**[[Sidebar]]**

## Overview of Thematic Frameworks, Thematic Studies, and Historic Contexts

Thematic frameworks and accompanying thematic studies and historic contexts can serve a number of useful roles within an inventory program and in related data collection activities such as surveys. All three devices were originally created to support heritage designation and listing, although internationally the meaning of these concepts is neither clear-cut nor consistent, and this author is not aware of a single source that defines all three concepts and explains their relation to each other. (See the **glossary** for the definitions used in this book.) Later chapters will explain and illustrate more specifically how these concepts may be applied to heritage inventories and surveys.

### Thematic Frameworks

For purposes of this book, thematic framework is considered the overarching concept of the three. A thematic framework is an organizing structure that broadly identifies themes relating to important trends, topics, and patterns in prehistory and history that are represented through a diverse range of heritage places. Thematic frameworks help ensure that heritage identification, designation or listing, and interpretation represent a full range of deliberately articulated themes. Thematic frameworks have been applied in U.S. heritage practice since the 1930s. For example, the U.S. National Park Service thematic framework ({{National Park Service 2000||2000}}; {{National Park Service 2018||2018}}) for prehistory and history identifies the following eight themes at a national level for the United States:

* Peopling Places
* Creating Social Institutions and Movements
* Expressing Cultural Values
* Shaping the Political Landscape
* Developing the American Economy
* Expanding Science and Technology
* Transforming the Environment
* Changing Role of the United States in the World Community

This framework is designed to guide the identification and evaluation of significance of resources for listing in the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, for designation as National Heritage Landmarks, and for potential addition of sites of cultural significance to the National Park System.

In addition to their application in the United States, thematic frameworks are formally utilized and applied in heritage inventory and survey work as well as designation or listing in Canada ({{Parks Canada 2000}}; {{Parks Canada 2019||2019}}) and Australia ({{Australian Heritage Commission 2001}}; {{Heritage Council of Victoria 2010}}). They have also been applied within World Heritage listing processes by UNESCO, ICOMOS, and others involved in World Heritage deliberations ({{UNESCO 2005}}), as well as to international heritage practice more generally ({{Marsden and Spearritt 2021}}).[[1]](#endnote-1)

### Thematic Studies

Thematic frameworks are sometimes elaborated through thematic studies or [historic context statements](#_Historic_Contexts). The latter two concepts are quite similar, and in some cases, they are difficult to distinguish. A thematic study (sometimes in the U.S. referred to as a *theme study*) is a narrative document that presents in-depth research and/or a synthesis of existing research on one or more themes, often those identified through a thematic framework. The studies help justify the significance of themes and associated heritage types and may include evaluation standards to help assess heritage significance.

Thematic studies are employed in combination with thematic frameworks in the heritage management systems of the U.S. ({{National Park Service 2021}}), Canada ({{Parks Canada 2023}}), and Australia ({{Australian Heritage Council 2021}}). Heritage organizations in the United Kingdom ({{Franklin et al. 2012}}) and New Zealand have employed thematic studies without reference to thematic frameworks ({{Wellington City Council 2013}}). World Heritage practice also utilizes thematic studies, most commonly without reference to thematic frameworks ({{ICOMOS 2011a}}; {{TICCIH n.d.}}). As noted in the *World Heritage Operational Guidelines,* “As requested by the World Heritage Committee or as necessary, ICOMOS and IUCN will carry out thematic studies to evaluate proposed World Heritage Properties in their regional, global, or thematic context” ({{UNESCO World Heritage Committee 2021}}).

### Historic Contexts

Historic contexts are used to organize information about related heritage resources based on theme, geographical area, and chronological period. Associated historic context statements – devices with similarities to thematic studies, are increasingly being designed in the United States ({{National Park Service 1983}}) and in Canada to inform inventory and survey work and to support designation or listing. Such context statements contain a narrative discussion of a theme or themes, identify and describe important associated heritage resource types, and provide standards and guidelines for evaluations of significance. In some cases, such as SurveyLA (see **chapter 5**), historic context statements have been specifically designed to establish the physical characteristics, associative qualities, and aspects of integrity or authenticity a resource must have to be an important example of its type. Importantly, they can help provide consistency in the identification, description, and assessment of a range of heritage types.

Thematic frameworks, as well as theme or thematic studies and historic context statements, periodically need to be expanded and revised. Interpretations of history change over time – sometimes through new research, new survey findings, and public engagement  – and through new methods of information analysis. Inevitably, at times new priorities or topics emerge that are deemed to be significant but that in the past had gone unrecognized.

1. For an overview of the use of thematic frameworks within national and international contexts, see {{Clayworth 2008}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)