



OFFICE OF HISTORIC RESOURCES INFO BRIEF

“Climate Heritage”: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Addressing Climate Change

For decades, historic preservation professionals and community activists have seen real estate development pressure as the main threat to significant historic resources – with the bulldozer seen as the most pervasive symbol of destruction. But with the accelerating impacts of a changing climate, another set of threats is emerging, as changes in temperatures, rainfall, wind, soil conditions, and sea level are increasingly affecting our cultural resources.

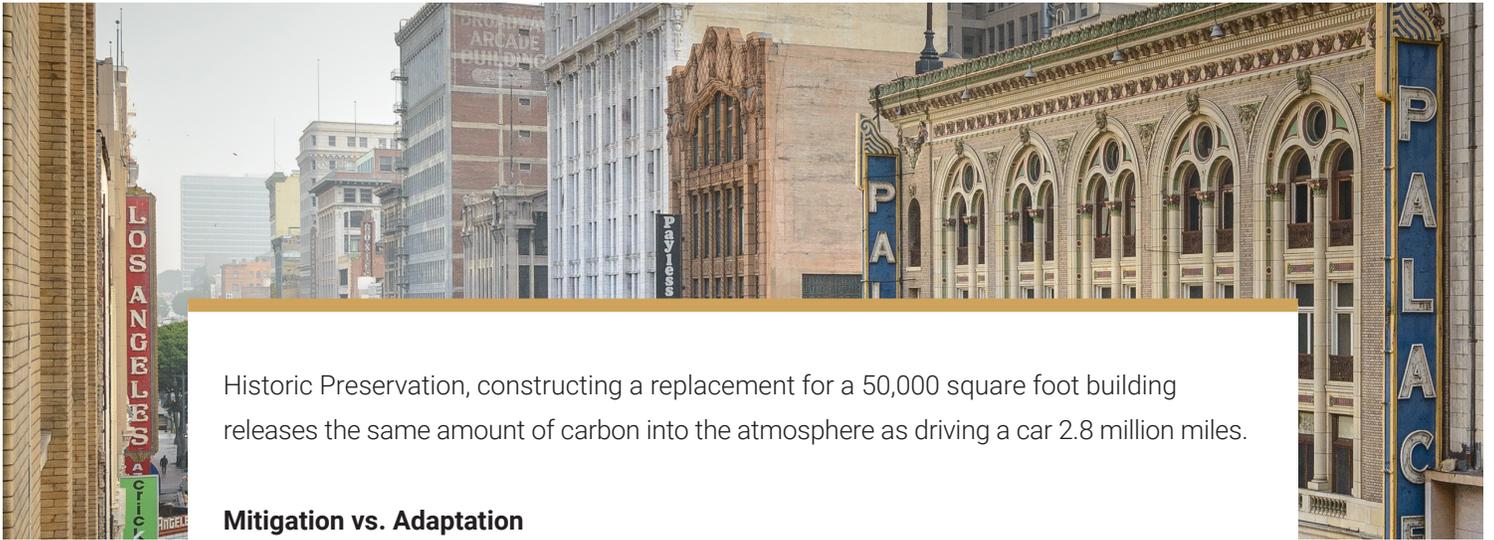
We are already beginning to see these impacts in Southern California: last fall’s wildfires destroyed many significant historic resources just outside the city of Los Angeles, in the Santa Monica Mountains. The unique heritage in Los Angeles’ hillside neighborhoods is at greater risk due to wildfires sparked in extreme weather conditions. And many of Los Angeles’ lower-lying coastal communities, such as Venice, Playa del Rey, or portions of San Pedro and Wilmington, are at risk of inundation in the coming decades.

“The Greenest Building”

But even as climate change is increasingly imperiling historic resources, our historic resources also have an important role to play in minimizing the impacts of climate change. Simply put, preserving historic buildings can reduce carbon emissions. As architect Carl Elefante succinctly stated, “The greenest building is the one that’s already built.”

A 2011 study by the National Trust for Historic Preservation found that, even if a new building is 30% more energy efficient than a historic building, it takes between 10 and 80 years (depending on the building type) to make up for the carbon emissions expended by demolition and new construction. According to the Advisory Council on





Historic Preservation, constructing a replacement for a 50,000 square foot building releases the same amount of carbon into the atmosphere as driving a car 2.8 million miles.

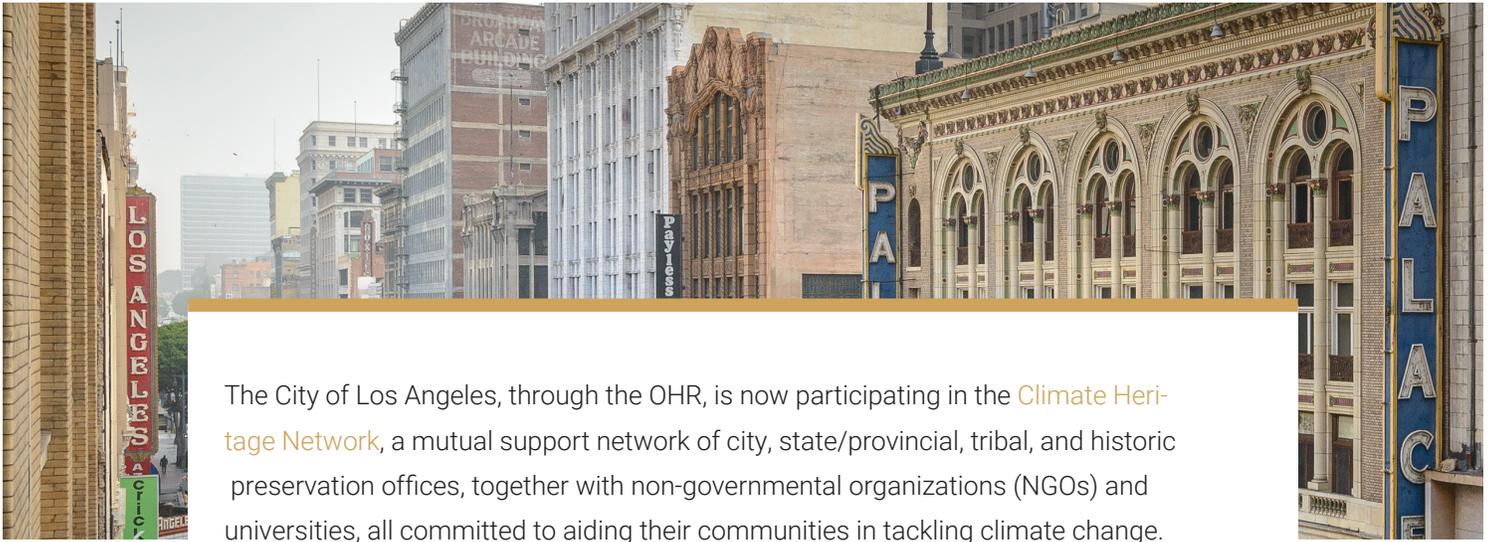
Mitigation vs. Adaptation

Climate change specialists seek to address our climate challenges in two ways: through “mitigation” – reducing our contributions to greenhouse gases and climate change– and “adaptation,” addressing strategies to prepare ourselves for the impacts of a changing climate. To achieve mitigation, preservation professionals are starting to ask difficult questions, such as, how do we improve the energy efficiency of historic buildings while still preserving significant historic features? Since existing buildings are responsible for approximately 40% of carbon emissions, how do we find a climate heritage “sweet spot” – bringing existing buildings as close as possible to “net zero” carbon emissions while also maximizing heritage conservation values. And how can we better quantify the carbon value of retaining and reusing historic buildings?

Under “adaptation,” how do we begin to assess which cultural resources are at greatest risk due to impacts of climate change, such as wildfire or sea level rise? In Los Angeles, can we use the data from SurveyLA, the city’s completed citywide survey of historic resources, to understand our cultural heritage that may be at greatest risk? And how can the qualities found in successful historic neighborhoods – strong cultural traditions, higher social cohesion, and walkable urbanism – help create more resilient communities in this era of rapid climate change?

The Climate Heritage Network

To be sure, the Office of Historic Resources (OHR) does not have all of the answers to these questions, but it is an important moment to elevate these issues, expand partnerships with organizations working on resilience and sustainability, and begin learning from “best practices” around the nation and around the world.



The City of Los Angeles, through the OHR, is now participating in the [Climate Heritage Network](#), a mutual support network of city, state/provincial, tribal, and historic preservation offices, together with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and universities, all committed to aiding their communities in tackling climate change. The Network was launched in September 2018 at the San Francisco Global Climate Action Summit.

This new network grew out of the [Pocantico Call to Action](#), drafted in 2015 by representatives of over 20 organizations who came together in Tarrytown, NY at the Pocantico Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund to develop an action agenda for preserving cultural heritage in a changing climate. The Call to Action included a pledge to collaborate and ensure that cultural heritage voices and expertise are represented in climate policy discussions.

The City of Los Angeles is joining forces with other large cities, including New York and San Antonio, to learn from each other, through collaborations between multiple cities' historic preservation officers and Chief Sustainability Officers.

The City of Los Angeles' leadership on climate issues has been reinforced with Mayor Garcetti's [Green New Deal](#) plan, an update to the Sustainable City pLAn, originally issued in 2015. The 2019 pLAn offers an opportunity to align best practices in historic preservation, including the administration of the City's 35 Historic Preservation Overlay Zones (HPOZs), with the City's sustainability goals.

The OHR looks forward to increased collaborations with environmental leaders and sustainability experts to ensure that the City of Los Angeles prepares itself for the cultural heritage impacts of a changing climate and reduces its own carbon emissions from older buildings to help meet the global climate challenge.

