

DETERMINATION OF THE ZONING “HEIGHT OF A BUILDING OR STRUCTURE”

The City of Los Angeles has many layers of regulation related to the permissible height of buildings and structures. The regulations may depend on the location of a project, the type of project, slope of the lot or proximity to residential zones. This bulletin provides the general approach that should be used in determining the permissible height of a building or structure as well as how to correctly establish what the height of a building or structure is. A complete set of all regulations on this subject is not feasible in one document. A careful review of the regulations must be done once the site and the type of project is known.

I. General Approach to Establishing the Height of a Building or Structure

- a. Obtain a topographic map (not a cross-section or building elevation), signed by a licensed Civil Engineer or Licensed Surveyor, with the building or the structure outlined. The use of a topographic map will result in the most accurate determination of the height. An example showing a correct and an incorrect method of establishing height is on page three.
- b. Determine the “Grade” or “Adjacent Ground Elevation” which is defined as follows:

Grade (Adjacent Ground Elevation) -- is the lowest point of elevation of the finished surface of the ground, paving or sidewalk within the area between the building and the property line, or when the property line is more than 5 feet from the building, between the building and a line 5 feet from the building. This definition does not apply to any building or structure located within the Hillside Ordinance area or in Specific Plan areas such as Century City North, Century City South and others.

- c. Locate the highest point of elevation of the building or structure (including all roof structures such as chimneys, stairway towers, etc.). See item (e) of Section 2 (Special Provisions) below regarding allowable projections for roof structures such as fireplaces, antennas, etc. Allowable projections need not be included in the height calculation.
- d. The vertical distance between the “Grade” and the “highest point of elevation,” as described in steps b and c above is the “height of the building or structure.” Note that the Zoning Code definition differs from the Building Code definition and each must be applied independently for the corresponding code section under consideration.

II. Special Provisions / Exceptions

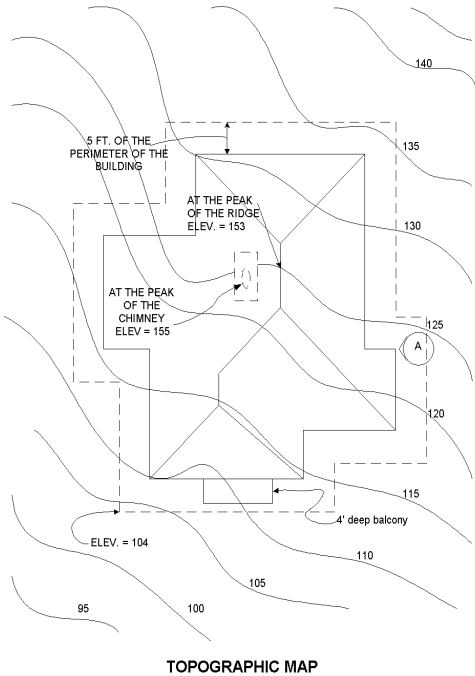
Following are some exceptions and special provisions that apply to commonly occurring situations. Since this is not a comprehensive list, consult with a plan check engineer at any of our public information counters for job specific applications.

- a. For projects subject to Hillside Ordinance, “Grade” is defined as lower of the natural or finished grade. When a project is located in any special area (e.g., Specific Plan, Pedestrian Overlay District, Community Design Overlay District, etc.), the “Grade” definition, the height limitation, exceptions, etc. (if different from the general Code) must be applied appropriately as required by its applicable ordinance. It is always advisable to review the Specific Plans. Some Specific Plans establish height limits in reference to sea level, curb level, street level, or other points of reference.
- b. If grading is (was) done in conjunction with a Subdivision of five acres or more, then the resulting grade would be considered the “Natural Grade” .
- c. Retaining walls cannot be used to raise the “Grade” and increase the allowable height of the structure.
- d. If the difference between the highest and the lowest grade elevation around the perimeter of the building exceeds 20 vertical feet, then the allowable height may be increased by 12 feet (provided the original height limit is not exceeded at any given “section” or “plumb line” of any part of the building). This exception is not allowed for buildings that are subject to the Hillside Ordinance.
- e. Certain roof top features & structures (e.g., antennas, chimneys, stairway towers, elevator tower, etc.) are allowed to exceed the height limit as follows:

... may be erected above the height limit specified in the district in which the property is located if, for each foot such structure exceeds the height limit, an equal setback from the roof perimeter is provided, except that stairways, chimneys and ventilation shafts shall not be required to be set back from the roof perimeter. No portion of any roof structure as provided for above shall exceed the specified height limit by more than five feet, except that where height is limited to seventy-five (75) feet, roof structures for the housing of elevators and stairways shall not exceed twenty (20) feet in height, and where height is limited to thirty (30) feet or forty-five (45) feet, such roof structures for the housing of elevators and stairways shall not exceed ten (10) feet in height. Other than stairways, chimneys or exhaust ducts, these structures shall not be located within five (5) feet of the perimeter of the roof. Note: Refer to Sec. 12.21A17(c)3 of the Code for a different set of exceptions for projects subject to the Hillside Ordinance.
- f. Depressed driveways intended for access from the street to a basement garage and secondary side or rear access stairwells are not used to establish the “Grade.” This interpretation does not apply to any buildings or structures located within the boundaries of Specific Plans which specifically address height measurement or buildings regulated by the Hillside Ordinance.
- g. Architectural projections which cantilever 5 feet or less from an exterior wall of a building are not included as part of definition of the “perimeter of the building” when calculating height.
- h. Open rooftop guardrails on apartment buildings are not included in the height of a building when such guardrails are provided around the open space required by code.

HEIGHT DETERMINATION EXAMPLE

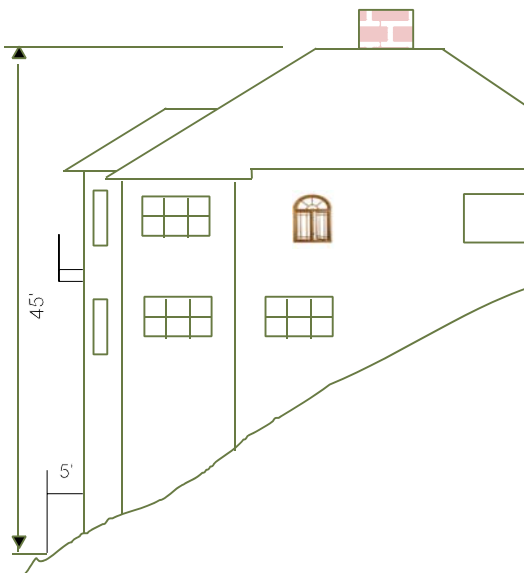
Method #1 (correct method using a topographic map)



- Use the topographic map provided
- Determine Grade. From the topographic map prepared by a licensed CE or LS, the lowest elevation within 5' of the perimeter of the building is 104'. The balcony is an architectural projection that need not be considered since it projects less than 5' from the exterior wall.
- The highest elevation of the building is 155 measured to the top of the chimney. However, a chimney is allowed to project up to 5'. Therefore the highest point of elevation of the building to be used is 153
- The height is calculated by subtracting 104 (the lowest grade within 5 feet of the perimeter of the building) from 153 (the elevation at the peak of roof ridge). The height is therefore 49 feet.

Method #2 (INCORRECT method using a section or elevation)

Looking only a section or an elevation, for the same building, often results in an INCORRECT building height of 45 ft. Typically, these architectural elevations only show an approximation of the true grade contour and should not be relied upon for an accurate determination of height.



ELEVATION A

III. Height Limitations

- a. Determine the allowable height limit according to the Height District or applicable regulation (e.g., Specific Plan, Hillside Ordinance, etc.). Chart # 1 represents the general code limitations based only on the Height District and zone designation. This chart can be used to determine the height limit when the site is not subject to any Specific Plan or any other Ordinance specific to the site.

Some projects are affected by more than one layer of regulation pertaining to allowable height. In addition, there are specific regulations depending on the type of development (e.g., Mini-Shopping Center Development), location (e.g., Hillside Ordinance, Specific Plan, etc.), and/or other site-specific limitations (“Q” or “D” conditions, transitional height, etc.). Due to all these variables, it is suggested that once you have selected a site for development, you seek the assistance of a plan check engineer at any of the Department’s public information counters.

Specific Plans are land use ordinances applicable in designated parts of the City. They frequently consist of regulations that prescribe permissible uses, parking requirements, setbacks, allowable height and many other requirements that are different from the general regulations of the Planning and Zoning Code. Construction projects in these areas frequently require a discretionary approval by the Director of Planning after scrutiny by a Design Review Board. These ordinances, when applicable, need to be reviewed in detail prior to designing a project.

- b. If a project is subject to more than one layer of regulation, the most restrictive will be the governing height limit.
e.g., Mini-shopping centers are limited to 40 feet; however, if it is located in 1XL district (which has a limit of 30 feet), the governing height limit is 30 feet.

CHART No. 1 HEIGHT DISTRICTS LIMITATIONS							
ZONE	1	1L	1VL	1XL	2	3	4
A1 A2, RE40 RZ, RMP RW2, RD & R3	45' ^(a)	45' ^(a)	45' ^(a)	30' ^(a)	75' for RD and R3; no limits for other zones	75' for RD and R3; no limits for other zones	75' for RD and R3; no limits for other zones
RE11 RE15 RE20, RA	36' ^(a)	36' ^(a)	36' ^(a)	30' ^(a)			
R1 R2 RS, RE9	33' ^(a)	33' ^(a)	33' ^(a)	30' ^(a)			
RU, RW1	30' ^(a)	30' ^(a)	30' ^(a)	30' ^(a)			
PB	NONE	75'	45'	30'	NONE	NONE	NONE
R4 R5	NONE	75'	45'	30'	NONE	NONE	NONE
C, M ^(b)	NONE	75'	45'	30'	75' for CR; no limits for other zones	75' for CR; no limits for other zones	75' for CR; no limits for other zones

Note: Height limits shown above are measured in feet. See code for other limitations (e.g., number of stories and/or floor area limits based on the buildable area of the lot, aka “floor area ratio”).

(a) Requirements for Single Family Dwelling projects may be governed by the Hillside Ordinance.

(b) Portions of buildings on a C or M zoned lot shall not exceed the heights limits set forth below when located within the distances specified from a lot classified in the RW1 Zone or more restrictive zone.

DISTANCE (ft)	HEIGHT (ft)
0 to 49	25
50 to 99	33
100 to 199	61