



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

## Report to the Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: March 11, 2021 REPORT NO. HRB-21-023

HEARING DATE: March 25, 2021

SUBJECT: **ITEM #1 – Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna**

RESOURCE INFO: [California Historical Resources Inventory Database \(CHRID\) link](#)

APPLICANT: I P Investments, LLC; represented by Scott Moomjian

LOCATION: 805 West Cedar Street, Downtown Community, Council District 3  
APN 533-321-09-00

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna located at 805 West Cedar Street as a historical resource.

### STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna located at 805 West Cedar Street as a historical resource with a period of significance of 1974-1988 under HRB Criteria A and B. The designation excludes the one-story property located at 1560 California Street. This recommendation is based on the following findings:

1. The resource, which is significant for its association with the LGBTQ community, reflects a special element of San Diego's historical, cultural, and social development and retains integrity to its 1974-1988 period of significance. Specifically, the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna provided a private, safe space for gay men to meet, socialize, and engage in discrete sexual activities at a time when homosexuality was not only condemned, but prior to 1976, illegal. Additionally, the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna provided emotional support and information to its members regarding sexually transmitted diseases and how best to protect themselves from infection during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic when the disease was poorly understood and highly stigmatized.
2. The resource is identified with Frank Stiriti, a historically significant person and retains integrity for his association. Specifically, Frank Stiriti was the owner and founder of the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna and was also an advocate, educator, and volunteer for the LGBTQ community, especially during the AIDS crisis in San Diego.

## BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with a proposed building modification or demolition of a structure of 45 years or more, consistent with [San Diego Municipal Code Section 143.0212](#). The subject resource is located in Downtown San Diego at the beginning of the southside of West Cedar Street adjacent to the Pacific Highway and the County Administration Building.

The property was identified in the [2016 San Diego Citywide LGBTQ Historic Context Statement](#) and for its association with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community's "Social Life" contextual theme.

The property located at 1560 California Street was evaluated by staff and cleared from further historic review through the Potential Historic Resource Review process. The property dates to circa 1907 and was originally constructed as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century masonry commercial building. Staff found that the property did not rise to the level of individual designation nor warranted further evaluation through a Historical Resources Research Report.

The historic name of the resource, the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna, has been identified consistent with the Board's adopted naming policy and reflects the name of the tenant that occupied the property during its 39 years of operation.

## PRIOR REPORT

In 2019, Scott Moomjian submitted a Historical Resource Research Report for 805 West Cedar Street for staff's review. This report was never deemed complete nor resubmitted with the edits requested by staff, however some of the primary research in the Moomjian report was included in the current Historical Resource Research Report prepared by Brian F. Smith and Associates.

## ANALYSIS

A Historical Resource Research Report was prepared by Brian F. Smith and Associates, which concludes that the resource is significant under HRB Criteria A and B and staff concurs. This determination is consistent with the *Guidelines for the Application of Historical Resources Board Designation Criteria*, as follows.

*CRITERION A - Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's, a community's or a neighborhood's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development.*

The subject property located at 805 West Cedar Street, known as the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna, was one of the seven identified bathhouses within the City of San Diego and was one of the last extant operating bathhouses in the City upon its closure in 2013. As noted in the *2016 San Diego Citywide LGBT Historic Context Statement*, the first documented bathhouse in the City opened in 1869. Bathhouses at this time served as swimming pools for relaxation as well as bathing spots for those without indoor plumbing. The city's earliest bathhouses were located on the waterfront and were seasonal, family-friendly attractions eventually evolving into gay destinations due to their separate men's and women's

facilities. The construction of bathhouses later spread inland and became year-round venues with additional services such as massages, saunas, and other spa features. The gay activities occurring within the bathhouses at this time were secretive with the businesses maintaining heterosexual public fronts and clients, alongside their gay patrons. Bathhouses served as a safe space for many men at this time who resorted to having sex in public and semi-public places out of fear that their landlords or neighbors would discover their true identities, effectively ruining their lives and careers. The construction of bathhouses increased in San Diego with the 1975 passage of California's Consenting Adult Sex Bill, which repealed the law against sodomy and legalized sex between men.

From its inception in July of 1974, the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna provided a private, safe space during a period of history when physical and romantic relationships between men were not only condemned by society but prior to 1976 were illegal. Frank Stiriti, a gay man as well as the owner and founder of the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna, aimed to create a recreational facility in conservative San Diego where gay men could find one another. He operated a steady business into the mid-1980s when the AIDS crisis began to emerge throughout the United States. However, he did not close his business like many other local bathhouse owners did during the escalation of the AIDS crisis as requested by San Diego's Board of Supervisors in 1988 to reduce the spread of AIDS. Instead, he used the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna as a meeting place to engage with community members ways in which to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, and AIDS through self-made brochures and advocating for safe sex practices through the distribution of free condoms upon entrance of the building. The brochures were prepared and paid for by Frank Stiriti as there was no government funding for AIDS related literature at this time. The space was later used for seminars on AIDS related resources and quickly became a vital information source for people who did not feel comfortable going to The Center for Social Services (presently The San Diego LGBT Community Center) in Hillcrest.

When considering a potential period of significance for the subject property, staff considered two options. A period of significance which reflected the entire period in which the building operated as a bathhouse would take the period of significance from 1974-2013, which is quite recent and raises questions regarding appropriate historical perspective. When considering that the significance is derived in large part by the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna serving as a safe, private space for men to meet and engage in discrete sexual activities when it was illegal to do so to providing information on the AIDS crisis when it was highly stigmatized, staff finds that that ending the period of significance when bathhouses in San Diego were requested to close to reduce the spread of AIDS in 1988, which the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna did not abide by, an appropriate period of time. Therefore, staff has concluded that limiting the period of significance to 1974-1988 for the years that the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna opened its doors and remained open to provide a safe, private space for men to meet, engage in discrete sexual activities as well as a venue to learn more about the AIDS crisis during a period of time when limited information and resources were available for the highly stigmatized disease.

Significant properties related to the "Social Life" contextual theme within the *2016 San Diego Citywide LGBT Historic Context Statement*, are directly associated with the development of the LGBTQ social scene. The Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna was a significant historical, cultural and social place of interaction for gay men and continues to retain integrity of location, feeling, design, materials, workmanship, and association as related to HRB Criterion A.

Significance Statement: The Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna, located at 805 West Cedar Street, provided a private, safe space for gay men to meet, socialize, and engage in discrete sexual activities at a time when homosexuality was not only condemned, but prior to 1976, illegal. Additionally, the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna provided emotional support and information to its members regarding sexually transmitted diseases and how best to protect themselves from infection during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic when the disease was poorly understood and highly stigmatized. Therefore, staff recommends designation of the resource located at 805 West Cedar Street under HRB Criterion A.

*CRITERION B - Is identified with persons or events significant in local, state or national history.*

The subject property located at 805 West Cedar Street is significant for its association with Frank Stiriti, the founder and owner of the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna. Frank Stiriti was born in 1944 in Massachusetts and graduated from Northern University in Boston. He first visited San Diego in 1968 while stationed in the Navy and would later return with his then partner, Joe O'Toole. With the help of his business partner Don Schermerhorn, whom he had met while serving in Vietnam, the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna opened in 1974. In the beginning one of the three, Stiriti, O'Toole, or Schermerhorn, were present on site. Later, they were able to hire six employees total who were paid an hourly wage as well as insurance and health benefits. With the onset of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, Stiriti worked with Jess Jessop, who founded The Center for Social Services in Hillcrest, to provide seminars as well as prepared literature to distribute to patrons about safe sex practices. Stiriti also stepped forward to fund the literature since government funding was not earmarked for addressing these issues at this time.

Along with being a business owner, Stiriti has been a longtime donor to LGBTQ and HIV and AIDS organizations. San Diego City Human Relations Commissioner Nicole Murray-Ramirez noted that Frank Stiriti was directly responsible for the AIDS Assistance Fund's food shelves being stocked during the early days of the AIDS epidemic and was responsible for donating thousands of dollars to the LGBTQ community throughout the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna's operation. In recent history Stiriti has been acknowledged for his efforts within the LGBTQ community and he was inducted into the Community Wall of Honor located at The San Diego LGBT Community Center as well as the San Diego's LGBT Veteran's Wall of Honor.

Frank Stiriti is a significant individual within San Diego's LGBTQ community and is best associated with his ownership and operation of the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna within its 1974-1988 period of significance for not only providing a safe space for gay men to be themselves during a period of time when it was illegal to do so, but for utilizing the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna for lectures and distribution of self-made AIDS related literature during the height of the AIDS crisis, specifically during a time when the disease was poorly understood and highly stigmatized. Therefore, staff finds that the resource continues to retain integrity of location, feeling, design, materials, workmanship, and association as related to HRB Criterion B.

Significance Statement: The subject resource was owned and operated by Frank Stiriti during the its 39 years of operation. Throughout this time, Stiriti provide a safe space for gay men to meet and engage in sexual activities and was an early advocate, educator and donor to San Diego's LGBTQ community, specifically during the AIDS crisis. Therefore, staff recommends designation of the resource located at 805 West Cedar Street under HRB Criterion B.

*CRITERION C - Embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period or method of construction or is a valuable example of the use of natural materials or craftsmanship.*

The subject property located at 805 West Cedar Street was constructed as an addition to the front façade of the Pioneer Printers building located at 1560 California Street in 1961. In its current condition, the property is a combination of the Block and Utilitarian Industrial architectural styles with the primary elevation of the site featuring an off centered, deeply recessed entrance with evenly spaced, semicircular Doric columns, a smooth stucco finish and two covered window openings. The side and rear elevations feature limited details other than the continuation of the same stucco texture and one Doric column along the east façade.

When the property was first constructed in 1961, it was originally for an addition to the Pioneer Printers located at the rear of the lot. At that time, the building featured a masonry façade with "Pioneer Printers" displayed around the parapet and did not include any window openings along the primary elevation. Modifications since its 1961 construction include the addition of ceramic tile veneer to the northeast corner between 1969 and 1976, the addition of a first-floor window opening on the north façade in 1972, sun deck and patio construction on the east façade between 1974 and 1976, changes to the "805 West Cedar Street" sign, the addition of stucco finish and Doric semicircular columns and window boarding between 1976-2007.

In 2014 the subject property experienced exterior modifications without the benefit of a permit. These modifications occurred on the primary elevation and included the addition of one new window on the second story, two operable windows within the existing boarded window openings, and the removal of a column along the east facing, side elevation. Since these modern modifications were done without the benefit of a permit, they are not considered an impact to the integrity of the building at this time.

While the property does retain its original square footprint and general form, extensive exterior modifications have cumulatively impacted the design, workmanship, and materials which are the significance aspects of integrity related to HRB Criterion C. Therefore, due to substantial alterations and a lack of character defining features of any recognized style, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion C.

*CRITERION D - Is representative of a notable work of a master builder, designer, architect, engineer, landscape architect, interior designer, artist or craftsman.*

The subject property located at 805 West Cedar Street was built by the C.A. Larsen Construction Company in 1961 as an addition to the Pioneer Printers building located at 1560 California Street. The property which was later separately addressed as 805 West Cedar Street was modified throughout its period of significance by Stanley Brune, Julian V. Thompson, PBD Arch, Max Gurth, Bob Smith, and Guy Irwin. None of these architects or builders have been established by the Historical Resources Board as a Master Architect, Designer or Builder, and there is insufficient information to designate them as such at this time. Therefore, staff does not recommend designation under HRB Criterion D.

*CRITERION E - Is listed or has been determined eligible by the National Park Service for listing on the National Register of Historic Places or is listed or has been determined eligible by the State Historical Preservation Office for listing on the State Register of Historical Resources.*

The property at 805 West Cedar Street has not been listed on or determined eligible for listing on the State or National Registers. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion E.

*CRITERION F - Is a finite group of resources related to one another in a clearly distinguishable way or is a geographically definable area or neighborhood containing improvements which have a special character, historical interest or aesthetic value or which represent one or more architectural periods or styles in the history and development of the City.*

The property at 805 West Cedar Street is not located within a designated historic district. Therefore, the property is not eligible for designation under HRB Criterion F.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Designation brings with it the responsibility of maintaining the building in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. The benefits of designation include the availability of the Mills Act Program for reduced property tax; the use of the more flexible Historical Building Code; flexibility in the application of other regulatory requirements; the use of the Historical Conditional Use Permit which allows flexibility of use; and other programs which vary depending on the specific site conditions and owner objectives. If the property is designated by the HRB, conditions related to restoration or rehabilitation of the resource may be identified by staff during the Mills Act application process, and included in any future Mills Act contract.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff's field check, it is recommended that the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna located at 805 West Cedar Street be designated with a period of significance of 1974-1988 under HRB Criteria A as a special element of San Diego's historical, cultural, and social development and Criteria B, for its association with Frank Stiriti, a historically significant individual. The designation excludes the one-story property addressed at 1560 California Street.

  
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Emma Haggerty  
Senior Planner  
Development Services Department

  
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Suzanne Segur  
Senior Planner/ HRB Liaison  
Development Services Department

EH/ks/ss

Attachment(s):

1. Draft Resolution
2. Applicant's Historical Report under separate cover

RESOLUTION NUMBER N/A  
ADOPTED ON 3/25/2021

WHEREAS, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego held a noticed public hearing on 3/25/2021, to consider the historical designation of the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna (owned by I P Investments LLC, 908 Southmore Avenue #270, Pasadena, CA 77502) located at **805 West Cedar Street, San Diego, CA 92101**, APN: **533-321-09-00**, further described as LOT 12 R/W in the City of San Diego, County of San Diego, State of California; and

WHEREAS, in arriving at their decision, the Historical Resources Board considered the historical resources report prepared by the applicant, the staff report and recommendation, all other materials submitted prior to and at the public hearing, inspected the subject property and heard public testimony presented at the hearing; and

WHEREAS, the property would be added to the Register of Designated Historical Resources as **Site No. ,** and

WHEREAS, designated historical resources located within the City of San Diego are regulated by the Municipal Code (Chapter 14, Article 3, Division 2) as such any exterior modifications (or interior if any interior is designated) shall be approved by the City, this includes but is not limited to modifications to any windows or doors, removal or replacement of any exterior surfaces (i.e. paint, stucco, wood siding, brick), any alterations to the roof or roofing material, alterations to any exterior ornamentation and any additions or significant changes to the landscape/ site.

NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED, the Historical Resources Board based its designation of the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna on the following findings:

(1) The property is historically significant under CRITERION A for its association with the LGBTQ community and reflects a special element of San Diego's historical, cultural, and social development and retains integrity to its 1974-1988 period of significance. Specifically, the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna provided a private, safe space for gay men to meet, socialize, and engage in discrete sexual activities at a time when homosexuality was not only condemned, but prior to 1976, illegal. Additionally, the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna provided emotional support and information to its members regarding sexually transmitted diseases and how best to protect themselves from infection during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic when the disease was poorly understood and highly stigmatized. This finding is further supported by the staff report, the historical research report, and written and oral evidence presented at the designation hearing.

(2) The property is historically significant under CRITERION B for its association with Frank Stiriti, a historically significant person and retains integrity for his association. Specifically, Frank Stiriti was the owner and founder of the Vulcan Steam Room and Sauna and was also an advocate, educator, and volunteer for the LGBTQ community, especially during the AIDS crisis in San Diego. This finding is further supported by the staff report, the historical research report, and written and oral evidence presented at the designation hearing.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, in light of the foregoing, the Historical Resources Board of the City of San Diego hereby approves the historical designation of the above named property. The designation includes the parcel and exterior of the building as Designated Historical Resource **Site No. .**

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the designation shall exclude the one-story property located at 1560 California Street.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Secretary to the Historical Resources Board shall cause this resolution to be recorded in the office of the San Diego County Recorder at no fee, for the benefit of the City of San Diego, and with no documentary tax due.

Vote:

BY: \_\_\_\_\_  
DAVID MCCULLOUGH, Chair  
Historical Resources Board

APPROVED: MARA W. ELLIOTT,  
CITY ATTORNEY

BY: \_\_\_\_\_  
LINDSEY SEBASTIAN,  
Deputy City Attorney