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Historic Designation and Housing Production in Los Angeles

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Historic Designation and Housing Production in Los Angeles

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Issue

Historic Preservation Overlay Zones (HPOZs) are local historic districts intended to protect the city of Los Angeles's cultural and historic resources. Since 1983, the city has established 35 zones encompassing 2.4% of parcels. Each district is governed by a unique preservation plan that sets standards for historic protections. City planning staff and local HPOZ boards approve or deny new projects based on the respective plans. Delay, discretion, and complex design requirements are all part of the HPOZ process, which should discourage housing construction.

This study analyzed how HPOZ designation has impacted housing construction between 1996 and 2025. The results suggest HPOZ designation had minimal impact on housing supply. In the study areas, housing construction rates remained largely unchanged before and after receiving HPOZ designation, and HPOZ designation did not push new housing supply to surrounding areas. These findings suggest historic district designation alone does not influence where housing development occurs.

The findings are particularly relevant to recent California legislation. Assembly Bill 2580 (2024) requires cities to evaluate how historic designation impacts housing goals, while AB 1061 (2025) streamlines lot splits in historic districts. If HPOZ designation has only a modest effect on housing development, the impacts of these recent laws may also be limited.

Study Approach

This study used census data to create a control group of tracts with demographic and built-environment characteristics

similar to those containing HPOZs. Building permit records from the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety were then assigned to either the control or HPOZ groups and classified as occurring pre- or post-HPOZ designation. The analysis only included permits that changed the number of residential units and had certificates of occupancy. Difference-in-difference and triple difference regressions compared residential construction in control tracts with construction in HPOZs before and after designation.

Key Findings

- » **Minimal housing built in L.A.'s historic neighborhoods:** Historic neighborhoods have had a disproportionately low share of new housing construction. Between 1996 and 2025, developers built only 156 residential projects, totaling 662 housing units, in neighborhoods that had been or would become HPOZs. In the same period, developers built 158,998 units across the city. 2.4% of city parcels are within HPOZs, yet only 0.4% of new units were constructed within their borders.
- » **Historic districts do not affect where developers build housing:** HPOZ designation did not have a statistically significant effect on housing construction within zones or in surrounding neighborhoods.
- » **Short HPOZ timelines mitigate housing impacts:** The HPOZ process takes at most 14% of the length of the 577-day average Los Angeles multifamily housing approval timeline (Gabriel & Kung, 2025). The HPOZ program's disincentive to housing development through delay is marginal.

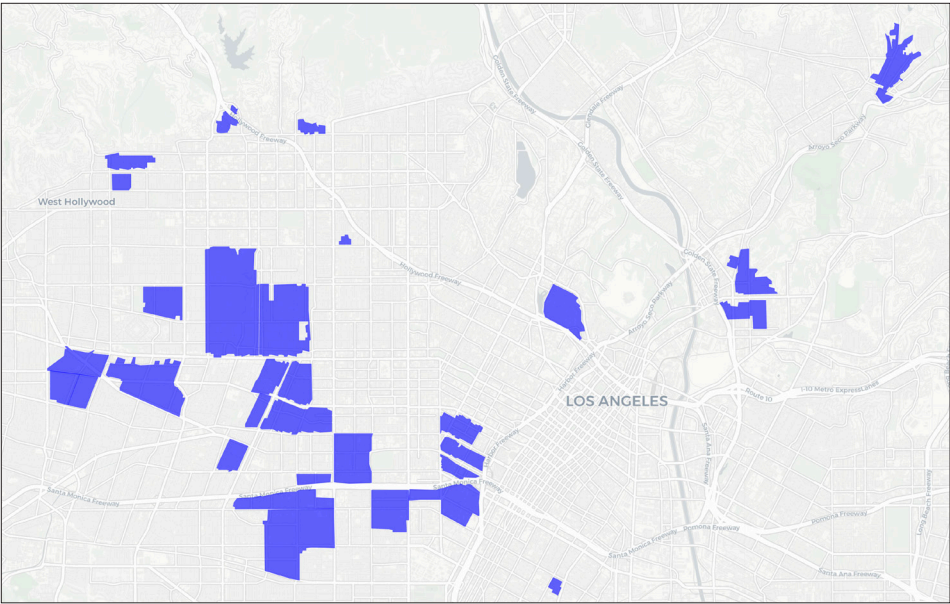


Figure 1.
*Historic Preservation Overlay Zones in
Central Los Angeles*

Recommendations

HPOZs constitute a small percentage of Los Angeles’s parcels. Minimal residential construction occurred in historic neighborhoods even before the city designated them as HPOZs. During the study period, slow approval timelines, zoning changes, the implementation of community plans, and CEQA were more significant hurdles to build new housing.

Since historic district designation appears to have no statistical impact on where developers build housing, policymakers and advocacy groups would be better served reforming other land use regulations. Compliance with AB 2580 and AB 1061, specifically, is likely to increase planning departments’ workloads without addressing meaningful barriers to new housing. Instead, policymakers should focus their efforts on other regulations and processes that have discouraged housing construction in historic districts and across the state.

More Information

Avery, L. S. (2025). Historic Preservation Overlay Zones and Where Housing Gets Built in Los Angeles (Master’s thesis, UCLA).

References

Gabriel, S. & Kung, E. (2025). Development approval times and new housing supply: evidence from Los Angeles (February 20, 2025). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4872147>