Knowing what historic resources exist is a fundamental aspect of sustainable, effective planning. However, few cities have the time or resources to survey and analyze each building within their boundaries. Character studies are an innovative response to the challenge of producing practical, plan-ready data about historic resources across large areas quickly and inexpensively.

The Character Study Project (CSP) is designed to address immediate practical needs and long-term strategic issues in the planning and preservation fields by (1) collecting and analyzing block-scale data about the historic urban environment, (2) integrating this data into existing planning and policy frameworks, and (3) completing survey work within tight timeframes and budgets.

The CSP’s innovative approach employs web-based aerial images, digitized historic maps, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to quickly classify multi-parcel clusters by chronology and building typology, assemble and analyze the data, and field-check the digital survey to gauge integrity and ensure accuracy. The results document areas’ built character, historical evolution, and identify clusters warranting preservation attention. Results can be easily integrated into planning systems and considered on an equal footing with other planning issues; they can also help preservation advocates strategically direct advocacy and documentation efforts.

A successful pilot study was conducted in Philadelphia’s Lower Northeast planning district in January 2012. The five-day pilot included classification, fieldwork, and analysis of the six-mile-square planning district, and concluded in the incorporation of results into the Philadelphia Planning Commission’s Lower Northeast District Plan. Next steps for the CSP include implementing character studies for the rest of Philadelphia and conducting outreach about the methodology to other cities, towns, and regions.

Project collaborators include the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, the Philadelphia Historic Commission, and the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia. Learn more at www.design.upenn.edu/historic-preservation/center-research-preservation-and-society.