

Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monuments – Q&A

What Allows the City to Designate and Regulate Historic Properties?

The Cultural Heritage Commission was established in 1962 when the City Council approved the city's Cultural Heritage Ordinance (Section 22.130 of the City of Los Angeles Administrative Code). The five Commissioners are appointed by the Mayor and serve five-year terms. Each Commissioner is chosen because of his or her special expertise in the historic, cultural and architectural traditions of the community. The City of Los Angeles has now designated over 800 Historic-Cultural Monuments under the Ordinance.

What is the Process for Designating a Building as a Historic-Cultural Monument?

Applications for designation are made to the Cultural Heritage Commission, which are reviewed by the Commission's staff for completeness. The Commission conducts a series of public meetings (including a tour of the property) before voting on whether or not to designate the property. If affirmative, the Commission sends its recommendation to the City Council Planning and Land Use Committee. A hearing is held and the committee gives its recommendation to the City Council, which makes the final determination, also at a public meeting.

What are the Criteria for Designation?

A historical or cultural monument is any site (including significant trees or other plant life located thereon), building or structure of particular historical or cultural significance to the City of Los Angeles, such as:

- historic structures or sites in which the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state or community is reflected or exemplified,

or

- which are identified with historic personages or with important events in the main currents of national, state, or local history;

or

- which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural-type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, or method of construction,

or

- are a notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual genius influenced his or her age.

These criteria are deliberately broad enough to include a wide variety of historic resources, but a proposed resource should have sufficient architectural, historical, and/or cultural significance to warrant designation. A proposed resource may be eligible for designation if it meets only one of the criteria above.

Who Can Submit a Nomination?

Anyone can submit a Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) nomination to the Cultural Heritage Commission (CHC) – the property owner, any other individual, or a group. The City Council may also propose sites for Historic-Cultural Monument status, a process that is typically initiated through a motion introduced by an individual Councilmember.



Is There an Age Requirement?

In Los Angeles, there is no requirement that a building be a certain age before it can be designated. In general, enough time needs to have passed since the resource's completion to allow an evaluation of its significance within a historical context. This is not always the case with other governmental bodies: listing on the California and National Registers of Historic Places is typically reserved for buildings over 50 years old, unless they can demonstrate exceptional significance. Some other municipalities have age requirements that usually range between 25 and 50 years. The youngest structure to be designated in Los Angeles was built in 1989 – it is Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's Binoculars at the Chiat/Day Building in Venice (the rest of the building, designed by Frank Gehry, is not designated).

What Can Be Nominated?

The criteria for designation are quite broad and allow for numerous types of monuments. As you might expect, buildings make up the great majority of HCMs – including many examples of residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial structures. Structures like bridges, stairways, and median strips have also become HCMs. Open spaces such as Echo Park and Banning Park (which, in these cases, also feature historic structures) have been declared monuments, as have individual trees or groups of trees. Even the big rock that is Eagle Rock is an HCM.

Must the Property Owner be Notified about the Nomination?

Under the City's Cultural Heritage Ordinance, the owner is not required to support the nomination. This is particularly important when the current owner wants to demolish or radically alter an important structure because it gives community members the opportunity to protect the site through designation. To avoid preemptive demolition or alteration before the nomination can be heard, the CHC does not notify the owner that an application has been filed until after the first hearing. If the Commission takes the nomination under consideration at that hearing, no permits for demolition or significant alterations may be issued. Even if a demolition permit has already been issued when the Commission takes the nomination under demolition, no actual demolition may occur while the nomination is being considered by the Commission and City Council.

Does Designation Protect Interiors of Buildings?

While many cities' preservation ordinances clearly state that they allow review of only building exteriors, the City of Los Angeles' ordinance is silent on the scope of its designations. In practice, the Cultural Heritage Commission's staff has reviewed proposed alterations to the interior of designated structures when the interiors contain significant, character-defining features of the building that were identified in the nomination.

What Happens When a Building Is Designated? Is it Protected Forever?

In Los Angeles, designation as a Historic-Cultural Monument does not guarantee that the building cannot be demolished. Instead, it merely buys time in order to create opportunities for preservation solutions to emerge. The ordinance allows the Cultural Heritage Commission to object to the demolition, delaying the demolition for up to 180 days, plus another possible 180-day extension if approved by the City Council, to allow for time to preserve the monument. Designation also ensures that city staff trained in preservation and architecture reviews and approves proposals for work on HCMs before any work permits are issued.

A Monument is also presumed to be a significant historical resource under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), triggering the requirement to perform an environmental review (that could lead to the preparation of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR)) before demolition can occur (see page 5 for more information).

