



The Local Landmarker

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On the Cover: This house has seen several periods of alterations, one that has acquired significance in its own right and others that have not. This house was constructed ca. 1815 in the Federal style, with a classical cornice, quarter-round “lunette” windows in the gable, and an entrance with delicate, “Adamesque” ornament and a fanlight. The Greek Revival style portico was added ca. 1835. This change reflects a significant shift in American architecture from the early to the mid 19th century; the owners were “modernizing” their house to reflect the changing styles, and in doing so have left a record of their aspirations, as well as the development and growth of the building, the village, and the nation during the early years of the United States. As such it has acquired significance as part of the history of the building.

From the Coordinator

This issue

I often get questions from commission members about how to review Certificates of Appropriateness applications for properties that are included within the boundaries of historic districts but that do not contribute to the significance of the district. An example would be a ca. 1975 ranch house in an otherwise intact Victorian-era neighborhood. Another example is the house or building that is just as old as the others in the district, but been significantly altered, with very little of its historic design or material extant.

Another question is how to review proposals at buildings that DO contribute to a district, but have had alterations or changes (before local designation) that do not contribute to the significance of the individual building. An example of this would be a house that retains all its original materials and design *except* for where all the wooden turned porch elements (posts, railings, etc.) were replaced in the 1960's or later by under-scaled wrought-iron materials. Trickier still can be the building that has changes to the original design or construction and where those changes have acquired significance in their own right and should be respected in any proposed work.

There are no easy answers to these questions, you can start by understanding the district and its individual buildings before make your decisions. This issue of the *Landmarker* will hopefully help you evaluate these situations more clearly and in a consistent and defensible manner.

I'm also looking for "guest" writers for upcoming issues of the *Landmarker*. Maybe you have a successful grant project you'd like to share, or a topic you've researched in order to help the work of your commission. If so, please contact me and we can talk about getting your name in print!



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Reviewing Proposals at Non-Contributing or Altered Historic Buildings

Very few historic districts or historic buildings survive into the present without any changes. It may have been the demolition of a key building and its replacement with something entirely out of character or an inappropriate alteration to an historic house that sparked the drive for a local district in the first place. Many historic buildings have had very interesting “lives”, with changes of use or stylistic “updates” impacting their overall integrity. Of course, both the districts and the buildings in them have to have retained an appropriate level of integrity to become designated in the first place, but you most likely have some situations that will cause you to scratch your head.

For instance, you may have to review a proposal at a single story brick house in a streetscape of two-or-more-story clapboarded, shingled, or otherwise-sheathed houses of vastly different scales and detail than that of the subject property. How do you review proposals at buildings like this that are within the district but do not contribute to the significance of the district?

Also, you might be faced with a proposal at a building that by virtue of its age, overall character, and location clearly contributes to the district, but is missing some of its historic details. This can be things such as turned porch posts replaced at an unknown time with under-scaled wrought iron supports, a once colorful patterned slate roof replaced in the late 20th century by a gray asphalt roof, or a once prominent corner tower truncated to a mere stump during a ca. 1950 renovation. How do you approach these projects?

Or, how about a building that you know from historic documentation was once a great example of a Queen Anne house or Italianate commercial building, but was altered to such a point that it is now considered non-contributing? You might be tempted to make an owner “bring it back,” but they simply want to undertake some simple repairs.

There are also those buildings that been altered, but those changes are significant to the overall history and “story” of the resource and are worthy of preservation. Sometimes an owner will wish to recapture the “first” period of the building, removing details and materials added during the property’s period of significance. These can be minor in scope or truly monumental, such as removing an entire porch or portico that was not part of the original construction. The goal may be intriguing and the idea exciting, but you have to approach such a proposal with standards that protect the full history of the building and district.

These are some of the issues that reviewers of proposals at historic buildings are faced with, both at the local preservation commission level as well as at the State Historic Preservation Office. It can be a true test of using established standards, following appropriate processes instead of personal wishes and be an example of treating every owner and every project with thoughtful consideration and within the “big picture” of the work of a preservation commission.

“That Building”

They are out there, the “onion in the petunia patch”, the one that catches your eye every time you drive by. It can be a single story commercial infill structure with a pre-fabricated metal storefront in the middle of a row of three-story, mid 19th century masonry commercial buildings, all with historic storefronts, decorative window lintels, and projecting cornices. It can be a long, low ranch house with a dark hipped roof in a block of two and three-story houses that all proudly stand up vertically with cross gables, towers, turrets, colored slate, roof cresting, or similar details. Or, maybe it is the one with a rich history, but has been significantly altered or is severely deteriorated: these can be the hardest to accept as they are, since our eye starts to peel away the layers, add the missing parts and see it as it was originally.

Whatever the case, if they are located within a district, they are part of your responsibility and you must treat them using the guidelines in your law and any other design guidelines you have appropriately adopted. For purposes of this article, I will be referring to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, which are the standards that are reflected in the review criteria in the New York State Model Preservation Law (see *The Local Landmarker*, Issue 2, December 2006).

Why me? Can’t you see that my building’s not historic?

Sometimes owners may think that their buildings are clearly non-historic and that any work that they are proposing doesn’t have to be reviewed by the commission. However it is the location of the building, not its appearance or contributing status that counts here. If the building is within the boundaries of the historic district, the owner has to go through the review process; it is how you approach the review that is the crux of the matter.

For example, if we take the single story house in the block of multi-story houses mentioned above, what aspects of the building or the proposal do you focus on in your review? Clearly you are not looking to preserve the fabric of modern windows that may be metal or vinyl. You are not looking to make sure that the dark three-tab asphalt shingles are replaced exactly in kind, although that in-kind type of work would certainly make the project easier to review. What you are looking for is how the proposal may affect the adjacent or surrounding historic resources or the district’s overall character. Most minor work at such a non-contributing resource will be a simple approval. A roofing change from a dark to a buff roofing shingle might not be anything to get excited about. However, if the owner wishes to significantly add onto or radically change the existing materials and form of the building, then there is a serious review to undertake.

If an owner wishes to add some dormers to the building’s roofline to create useable attic space and if these dormers make sense architecturally with the building in scale, location, fenestration, etc., this may be a simple review. However, if the owner wishes to add an entire second floor, then the review gets a bit more complex. An entire new floor and new roofline will certainly increase the visibility of the building in the streetscape. Do you ask the owner to “mimic” the older buildings on either side? Do you ask him to simply copy the first floor?

Looking at the language in the model law for reviewing “Certifications of Appropriateness” is helpful in this instance (note the text in bold);

Section 5: Criteria for Approval of A Certificate of Appropriateness

- (A) In passing upon an application for a certificate of appropriateness, the Historic Preservation Commission shall not consider changes to interior spaces, unless they are open to the public.

The Commission's decision shall be based on the following principles:

- (i) properties which contribute to the character of the historic district shall be retained, with their historic features altered as little as possible;
 - (ii) **any alteration of existing properties shall be compatible** with their historic character, as well as **with the surrounding district; and**
 - (iii) **new construction shall be compatible with the district in which it is located.**
- (B) **In applying the principle of compatibility, the Commission shall consider the following factors:**
- (i) the general design, character and appropriateness to the property of the proposed alteration or new construction;
 - (ii) **the scale of proposed alteration or new construction in relation to the property itself, surrounding properties, and the neighborhood;**
 - (iii) texture, materials, and color and their relation to similar features of other properties in the neighborhood;
 - (iv) **visual compatibility with surrounding properties, including proportion of the property's front facade, proportion and arrangement of windows and other openings within the facade, roof shape, and the rhythm of spacing of properties on streets, including setback; and**
 - (v) the importance of historic, architectural or other features to the significance of the property.

Section 5 (A) iii, “any alteration of existing properties shall be compatible ... with the surrounding district;” is the key here, with compatibility criteria fleshed out in Section B. Scale is the first important consideration. If the new addition is entirely out of scale with the buildings around it (significantly wider, taller, etc.) then it is likely inappropriate. One rule of thumb that has been used for many historic districts is that any new construction in a historic district, be it enlarging an existing non-contributing building, or an entirely new construction, be within 10% to 15% of the height and width of the adjacent buildings. The next guidance in 5 (B) iv is more direct as to placing features on the new construction as well as the location of the new construction itself. Setback is key here, along with window design, and other features. For more information on approaching new construction in historic districts see *The Local Landmarker*, Issue 9, 2008. Remember, you are not requiring an owner to “finally” fix that non-contributing building or make it look exactly like those around it. Just as the contributing buildings are clearly of their age but play by a set of common rules, any changes to a non-contributing building should reflect its time, but also its neighborhood!

But the porch on my property was changed before I bought it (or before the commission was established!)

There are historic buildings that may have had some insensitive alterations before they were designated. However, their overall historic character can still be clearly read in their materials, scale, setback, features, etc. and, overall, they contribute to the character of the historic district. This may mean that they have some non-historic materials or features that would not have been approved if the law and the commission had existed at the time that work was undertaken. Take the case of a porch that historically had single story classical columns with a turned balustrade, replaced sometime in the past with thin, black-painted wrought iron supports and railings. The owner needs to replace one of the uprights due to some damage from a falling tree limb. Do you take insist that he restore the entire porch railing to its historic appearance? No. In this case, you are reviewing the proposed work in the context of existing materials and design. The best approach would be to allow replacement in-kind of the failed upright, which will maintain the existing appearance. If the owner wishes to remove the entire system, then that opens up a choice between several options. These are:

1. Replace the materials in-kind, as is.
2. Restore the original porch exactly as it was, based on conclusive physical, pictorial, or documentary evidence. The Secretary's Standards do allow for the use of modern materials as long as they have an appropriate appearance.
3. If recreating the historic porch is problematic due to documentation, obtaining the correct materials, or accessing appropriate craftsmanship, technology, etc., then the most appropriate treatment is to build a new porch. However, this porch must be based on the form, scale, and details of the historic, but there can be some leeway in how details are treated. This is the "middle path", bringing some of the original character back without being exact in every detail. The new porch should be honest to its time, but honor the original.

The philosophical approach behind these three approaches is that you had one historic appearance lost to a second non-historic appearance, and in the next phase of work that you are reviewing, you do not create a third, entirely new non-historic appearance. .

"Well, it was once historic, but now..."

I'm sure you have at least one example like this in your community: the once grand house, commercial building, or church that still survives, but in a greatly altered form. While your personal dream may be to turn back the clock and recapture it "the way it was," in your local survey and designation report, it is listed as "non-contributing" due to the many alterations it has suffered. This is an instance where you have to set your personal wishes and agendas aside (which of course must be done for ALL reviews) and deal with the review in a professional manner, using all the process and standards you have in your law and regulations. Although you know that there might be a beauty underneath all that asbestos shingle or aluminum siding, you must approach this review in a manner akin to that of the one-story ranch house in the first example. You review any work here in regard to how it might affect the neighboring properties or surrounding district. You cannot make the owner undertake restoration work outside the scope of the project proposal. The argument "but we know what the tower looked like....." cannot be brought into the discussion, and your dream of returning the building to its full glory will have to be deferred.

“Well, the house was built in 1820, but in 1855 they put these columns on, in 1890, they added this tower, and in 1972 my dad added the carport”

This type of project brings in the issue of “acquired significance,” a concept that the Secretary’s Standards clearly addresses. Standard #4 states: **Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.** The house on the cover of this *issue* illustrates changes that have both acquired significant as well as those that haven’t. First was the original federal-style house, then the columns and then the portico which clearly represents changing architectural styles (Greek Revival) possibly as well as the owner’s or the Village’s prosperity. However, other changes (see the picture below) have been undertaken more recently that do not have the same level of historical or stylistic importance. Look carefully at the windows; it is apparent that the existing first floor windows have been changed. The patching-in of clapboard where there were once full-length, possibly triple-hung windows are visible, as well as the loss of window trim is visible. This change, along with the new, smaller-scale, 1/1 vinyl windows is not a change that has acquired significance. While it does reflect something about the recent use of the property, the change was most likely not made with thought about either preserving or enhancing the house’s character.





Changes in “Modern” Times

This storefront in Catskill, NY is an example of a change that has acquired significance. The building is a three-story commercial/residential building constructed in the mid 19th century. Above the first floor, it has its original 3 bay form and projecting Italianate-style cornice. However, the storefront was replaced ca.1930 with one constructed of glass and metal in a restrained Art Deco style. The shining glass sheathing, the integral retractable awning that rolls back into a “novelty” metal frame (novelty metal is a term used for various alloys used in the early part of the 20th century for their color, finish, and decorative qualities), and the incised and applied metal signage in a “modern” typeface all speak to the storefront change representing significant advances in technology, commercial merchandizing, American architecture, and possibly a change in the building’s use or ownership. The materials are high quality, carefully designed, and were installed with the intent that it be a long-lasting change, which has proven to be the case. It appears that all evidence and materials of the earlier storefront was destroyed in this alteration, and due to its age, quality, and design features, this storefront is now a contributing feature on this building and to the larger district. Even if there was conclusive documentation of the earlier storefront, this storefront should be preserved in any future work proposals.

Figuring it out

So, how do you tell if a change has acquired significance? If you have a good district survey or designation report, this information should be noted in that document. If not, you have to go through a thoughtful review process, using your designation criteria. You can start by asking yourself the following questions.

- Was the change made within the past 50 years (the baseline criteria for National Register listing, and the baseline age in many local preservation laws). If so, it will most likely not be seen as having acquired significance in its own right. While there are National Register

criteria for changes or resources that are not 50 years old, the bar is high and difficult to reach for most typical alterations.

- Does it reflect a significant change in the building's use, or historical development of the district or community?
- It is an alteration that can be associated with significant historic American architectural trends or styles?
- Was it constructed of quality material, representing a significant investment in the building?

If the answer to one or more of these questions is yes, then you most likely have a significant change.

Going Forward

Most of us work in historic preservation, either at the professional or volunteer level with ideas of saving the great buildings in our village, city, or state. However, the reality is that we are charged with working with proposals at buildings in all states of repair, integrity, and significance. Hopefully this article will assist you in reviewing projects at properties that are less than perfect, and help you to make decisions about how that building, contributing or not, perfectly intact or not, continues to be a part of your surroundings.

The concepts and guidance described in this article are ones based on the Secretary's Standards, and have been developed over years of preservation practice. I recommend you look at your city, village, or town and think about the buildings under the protection of your local preservation law; those that are both contributing and non-contributing. Think about the changes they have occurred and how you would review a proposed project at that site, using the approaches above. Doing so may give you a "leg up" with any proposals that do come before you and the commission.

Featured Website

The State Historic Preservation Office in Kansas has produced a set of excellent window repair videos to inform the public on how cost effective and efficient it is to preserve, repair, and retrofit historic windows. This is in direct response to claims made by window replacement companies and the impact that wholesale window replacement has been having on historic properties in Kansas. Although we're Mid-Atlantic and they are Mid-West, the lessons in these videos translate just fine. I recommend you view them, and if possible, post a link to them on your commission's website or section on your municipality's website.

<http://www.kshs.org/resource/windowrepair.htm>



This window opening at an historic commercial/warehouse building has seen a change that has not acquired significance in its own right. The original tall, arched window has been removed, the opening downsized with block, and a new inappropriately scaled window installed. This change was not undertaken with any thought to historic character; nor does it reflect any significant change in use, architectural style, technological advance, or other such justification. Nonetheless, if the owner came before a commission with this alteration undertaken before designation, you could not compel them to restore the historic window. If the owner wished to do so, the new windows would have to be based on documentation of the original window configuration.

The Back Page...Further Reading

A team of staff members here at the State Historic Preservation Office have developed a “Tool Kit” on Historic Preservation and Weatherization, with excellent information on:

- Energy saving priorities, putting windows in the context of other , more crucial energy saving steps
- Routine maintenance tips, which can keep old windows “young”
- Common problems with older windows and how to address them
- The need for weather-stripping and how best to install it
- The appropriate installation of Storm windows and their benefits
- The appropriate time to order replacement windows, and the way to select the best fit for your historic house
- Local and regional contacts for historic preservation advocacy groups who may be able to provide you with recommendations for consultants and skilled contractors

If you are interested in receiving copies of this publication, call Eric Kuchar, our Historic Preservation and Weatherization expert at (518) 237-8643. Ext. 3260, or write him at eric.kuchar@oprhp.state.ny.us. These booklets can be great for you to include with Certificate of Appropriateness applications, post on your website, or distribute to property owners.

