

Preserving the historic places that make L.A. County unique.



LOS ANGELES
CONSERVANCY



ABOUT HISTORIC DISTRICTS

What Are Historic Districts?

A historic district is a formally designated group of buildings, structures, sites, and spaces that relate to one another historically, architecturally, and/or culturally.

A district can span part or all of a neighborhood. It can be large or small, can represent any architectural style(s), and can include streetscape and landscape elements.

Individual buildings within a district don't need to be highly significant on their own. The area's overall cohesiveness, uniqueness, and architectural integrity are what matters.

Historic districts can go by any number of names, including Historic Preservation Overlay Zones (HPOZs), historic districts, and landmark districts. Yet they all represent a commitment to recognizing and protecting their community's architectural heritage, as well as the awareness that preservation truly does begin at home.

There are three types of historic district designation:

- National: Listing in the National Register of Historic Places
- State: Listing in the California Register of Historical Resources
- Local: Designation by the city/municipality

National and state designations offer recognition and certain protections under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). However, as with individual landmarks, local designation offers the most protection through local land-use planning and review. This website addresses only locally designated historic districts.

Each locality has its own process for designating and managing historic districts, as well as its own level of protection for them. Yet historic districts share some basic elements:

Geographic Boundaries

Most historic districts are composed of a contiguous grouping of structures. These structures often share a common development history: they may have been part of a single development tract, have a well-defined period of construction or architectural style, have consistent design

elements such as a planned street pattern or uniform setback, or relate to a significant cultural event or movement.

In some cases, historic districts can consist of a non-contiguous group of structures related thematically to one another. For instance, they may have been designed by the same architect or were part of a design program, or they may feature a specific technological or manufacturing innovation.

Criteria for Designation

Within the boundaries of a historic district, most of the structures must be considered “contributing,” meaning that they are historically significant to the neighborhood and have maintained the integrity of their original design.

A historic district will inevitably include some percentage of “non-contributing” structures as well—those built outside the district’s established “period of significance,” as well as those that have been greatly altered. The “period of significance” is usually the time period in which most of the original construction in the neighborhood occurred.

Protection or Oversight

Historic districts have some level of protection and oversight in order to maintain their integrity and significance.

The strongest historic district ordinances enable the city to deny inappropriate alteration or demolition of historic structures within district boundaries. They also allow for design review of new construction within the district, to help ensure that new development is compatible with the neighborhood’s unique historic character.

Some type of design review board, HPOZ board, or historic preservation commission participates in this review. Many historic districts produce their own design guidelines to help residents with this process. The City of Pasadena's design guidelines are a great example.

Why Do People Create Historic Districts?

Historic district designation—particularly on the local level—offers a range of benefits to property owners and residents, including:

They help protect the authentic, unique character of a neighborhood.

Historic neighborhoods often face threats from mansionization and overdevelopment, as well as incompatible zoning or inappropriate alterations. Historic district designation is one of the few

tools cities can use to protect original structures and safeguard against the destruction and degradation of their built heritage.

They enhance property values and protect homeowner investment.

Properties in historic districts often experience greater property value increases than do similar properties elsewhere.

Historic district designation gives buyers assurance that the unique character and ambiance that attracted them to the area in the first place will endure over time, which actually creates economic value.

They can lead to significant tax savings for property owners.

In many California cities, owners of contributing structures in historic districts can participate in the Mills Act Property Tax Abatement Program. This program allows qualifying owners to receive a potential property tax reduction and use the savings to help rehabilitate, restore, and maintain their buildings.

The Mills Act is the single most important economic incentive program in California for the restoration and preservation of historic buildings by private property owners. Contact your planning department to see if your city offers the Mills Act Program.

They help protect large numbers of historic resources.

By covering a swath of properties, historic districts can cover more ground—literally—than individual landmark designation alone.

They help build community.

Working together to create and maintain a historic district can bring neighbors together, build a sense of community, and foster civic pride. This cohesiveness often helps the neighborhood address other issues, such as crime and safety.

They encourage better design.

Comparative studies have shown that there is a greater sense of relatedness, more innovative use of materials, and greater public appeal within historic districts than in areas without historic designations.

Sources: Conservancy archives, National Trust for Historic Preservation, City of Los Angeles Office of Historic Resources

How Are Historic Districts Created?

Historic districts are created through grassroots support, driven largely by the residents themselves. Very broadly, the process typically starts with a group of interested residents who reach out to their neighbors and local planning department or city council to launch the process. The journey to historic district designation often takes years, so patience and persistence are key. The very basic steps include:

Determining City Policy

If you think your neighborhood could be a historic district, you can start by determining if your city has a process in place for designation. In many cases, a city's historic preservation ordinance includes language allowing for the designation of historic districts. In other cases, a city establishes a separate ordinance for this express purpose.

To find out if your city allows for the designation of historic districts, see our 2008 Los Angeles County Preservation Report Card (downloadable PDF document). Go to the end (pages 27 - 32), find your city, and check the column titled, "Has ordinance that allows designation of historic landmarks?"

If your city doesn't have such an ordinance, it might have an alternative, such as zoning districts, design overlay zones, or neighborhood specific plans that provide for architectural review. While they may not be eligible for incentives such as the Mills Act, at least they offer some protection.

Neighborhood Outreach and Research

The next steps are talking with neighbors and doing some basic research. You can find out a lot about your neighborhood's history, development pattern, and architecture, as well as start to think about possible boundaries of a potential district.

To find out how to research your property and/or neighborhood, see the Conservancy's Historical Research Guide. For information to share with neighbors, visit our Historic District Resources page.

Contacting the City to Launch the Process

Early on, it's important to contact your city council representative(s) and/or planning department to express your interest in creating a historic district and to learn how the designation process works in your area.

You can also contact local preservation groups for assistance. The Los Angeles Conservancy can provide technical assistance, and we often visit neighborhood groups to discuss the process. If your city has a local preservation group (such as Pomona Heritage or the Santa Monica

Conservancy), contact them as well. They can be great sources of city-specific information and advice.

Documenting the Neighborhood

Preparing a neighborhood for designation as a historic district includes creating a context statement to document the area's historic, architectural, and/or cultural significance. This can take the form of a well-researched history, a description of the architectural features and other characteristics that define the district, and a context of its place in the larger development pattern and history of the city or nation.

A comprehensive survey identifies all contributing and non-contributing buildings, structures, and lots in the area. It may also include landscape or other natural features, streetscape, or other significant elements. Typically, city officials or preservation professionals contracted by the city will conduct the survey, although community members may be able to help. For a partial list of qualified preservation professionals, see the Conservancy's Go-To Guide (formerly known as the Preservation Resource Directory).

Designation and Maintenance

If a neighborhood is designated as historic (per the city's specific process), it typically develops a preservation plan or design guidelines specific to the district. This document serves as ongoing reference for residents as well as the governing body (planning department, preservation or design commission, etc.) to ensure that construction projects within the district meet preservation standards.

The guidelines can be general or quite specific depending on the neighborhood. Typically, these guidelines are based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, nationally recognized historic preservation standards.