



Philadelphia Historic District Q&A

Historic Districts: The Basics

What is a historic district?

A historic district is a collection of historic resources linked by a location or theme. Local historic districts recognize the historic, cultural and architectural importance of a neighborhood or area with the goal to preserve the historic fabric of that place. The definition listed in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance is as follows: “A geographically definable area possessing a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of buildings, structures, sites, or objects united by past events, plan, or physical development. A district may comprise an individual site or individual elements separated geographically but linked by association, plan, design, or history.”

What is the difference between the local (City of Philadelphia) and national historic registers in terms of how each protects historic architecture?

The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the nation’s historic properties deemed worthy of preservation, however, the properties listed on the National Park Service’s National Register of Historic Places are not protected from demolition or insensitive alteration. Majority, but not all of the Spruce Hill neighborhood is already listed on the National Register Historic District, as part of the West Philadelphia Streetcar Suburb Historic District. The primary advantage of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places is that it allows commercial property owners to take advantage of historic tax credits when undertaking projects that include major restoration.

Listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, designated by the Philadelphia Historical Commission, does offer protection from demolition or insensitive alterations. Currently, there are ~250 properties within the Spruce Hill neighborhood that are already protected and listed on the Philadelphia Historic Register. If your home or property is currently listed on the local historic register, a historic district nomination/designation would bear no effect to the owner.

What advantages does a historic district bring?

The creation of a historic district does not stop change. Rather, designation provides a mechanism to maintain the basic physical and visual character of a district. Many cities,

including New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, New York, Boston, and Baltimore, as well as many smaller municipalities in Pennsylvania, have adopted historic districting successfully as parts of their planning, economic development, and historic preservation programs. Studies demonstrate that local historic districts contribute to the stabilization of property values and the fostering of community pride. By taking care of your property, you play a role in preserving Philadelphia's history.

Further, the Philadelphia Historical Commission provides expert advice on maintaining historic properties at no charge.

Does designation affect my property taxes or insurance?

No. Designation has no bearing on property assessment, taxes, or insurance, only property value. Historic designation is not a factor in the City of Philadelphia's property re-assessments, only prevailing sales trends and other related market data. Many studies have shown that property values are more likely to stabilize in historic districts.

If my property is designated a historic district, as a property owner, what is my responsibility?

The Philadelphia Historical Commission regulates designated properties. The property owner will need the commission's approval if:

- Alterations to the property requires a building permit, or
- Alterations are to be made to the exterior of the building or site features

These reviews focus on changes to facades and other exterior features. Protecting public views of historic properties is the Philadelphia Historical Commission's primary goal. The Historical Commission's job is to manage change, not prevent it.

When you're considering alterations, contact the commission staff for advice. They can help with preservation techniques and building materials.

How does a historic district prevent demolitions?

Demolition permits in historic districts are reviewed by the Historical Commission. There are some circumstances in which demolitions are allowed, including those benefiting the public interest or in instances of financial hardship where it has been demonstrated that a sale of the property would be impracticable or cannot yield a reasonable rate of return.

Approvals & Permits

What types of construction projects does the Historical Commission review?

The Philadelphia Historical Commission requires reviews for projects altering the exterior appearance of the building, site, or permanent site features. For example, windows, steps, gates, patios, roofing, and more. The Historical Commission's job is to manage change, not prevent it and the staff are committed to working with property owners to meet mutual objectives of cost and appearance.

Reviews are **not** required for ordinary maintenance and repair such as scraping and painting wood trim, cleaning gutters, and replacing clear window glass. Also, reviews are not required for gardening, landscaping, tree trimming, or temporary holiday decorations, provided no historic features are altered or removed.

Alterations made before the property's designation are grandfathered in. For example, if your property has non-historic windows, you won't be required to restore them when the property is designated. However, one will need to obtain the commission's approval if the windows will be replaced after historic designation.

Would becoming a historic district require me to restore all of the historical details on my property? What if repairs have already been done to my home in a non-historic way (e.g. vinyl windows)?

Being listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places does not obligate a property owner to replace elements or materials that are already in place at the time of listing. The Historical Commission cannot enforce an owner to perform work on a property, except in cases of extreme neglect.

Impact on Property Owners

How would historic status affect the cost of major exterior repairs?

For the purpose of this response, let's assume that we are talking about roof replacement. For a typical second empire mansard roof, the commission is most concerned with protecting public views of historic properties and may require that the roof material visible from public view appear to match the texture and profile of the slate which it replaced. This may result in higher material costs. The commission is cognizant of financial constraints and is willing to work with owners to meet mutual objectives of cost and appearance, including partnership on the research for alternative materials. Less scrutiny will be given to areas not visible from the public right of way.

Can the Historical Commission require me to do something I cannot afford?

No. There is a hardship clause in the ordinance so that the commission cannot make you do work that would cause economic hardship. The Philadelphia Historical Commission staff are committed to working with property owners to meet mutual objectives of cost and appearance. Further, the commission's advisory Committee on Financial Hardship evaluates claims of hardship at public meetings; however, these claims typically have to do with proposed demolition of historic buildings.

Additional Questions

What would a nomination for Spruce Hill look like?

Recent nominations of other properties and districts can be viewed at the Historical Commission's website. The University City Historical Society also links to recent nominations within West Philadelphia on their website, www.uchs.net

How can we be assured that the city will enforce historic district regulations?

It is the City's responsibility to enforce the integrity of a historic district. Citizens play an integral part in reporting potential violations so that they can be enforced by the City.

How does historic designation affect the amount of affordable housing in a given neighborhood?

Historic designation in no way impacts the amount of affordable housing in a given neighborhood. Historic designation does not make it any more difficult to create affordable housing. In fact, listing on the National Register may open the door for tax credits which make affordable housing more financially viable.

Would a historic district impact levels of owner-occupied housing?

We are not aware of any studies showing how historic designation may impact owner-occupancy.

Where can I learn more?

University City Historical Society: The University City Historical Society advocates for the preservation of the history, architecture and cultural heritage of West Philadelphia. This site provides numerous resources on existing historic districts within West Philadelphia, which were led or supported by the University City Historical Society.

Philadelphia Historical Commission Rules & Regulations: This document contains all of the rules, regulations and processes that are followed and enforced by the Commission.

Philadelphia Historical Commission Ordinance: This document is the underlying piece of legislation created by City Council to form and govern the Commission.

Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia: The Preservation Alliance is an independent, nonprofit advocacy organization for historic preservation, unaffiliated with the City of Philadelphia. It is a go-to resource for the preservation community and owners of historic buildings. Their [Marketplace Directory](#) has a wealth of contractors and resources for preservation, and their [Preservation Toolkit](#) and [Philadelphia Resources Directory](#) are home to further links to regional resources.

Philadelphia Historic Preservation Task Force: Organized by the Mayor's Office and Philadelphia Historical Commission, the Task Force is a new initiative of the City to improve its approach to preservation policy and advocate for greater, preservation-related owner/developer benefits. Its website has a wealth of resources for owners of historic buildings, notably its [Neighborhood Preservation Toolkit](#), [Resources for Homeowners](#), and [Historic Designation FAQs](#).

Philadelphia Historical Commission: The Commission is the City-created agency responsible for overseeing historically designated properties and districts. Its website publishes the schedule of [Commission Meetings & Agendas](#) has a number of resources, such as [Information for Property Owners](#).

Thank you to our partners at UCHS for review of this Q&A!