

CHARACTER DEFINING FEATURES

Mainstreets across America are increasingly using historic preservation to protect the historic buildings that create a sense of place and establish an identity in a community. Adaptive reuse of these buildings creates a catalyst for rehabilitation by creating jobs, increasing market values, and attracting tourists. As Richard Moe, former president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation states, “When people go on vacation they generally seek out destinations that offer them the sense of being someplace, not just anyplace.”

As the need to rehabilitate and renovate historic structures increases, the understanding of the buildings important components worthy of preservation should be identified. The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for rehabilitating historic buildings calls for the preservation of the exterior and interior portions or feature of the building that are significant to its historic, architectural, and cultural values. Identifying these character defining features and determining how they contribute to the building’s significance is the first step in creating a rehabilitation plan that ensures proper reuse of a historic structure.

An owner of a historic property should first review the building’s history to reveal why and when the building achieved its significance. This information helps to identify a rehabilitation plan that will preserve the physical components that distinguish a building’s historic character. The National Register of Historic Places files may prove useful in identifying when and at what time period the building was significant.

After identifying why and when a building was significant, property owners should then assess the building by walking through and taking account of each element that makes up the interior of the building. The goal of the assessment is to identify which elements contribute to the building’s character and which do not. The assessment should include:

1. **Identifying primary and secondary spaces.** Primary spaces include foyers, corridors, lobbies, parlors, assembly rooms, and stair halls. Often primary spaces are the most architecturally detailed and contain a high level of significant finishes and materials. Primary spaces are always important to the character of the building and should be closely observed for character defining features. Secondary spaces are usually more utilitarian in appearance. They are often rooms that service a building such as a storeroom, kitchen, bathroom, basement, or utility room. Secondary spaces often create less of a risk when implementing renovation plans but should still be assessed for significant features.

2. **An understanding of the sequence of space.** Oftentimes the sequence of space or type of floor plan can, in itself, be a character defining feature. The sequence of space such as a church's nave-narthex-altar sequence or a theater's foyer-lobby-stair-auditorium sequence can define and express a building's historic function and unique character. A floor plan typical of a particular style or time period can also be a character defining feature.

3. **Identifying architectural features and finishes that are part of the interior's history and character.** The assessment should also identify architectural features and finishes that are part of the buildings history and character. The features that are characteristic of the buildings style or time period should be retained throughout the renovation process. Architectural features and finishes worthy of preservation can include:
 - a. Marble or wood wainscoting
 - b. Grained woodwork
 - c. Columns
 - d. Crown molding
 - e. Baseboards
 - f. Mantels
 - g. Window and door trim
 - h. Ceiling medallions
 - i. Parquet floors
 - j. Plaster walls

Architectural features and finishes, even if machine made and not exhibiting high craftsmanship, may be character defining. The simplicity of a one room school building can be just as rich in history and character as a high style Victorian home.

Identifying character defining features in historic buildings will ensure the features that are most worthy of being preserved are kept intact during restoration efforts. It is important to save these features as they are the features that help define and identify the uniqueness of a community. Once the character-defining elements are removed, the building loses its historic integrity and the ability to invoke its historic significance.

About the Author:

Laura Schwartz MHP, preservation specialist for Church Restoration Group, is a graduate of the University of Kentucky where she received her master's degree in historic preservation. Laura primarily works with building owners, architects and preservation organizations. She also serves as the project lead on other historically significant projects. Laura's primary role for her clients is to ensure the Secretary of Interior's Standards are followed during restoration and when repairs are made to historic buildings. Her knowledge of the Section 106 process, the National Register nomination process, local historic nominations, and other preservation laws, makes her a valuable resource for local and national organizations particularly in promoting conservation when emergency services are conducted and during restoration. She is frequently asked to speak on disaster preparedness topics for historic structures.