## Historic Preservation Practice in the United States

Following passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service (NPS) prepared extensive standards and guidelines concerning historic preservation activities carried out under federal programs, state and local level governments, and private parties ({{National Park Service 1983}}). This guidance serves as nationally accepted professional standards for his­toric preservation practice and ensures a uniform and consistent process for documenting and evaluating historic properties through surveys or property designations. The concepts and terms discussed here comprise the basic elements of these national professional standards.[[1]](#endnote-1)

### Historic Property

The terms *historic property* and *historic resource* are used interchangeably in the United States to refer to buildings, structures, objects, sites, and districts that have been evaluated as significant ({{National Park Service 1997b|15}}):

* **Building.** A building is created principally to shelter any form of human activity; examples are residences, schools, churches, factories, theaters, and stores.
* **Structure.** The term *structure* is used to distinguish from buildings those functional constructions made usually for purposes other than human shelter, such as bridges, roadway systems, dams, and tunnels.
* **Object.** The term *object* is used to distinguish from buildings and structures those constructions that are primarily artistic in nature or that are relatively small in scale and simply constructed. An object is associated with a specific setting or environment, although it may be movable. Examples include sculpture, statuary, and fountains.
* **Site.** A site is the location of a significant event, a prehistoric or historic occupation or activity, or a building or structure, whether standing, ruined, or vanished, where the location itself possesses historic, cultural, or archaeological value regardless of the value of an existing structure. Sites include cemeteries, designed landscapes, cultural landscapes, and natural features.
* **District.** A district possesses a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of sites, buildings, structures, or objects united historically or aesthetically by plan or physical development. Districts include residential neighborhoods, commercial areas, civic centers, industrial complexes, and institutional campuses such as hospitals and universities.

### National Register of Historic Places

The National Register of Historic Places is the United States’ official inventory of historic places worthy of preservation. The NPS established the National Register to identify properties of architec­tural, historical, engineering, or archaeological signifi­cance at the local, state, or national level.[[2]](#endnote-2) The National Register provides standardized criteria for evaluating properties for significance ({{National Park Service 1997a}}). These criteria have been adapted for use by most state and local governments in developing their own designation programs and are also applied to properties during survey work.[[3]](#endnote-3)

To be listed in the National Register, a property must meet at least one of the criteria set forth in *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* ({{National Park Service 1997a|2}}; see below) andretain integrity of those features necessary to convey its significance.

**[Begin block quote]**

The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

A. that are associated with events that have made significant contributions to the broad patterns of our history; or

B. that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or

C. that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or

D. that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history

**[end block]**

### Historic Context Statements and the Multiple Property Documentation Approach

A historic context statement is a narrative, technical document specific to the field of historic preservation. Contexts organize information about important trends, patterns, and topics significant to the development history of a defined geographic area into themes, and then relate those themes to property types that share common physical and associative attributes.

Historic context-based surveys are the foundation of preservation planning in the United States. They provide a framework for establishing preservation goals and priorities and ensure consistency in resource identification and evaluation. Contexts can address a single theme and property type, such as Midcentury Modern residential architecture, or can provide a comprehensive summary of all aspects of history of an area.

The multiple property documentation (MPD) approach developed by the NPS is the format most used for context-based surveys in the United States ({{National Park Service 1999}}). Although designed to streamline the nomination of properties related by theme to the National Register, the MPD approach is also highly effective in conducting heritage surveys, particularly at a large scale. This approach provides a narrative discussion of themes; identifies and describes property types that represent the themes; and, importantly, provides specific guidance and comparative analysis regarding the physical characteristics, associative qualities, and aspects of integrity a property must have to be an important example of a property type and eligible for designation.

1. . Other terms used throughout this publication are defined in the **glossary**. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . The National Register Program was authorized as part of the NHPA. The associated National Historic Landmarks Program recognizes properties of exceptional significance to the nation. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . The City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument program, for example, has four criteria that parallel National Register criteria. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)