## Peer Review in Heritage Surveys

**contributor:** Lauren Bricker

This essay is drawn from the author’s experiences both managing and serving on peer review panels associated with California-based heritage surveys of all sizes, from a single neighborhood in San Francisco to the citywide survey of Los Angeles. These experiences provide some perspective and guidance on organizing and executing a peer review program. Through peer review, the methodology and results of a survey are subject to the scrutiny of subject matter and community experts whose participation will “enhance the quality, objectivity, utility and integrity” of the information generated ({{Frost 2008|2}}).

### Panel Composition

The scope of a survey and the goals and objectives established for peer preview will determine factors to consider when selecting panelists (**fig. 10.8**). Participants should have a knowledge of current survey practice, methods, and technologies, including an understanding of thematic frameworks and historic contexts as strategies for resource identification and evaluation (see the **sidebar on this subject** in chapter 2). The survey scope defines the geographic area and nature of the resource types to be identified. Panelists, therefore, may be experts in the history and development of a city or region or individuals with expertise on particular building typologies, distinctive construction materials and systems, or topics relating to social, ethnic, and cultural histories.

**[[fig-10-8]]**

Participants may contribute subject matter expertise to inform the development of historic contexts as well as survey findings. Peer review is also benefited by the knowledge of heritage preservation agencies and advocates who are aware of current issues in local or regional heritage management. During review sessions, guest panelists with specialized knowledge of the history of an area or community may also supplement the knowledge base of the panelists. This may be particularly important for large-scale citywide or regional surveys. Guest panelists may also be city planners and others engaged in implementing the survey findings through land use management and environmental review. In sum, peer review panelists provide a number of functions to support quality control of survey findings:

* Fill gaps in or augment the knowledge of the surveyors
* Bring new perspectives and suggest different ways to analyze, and consequently assess, the resources identified by the survey teams
* Confirm the findings of the survey teams, thereby validating and contributing to the credibility to the findings
* Reinforce and support the importance of using the professional standards set for the survey
* Provide a final check to assure a level of consistency in the evaluation of significance

An important consideration in managing the survey peer review process is whether the same panelists will participate throughout the life of the survey or if there may be changes in the panelists, for example, when surveys are phased and take many years to complete. Long-term membership on a panel helps assure continuity of judgment, particularly when analyzing a large number of similar resources and is of considerable benefit to the survey.

A second important consideration is the number of participants on the panel. The temptation to add members who cover different areas of expertise must be mitigated by the need to maintain a panel of a reasonable size. Not only does an overly large panel raise the challenge of reaching consensus among many experts but it may impose an undue financial burden on the project – assuming that some type of payment or honorarium is included in the project budget.

### The SurveyLA Peer Review Program

SurveyLA provides an example of a peer review program for a large-scale survey. The review panel consisted of five paid members from varying areas of expertise. In general, the panel remained consistent throughout the life of the project, about eight years. The panel convened approximately four times per year, but rather than following a preset schedule, timing of meetings coincided with the completion of surveys following a phasing plan.

The meetings were organized by the City of Los Angeles Office of Historic Resources, the managing agency for SurveyLA, and were facilitated by survey staff and field survey consultants. Student interns and city planners, as well as local history experts (who were compensated for their time) often attended the meetings. Findings for the geographic areas to be covered in the meeting were submitted to the panelists for their review in advance of meeting.

Typically, the meetings began with a discussion of the geography and topography of the survey area, followed by a presentation of the history and development of the area, a summary of the major categories of property types identified, and a summary of the survey findings. While the peer review panel process looked broadly at the survey findings, panelists also identified specific issues for further discussion and consideration.

Over time, several types of questions surfaced at these meetings. There was considerable discussion by the surveyors and the peer review panel about the assessment of popular and standardized building types. One such example was the significance of the ubiquitous carwash as a typology whose significance derives from its association with the automobile in Los Angeles. Similarly challenging was the city’s post–World War II program to construct standardized fire stations: The panel members asked if the stations were individually significant or if they were important as components of the building program. If the latter, was the prevailing rationale the best way to recognize this program in the findings on a citywide basis?

Another extremely challenging aspect of SurveyLA was the recognition of ethnic identity and changing demographics associated with places in Los Angeles. In the Leimert Park community, for example, initially, the consultants evaluated the area as an important planned residential community whose prevailing historic architectural character was defined by period revival–style residential development and planned commercial spaces (**fig. 10.9**). An aspect of this history was that the developer included restrictive covenants that barred minority members from owning property in the area. However, by the 1950s, a number of African American families had moved into the region, and the population grew from 70 to approximately 4,200 within a decade ({{Kurashige 2008|252}}). Based on comments from the panel and further analysis by survey teams, the district evaluation now recognizes the significance of this period through additional themes associated with the African American community and their contributions to the history of the area.

**[[fig-10-9]]**

### The Value of Peer Review

The peer review panel plays an essential role in validating the heritage survey findings. While occasionally the panelists may provide additional information or suggest different ways to analyze a property, more frequently the panel confirms the findings and reinforces the objectivity – and credibility – of the survey process. The inclusion of peer review panelists in the process reaffirms the use of professional standards by the field surveyors. The review panel provides a final check to assure a level of consistency in making evaluations of heritage significance. It also provides a level of quality control that is especially important given that survey results may be used to inform preservation programs and policies.