

Writing an Effective Significance Statement (Item 18)

This is the most important part of the nomination. All of your relevant research must be condensed into a statement that makes a *compelling* case for the building's significance and its worthiness for designation as a Historic-Cultural Monument. For buildings that aren't obvious shoe-ins for designation, your statement should be **super compelling**.

In general, the Cultural Heritage Commission (CHC) is much more used to considering structures for their architectural merit, rather than their connection to historic trends, events, or people. In many cases, the latter types of structures may be somewhat compromised in their architectural integrity, but still quite able to resonate with the story they tell.

You should think of this statement as a narrative – it tells a story about your building. Hopefully, your research uncovers enough information to make this a rich story. It is critical that you place historic buildings in a context. For a nomination based on architectural merit, the statement must include biographical information about the architect (if known), the relationship of the building's style to either the architect's body of work or to known aesthetic and stylistic trends of the period. For a cultural nomination, the range of potential contexts is much broader and depends entirely on the resource and your research findings.

The CHC evaluates nominations based on criteria established in the Municipal Code:

A historical or cultural monument is any site (including significant trees or other plant life located thereon), building or structure of particular historical or cultural significance to the City of Los Angeles, such as:

- historic structures or sites in which the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state or community is reflected or exemplified,
- or
- which are identified with historic personages or with important events in the main currents of national, state, or local history;
- or
- which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural-type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, or method of construction,
- or
- are a notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual genius influenced his or her age.

It is critical to specifically identify which criteria the nominated site meets and to use the language of these criteria in the body of the significance statement. A nomination only needs to prove that the site meets one criterion – if it meets more, so much the better.

The staff at City Planning is now asking that this section be limited to 750 words (one single-spaced page, more or less). This is impractical for many nominations, which require a great deal of information to place the building in its historical context, such as for nominations based on a site's cultural, rather than architectural, importance. The information in our nominations will quite possibly outlive the buildings we get designated. It's important that all relevant information become part of the public record, so try to stay close to the recommended limit, but don't fear going further if the nomination requires it.



Basic Outline

1. Begin with a brief sentence stating why the building is important, and how it appears to meet the Cultural Heritage Ordinance criteria.
2. Provide a brief history of the structure, explaining who it was built for, and why it was constructed.
3. If the structure is notable for its architecture, elaborate on why this is an outstanding example of its style or the work of a master craftsman or architect.
4. If historical events or persons are associated with the structure, thoroughly describe and explain them. Include copies of background information (news clippings, etc.) that help establish the historic importance you are claiming.
5. Include any additional background material on the architect or contractor. This could include other examples of the architect's work and how long the architect may have worked in Los Angeles.

Tips for Effective Significance Statements

1. Include all relevant research material you have collected. "Relevant" is the key word here – include only information that furthers the story you are trying to tell in your nomination, not every single item that your research turns up.
2. Review the criteria and make sure that the information in your significance statement meets one or more of them.

Sample Significance Statements

A. Commercial: San Fernando Building

Constructed in two stages between 1906 and 1911, the San Fernando Building is significant as an excellent example of Beaux-Arts architecture. The structure was built as a commercial venture by Col. James B. Lankershim, one of the largest landholders in the state of California. James was the son of Issac Lankershim, thus heir to the 60,000 acre San Fernando Rancho, the 48,000 acre El Cahone Rancho near San Diego, and a 15,000 acre ranch near Fresno. He became a resident of Los Angeles in 1872 and subsequently became president of the Main Street Savings Bank and the Bank of Southern California. He was responsible for construction of the Lankershim Building (1890); the construction of the Lankershim Hotel (1905); and the organization of the Los Angeles Farming and Milling Company. Construction of the San Fernando Building began on October 6, 1906 by the Wesley Roberts Construction Company. Los Angeles consulting engineer and architect John F. Blee planned and supervised the construction of the edifice. Blee began his architectural career in Boston in 1895, practicing with several notable firms, including those of Loring & Phillips, Jenney & Fox, and John A. Fox. The San Fernando Building was Blee's first major undertaking in Los Angeles. The structure was built at an estimated cost of \$200,000. The offices were open for tenants on October 1, 1907, and were considered among the finest available in the city. A Turkish bath, café, and still extant billiard room were located in the basement, shops on the main floor, and offices above the first floor. The building has had a



colorful history. About 1910, the building achieved some local notoriety as Los Angeles businessmen engaged in gambling activities in Rooms 637, 638, and 639. The Los Angeles police raided these gambling rooms on a number of occasions; their attempts were foiled by an extensive “tip-off” network. Two additional stories were added to the building in April, 1911 at a cost of \$50,000. The additional stories were designed by Robert Brown Young & Son, an important local architecture firm; construction was undertaken by George D. Hulbert. Architect Robert Brown Young designed many of Los Angeles’ most prominent buildings from 1895 to 1915, including several on Broadway.

In summary, the San Fernando Building is significant for its architectural quality, as a stylistic and representative example of commercial architecture in Los Angeles during the beginning of the twentieth century.

B. Residential: Cliff May Experimental House

The Experimental House (also known as the Skylight House, or Cliff May #4) is significant as the work of a master architect and landscape architect and as a unique example of the evolution of Ranch House design, a housing style endemic to Los Angeles and replicated throughout the world.

Cliff May, the father of the California Ranch style of residential architecture was born in 1908 in San Diego, and was a direct descendant of the Estudillo Ranchero family. May, in collaboration with *Sunset Magazine*, wrote two books defining the Western Ranch House style, the predominant Post-War residential building type in Los Angeles. May designed the Experimental House as personal residence and as a laboratory for his cutting edge design ideas. The Experimental House was designed as the physical embodiment of “Western Living” and clearly shows the fusion of Modern design with Ranch architecture.

For the landscape design for the Experimental House, May collaborated with one of the foremost landscape architects of the time, Thomas Dolliver Church. During the time of Experimental House design, construction, and initial review, Church received the Fine Arts Medal of the American Institute of Architects (1951), and the Gold Medal of the New York Architectural League (1953), among his select national awards for the 2,000 gardens designed in his forty year career.

The physical design of the Experimental house, as with May’s other Ranch houses, was heavily influenced by his early exposure with the 19th century adobes and haciendas that once permeated the Southern California landscape. As with those earlier examples, May designed his homes utilizing the concept that “Living space is a total combination of indoor-outdoor space.” The precedent for this integration was found at the early adobes where activities such as eating, cooking, and bathing were all conducted outside. In the Experimental House, the line between indoor and outdoor spaces was as transparent as possible. May utilized a fifteen-foot sliding glass wall in the living room that opens onto one of two patios, equipped with a picnic table a fire-pit and outdoor wall seating to expand the residential living area. However, the most prominent feature of the house was the two hundred and eighty-eight square foot skylight that stretched the length of the house. The skylight was controlled by a thermostat, which automatically opened and closed the window according to the temperature and weather. May used this house as a test case for skylight design, which he later incorporated into many of his subsequent building designs.



An emphasis on open living space was another concept tested at the Experimental house and to foster this, May omitted the majority of interior walls, substituted with twenty-five 2'x 4'x 6' movable mahogany partitions which could be arranged to the whims or requirements of its residents. Because the partitions do not touch the ceiling and are mobile, air, light and living all flow unimpeded inside. In spite of the radical ideas implemented at the Experimental House, May did not lose sight of the importance of the relaxed western lifestyle. The treatment of the exterior form and materials indicates a close link with the adobe tradition and to the surrounding landscape.

With the Experimental House, Cliff May not only constructed a house that would greatly influence his later work, but constructed a living space that captured the essence of Southern California living. As a Ranch style structure with a conceptual focus, the Cliff May Experimental House is one of a kind.

