

Education: What are Preservation Standards

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DEFINITION: Standards are used as a measure, norm, or model in comparative evaluations.

The Federal Government utilizes Standards when evaluating changes to historic properties. The tried and tested document is the US Secretary of the Interior's (SOI) Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. The Standards are one to two sentences in a list of 6 to 10 Standards. There are 4 Treatments: Preservation, Rehabilitation, Restoration and Reconstruction. Each of these treatments address a particular type of historic property. Preservation retains, stabilizes and protects, Restoration brings a building back to a specific period of time, and Reconstruction builds a missing structure. *For example, the Standards for Reconstruction applies only to accurate reconstruction of an important site, such as a historic fort.* Certain historic properties of significance may choose to follow a particular treatment, but Rehabilitation is most commonly used. Preservation, Restoration and Reconstruction can be referenced as a "treatment" within a rehabilitation project for a better understanding, but it is not what is specifically applicable. Though it is important to know that there are other treatments and their applicable Standards and Guidelines, they are not often utilized in evaluating impacts to historic resources in local design review or for the Federal Historic Tax Credit incentive.

The treatment Standard that is most applicable to most situations is Rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is also the most versatile of the Standards and is intended to allow for new adaptive reuse of a historic structure while retaining the important historic aspects of a structure. Rehabilitation is also the Standard that is utilized for the 20% Federal Investment Tax Credit program. The tax credit intends to spur investment in historic properties and extend their useful life. Rehabilitation is also the Standard that is applied to the review of a historic property that is proposing a change, upgrade or an addition. The US Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation follow:

US Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation

1. A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces and spatial relationships.
2. The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.
3. Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.
4. Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.
5. Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.
6. Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.
7. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials will not be used.

8. Archeological resources will be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.
10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Why use Standards?

A Standard allows an action or selected result to be looked at in a way to see if the action taken meets up to a certain expectation or measure. A Standard allows an architect for example to choose a unique placement of a material that is then compared with the Standard (all applicable Standards) to see if it is following those Standards. With standards you look at the larger impacts that for example may impact a neighborhood context down to smaller impacts to the property next door. Standards can balance out impacts, allow for creative solutions under those considerations contained within those Standards. This is much different than providing an exception that tends to provide a blanket excuse to design decisions. The operable word with a stated Standard is "will" which does require a determination. Using a Standard tends to eliminate conflicts, absolute rules when used can force inappropriate design decisions.

Guidelines: Accompanying the SOI Rehabilitation Standards are guidelines. This guidance takes the form of treatment actions "Recommended" and "Not Recommended". Guidelines are developed to help apply the Standards to a specific type of component of a historic resource. The Guidelines are intended as an aid to assist in applying the Standards to varying types and styles of historic buildings. They are not meant to give case-specific advice or address exceptions or unusual conditions. Actions can be proposed and then compared to the applicable Standards. This approach may sometimes seem to not give a specific answer, but that is the point, each historic property is unique so the approach to its treatment is custom and unique. Evaluation of a property with Standards is looking at the design as a whole, balancing out what is historically important for compatibility and what can be modified within the Rehabilitation Standards. Intent is also not voiced; the Standards and Guidelines are clearly stated for use. The SOI Standards have limited use of example photos, they are used mostly for interest and opening the minds-eye, not as a "what is required" example.

Conclusion: The US Secretary of the Interior's (SOI) Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties is not a building code. The SOI Standards is also not a collection of appropriate design examples. The SOI Standards are not specific and do not give you an immediate answer. The standards pose a significant question and it is up to the person to address that question appropriately. The Standards are supplemented with additional recommendations in the form of guidelines, which again is general advice. A specific design decision is made by the architect and or applicant and that decision is tested against each specific listed standard. The utilization of SOI Standards does take a different kind of mind set as well as a greater understanding of historic preservation principles.