

STAIRWAYS

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A historic building's plan is generally defined by its interior circulation patterns. Stairways and stairhalls are principal elements of these patterns. Historic stairways can be important not only in their design, materials, and workmanship, but in their spatial relationship to the rest of the building. Retention and repair of existing stairways is always recommended as the first option in rehabilitation projects. Alterations to historic stairways usually result in substantial redefinition of a building's historic plan, and loss of historic character. Such alterations can jeopardize certification of a rehabilitation project.

Evaluation of Historic Stairways

Residential Buildings: Original stairways and stairhalls are frequently the single most important features of a residential building's interior. Rehabilitation schemes calling for removal or substantial alterations to such stairways are generally not compatible with the historic building. Retention and repair of existing stairways in residential buildings should always be the first rehabilitation option.

Hotels: Most hotels and similar buildings have primary staircases which are integral aspects of the historic interior. Rehabilitation schemes calling for substantial alterations to such stairways are generally not compatible with the historic building. Many hotels also have secondary staircases with less distinctive design, materials, and craftsmanship. Retention of all historic stairways is preferred in rehabilitations of these buildings, but the primary staircases are more important in defining the character of these buildings, and should be given priority in preservation planning.

Public Buildings: Primary staircases in courthouses, schools, assembly halls, theaters, post offices, and comparable buildings are usually major elements of the historic interior. Alterations to such staircases will almost always compromise the integrity of the building.

Commercial Buildings: Many historic commercial buildings have integral stairways which help define the historic interior. In some cases, stairways in open-plan commercial, factory, or warehouse buildings do not have significant design, materials, or craftsmanship, and may not be considered significant historic features. In some cases, only portions of existing staircases may be considered important.

Previously Altered Stairways

Stairways that have been altered in earlier renovations of a property, or which are not original to a building, may still be significant historic features worthy of preservation. Altered or rebuilt stairways can exhibit significant design qualities, materials, workmanship, and finishes. Even if a building's original stair configuration is known, restoration of that configuration should not be undertaken until the potential value of the existing features are interpreted.

If it can be determined that an existing stairway, either because of alterations, reconstruction, or other factors, is not a significant element of an interior, then the historic plan may have lost much of its integrity, and more liberal alterations to the interior may be possible. Restoration of an original configuration, or design of a completely new stairway, might be appropriate under these circumstances.

Inappropriate Rehabilitation Measures

Inappropriate measures in stairway rehabilitation may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Removal** of significant stairways or portions of such stairways.
- Removal** of significant details of stairways, including newel posts, balustrades, stringers, or other features.
- Enclosure** of significant stairways with partitions, or the introduction of new partitions in significant stairhalls.
- Relocation** of significant stairways to new locations or new configurations. Relocations, while they may preserve the historic materials, usually result in loss of the historic circulation pattern, and frequently involve loss of historic craftsmanship.
- Replacement** of deteriorated features which can be repaired. Wear on historic materials, including stair treads and balustrades, is part of their historic patina. Retention and repair of historic elements allows for preservation of historic materials and craftsmanship that would be lost if the elements were replaced.

Code Requirements

Some old stairways do not comply with current building codes. Rehabilitations of buildings with such stairways should be carefully studied so that the historic character of the building can be retained while still satisfying the intent of the codes. The BOCA building code allows for discretion by building officials in evaluating the rehabilitations of certified historic buildings.

Code requirements for buildings with significant historic stairways can be addressed, in many cases, with sprinkler systems; with new fire-rated stairways to supplement the historic stairways; or with similar measures. Balustrades and handrails of insufficient height can be augmented without destroying significant materials.

Consultation with local building officials and with the Department of Historic Resources can help

identify appropriate measures for bringing historic stairways into compliance with building codes.

Temporary Protection

Even with the use of trash chutes and material hoists, historic staircases can suffer unnecessary abuse during construction work. A protective system should be devised for significant stairways that may be vulnerable to damage during construction. Such protection can be as simple as Kraft paper covering, or as elaborate as a soft fiberboard cushion topped with plywood.

New Stairways

Where new stairways are considered in historic buildings, they should be located so that they do not require alterations to significant spaces or materials; and so that the historic plan and circulation pattern is retained intact.

If new exterior stairways or elevator towers are proposed, the location, massing, and exterior finish should be planned so that the new work does not destroy or obscure significant historic features of the building. Some historic buildings are so arranged that new exterior stairways or elevators would inevitably diminish the historic character of the building.

The Department of Historic Resources can answer further questions on stairway rehabilitation provisions in historic buildings. Contact Bill Crosby at (804) 367-2323 if you desire further information.