



## OFFICE OF HISTORIC RESOURCES INFO BRIEF

# The Cultural Heritage Commission – Its Role and History

### **The Role and Duties of the Commission**

The Cultural Heritage Commission (CHC) is a five-member, mayoral-appointed commission that considers nominations of sites as City Historic-Cultural Monuments (designated City landmarks) and reviews proposed project work affecting more than 1,100 existing Historic-Cultural Monuments.

The Commission also serves as the City's primary forum for the discussion of historic preservation policy. Recommendations of the Cultural Heritage Commission are forwarded to the City Council for their final action. The Cultural Heritage Ordinance also gives the Commission the authority to temporarily delay alteration or demolition of historically significant structures until a proper review can be completed.

The Commission is also charged with the following additional duties:

- Review and approval of historic resources surveys conducted for proposed Historic Preservation Overlay Zones (historic districts)
- Appointment of two of the five members of each Historic Preservation Overlay Zone Board, including the Board architect (the CHC approves three of the seven members for Boards that oversee multiple HPOZs)
- Oversight of the Mills Act Historical Property Contract Program and approval of exemptions from the City's valuation limits for the Mills Act
- Comment on behalf of the City, as a Certified Local Government for historic preservation, on nominations of sites to the National Register of Historic Places





The CHC meets on the 1st and 3rd Thursday of each month, starting at 10:00 a.m., usually in Room 1010 of City Hall. All meetings are open to the public and the Commission encourages public input and participation in its discussions. Serving on the Cultural Heritage Commission represents a significant commitment for these volunteer citizens. A two-member Commission subcommittee typically conducts an inspection tour to evaluate sites that will be undergoing final consideration for Historic-Cultural Monument status at a future meeting, taking the Commission to every corner of the city.

### **A Short History of the Cultural Heritage Commission**

In 1958, a small group of volunteers, as members of the Los Angeles chapter of the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) Historic Building Committee, became alarmed by the destruction of historic landmarks created by the explosion of growth in post-World War II Los Angeles. The AIA Committee and the City's Municipal Art Commission began working on an ordinance that would create a citizen board to survey, identify and protect historic sites throughout the city.

This early work culminated in the passage of the City's Cultural Heritage Ordinance in 1962. Los Angeles' ordinance was one of the earliest pieces of historic preservation legislation in a major urban center, predating by three years the 1965 passage of New York City's renowned Landmarks Preservation Law. The Cultural Heritage Ordinance created a five-member Cultural Heritage Board, giving the Board the responsibility to designate as Historic-Cultural Monuments any building, structure, or site important to the development and preservation of the history of Los Angeles, the state, and the nation.

The Board's first meeting on August 6, 1962 was both a landmark event and a pressure-packed, memorable day. The first five Historic-Cultural Monuments declared were sites that were all considered threatened to some extent. The Leonis Adobe, located on the border of Calabasas, was under immediate threat of demolition. Immediately upon the Board's designation, a stop work order was issued to stay the demolition of this significant landmark. The Adobe was ultimately saved, and has the honor of being designated as Historic-Cultural Monument #1. Bolton Hall in Tujunga, the Plaza Church at El Pueblo,







Angels Flight, and the “Salt Box” on Bunker Hill (later destroyed by fire) were also designated at the first meeting.

William Woollett, FAIA, was the first elected President of the Cultural Heritage Board. Carl Dentzel, longtime director of the Southwest Museum, was an original Board member, later served as the Board President, and remained on the Board until 1980. Prominent architectural historian and author Robert Winter also served on the Board, from 1972 to 1984.

When Bunker Hill redevelopment in downtown Los Angeles led to the wholesale destruction of historic Victorian-era architecture, the Cultural Heritage Board played a leadership role in relocating some of Bunker Hill’s most significant architectural works. Nancy Fernandez, the longtime Commission Executive Assistant, worked tirelessly with community members to create “Heritage Square” in 1969, on a parcel of land alongside the Pasadena Freeway that would become a home for historic architecture that otherwise would have been demolished. Heritage Square remains an active museum today interpreting the architecture and history of Southern California.

Originally, the Cultural Heritage Board had the unilateral power to declare Historic-Cultural Monuments. In 1980, a code amendment required that the City Council confirm the Board’s action before a property becomes an Historic-Cultural Monument. In 1985, the Cultural Heritage Board became a full-fledged City Commission.

Under Mayor Tom Bradley, Dr. Amarjit S. Marwah served as one of the longest-running Commission Presidents, heading up the Commission from 1985 to 1993. Staff Architect Jay Oren also provided significant leadership to the Cultural Heritage Commission for two decades, before his retirement in 2006. In 2004, the Commission’s staffing moved from the City’s Cultural Affairs Department to the Department of City Planning, leading to the creation of a comprehensive Office of Historic Resources in 2006.