



Best Practices Review

A publication on National Register Bulletin guidance

Considering Unusual Properties

Introduction

The National Register of Historic Places includes a wide range of properties that reflect the diversity of American history and culture. Among them are properties that invite a broader understanding of what constitutes heritage. These listings demonstrate that the National Register criteria can be applied to properties that fall outside familiar categories.

This issue of the *Best Practices Review* addresses identifying and documenting unusual properties. By bringing attention to these places, the National Register helps expand public awareness of the many ways history and culture are reflected in the built environment.

Identifying the Unusual



Lucy the Margate Elephant, Margate, New Jersey. (Photograph by Jack E. Boucher)

The National Register has, since its earliest years, listed unusual properties. Certainly “Lucy, the Margate Elephant” quickly comes to mind: this building was listed in the National Register in 1971 (and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1973). But less grand examples were recognized early in the program’s history, too, most often as properties deeply meaningful to local communities.

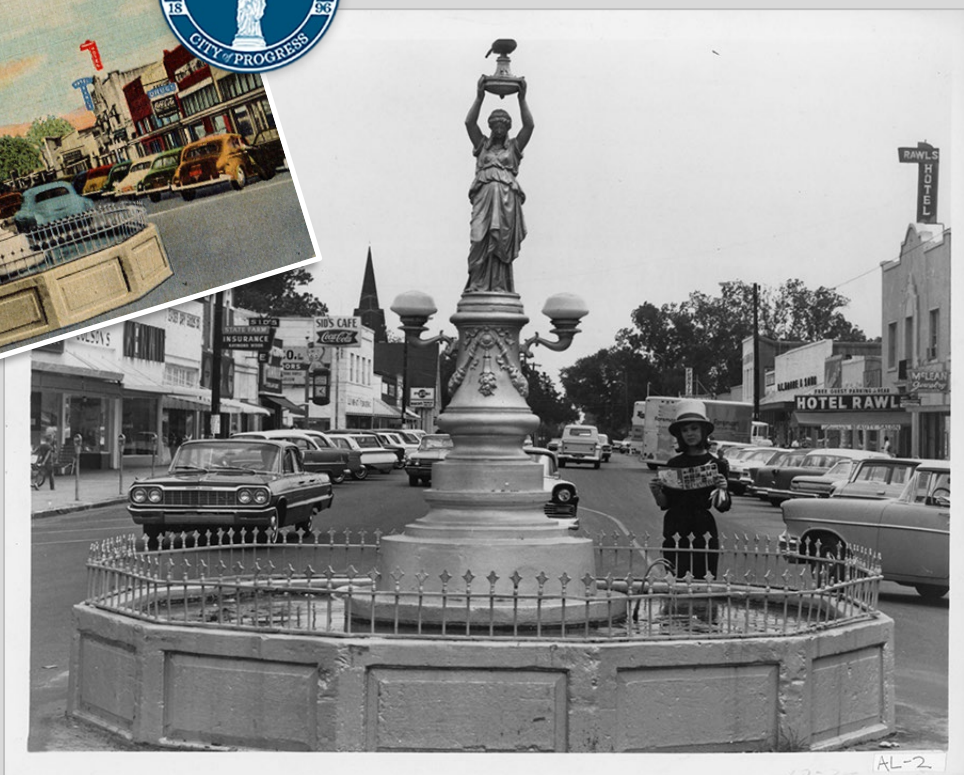
For example, the **Boll Weevil Monument** was listed in 1973 as an object for its significance to the people of Alabama. The citizens of Enterprise erected the monument in 1919 to commemorate this insect anti-hero for its role in “diversifying the local economy by abolishing one-crop agriculture” (Boll Weevil Monument Registration Form, p. 3). Located at the intersection of Main and College Streets, the

monument consists of a cast-lead statue of a woman standing on a graduated base in the center of a 15-foot concrete pool. The 3-foot-tall figure holds over her head a larger-than-life aluminum boll weevil (a

later addition, in 1949). Although created as a commemorative property, the monument has acquired its own significance due to the passage of time, a consideration described in *National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (Criteria Bulletin) at page 40. Today, the Boll Weevil Monument is featured on Enterprise’s city logo.



Boll Weevil Monument, Enterprise, Alabama. (Left, Curteich-Chicago "C.T. Art-Colortone" postcard; center, Enterprise, Alabama logo, <https://www.enterpriseal.gov>; right, photo by Bureau of Publicity and Information, Montgomery, Alabama)



Other properties may be listed for reasons not apparent at first glance. For example, the early nineteenth - century **Olson House** in South Cushing, Maine, is a well-preserved vernacular Greek Revival Style farmhouse, with several outbuildings. However, it was listed in 1993 not under Criterion C for its architectural significance but rather under Criteria A and B for its role in art. As described in the nomination,

[a] weathered nineteenth century farmhouse whose rural setting remains largely undisturbed, the Olson House has achieved significance in the history of American art by virtue of its association with Christina Olson and the work of Andrew Wyeth. For nearly thirty years, from 1939-1968, Wyeth depicted the house, its immediate environment, and its occupants Christina and Alvaro Olson in a series of drawings, watercolors, and tempera paintings including one of the most widely recognized images of the twentieth century: "Christina's World."

(Olson House Registration Form, Section 8, p. 2)

Wyeth had "unrestricted access to the house, and in fact was given a room to work in on the third story" and the property's period of significance tracks with Wyeth's relationship with the Christina and Alvaro Olson, from 1939 when he first met the Olsons, to 1968, after both Olsons had died. The Olson House was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2011. It is open to the public, who can examine the property from the same views that inspired Andrew Wyeth for almost fifty years.



Bottom, "Christina's World" by Andrew Wyeth. (Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8005786>)
Top, Olson House, South Cushing, Maine, view from southwest. (Photograph by Kirk Mahoney, 1993)

Another example of a property whose significance is not obvious is the **Plaza Tower** in New Orleans, Louisiana. This 33-story office building, with a distinctive, cantilevered "hat," was listed in the National Register in 2012 under Criteria C; however, it was not listed for its significance in architecture but in engineering, specifically, for the mostly invisible characteristic that make it significant: its innovative foundation system. Construction began in 1964 and employed a new, patented civil engineering technology, the Brunspile sectional pile and wedge connector. This system of pre-cast pilings allowed for deeper penetration of the alluvial soils that characterize the New Orleans area and provided the necessary support for taller (and heavier) buildings. Its successful use in the Plaza Tower project pioneered the method for subsequent tall buildings in the city as well as other areas with similar soils.

The existence of the tower itself is the primary evidence of the significance of the engineering. Although the interior was largely gutted for asbestos and mold remediation, the interior features, spaces, and finishes were not important to assessing the integrity of the property. The existence of the tower, with its original marble cladding, demonstrates the efficacy of the Brunspile system: Plaza Tower proved the system's worth and spurred construction in New Orleans of skyscrapers. The numerous other tall (and taller) buildings



subsequently constructed with the same system attest to the significance of Plaza Tower as an influential pioneer in engineering.

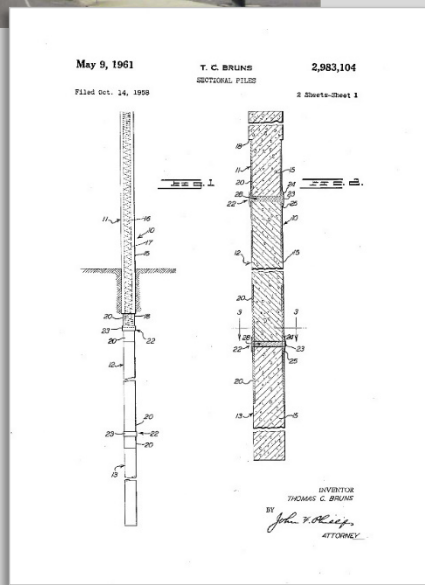
Embodying a Context

Properties listed in the National Register must possess significance when evaluated within the perspective of their historic context. Once the historic context is established and the property type is determined, it is not necessary to evaluate the property in question against other properties *if*:

- It is the sole example of a property type that is important in illustrating the historic context, *or*
- It clearly possesses the defined characteristics required to strongly represent the context.

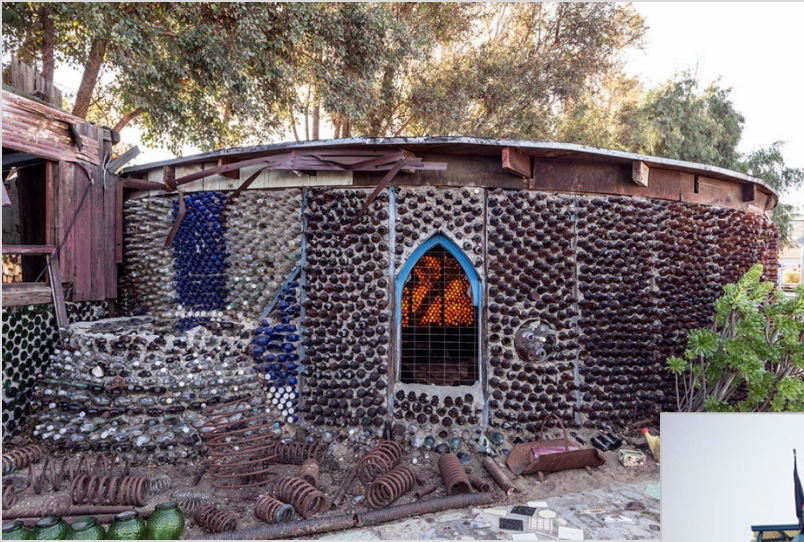
If these two conditions do not apply, then the property will have to be evaluated against other examples of the property type to determine its eligibility (*National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (Criteria Bulletin), p. 9). Unusual National Register-listed properties include folk art environments and Programmatic architecture (also variously referred to as Mimetic, Thematic, or Fantasy architecture) and these topics are the subjects of a great deal of literature, creating well-understood contexts for evaluating a variety of unusual properties.

For example, **Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village** in Simi Valley, California, is a property that embodies the characteristics of California folk art. This 1/3-acre historic district includes 17 structures—7 of which are contributing resources—built by Tressa “Grandma” Prisbrey with minimal assistance, using bottles placed horizontally in mortar to create buildings to house her various collections of common (and uncommon) items,



Top, Plaza Tower, New Orleans, Louisiana. (Photograph by Mary Jane Carleton, 2012)
Bottom, drawing of Brunspile System. (U.S. Patent Office)

including lipstick cases, pine cones, horse shoes, shells, gourds, toothbrushes, dolls, and 17,000+ pencils. The property was listed in the National Register in 1996 as a district for its statewide significance under Criteria B and C in the areas of art, architecture, and landscape architecture. Constructed between 1956 and 1965, Bottle Village is a folk art environment designed and built almost singlehandedly by Mrs. Prisbrey, who went on to become widely acclaimed as a folk artist. At the time of its nomination to the National Register, Bottle Village was recognized as “a bona-fide tourist attraction” (Bottle Village Registration Form, Section 8, p. 4). Section 8 “Statement of Significance” includes a discussion of folk art environments and their history in California and places the property squarely within the context of environments that reflect “the idiosyncratic visions of singular creators working with obsessive consistency over a period of years” while distinguishing Bottle Village



Top, Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village, Simi Valley, California. (The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)



Right, Encinitas Boathouse, Encinitas, California. (Photograph by Tom Cozens)

as “a rarity created out of actual mass consumer throwaway from everyday lives of Americans of the late 1950's and early 1960s” (Bottle Village Registration Form, Section 8, pp. 1-2). Although California was, at the time, “home to at least fifty folk art environments,” Bottle Village clearly possesses the defined characteristics that strongly represent this context:

In the folk art field, Bottle Village has been called “monumental” and “[a] testament to how far American women folk artists have come”..... In his book "Architectural Follies in America," Gwyn Headley, the art world's foremost authority on the subject of architectural follies, calls Bottle Village “The most ambitious bottle house in the nation.”

(Bottle Village Registration Form, Section 8, pp. 1, 4 (footnotes omitted).)]

Likewise, the **Encinitas Boathouses** are “[d]irectly tied to what is today regarded as a classically Californian historical movement of strange and unusual vernacular architecture” and as such are “an exceptionally rare, well-designed and well-crafted example of Fantasy-themed residential style from the apex of the 1920s and 1930s Programmatic Fantasy Architecture craze” (Encinitas Boathouses Registration Form, pp. 12, 26). These two “celebrated buildings within the City of Encinitas, symbolizing the historic beach town’s close connection to the sea” were listed in the National Register in 2019 under Criterion C for their local significance in architecture, with a period of significance based on the year of their construction, 1929 (Encinitas Boathouses Registration Form, p. 12).

Evaluating a Moved Property



Dine-A-Ville Dinosaur, Vernal, Utah. (Photograph by Cory Jensen)

It is not uncommon for a unique roadside attraction to literally move on down the road. A property removed from its original or historically significant location can be eligible if it is significant primarily for architectural value or is the surviving property most importantly associated with a historic person or event (Criteria Bulletin, p. 29).

For example, the **Dine-A-Ville Dinosaur**, a 40-foot-tall anthropomorphic pink dinosaur with a curving neck, toothy smile, and long lashes, once welcomed visitors to a local motel/cafe in Vernal, Utah. Erected in 1958 of wire mesh and fiberglass resin on a metal frame, this monumental roadside sculpture was moved in 1999 from its original location to its current location, where it now welcomes visitors traveling from the east and Dinosaur National Monument. The Dine-A-Ville Dinosaur was listed in the National Register in 2023 as an object of local significance under Criteria A and C in entertainment/recreation and art. The nomination succinctly documents the sculpture's integrity of design (noting its color change from orange to pink and (sadly) its no-longer-functioning illuminated, rolling eyes), materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. In its new location, it has the "orientation, setting, and general environment that are comparable to those of the historic location and that are compatible with the property's significance:" the Dine-A-Ville Dinosaur still faces Main Street, amidst a landscape of rocks and shrubs, along the city's commercial strip (Criteria Bulletin, p. 30).

Addressing a Museum Object

Unusual objects may be part of a museum collection, although this status does not necessarily prohibit the object from being listed in the National Register. For example, "**Big Brutus**" in West Mineral, Kansas, is a retired electric coal mining shovel listed in the National Register in 2018 as an object for its statewide significance under Criteria A and C in industry and engineering, with a period of significance of 1962 to 1974. Big Brutus is the centerpiece of a museum of Kansas mining history. The Criteria Bulletin provides that objects relocated to a museum are inappropriate for listing in the National Register; however, Big Brutus is an exception to this prohibition as it is not only sited in a setting appropriate to its significant historic role, the location and setting are the land once worked by Big Brutus (the land itself is a contributing resource (site))(Criteria Bulletin, p. 5).



Big Brutus, West Mineral, Kansas. (Photograph by Patrick Zollner and Amanda K. Loughlin)

As described in the nomination,

Brutus rests firmly on bedrock, slightly below ground level, in a self-dug 20' deep and 120' wide circular clearing on the eastern side of 16 acres of land that the Pittsburg and Midway Coal Mining Company had originally set aside as the site for the shovel's dismantling. The 16-acre site is now a well-maintained park and is the home of the Big Brutus Visitor Center and Museum, a maintenance building, an events shelter, an antique 3 cubic yard Page Dragline, numerous strip mining and deep mining machines, and other mining artifacts.

(Big Brutus Registration Form, p. 3.)

The period of significance includes the year Big Brutus was assembled and the 11 years it removed overburden of rock, clay, and dirt from the multiple seams of coal in the Weir-Pittsburg Coal Field of Crawford and Cherokee counties in southeastern Kansas.

This publication complements the guidance provided in National Register Bulletins by providing examples on specific topics. Your feedback is welcome; please contact Sherry Frear, Chief & Deputy Keeper, sherry_frear@nps.gov.

For copies of the nominations referenced in this document, please visit our [Sample Nominations](#) page.

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All images are from National Register nominations unless otherwise noted.

[The National Register of Historic Places](#) is the official list of buildings, structures, objects, sites, and districts significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture.

