

= Historic districts in the United States =

In the United States , a historic district is a group of buildings , properties , or sites that have been designated by one of several entities on different levels as historically or architecturally significant . Buildings , structures , objects and sites within a historic district are normally divided into two categories , contributing and non @-@ contributing . Districts greatly vary in size : some have hundreds of structures , while others have just a few .

The U.S. federal government designates historic districts through the United States Department of Interior under the auspices of the National Park Service . Federally designated historic districts are listed on the National Register of Historic Places , but listing usually imposes no restrictions on what property owners may do with a designated property . State @-@ level historic districts may follow similar criteria (no restrictions) or may require adherence to certain historic rehabilitation standards . Local historic district designation offers , by far , the most legal protection for historic properties because most land use decisions are made at the local level . Local districts are generally administered by the county or municipal government .

= = History = =

The first U.S. historic district was established in Charleston , South Carolina in 1931 , predating the U.S. federal government designation by more than three decades . Charleston city government designated an " Old and Historic District " by local ordinance and created a board of architectural review to oversee it . New Orleans followed in 1937 , establishing the Vieux Carré Commission and authorizing it to act to maintain the historic character of the city 's French Quarter . Other localities picked up on the concept , with the city of Philadelphia enacting its historic preservation ordinance in 1955 .

The regulatory authority of local commissions and historic districts has been consistently upheld as a legitimate use of government police power , most notably in Penn Central Transportation Co. v. City of New York (1978) . The Supreme Court case validated the protection of historic resources as " an entirely permissible governmental goal . " In 1966 the federal government created the National Register of Historic Places , soon after a report from the U.S. Conference of Mayors had stated Americans suffered from " rootlessness . " By the 1980s there were thousands of federally designated historic districts . Some states , such as Arizona , have passed referendums defending property rights that have stopped private property being designated historic without the property owner 's consent or compensation for the historic overlay .

= = Property types = =

Historic districts are generally two types of properties , contributing and non @-@ contributing . Broadly defined , a contributing property is any property , structure or object which adds to the historical integrity or architectural qualities that make a historic district , listed locally or federally , significant . Different entities , usually governmental , at both the state and national level in the United States , have differing definitions of contributing property but they all retain the same basic characteristics . In general , contributing properties are integral parts of the historic context and character of a historic district .

In addition to the two types of classification within historic districts , properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places are classified into five broad categories . They are , building , structure , site , district and object ; each one has a specific definition in relation to the National Register . All but the eponymous district category are also applied to historic districts listed on the National Register .

= = Federal @-@ level = =

A listing on the National Register of Historic Places is governmental acknowledgment of a historic

district . However , the Register is " an honorary status with some federal financial incentives . " The National Register of Historic Places defines a historic district per U.S. federal law , last revised in 2004 . According to the Register definition a historic district is :

a geographically definable area , urban or rural , possessing a significant concentration , linkage , or continuity of sites , buildings , structures , or objects united by past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development . A district may also comprise individual elements separated geographically but linked by association or history .

Districts established under U.S. federal guidelines generally begin the process of designation through a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places . The National Register is the official recognition by the U.S. government of cultural resources worthy of preservation . While designation through the National Register does offer a district or property some protections , it is only in cases where the threatening action involves the federal government . If the federal government is not involved , then the listing on the National Register provides the site , property or district no protections . For example , if company A wants to tear down the hypothetical Smith House and company A is under contract with the state government of Illinois , then the federal designation would offer no protections . If , however , company A was under federal contract the Smith House would be protected . A federal designation is little more than recognition by the government that the resource is worthy of preservation .

In general , the criteria for acceptance to the National Register are applied consistently , but there are considerations for exceptions to the criteria and historic districts have influence on some of those exceptions . Usually , the National Register does not list religious structures , moved structures , reconstructed structures , or properties that have achieved significance within the last 50 years . However , if a property falls into one of those categories and are " integral parts of districts that do meet the criteria " then an exception allowing their listing will be made . Historic district listings , like all National Register nominations , can be rejected on the basis of owner disapproval . In the case of historic districts , a majority of owners must object in order to nullify a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places . If such an objection occurred , then the nomination would become a determination of National Register eligibility only .

= = State @-@ level = =

Most U.S. state governments have a listing similar to the National Register of Historic Places . State listings can have similar benefits to federal designation , such as granting qualification and tax incentives . In addition , the property can become protected under specific state laws . The laws can be similar or different from the federal guidelines that govern the National Register . A state listing of a historic district on a " State Register of Historic Places , " usually by the State Historic Preservation Office , can be an " honorary status , " much like the National Register . For example , in Nevada , listing in the State Register places no limits on property owners . In contrast , state law in Tennessee requires that property owners within historic districts follow a strict set of guidelines , from the U.S. Department of Interior , when altering their properties . Though , according to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 , all states must have a State Historic Preservation Office , not all states must have a " state historic district " designation . As of 2004 , for example , the state of North Carolina had no such designation .

= = Local @-@ level = =

Local historic districts usually enjoy the greatest level of protection legally from any threats that may compromise their historic integrity because many land @-@ use decisions are made at the local level . There are more than 2 @, @ 300 local historic districts in the United States . Local historic districts can be administered at the county or the municipal level ; both entities are involved in land use decisions .

Local historic districts are identified by surveying historic resources and delineating appropriate boundaries that comply with all aspects of due process . Depending on local ordinance or State law

, property owners permission may be required ; however all owners are to be notified and given a chance to share their opinion . Most local historic districts are constricted by design guidelines that control changes to the properties included in the district . Many local commissions adopt specific guidelines for the " tout ensemble " of each neighborhood , although some smaller commissions rely on the Secretary of Interior Standards . For most minor changes , homeowners can consult with local preservation staff at the municipal office and receive guidance on and permission for the changes . Major changes however , require homeowners to apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) , and the changes may be decided upon by the historic commission or architectural review board . The COA process is carried out with all aspects of due process , with formal notification , hearings , and fair and informed decision making .

According to the National Park Service , historic districts are one of the oldest forms of protection for historic properties . The city of Charleston , South Carolina is credited with beginning the modern day historic districts movement . In 1931 Charleston enacted an ordinance which designated an " Old and Historic District " administered by a Board of Architectural Review . Charleston 's early ordinance reflected the strong protection that local historic districts often enjoy under local law . It asserted that no alteration could be made to any architectural features which could be viewed by the public from the street . Local historic districts , as in New Orleans and Savannah , Georgia , predate the Register by 10 years or more as well .

Local historic districts are most likely to generate resistance because of the restrictions they tend to place on property owners . Local laws can cause residents " to comply with (local historic district) ordinances . "

The issue of local historic districts and the impact on property values is a concern to many homeowners . The effects have been extensively studied using multiple methodologies including before @-@ and @-@ after analysis and evaluating comparable neighborhoods with and without local designation status . Recent factual analysis has been conducted by independent researchers in a number of states , including New Jersey , Texas , Indiana , Georgia , Colorado , Maryland , North and South Carolina , Kentucky , Virginia , and elsewhere . As stated by economist Donovan Rypkema , " the results of these studies are remarkably consistent : property values in local historic districts appreciate significantly faster than the market as a whole in the vast majority of cases and appreciate at rates equivalent to the market in the worst case . Simply put ? historic districts enhance property values . " In a 2011 study Connecticut Local Historic Districts and Property Values , it was found that ? property values in every local historic district saw average increases in value ranging from 4 % to over 19 % per year . ? Similarly , in New York City between 1980 @-@ 2000 , local historic district properties on a price per square foot basis increased in value significantly more than non @-@ designated properties . Equally important , local historic district property values were found to resist market downturns better than historic non @-@ designated properties . A recent study investigating the data on single @-@ family residential mortgage foreclosures and comparable non @-@ designated neighborhoods found that designated properties were significantly less likely to experience foreclosure . Local historic district designation has proven to protect property values from wild fluctuations and provides stability in the housing market .

= = Significance = =

The original concept of an American historic district was as a protective area surrounding more important , individual historic sites . As the field of historic preservation progressed , those involved came to realize that the structures acting as " buffer zones " were actually key elements of the historic integrity of larger , landmark sites . Preservationists came to the view that districts should be more encompassing , blending together a mesh of structures , streets , open space and landscaping to define the historical character of a historic district .

As early as 1981 the National Trust for Historic Preservation identified 882 American cities and towns that had some form of " historic district zoning " in place ; local laws meant specifically to protect historic districts . Before 1966 , historic preservation in the United States was in its infancy . That year the U.S. Conference of Mayors penned an influential report which concluded , in part ,

that Americans suffered from a sense of " rootlessness . " They recommended historic preservation to help provide Americans with a sense of orientation . The creation of the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 , on the heels of the report , helped to instill that sense of orientation the mayors were looking for . The mayors also recommended that any historic preservation program not focus solely on individual properties but also on " areas and districts which contain special meaning for the community . " Local , state and federal historic districts now account for thousands of historic property listings at all levels of government .