

Abstract

Cities throughout the United States have adopted historical designations in order to protect the historic architectural resources and promote economic development of areas that carry a cultural significance to their communities. Detroit, a city in steep economic decline from 1970 until 2015, has also attempted to use historical preservation to promote economic development in particular neighborhoods. The role of historic preservation has rarely been considered in a city in steep, ongoing economic decline. The study presents spatial analysis techniques that can help determine the association, if any, of historical district designations with neighborhood rise or fall. By using various approaches to count structures and measure preserved space within census tracts, a difference-in-differences (DiD) analysis and an ordinary least squares regression model was developed to test the association of preservation and neighborhood status change from 1970 to 2015.

The results indicate that census tracts with a historic designation showed less decline and quicker improvement in neighborhood status when compared to census tracts with no protections. To further corroborate DiD results, ordinary least squares analysis indicated statistically-significant relationships between the percentage of historical district coverage and historically protected building counts and changes in all but two indicator values, but these results should not be accepted as evidence of causality because there is significant spatial autocorrelation. Also, Detroit's socio-economic conditions differ from other metropolitan statistical areas in the U.S. Further research is needed in other cities during periods of economic decline and with additional control variables.