



City of Pasadena Historic Preservation

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The Top Ten Myths About Historic Preservation

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This handout is intended to clarify some common misunderstandings about historic preservation to ensure that property owners have accurate information and realistic expectations about the impacts or benefits of preservation tools.

Myth #1: "If a property gets designated as a historic landmark or is within a landmark district, it's protected forever and can never be demolished."

Fact: Historic designation ensures a more thorough review of demolition proposals, but a truly determined property owner may be able to obtain approval to demolish a designated historic building. In the City of Pasadena, the City's Historic Preservation Commission may deny proposals to demolish designated historic buildings, including properties in landmark districts. The property owner may appeal a denial to the City Council. In the case of larger developments, an Environmental Impact Report may be required if the project includes demolition of a designated or eligible historic resource and the City can approve the demolition by adopting a statement explaining why certain benefits or "overriding considerations" of the proposed project outweigh the preservation of the historic resource. Pasadena also has an exception for cases of demonstrated economic hardship.

Myth #2: "Historic designation will reduce my property values."

Fact: Study after study across the nation has conclusively demonstrated that historic designation and the creation of historic districts actually increase property values. Why? In part, historic designation sets a neighborhood or an individual historic site apart from similar non-historic properties. Many buyers seek out the unique qualities and ambiance of a historic property or neighborhood. Landmark district designation gives potential homebuyers two rare and economically valuable assurances: that the very qualities that attracted them to their neighborhood will actually endure over time, and that they can safely reinvest in sensitive improvements to their home without fear that their neighbor will undermine this investment with inappropriate new development.

Myth #3: "If my property is designated as a historic site, I won't be able to change it in any way, and I don't want my property to become like a museum."

Fact: Owners of designated historic structures may make very significant changes to their structures. Historic preservation laws, at their essence, are not meant to prevent change, but, rather, to manage change. The tool to manage change is the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, the nationally accepted benchmark for evaluating changes to historic structures. The Standards don't require that every element of a historic site remain intact. However, the most

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There are over 4,000 properties in the City of Pasadena that are recognized as historic resources, including those in landmark or historic districts.

significant, or “character-defining”, historic elements of a property should be retained. New additions to the historic property are allowed, but should be compatible with the site’s historic architecture while also being differentiated from the original structure. The Standards urge the repair of deteriorated historic features, but do allow for replacement where the severity of deterioration leaves no other option. In Pasadena, these standards only apply to the exterior of the building except for certain of the City’s most important historic resources, and in landmark districts, the standards only apply to exteriors of buildings that are visible from the street.

Myth #4: “Preservation is only for the rich and elite, and for high-style buildings.”

Fact: Historic preservation isn’t just about house museums anymore. Today’s preservation movement is increasingly diverse and focuses not just on grand architectural landmarks, but on more modest sites of social and cultural significance. Preservation can be about the “power of place” found at sites containing rich social and cultural meaning as well as neighborhoods that represent development patterns and modest examples of architecture that reflect how people lived in Pasadena at different points in the City’s history.

Myth #5: “Historic preservation is bad for business.”

Fact: Historic preservation is at the very heart of our nation’s most vibrant economic development and business attraction programs. From local examples such as Old Pasadena or the Playhouse District to San Diego’s Gaslamp Quarter, to traditional, historic southern cities such as Charleston or Savannah, to the recent boom in “heritage tourism,” today’s economic development strategies no longer see preservation and business development as competing values. The National Main Street Center, a program that uses historic preservation to revitalize town centers and neighborhood commercial districts, has actually tracked economic results in 1,700 Main Street communities nationally. These preservation-based programs have created over 231,000 new jobs and resulted in over \$17 billion in reinvestment to date, with every dollar spent on a Main Street program yielding \$40 in economic reinvestment.

Myth #6: Preservation is more expensive than new construction

Fact: Historic preservation is typically more cost effective than new construction. Why? Historic buildings certainly do sometimes need upgrades, but these are usually less expensive than the costs of building all-new foundations, structural systems, roofs and building finishes. The National Trust for Historic Preservation reports that in Chicago, where the public school system is now spending \$2.5 billion to upgrade facilities, bare-bones new construction is costing \$155 per square foot -- but renovation is costing just \$130. In Los Angeles, the State of California learned the potential savings from historic preservation in comparing the construction of two State Office Buildings: the new Ronald Reagan State Office Building on Spring Street at 3rd St., and the Junipero Serra State Office Building just two blocks away on Broadway at 4th St., in the renovated former flagship location of the Broadway Department Store. The historic renovation not only reused and reinvigorated an important landmark from 1914, but it saved taxpayers money by delivering office space at about half the cost per square foot of the all-new Reagan building just a few years before.

The City of Pasadena adopted the Mills Act in 2002, and approximately 300 properties are currently benefiting from this tax incentive program.

Myth #7: If I buy a historic property, there's lots of government money available to help me fix it up

Fact: Financial benefits available to owners of historic properties are generally limited to be tax incentives. In Pasadena, the most common financial incentive is the Mills Act program, which allows owners of historic properties to take often-significant property tax reductions in exchange for agreeing to conduct specific maintenance or rehabilitation work to maintain their historic property into the future. Less common are income tax incentives available to owners of sites listed in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, who may take advantage of a Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit that provides a 20% tax offset for the cost of rehabilitation. National Register properties are also eligible to benefit from "conservation easements"—binding legal agreements with preservation organizations such as Pasadena Heritage that can allow owners to claim a charitable deduction on their Federal income taxes.

Myth #8: Old buildings are less safe

Fact: Although historic structures do sometimes require structural retrofits or the addition of fire sprinklers to enhance their safety, historic buildings typically perform better than newer construction in earthquakes and other natural disasters. What determines the safety of buildings is the quality of construction, not age, and, in many ways, "they just don't build 'em like they used to." Pasadena's signature historic structures have survived every major temblor of the past eight decades. Yet, in the 1994 Northridge earthquake, the most catastrophic damage occurred not to historic buildings but to newer construction such as parking garages, concrete tilt-up buildings, and newer apartments with "tuck-under" parking.

Myth #9: Preservation is an un-American violation of property rights

Fact: Historic preservation laws no more infringe on property rights than do many other laws and private rules that Americans have long accepted. Though everyone likes to believe "my home is my castle and I can do whatever I want," this statement simply doesn't reflect reality. Zoning laws prevent you from replacing your single-family home with an apartment building or a five-story vertical mansion. We should all be happy that such laws prevent our neighbor from putting a landfill or a skyscraper behind our back fence. If you live in a condominium (or a gated community), your property rights are limited by Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CC & Rs), documents that can legally prevent you from owning a pet, washing a car in your driveway, or having a basketball hoop over the garage. CC & Rs restrictions are far more onerous than historic preservation laws, yet are commonly accepted even by vocal property rights advocates.

Myth #10: Preservationists are always fighting new development and only care about the past

Fact: Historic preservationists do care deeply about the past -- generally not just to wallow sentimentally in a bygone era, but as a way of anchoring ourselves as we move forward confidently into the future. Historic preservation is not about stopping change and is certainly not about squeezing out creative and exciting new architecture and development. Preservation allows us to retain the best of shared heritage to preserve sites of unique quality and beauty, revitalize neighborhoods, spur economic revitalization, and, quite simply, create better communities.