Preservation Planner  
San Francisco City and County  
Planning Department  
1650 Mission Street, Suite 400  
San Francisco, CA 94103

*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

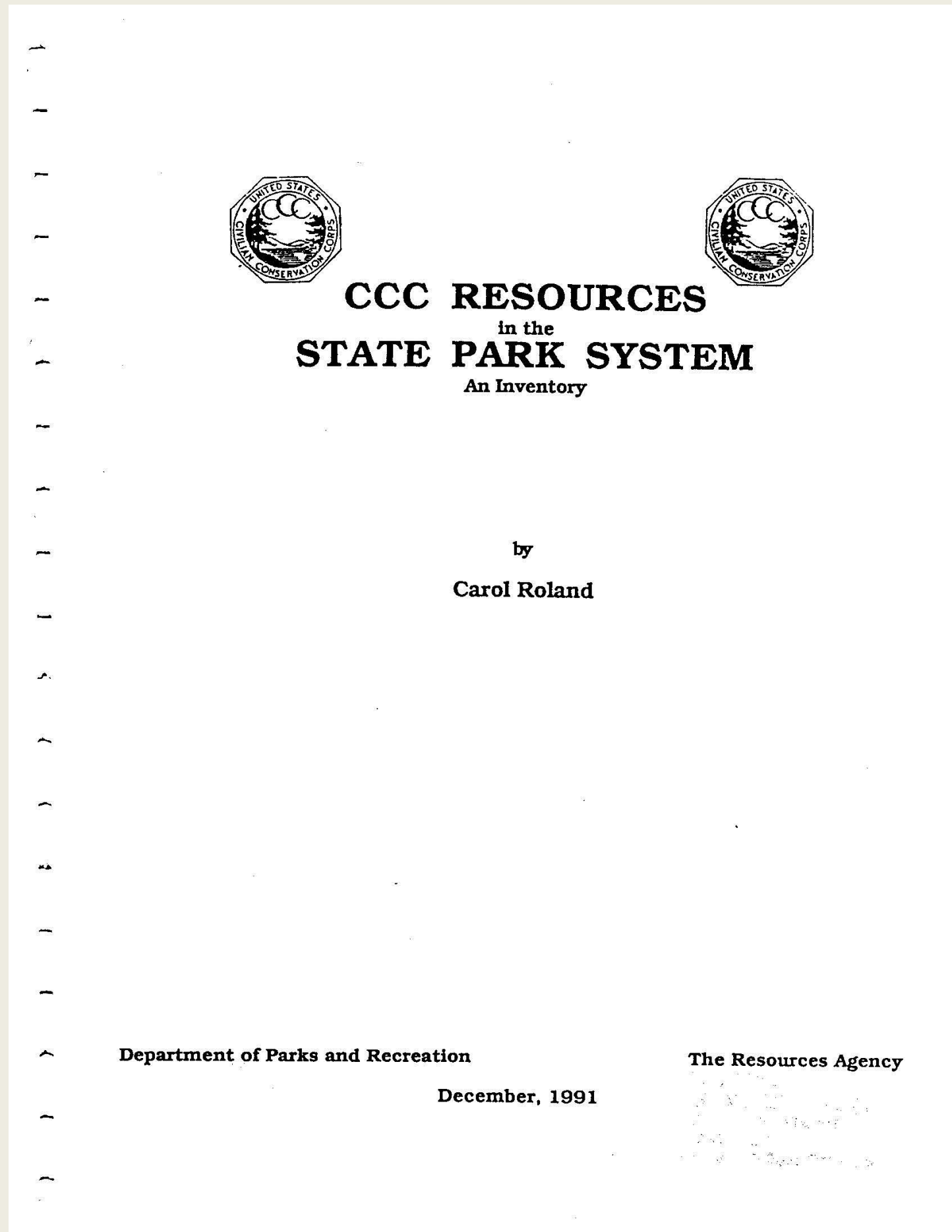
## Establish significance criteria





# 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:

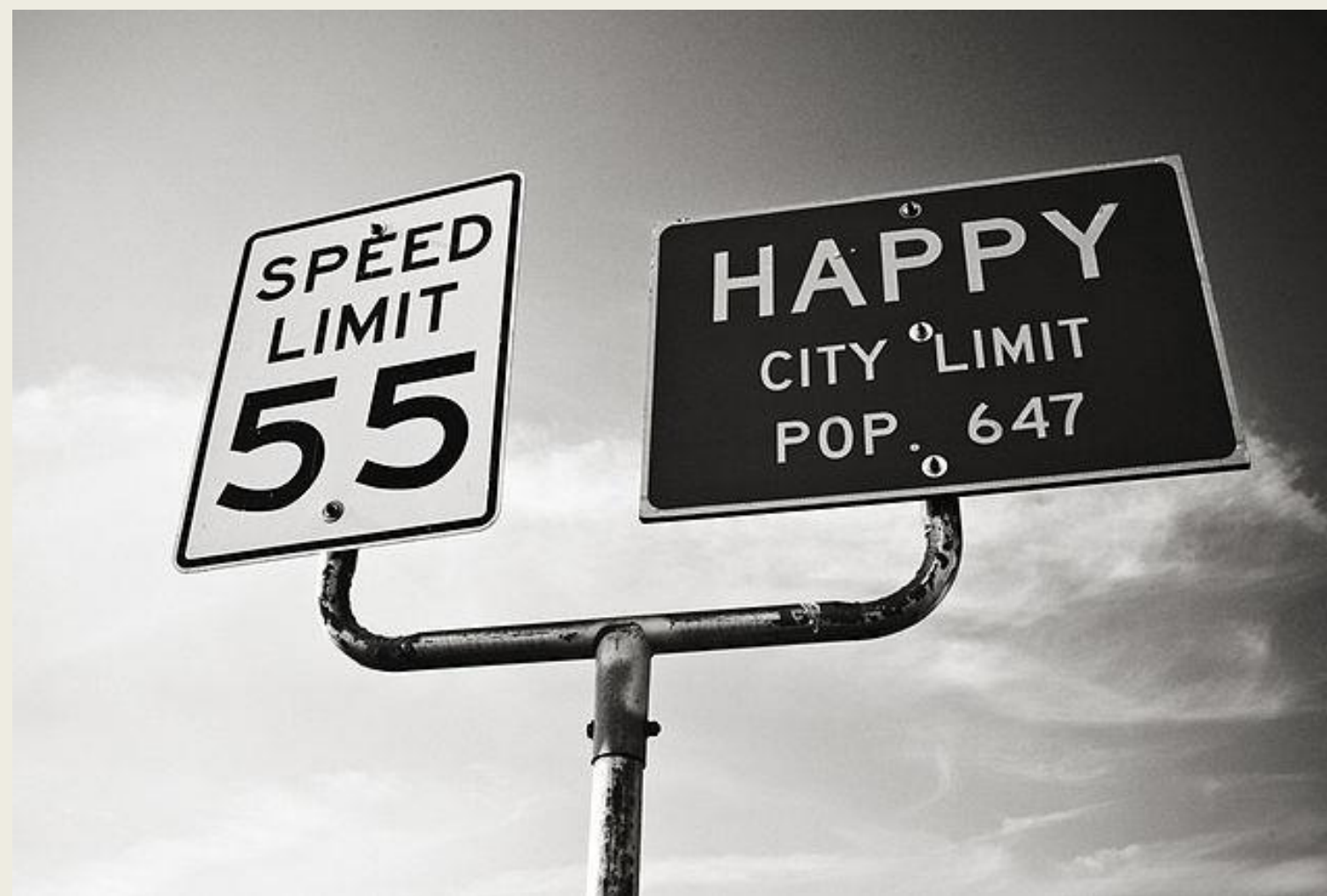
- Residential
- Commercial
- Carnegie Libraries
- Railroad related buildings and structures
- Water storage facilities



# 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.”

*National Register Bulletin 39, “Researching a Historic Property,” 2.*



# 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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?





