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A Toolkit for Change: The Los Angeles Women's Landmarks Project

How to Evaluate your Landmarks in 5 Steps

How do we create a more inclusive historic preservation process?

It seems like a monumental task, but we can start by looking at the places and practices that we see and use every day. The Los Angeles Women's Landmarks project started by looking at our local designation program: Historic-Cultural Monuments (HCMs). We knew anecdotally that women are underrepresented in HCMs, but what does that actually mean? How many sites are designated for women's history? How are women represented in historical narratives? Are women blatantly overlooked?

To push for change and include more women in HCMs, we needed to know exactly how women are excluded from the historical record. These questions required us to dig deeper into HCMs and create a system for evaluating historic landmarks on their inclusion of women's history. The process—consisting of five steps—was used to evaluate a sample of forty-three HCMs for their representation of women's history, but it can be applied to various scales. Whether you're looking at a single site, multiple designations, or a historic district, the following steps can help you identify what work needs to be done to highlight women's contributions.

To see these steps in action see **How to Evaluate Your Landmarks in 5 Steps: Los Angeles as a Case Study** in the Evaluation and Assessment part of the toolkit.

Step 1: Know Your Designation Process

When Was the Last Time You Reviewed Local Preservation Policies?

Before evaluating individual historic sites, it's essential to understand the regulatory and procedural frameworks that guide preservation in your area. This can include local, state, national, and tribal preservation policies. Identify and review the relevant policies:

- Local ordinances are typically found in local municipal code, which can be found in databases like [Municode](#) or [American Legal Publishing](#).
- [State Historic Preservation Offices](#)
- [Tribal Historic Preservation Offices](#)
- [The National Register of Historic Places](#)

We may generally know the policies and practices that guide preservation in our area, but it never hurts to review the exact regulatory and procedural frameworks that impact our local historic sites. Don't feel like you need to be an expert on every policy.

Who Oversees Historic Preservation in Your Area?

Identify the entity (or entities) responsible for overseeing preservation activities. Depending on your location, this may include:

- A local historic preservation commission or similar board
- A planning or community development department
- A State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)
- Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPOs)

Review their website or published materials to understand:

- Their mission and priorities
- Available resources and guidance
- Existing inventories or registers of historic properties

How is Historic Significance Determined?

Determine the criteria used to evaluate historic significance. These criteria can vary:

- Many local jurisdictions adapt or mirror National Register criteria (association with events, persons, design/architecture, and archaeological significance)
- Others develop locally specific criteria that reflect community values

If formal criteria are not clearly defined, note this as a potential gap in the system.

What is the Designation Process?

Examine how properties are nominated and designated:

- Who can submit a nomination (property owners, staff, community members)?
- What documentation is required?
- What steps are involved (application, staff review, public hearing, final decision)?

Identify the decision-making body (e.g., preservation commission, planning commission, city council) and how criteria are applied during review.

Questions to Consider

- How accessible is the designation process?
 - Can community members easily participate, or does it require specialized knowledge and resources?
- Are there barriers to nomination or designation?
 - Consider time, cost, technical requirements, or ownership restrictions
- Are existing policies fully utilized?
 - For example, does the ordinance allow for updates, amendments, or rescissions of designations?
- If so, how frequently are these tools used?
- Do current criteria and processes reflect the full diversity of community history?

Step 2: Identify Landmarks

Begin by identifying sites associated with women's contributions—whether or not they are formally recognized for that significance.

Use Existing Inventories and Designation Databases

If your city, county, or state maintains an online database or register of historic resources, use it as a starting point:

- Search for sites explicitly associated with women's history, if possible
- Review existing landmark lists for places that may have overlooked or underrepresented connections to women

Keep in mind that not all systems categorize sites by theme, so identifying relevant places may require reading beyond titles or summaries.

Look Beyond Formal Designations

Important sites may not yet be designated at all. Consider:

- Community landmarks, gathering places, or sites of cultural memory
- Residences, workplaces, or institutions connected to women's contributions
- Places recognized informally but not protected through official designation

Engage the Community

This step often benefits from collaboration. Reach out to:

- Local preservationists and historians
- Historical societies and archives
- Librarians and educators
- Community organizations
- Colleagues, family, and friends

Community knowledge can help identify sites of women's history that are not documented in official records.

Step 3: Evaluate a Sample

Choose a single landmark, a group of sites, or an entire historic district for closer evaluation.

Examine How the Site's History is Currently Interpreted

The goal of this step is to assess the existing historical narrative for its representation of women's history. Use existing documentation, which may include:

- Nomination or designation reports
- Staff reports or findings
- Plaques, interpretive signage, or websites

In some jurisdictions, nomination files (such as those maintained by local preservation offices or State Historic Preservation Offices) are the most detailed source. However, access and format will vary by location, so use whatever documentation is available and relevant.

Questions to Consider

- How are women represented in the site’s narrative? Are they central, peripheral, or absent?
- Whose stories are emphasized, and whose stories are minimized or omitted?
- Is the site’s significance framed in a way that obscures women’s contributions (e.g., focusing solely on male figures, architecture, or events)?
- Are there opportunities to reinterpret the site using existing information?
- What additional research might be needed to better understand women’s roles connected to this place?

You can use the **Evaluating Historic Sites Template** in the Evaluation and Assessment section of the toolkit for guidance.

Step 4: Analyze the Trends

Identify Patterns in Representation and Narrative

After evaluating your sample, step back and look for recurring patterns in how women’s history is represented. Underrepresentation is not only about missing stories—it can appear in more subtle ways across designation materials. Use your findings to identify how these patterns manifest in your local preservation system.

As you review your sample, consider whether you observe the following trends:

- **Omission:** Women are not mentioned at all, even when they played a significant role in the site’s history.
- **Underrepresentation in significance:** Women may appear in background narratives but are not included in the official statement of significance, meaning their contributions are not recognized in the designation itself.
- **Diminished or overshadowed contributions:** Women are mentioned, but their roles are minimized or framed as secondary to male figures or dominant historical narratives.
- **Gendered or biased language:** Narratives rely on stereotypes, emphasize appearance or relationships, or otherwise diminish women’s historical importance.
- **Limited or non-intersectional narratives:** Even when women’s history is recognized, it may center a narrow group (often white, middle- or upper-class women), excluding broader and more diverse experiences.

Look for trends not just in individual sites, but across categories:

- Are certain types of sites (e.g., domestic spaces, social clubs) more likely to include women’s history?
- Do certain narratives dominate (such as elite women’s organizations)?
- Are other histories—such as those of working-class women, women of color, or LGBTQ+ women—consistently absent?

These patterns can reveal how preservation practices shape what is considered historically significant.

Distinguish Between Strong and Weak Examples of Women's History

Not all sites will reflect the same issues. Some may serve as models:

- Well-researched nominations that center women's contributions
- Narratives that incorporate multiple identities and perspectives
- Sites that acknowledge layered or evolving histories over time

At the same time, others may require substantial revision due to omission, bias, or lack of depth.

Consider Structural Factors

As you analyze trends, reflect on the broader preservation framework:

- Do existing criteria or designation practices make it easier to recognize certain histories over others?
- Is there a reliance on outdated nominations or limited research?
- Does the process require levels of expertise or access that limit community participation?

In many cases, the depth and inclusivity of historical narratives are shaped by who has the time, resources, and training to conduct research and prepare nominations.

Questions to Consider

- In what ways is women's history underrepresented or misrepresented across your sample?
- Which patterns appear most frequently?
- Are there clear gaps in whose stories are being told?
- Which sites could be improved with minor revisions, and which require substantial re-evaluation?
- What do these trends suggest about your local preservation system as a whole?

Step 5: Create an Action Plan

We all need an action plan: a set of manageable tasks that help us achieve our overall goal. Based on your evaluation, identify the first steps you can take to better recognize women's history in your landmarks.

Identify Where Action is Needed

Use the patterns identified in Step 4 to determine your priorities:

- Sites where women are missing or misrepresented
- Specific narratives that could be expanded, clarified, or challenged
- Gaps where important histories are not recognized at all

Choose Your Approach

Not all actions require formal amendments or professional-level research. Depending on your goals and capacity, you might:

- Work within the preservation system
 - Propose updates or amendments to existing designations, if that is possible within your designation process
 - Conduct additional research to support reinterpretation
 - Identify new sites for potential designation
- Expand public interpretation and awareness
 - Write blog posts, articles, or short reports highlighting overlooked histories
 - Share findings through social media, digital storytelling, or walking tours
 - Create educational materials or presentations for community groups
- Build networks and partnerships
 - Connect with local historians, preservationists, and community organizations
 - Collaborate with students, researchers, or advocacy groups
 - Engage institutions (museums, libraries, nonprofits) that can support or amplify this work
- Document and share knowledge
 - Compile lists of underrepresented sites or themes
 - Record oral histories or community knowledge
 - Create accessible resources that others can build on

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