



LOS ANGELES  
CONSERVANCY



THE CULTURAL EDITION

# Landmark THIS!

Guide to Local Landmark Designation



Examples of designated Historic-Cultural Monuments (HCM) in the city of Los Angeles:

1. Watts Towers (1921-1954), Watts
2. Breed Street Shul (1915), Boyle Heights
3. Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building (1949), West Adams
4. Bob Baker Marionette Theater (1953), Downtown
5. Chinatown West Gate (1939), Chinatown
6. Boyle Hotel (1889), Boyle Heights
7. Ralph J. Bunche House (1919), South Los Angeles
8. Lincoln Theatre (1926), Central Avenue/South Los Angeles
9. The Black Cat (1939), Silver Lake
10. Church of the Epiphany (1886/1913), Lincoln Heights

Photos by Adrian Scott Fine, Daniel Paul, Jessica Hodgdon, Dunbar EDC, Flickr user Laurie Avocado, and the Office of Historic Resources.

# LANDMARK THIS!

## Guide for Local Landmark Designation

### Contents:

#### MAKING IT OFFICIAL:

4-5

##### Local Landmark Designation

- Are there different types of landmark designations?
- What does local landmark designation mean?
- How does a building become a local landmark?
- Once it is a local landmark will it be protected forever?
- Is local landmark designation the same for all communities?

#### GETTING STARTED:

6-8

##### Criteria, Eligibility and Integrity

- Is my building already a designated local landmark?
- Are there criteria that determine what is eligible?
- Is there an age requirement?
- What can be locally landmarked?
- Does local landmark designation protect interiors of buildings?
- Is there a survey or inventory of potential landmarks?
- Does being “determined eligible” mean anything?
- If my building has been altered will it still be eligible?

#### MAKING THE CASE:

9-13

##### Writing a Local Landmark Nomination

- Who can submit a local landmark nomination?
- Where can I find the history of my building?
- Can buildings be locally landmarked for cultural associations?
- How do I tell the story of my building?
- How much history do I include in the nomination?
- How do I describe my building’s architectural style and features?
- Case Study One: Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building
- Case Study Two: Bob Baker Marionette Theater

#### BUILDING SUPPORT:

14-16

##### Navigating the Political Process

- Why do politics matter?
- How can I ensure there is support for my nomination?
- Must the property owner be notified about the nomination?
- What is the designation process?

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

17

- Office of Historic Resources, City of Los Angeles
- Los Angeles Conservancy

### WHY DESIGNATE?

The purpose of this Guide is to answer commonly-asked questions about local landmark designation and to help those wanting to prepare and submit a nomination. Though there are many reasons why people want to have properties designated as local landmarks, here are a few examples:

**Bring attention and official recognition to previously unrecognized places.** It may be done for the sense of prestige that accompanies a building’s recognition for its historic, cultural, or architectural importance.

**Provide protection against demolition or inappropriate alterations.** In situations in which a historic building is threatened, individuals and/or community groups often attempt to designate the at-risk structure to provide some process or legal measures to prevent its loss.

**Enable financial incentives.** Many communities require landmark designation as a first step, whereas only owners of officially designated properties are eligible to receive tax reductions such as those achieved through the Mills Act (see Landmark Vocabulary, p. 6).

**Encourage long-term stewardship.** Landmark designation runs with the land and applies to any subsequent property owners, ensuring the building or site is properly cared for and protected.

### Landmark THIS!

The Los Angeles Conservancy presents Landmark THIS! in partnership with the City of Los Angeles’ Office of Historic Resources. The Cultural Edition of this guide is offered as part of our Landmark THIS! workshop series, focusing on culturally significant resources. To learn more about landmark designation, visit [laconservancy.org](http://laconservancy.org).



# MAKING IT OFFICIAL: Local Landmark Designation

## Are there different types of landmark designations?

Yes, generally there are three types: local, state and national. Each is used to honor a building or a place's historical, cultural, or architectural values. A historic building can be listed on just one or all three. In most cases, local landmark designation provides the strongest level of protection for an historic resource, as it requires some form of design review when alterations or demolition are proposed.

State and national listing does not necessarily provide an iron-clad guarantee that a building cannot be demolished or significantly altered. These types of listings:

- Recognize that the resource is important to the history of the community, state, or nation.
- Allow the owners of income-producing properties certain federal tax incentives for rehabilitation.
- Provide limited protection from adverse effects by federal or state involved projects

In California, however, listing on either local, state or national registers may trigger environmental review through the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). This process applies to projects which have other discretionary actions associated with them.

## What does local landmark designation mean?

Local landmark designation can offer the strongest protections through local land-use planning and review for alterations or demolition to a property. The type of protection and any required design review process depends on the specific community and the strength of its adopted preservation ordinance.

Many of the large municipalities in Los Angeles County, including Huntington Park, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Pasadena, Santa Monica, South Pasadena, West Hollywood, and Whittier have relatively strong preservation ordinances. Other cities, such as Burbank, Claremont, Glendale, Glendora, Monrovia, Pomona, Redondo Beach, and San Dimas provide some measure of protection for locally designated landmarks. Unfortunately, some cities have no provision for designating and protecting their historic resources.

## California Register of Historical Resources

This is the authoritative guide to California's significant historic and archaeological resources. Historic buildings may be nominated to the California Register by local governments, private organizations, or individual citizens. All properties listed on, or formally determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places are automatically listed in the California Register. In many cities that do not have historic preservation ordinances, the California Register provides an important statewide resource for official historic recognition. Applications are made to the Office of Historic Preservation (OHP).

## National Register of Historic Places

This is the nation's official list of historic resources -- buildings, structures, objects, sites and districts worthy of preservation. The National Register was established by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and is maintained by the National Park Service. There is a general requirement that the resource be 50 years old, but there are exceptions so that more recently constructed buildings can be listed. For instance, the Downey, California McDonald's, built in 1953, was listed on the National Register when it was only 31 years old.

OHP staff review the nomination and then submit it to the State Historical Resources Commission, which meets quarterly. If approved, the nomination is sent to the National Register division at the National Park Service in Washington, D.C. The owner must consent to the listing in the Register; if the owner objects, the building becomes officially "determined eligible" for the Register, which has the identical impact of triggering environmental review for alterations to the property.

National Register listing allows owners of historic buildings to take advantage of the 20% federal rehabilitation tax credit, one of the most important financial incentives for rehabilitating historic buildings. For more information, visit the **California Office of Historic Preservation**.

## How does a building become a local landmark?

Each locality has its own process for designating an individual landmark, as well as its own level of protection for them. For example, in Los Angeles, applications for individual landmark designation (known as Historic-Cultural Monuments/HCM) are made to the Cultural Heritage Commission, which 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 Management Committee (PLUM). A hearing is held and the committee gives its recommendation to the full City Council, which makes the final determination, also at a public meeting.

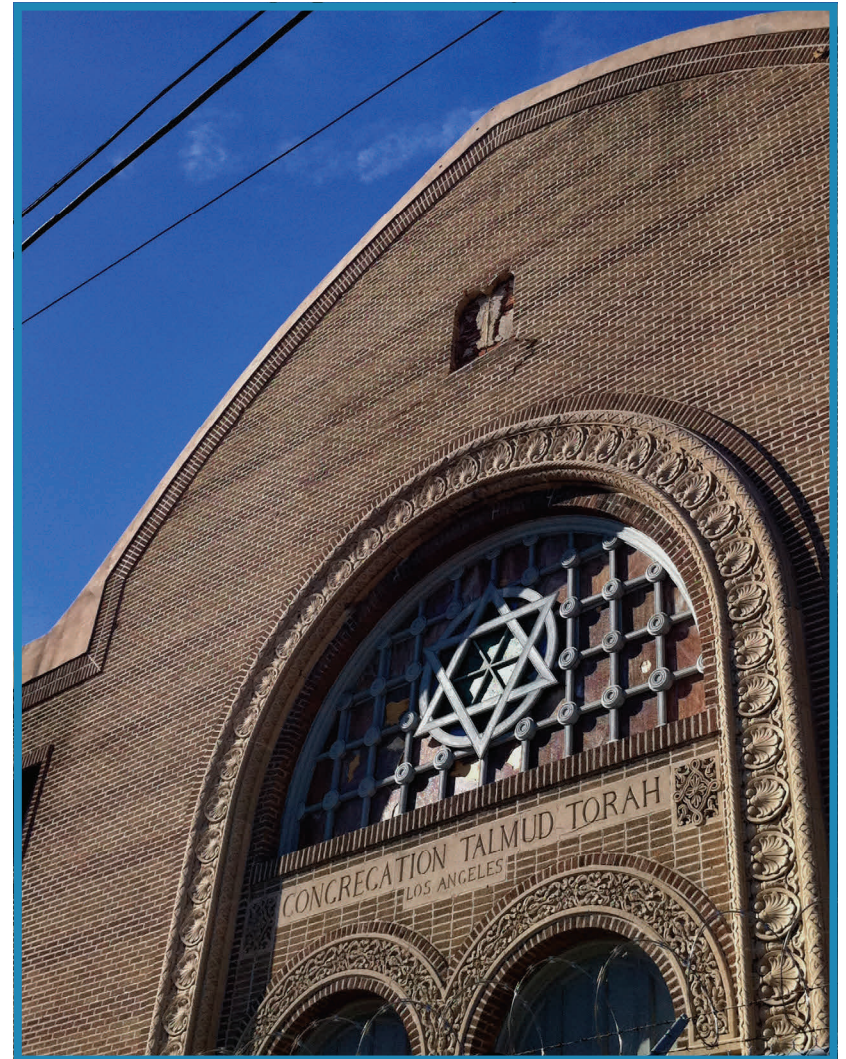
## Once it is a local landmark will it be protected forever?

Not necessarily. Most communities have some type of design review process that requires property owners of historic landmarks to submit plans for approval prior to making substantial alterations or demolition. In Los Angeles, designation as a Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) 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. Designation also ensures that city staff with preservation and architectural training reviews and approves proposals for work on HCMs before any work permits are issued.

Locally-designated historic landmarks are also presumed to be a significant historical resource under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), triggering the requirement to perform an environmental review and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) before demolition can occur (see more information on CEQA).

## Is local landmark designation the same for all communities?

No. Only about a third of the communities in Los Angeles County have established some form of a preservation ordinance to provide for local landmark designation. In each of these communities the process varies greatly, especially in terms of the protection offered through local landmark designation. In Los Angeles, the Cultural Heritage Ordinance, enacted in 1962, has made possible the designation of buildings and sites as individual local landmarks, called “Historic-Cultural Monuments” or HCM. There are currently over 1,000 Historic-Cultural Monuments, providing official recognition and protection for Los Angeles’ most significant and cherished historic places.



**Breed Street Shul (Boyle Heights).** Completed in 1923, the Breed Street Shul was the center of civic, social, and philanthropic activity within Los Angeles’ Eastside Jewish community. Architect Abram M. Edelman, whose father was Los Angeles’ first rabbi, designed the Shul in the Byzantine Revival style in order to evoke an old-world sensibility that was familiar to this largely immigrant congregation. The building was designated Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) #359 in 2001. Photo by Adrian Scott Fine/L.A. Conservancy.



# GETTING STARTED:

## Criteria, Eligibility and Integrity

### Is my building already a designated local landmark?

Most designated properties don't have a big bronze plaque identifying their historic status, so you'll have to do some research yourself to make sure a site isn't already designated or to alert you to possible sources of information for your nomination. How embarrassing to do a boatload of research only to find out that someone's already done the same thing! Before embarking on the path of research, you should check if a property is already designated or if a historic survey has been completed. In either case, you may decide that you don't need to proceed with a new or additional designation, or you may find that there's research already available that you can use for your nomination.

### Are there criteria that determine what is eligible?

Communities with a preservation ordinance usually have adopted some type of criteria that determines what is eligible as a local landmark. Often these 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 even if it meets only one of the criteria.

For instance, in Los Angeles, a Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) 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, which:

- the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community is reflected or exemplified; or
- are identified with historic personages or with important events in the main currents of national, state, or local history; or
- 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.

A proposed resource may be eligible for local landmark designation in Los Angeles if it meets at least one of the criteria above. It is critical to specifically identify which criteria

## LANDMARK VOCABULARY

**Alteration:** Any destruction, relocation or material change that would change a building's character-defining features or impair its significance.

**Character Defining Features:** A distinctive aspect, quality, detail, or characteristic of a building, site or structure that contributes to its physical character and historical significance. Such features may include landscaping, setbacks, massing, distinguishing aspects, roof attributes, architectural details, materials, windows, doors, and monuments.

**Condition:** Physical maintenance and upkeep of a building, as distinct from integrity considerations.

**Context Statement:** An organizing structure for interpreting history that groups information about historic resources that share a common theme, common geographical area and a common time period.

**Design Review:** Process for proposed changes to a building to be considered, and either approved or denied.

**Integrity:** Ability of a historic building to convey its historical, architectural and cultural significance, with consideration of the following aspects: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

**Landmark:** A cultural resource (building, structure, site or object) designated as a "landmark" by ordinance.

**Mills Act:** California state law allowing local governments to enter into contracts with the owners of historic structures, providing a reduction of property taxes.

**Period of Significance:** Span of time in which a property attained the significance for which it meets landmark criteria.

**Survey:** Process for identifying and gathering data on potential historic resources by which properties are documented and evaluated for inclusion on local, state and national registers.

the nominated landmark meets and to use the language of these criteria in the body of the significance statement. Depending on the community and their preservation ordinance, a local landmark nomination may only need to prove that the site meets one criterion – if it meets more, so much the better.

### Is there an age requirement?

In general, enough time needs to have passed since the building or object's completion to allow an evaluation of its significance within a historical context. Some communities have set a minimum age threshold, such as 50 years or older, while other municipalities have age requirements that usually range between 25 and 50 years. Listing on the National Register of Historic Places is typically reserved for buildings over 50 years old, unless they can demonstrate exceptional significance. In Los Angeles, there is no requirement that a building be a certain age before it can be designated. The youngest structure to be designated in Los Angeles was built in 1996. It is the Campbell Divertimento Fountain, designed by Mexican architect Luis Barragan. It was designated as a Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) in 1997.

### What can be locally landmarked?

The criteria for designation are often quite broad and allow for numerous types of landmarks. As you might expect, buildings make up the great majority of historic landmarks – including many examples of residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial structures. Structures like bridges, stairways, and median strips have also become landmarks. In Los Angeles, 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 a Historic-Cultural Monument.

### Does local landmark designation protect interiors of buildings?

In many communities a preservation ordinance will clearly state that design review applies only to building exteriors. In Los Angeles, its ordinance is silent on the scope of its landmark designations. In practice, the Cultural Heritage Commission's staff in the Office of Historic Resources (OHR) has reviewed proposed alterations to the interior of designated historic landmarks when the interiors contain significant, character-defining features of the building that were identified in the nomination. Therefore it is important to identify and call out these features when preparing a nomination.



The West Gate (above) and East Gate (below) to Chinatown were designated as Historic-Cultural Monuments in 2005. Together, the gates symbolized the emergence of a “new” Chinatown in the late 1930s after the original community was displaced to make way for the construction of Union Station. Photos by L.A. Conservancy.

## Is there a survey or inventory of potential landmarks?

Some municipalities have completed a survey or inventory of historic resources, which may encompass all or portions of the community. This is a good starting place to check and see if your building is listed. If so, there may be a rating that indicates its potential eligibility for either local, state, or national register listing. In Los Angeles, a citywide survey called SurveyLA began in 2010, partially funded by a \$2.5 million grant from the J. Paul Getty Trust. While Los Angeles has over 1,000 Historic-Cultural Monuments (local landmarks) and 30 Historic Preservation Overlay Zones (historic districts), before SurveyLA only about 15% of the city had been surveyed. Professional historic preservation consultant teams are conducting the field surveys under the direction of the city's Office of Historic Resources (OHR)

Los Angeles' survey covers the period from approximately 1865 to 1980 and includes individual resources such as buildings, structures, objects, natural features and cultural landscapes as well as areas and districts. Significant resources reflect important themes in the city's growth and development in various areas including architecture, city planning, social history, ethnic heritage, politics, industry, transportation, commerce, entertainment, and others. Learn more about SurveyLA at [preservation.lacity.org](http://preservation.lacity.org).

## Does being determined “eligible” mean anything?

Buildings are sometimes formally evaluated and identified through surveys and inventories as part of a proposed project and determined potentially eligible for local, state or national listing. Sometimes this is a first step in the landmarking process. It indicates a building or place appears to meet criteria for designation, though further research will be needed. A determination of eligibility, however, can also be critically important in ensuring a historic property is identified and considered as part of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) process, when a proposed project involves discretionary review.

## If my building has been altered will it still be eligible?

Older and historic buildings often experience changes and alterations over time. Sometimes these are minor and do not impact the look, character, and feel of the building. In other instances, a building may have been radically changed through new additions and the removal of original features. A building should be able to convey its historical, architectural, and cultural significance, with consideration of the following aspects that constitute physical integrity: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. If any of these aspects are severely compromised, it will be important to assess whether or not a building maintains its integrity. If not, it may no longer be eligible for landmark designation.

## California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA")

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires that historic resources be recognized and considered by development projects that could destroy or negatively impact them. Environmental assessments are done through documents called negative declarations, mitigated negative declarations, or environmental impact reports. In the first two, any negative impacts are addressed and mitigated. For environmental impacts that cannot be mitigated, an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) is prepared.

First, it is necessary to determine whether a building should be considered a historical resource as defined by CEQA. Simply because a resource is not currently listed in the National Register or California Register does not mean that it is not an historical resource and is not subject to CEQA environmental review. Any resource identified and determined eligible for listing in the California Register is also to be considered under CEQA. Local governments therefore have an obligation not only to determine whether a resource is listed, but also if it may be eligible for listing.

An EIR must consider alternatives to the proposed project that would preserve or reuse the historic resource and assess the feasibility of those alternatives. CEQA applies to historic properties when there is a discretionary action associated with an action or a project. For example, if someone applies for a demolition permit, and the local laws allow the permit to be issued automatically, there is no discretion, so CEQA review is not triggered. However, if the building is designated and the designation requires the local government to review demolition applications for historic buildings, the project is discretionary and CEQA is triggered.

An EIR will not necessarily save a building, but by studying alternatives to demolition, the project can possibly be changed and improved. For more information on CEQA, see the Los Angeles Conservancy's **Using CEQA to Protect Your Community** (in both English and Spanish).



# MAKING THE CASE: Writing a Local Landmark Nomination

## Who can submit a local landmark nomination?

Most preservation ordinances delineate who may submit or initiate a landmark nomination. In Los Angeles anyone can submit a Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) landmark nomination to the city's Cultural Heritage Commission – the property owner, any other individual, or a group. The City Council may also propose sites for Historic-Cultural Monument landmark status, a process that is typically initiated through a motion introduced by an individual councilmember.

## Where can I find the history of my building?

The Los Angeles Conservancy maintains an online **Historical Research Guide** to help people wanting to research properties in Los Angeles. It includes common resources that are relevant for other communities as well. This guide is broken down into sections based on typical research needs.

In preparing your local landmark nomination, you might need to use all of these sections or just one (i.e. if you're looking for specific information, such as a construction date). Some research must be conducted in person, while a growing amount of information is available online.

### Researching the site (i.e. the land):

- Legal Description
- Tract Maps

### Researching the building:

- Building Permits
- Maps: Sanborn Insurance Maps

### Researching the people and events associated with the building:

- Deeds
- Historical and Biographical Research
- Vital Records
- Historical *Los Angeles Times* Archive



The Black Cat (Silver Lake). On New Years Eve in 1966, the Black Cat bar, housed in a modest commercial structure, was the site of a transformative event in LGBT history. Police raided the bar and arrested over a dozen patrons. In response, community members organized one of the earliest large-scale demonstrations in support of LGBT civil rights. The building was designated an Historic-Cultural Monument in 2008. Photos by L.A. Conservancy.

## Can buildings be landmarked for cultural associations?

Yes. More and more buildings and places are starting to be identified and officially recognized for their important cultural associations. For a building or place being nominated for its cultural significance, the range of potential contexts is much broader and depends entirely on the resource, your research findings, and the criteria that the resource meets.

In Los Angeles, a good example is The Black Cat building (HCM #939), located in the Silver Lake area and associated with the city's early LGBT history. Built in 1939, the one-story simple commercial building was originally constructed as a Safeway Market. In the early 1960s it operated as a nightclub bar and laundromat. By the late 1960s, the bar section was operating as "The Black Cat Bar," serving a gay clientele. On December 31, 1966, eight undercover police officers raided the bar at midnight, arresting fourteen for assault and public lewdness. This event, in combination with a growing gay rights movement and 1960s youth counterculture, sparked an organized protest on February 11, 1967. A crowd of 300-600 gathered in front of The Black Cat for a peaceful demonstration. The events at The Black Cat occurred two years prior to the famed Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969.

While the 1939 building does not exhibit an architectural design style that rises to the level of local landmark criteria, it does retain significant architectural integrity, setting, and a context to convey the events that occurred there between 1966-1968. Rather than architecture, The Black Cat building was nominated for the role it played in the gay and lesbian civil rights movement in Los Angeles. It qualified for designation on these criteria:

- Reflects "the broad cultural, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community; and
- Is identified with "important events in the main currents of national, state, or local history."

## How do I tell the story of my building?

This is the most important part of the landmark nomination. All of your relevant research must be condensed into a statement that makes a *compelling* case for the building's significance and its worthiness for designation. For buildings that are not obvious shoe-ins for designation, your statement should be very compelling.

Most often we are used to considering structures for their architectural merit, rather than their important connections to historic and cultural trends, events, or people. In many cas-

## WRITING A STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: Start with a basic outline:

- **Begin with a brief sentence stating why the building is important, and how it appears to meet the criteria outlined in the preservation ordinance.**

**For example:** "[It] was important to the development of Los Angeles because the company was one of the first to offer life insurance to African Americans in Los Angeles and the Western United States, becoming the largest company to do so." Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, HCM Nomination (2011)

- **Provide a brief history of the structure, explaining who it was built for, and why it was constructed.**
- **If the structure is notable for its architecture, elaborate on why this is an outstanding example of its style or the work of a master craftsman or architect.**

**For example:** "Architect Paul Revere Williams, born and raised in Los Angeles, would become the country's first African American member of the American Institute of Architects and its first fellow." Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, HCM Nomination (2011)

- **If historical events or persons are associated with the structure, thoroughly describe and explain them. Include copies of background information (news clippings, etc.) that help establish the historic importance you are claiming.**
- **Include any additional and relevant background material on the architect or contractor. This could include other examples of the architect's work and how long the architect may have worked in the community.**



es, the latter types of structures may be somewhat compromised in their architectural integrity, but still quite able to resonate with the story they tell.

Your statement of significance and narrative should tell a story about your building. Hopefully, your research uncovers enough information to make this a rich story. It is critical that you place a historic building in a context for which it is significant. For example, a nomination based on a building's association with an historic event should include in its significance statement: 1) a discussion of the historical patterns, ideas, and/or actions that led to the event in this location; 2) a comparison of the event to others of its kind during the same era; and 3) a discussion of the outcomes or long-term effects of the event.

### How much history do I include in the nomination?

Include all relevant research material you have collected. "Relevant" is the key word here – include only information that furthers the story you are trying to tell in your nomination, not every single item that your research turns up. Review the criteria and make sure that the information in your significance statement meets one or more of them.

### How do I describe my building's architectural style and features?

As part of a landmark nomination, you are asked to provide the building's physical description. This is an important documentation of the building (or structure, object, or site) that helps to determine the character-defining features that will be protected through landmark designation.

The description should be the property's existing condition rather than its original or earlier appearance. Be clear and concise in your language, and keep the description to a page or less. Generally, you should move from the macro to the micro – from its size, style, and use to its doors, windows, and ornamentation. Use style guides and architectural dictionaries to help identify the building's architectural style and find the correct terminology for its component parts. The Description Worksheet in the HCM application is also a helpful guide in crafting an architectural description for a single building.

Organize your description from the basic to the specific. The style, size, and use of the building should appear in the first sentences. Also, avoid subjective judgments. You are trying to preserve the building and make a compelling case for its significance. Negative comments could have the opposite effect.

## WRITING AN ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

### Tips for Success:

- Begin with a comprehensive overview sentence that captures some of the building's major features (including number of stories, style, use, and general location).
- Continue with further description of macro aspects: building shape, cladding material, roofing material, and foundation material. Indicate and describe any differentiation between primary (street) facades and secondary (rear and/or side) facades.
- Begin to focus on specific features: window type, doors and door surrounds, porches, chimneys, storefronts, etc., and the location of these elements on the facades.
- Focus in on any particularly distinctive ornamental features or design details
- Discuss the overall condition of the building materials and features
- Describe the building's interior spaces – for a residential structure, note the number of bedrooms and bathrooms and the general configuration of the layout. For commercial, industrial, or institutional buildings, note the primary "public" spaces and their uses, along with the general configuration of the layout. Include a description of all notable historic interior features, including built-in furniture, fireplace mantles, decorative moldings, plumbing fixtures, tile work, flooring materials, etc. If you don't include this information in your nomination, important interior features may not receive the protection they deserve. This same methodology applies to describing exterior features.
- Describe the building's relationship to its site, to the street, or to adjacent buildings. Include specific landscaping features, if appropriate.
- Note any obvious alterations from the building's original condition, for example window replacement, additions, or changes in the cladding material. Use historic photos and permit research as a guide.

## WRITING AN ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

# CASE STUDY: Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building (1949)

## Architectural Description—Exterior and Interior (excerpts)

Located at the northeast corner of W. Adams Boulevard and Western Avenue in the West Adams neighborhood of Los Angeles, the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company Home Office is a six-story, irregular plan building in the Late Moderne style. Its exterior massing is characterized by a six-story central core flanked by two, five-story wings arranged symmetrically and projecting at 45-degree angles from the main entrance elevation.

The building is flat roofed, and is constructed of poured in place concrete, currently painted light cream with brown accents. Its centered entry has an original set of glazed, aluminum frame doors with full-height sidelights. Centered directly above the entry doors is a set of exposed aluminum numbers reading “1999,” the building’s address. The first floor entry is symmetrically designed, with the central entrance doors flanked by two full-height terrazzo clad bays at either side and blank stucco walls that were originally window bays. A later addition above these entrance and flanking bays are the presence of mid-century-era, perforated aluminum screens, which currently shield the transom windows. A flat-roofed entrance canopy, chamfered at either end with a stepped aluminum fascia, spans the entire central portion of the front elevation, covering the entrance and adjacent bays. Spanning the top of the canopy are freestanding edge-lettering in Moderne-styled stainless steel block letters spelling “GOLDEN STATE MUTUAL LIFE.”

Inside, the double-height lobby features round-cornered walls, soft-edged continuous soffits, and a curved full-length balcony at the mezzanine level...The upper portion of either lobby sidewall has oil on canvas, affixed murals, each 16'5" long and 9'3 1/4" tall. The west wall mural, painted by Charles Alston, depicts *The Negro in California History--Exploration and Colonization*, of events in African American history from 1527-1850. The east wall mural, painted by Hale Woodruff, depicts *The Negro in California History--Settlement and Development*, of events in African American history from 1850-1949.



Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building (West Adams). The Historic-Cultural Monument designation protects this 1949 building and its important interior murals depicting California's African American Heritage. Photos by L.A. Conservancy.



## WRITING AN ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

## CASE STUDY: Bob Baker Marionette Theater (1953)

### Architectural Description—Exterior and Interior (complete)

The Bob Baker Marionette Theater is a one-story vernacular building with an L shape plan. The structure has a flat asphalt roof and a white painted brick finish, with vertical sliding vinyl windows.

The north wing of the building, which houses the studio and reception room, is set all the way up to the sidewalk and the name of the theater is painted into its north wall, facing the parking lot. A pair of double wood doors with scalloped tops open from the lot into the puppet studio in back. The southern portion houses the theater itself, and is set back about 25 feet from the sidewalk with a substantially higher roof than the other wing. An adjacent building, also owned by Baker but not part of the proposed monument, abuts the side of the theater, forming a small front courtyard entrance.

The entryway courtyard features a marquee, on which the title of the current production is displayed, and roughly a dozen colored flags hang on poles from the three courtyard walls. The courtyard wall facing the street has a two panel door situated to the viewer's left, a loading door with corrugated sliding metal gate positioned to the center, and a box office window on the right enclosed in security bars. An ornamental white iron fence standing about four feet high separates the courtyard from the sidewalk.

Significant interior spaces include the red-curtained performance room, with harlequin clown figurines at both corners of the stage. Metallic streamers and bunting adorn the walls, and lighting is provided by three crystal chandeliers and multi-colored stage lights made out of coffee cans. Chairs form a “u” shape around the stage area, which is defined by blue carpeting, while the seating area is defined by red carpeting.



Bob Baker Marionette Theater (Downtown). Community stakeholders successfully nominated this vernacular puppet theatre for designation as a Historic-Cultural Monument in 2009. Since opening its doors in 1963, Bob Baker Marionette Theater has become the longest-running performing arts venue dedicated to the art of puppetry in the United States. Photos by Jessica Hodgdon/L.A. Conservancy.

# BUILDING SUPPORT:

## Navigating the Political Process

### Why do politics matter?

As much as one might wish that it were not, landmark designation is a political process. While some nominations sail through without controversy, others can become vicious battles between owners who don't want their historic building designated and members of the community who believe that designation is the only way to protect their shared cultural heritage. Sometimes, city councilmembers or other elected officials step into the ring – for one side or the other. It's a fascinating process, but don't forget that sometimes solid nominations for important buildings get rejected.

### How can I ensure there is support for my nomination?

In most communities, including Los Angeles, the city council is important in the landmark designation process. The councilmember representing the district in which a nominated building lies has a great deal of power in determining the final outcome of the nomination. Be sure to contact the council member early and often if you think a nomination may face any serious opposition. Getting the councilmember on your side early on will help you get through the process smoothly. Keep the councilmember, his/her staff and other key stakeholders in the loop, as it can take several months between the time you submit a nomination and the time it is formally approved by city council.

Political reality, however, may stand between your building and its protection through designation. In many cases, the councilmember may favor the demolition of a historic site in favor of a new development. Lobbyists, attorneys, and campaign contributors may get involved and attempt to sway a councilmember's decision. In general, once a councilmember decides whether he or she will support or oppose a nomination, other councilmembers are likely to vote accordingly because there is great hesitance among a council membership to interfere with specific development issues in a colleague's district.

### Must the property owner be notified about the nomination?

The requirement and timing for contacting the owner varies from community to community. In Los Angeles, the Cultural Heritage Ordinance does not require the owner to be in support of the landmark 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

### Tips for Successful Nominations:

Before you begin or submit a local landmark nomination, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do the benefits of landmark designation outweigh the risks?
- How likely is the nomination to be approved?
- Who are the likely supporters, how influential are they?
- Who are the likely opponents?
- Will the council office support my position?
- Does the site already have protection? If so, does it need more?
- Is the timing right to submit a nomination now, or later?

Identify a strategy for each that may pose a problem. In addition, your decision about whether and how to proceed with a landmark nomination needs to take the property owner's likely position into account. Issues to consider include:

- Is the owner likely to support the nomination or actively oppose it?
- If you don't have a relationship already, can someone else help broker a conversation with the owner?
- Is there a risk of the owner obtaining a demolition permit? If so, it may be critical that the owner not know about the initial process. For instance, in Los Angeles, at the first Cultural Heritage Commission hearing, if the property is taken under consideration, any permit activity is frozen until a final decision is made on the landmark nomination.
- Will or has the owner hired a lobbyist, attorney, or consultant to oppose the nomination?
- If the owner can be convinced to support the nomination, explain the benefits of landmark designation.

The answers to these questions will help you decide whether a nomination is worthwhile to pursue and, if it is, how best to do so. This aspect of the designation process can be quite complicated, especially for beginners. For help, contact the Los Angeles Conservancy.



demolition or alteration before the nomination can be heard, the Cultural Heritage Commission 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 consideration, no actual demolition may occur while the nomination is being considered by the Commission and City Council.

## What is the designation process?

In each municipality the process for local landmark designation will vary. In Los Angeles, there are three successive steps of review that you must proceed through. First, the Cultural Heritage Commission reviews the nomination. The Commission is composed of five mayoral appointees with some background in preservation, architecture, real estate, or related fields. Second, a nomination that successfully makes it through Commission review is then voted on by the City Council's Planning and Land Use Management Committee (PLUM). Lastly, the full City Council will vote on the nomination, which can either ratify or overturn the Commission's decision. In more detail, these are the three primary steps in the process:

### STEP ONE: Cultural Heritage Commission

- Submit nomination to staff of the Office of Historic Resources (Staff reviews nomination for completeness).
- If complete, staff schedules a hearing and writes a recommendation for the Cultural Heritage Commissioners, who will hear the application.
- 1st Hearing: decision about whether or not to take the nomination under consideration. The applicant makes a presentation (most often a PowerPoint) to the Commission, which also hears testimony from people who support the nomination and those who oppose (two possible recommendations: "take under consideration" or "do not take under consideration."
- 2nd Hearing: the Commission tours the site. Applicants and owners are encouraged to attend in order to answer any questions or address concerns that may arise.
- 3rd (and Final) Hearing: the Commission decides whether or not to recommend designation of the property. The Commission considers the testimony of the applicant, proponents, and opponents once again (a "no" vote means the nomination is dead; a "yes" vote moves the nomination to the City Council for ratification).

## Tips for Presenting Your Nomination:

Speaking in front of a group – particularly a group of city officials – can be intimidating at first. It is important that you appear confident of your nomination as you testify in front of a preservation commission and city council. They are used to people being nervous, though, so don't worry about that. What you do need to make sure of, however, is that you get them the information they need to make a decision in as concise and effective a manner as possible. Here are a few tips:

- **Be clear about your goals.** Make them understand why this nomination is important to you and to their constituents
- **Be concise.** Avoid historical minutiae and don't get bogged down in unnecessary details that might cause you to lose your audience.
- **Tell a compelling story.** Organize your facts in a manner that demands interest rather than stringing them together without concern for the overall "storyline."
- **Use compelling visuals.** Your PowerPoint presentation should reinforce your nomination. Avoid "reading" it.
- **Bring other members of the community.** Testimony from a diverse constituency is more likely to gain the support of officials than that of a single-minded group. For example, if a building is nominated because it's threatened with demolition, don't just bring tenants from that building to the hearing. Find neighbors and business owners who value and benefit from the presence of historic buildings and care.
- **Organize your supporters.** Before the hearing work with speakers to avoid repetitive testimony and focus on distinct points.
- **Avoid NIMBYism.** A successful nomination benefits the entire city, not just the immediate neighbors. Make a strong case for the "greater good" that will be realized through landmark designation.
- **Anticipate your opponents' arguments.** Try to preemptively defuse them in your testimony. Put yourself in your opponent's head!

**STEP TWO: Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) Committee:**

- Cultural Heritage Commission's recommendation that a property be placed on the city's list of Historic-Cultural Monuments is forwarded to the Planning and Land Use Committee (PLUM) of City Council.
- PLUM consists of three members of the City Council who review all planning-related issues and make recommendations to the full Council. Non-controversial nominations that are made with the consent of the property owner typically go through the PLUM and City Council process smoothly; contested nominations may not.
- For contested nominations, PLUM will ask for testimony from the proponents and opponents and will then vote on whether to recommend that the full City Council approve or deny the nomination. For uncontested nominations, the chair of PLUM will often put the item on the "consent calendar," meaning that it is approved without public testimony. It is important to carefully gauge the likelihood of opposition and be ready to testify at PLUM – you never know who might come out in opposition to your nomination.

**STEP THREE: City Council:**

- The full City Council votes on the recommendation of PLUM. Once again, contested nominations may require a great show of strength from a nomination's supporters. If uncontested, the nomination may go through on consent, which may seem anticlimactic, but don't worry: you've accomplished your goal and the city has a new local landmark, one that will hopefully be around for the enjoyment and appreciation of generations to come.



Boyle Hotel (Boyle Heights). Completed in 1889, the Boyle Hotel is one of the oldest remaining commercial structures in Los Angeles. The building has come to represent the city's turn-of-the-century transition from a small town enveloped by agriculture to a bustling metropolitan area surrounded by residential neighborhoods. As the Mexican and Mexican American population of Boyle Heights grew later in the twentieth century, the Boyle Hotel became the unofficial headquarters of the many mariachi musicians who gathered in the adjacent plaza, earning it the nickname "Mariachi Hotel." Photo by Adrian Scott Fine/L.A. Conservancy.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

For Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) nominations in the city of Los Angeles, contact:

### Office of Historic Resources (OHR)

The Office of Historic Resources in the Department of City Planning coordinates the City of Los Angeles' historic preservation activities and staffs the Cultural Heritage Commission.

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### For communities outside Los Angeles:

See the Los Angeles Conservancy's latest **Report Card** to find out how local landmark designation works in your community.



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The Los Angeles Conservancy is a nonprofit membership organization that works through education and advocacy to recognize, preserve, and revitalize the historic architectural and cultural resources of Los Angeles County.

With nearly 6,500 members and hundreds of volunteers, the Conservancy is now the largest group of its kind in the nation.