

# Adaptive Reuse in City of Los Angeles: A Planning Strategy for Housing and Preservation

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## Introduction

Los Angeles faces a deepening housing crisis, compounded by underutilized commercial buildings and rising construction barriers. Adaptive reuse is the repurposing of existing buildings for new uses. It offers a sustainable solution by converting vacant or obsolete structures into much needed housing. Since the 1999 Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO), Los Angeles has pioneered this strategy, especially in Downtown. However, as permitting rates plummet citywide down 57% in early 2025, adaptive reuse emerges as a critical policy tool to bridge the gap between housing need and limited development capacity. This project evaluates how adaptive reuse addresses housing, heritage, and equity through case studies, stakeholder analysis, and policy review.

## Key Findings

Over 12,000 housing units delivered through adaptive reuse in Downtown Los Angeles since 1999. Citywide Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (2025) expanded eligibility to areas like Hollywood, Wilshire, and Koreatown. Adaptive reuse is viewed as a sustainable, cost-saving alternative to new construction.

### What Stakeholders Say

95 % of city planners see adaptive reuse as essential to addressing commercial vacancies and housing demand. 75% of residents believe it contributes to housing supply. And 90% of developers support the idea but struggle with feasibility and permitting delays.

### What’s Not Working

Q1 of 2025 saw a 57% drop in new housing approvals signaling a permitting crisis, just 1,325 homes permitted citywide. Developers report slow inspections, high fees, and conflicting building code requirements. Projects outside Downtown face mixed-zoning confusion, historic preservation barriers, and community resistance due to fears of displacement.

## Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach focused on Downtown LA and the Hollywood/Wilshire Corridor.

### Qualitative Design

Six case studies were selected to represent diverse building types and reuse outcomes.

### Stakeholder Interviews

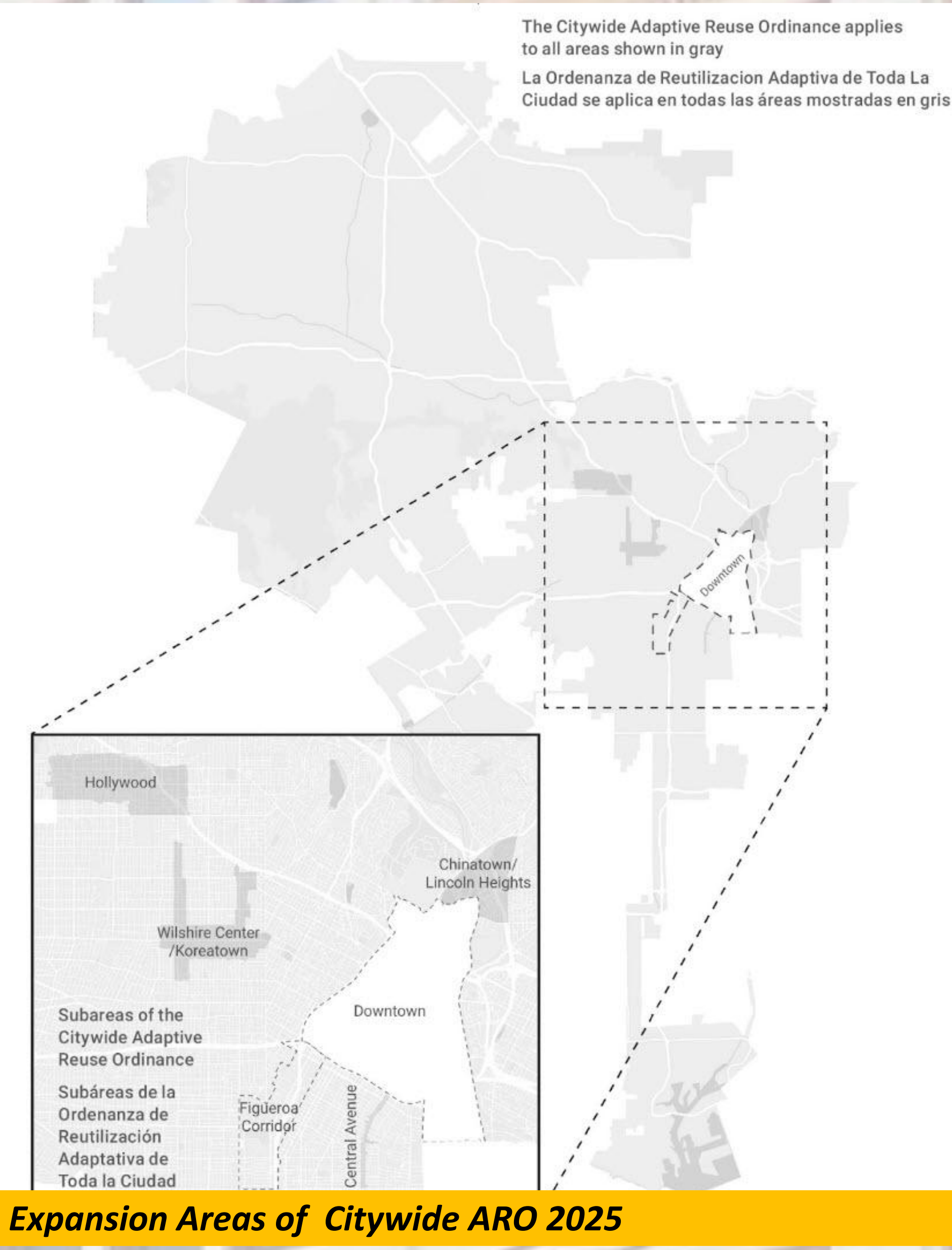
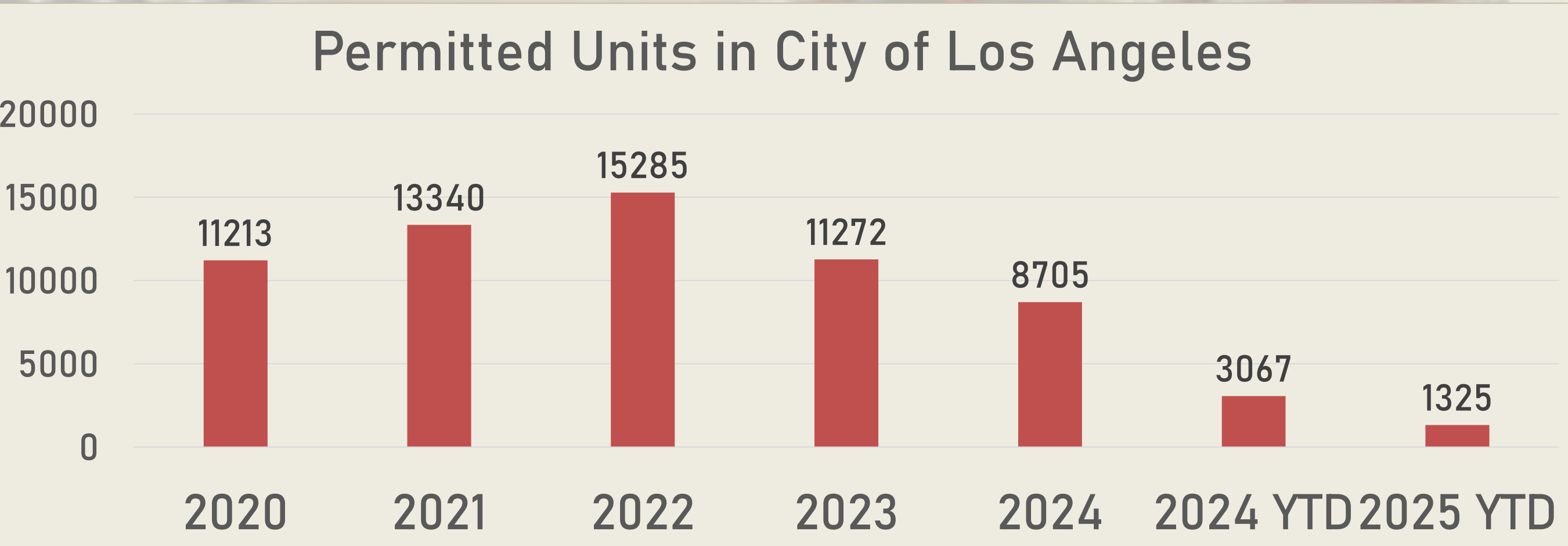
Planners, developers, and residents shared insights on policy effectiveness, feasibility, and equity concerns.

### Document Analysis

City policies (e.g., ARO, SB 79) and external reports (UCLA/RAND, Turner Center) were reviewed.

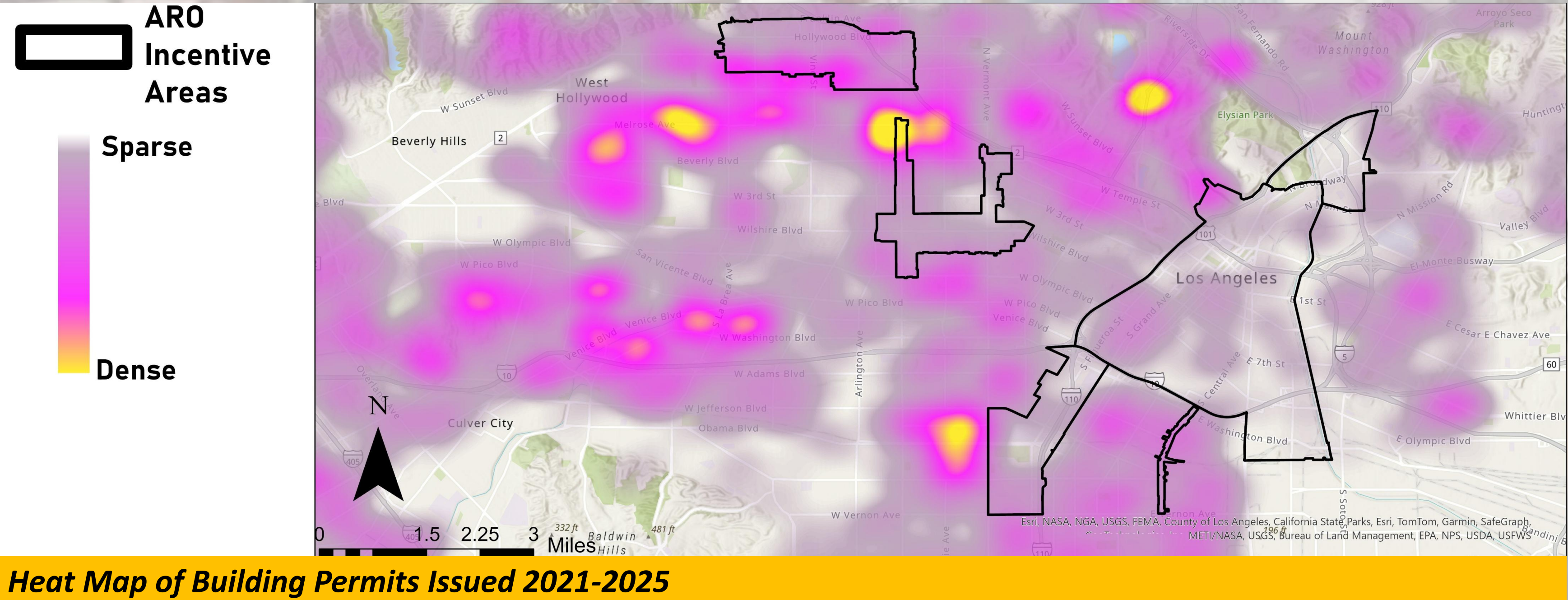
### Site Analysis

GIS tools mapped commercial vacancies and zoning overlays to assess spatial patterns in adaptive reuse potential.



## Conclusion

Adaptive reuse is a powerful tool for addressing Los Angeles’ housing crisis while preserving its architectural heritage. With permitting rates falling and new development slowing, reuse offers a faster, more sustainable path forward. However, to unlock its full potential, the city must streamline regulations, modernize codes, and align incentives with community goals. Adaptive reuse isn't just about buildings—it's about reimagining how we live, grow, and adapt as a city.



## Policy Solutions

Streamline permitting with a dedicated Adaptive Reuse Task Force and fast-track approvals for eligible buildings. Update building codes (e.g., fire, seismic, accessibility) to reflect reuse realities, especially for older nonconforming structures. Clarify zoning overlays to resolve conflicts in areas like Wilshire, Hollywood, and Koreatown.

## Financial Incentives

Expand use of Mills Act and offer tax abatements, grants, or low-interest loans for code upgrades and seismic retrofits. Create affordability-linked bonuses (e.g., density/floor area ratio incentives for including affordable units). Encourage public-private partnerships for reuse projects on publicly owned or underutilized sites.

## Equity & Community Impact

Pair reuse with anti-displacement tools: tenant protections, right-to-return policies, and anti-eviction ordinances. Require early and ongoing community input on large-scale reuse projects to improve transparency and trust. Use adaptive reuse to create mixed-income, mixed-use communities that support long-term affordability and local business resilience.