

DESIGN STANDARDS INTRODUCTION

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DEFINITIONS

“Preservation” is a term that everybody understands in some way, but the number of interpretations is surprising. To some it means museum quality time capsules, to others a coat of paint. Some see preservation as a necessity and others as a burden. Clear definition of terms will aid in applying the *Standards*.

What is a Historic Structure?

There are many ways to define a historic building, and of course there are many degrees of quality and importance among historic buildings. A very basic rule of thumb used by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and by Federal tax law is that any building 50 years old or older may be regarded as historic and may be eligible for local, state, or federal designation.

When a building or area is designated as historic, it means that it has been studied by the local, state, or federal government and found to have special value. Such a building may be an outstanding example of a particular architectural style, or it may be the site of important historical or cultural events. In most cases, only the exterior of a building is designated for preservation because this is the aspect that is important to the community. The Federal government maintains a list of such important landmarks. The National Register of Historic Places was created by the Federal government in 1966 as an honor roll of significant historic buildings and districts throughout the country.

Northville has many buildings that have been studied and designated, not individually, but as members of the historic district which was listed on the National Register in 1972. The historic district was incorporated into the Northville city ordinances in 1974. Designation by local government includes protection against unconsidered change or demolition. In the Northville Historic District, *ALL* of the buildings within the designated district, even those that are not historic, are protected.

The Northville Historic District Commission (HDC) reviews projects that would change the appearance of any building located in a historic district. During its review, the Commission recognizes that the buildings in the historic district have different degrees of historical importance. In order to define those differences, the HDC has divided buildings into three categories:

Significant Historic Buildings

These buildings contribute uniquely to the character of the district. In most cases they are examples of quality architectural design, materials, and workmanship. They include buildings of individual prominence or rarity, as well as buildings whose great value is their membership in, and impact on, a grouping of similar age and style. Some have special value because of the people and events associated with them. In some instances the social value makes up for lesser architectural quality. The Historic District Commission will review any proposed changes to significant historic buildings using the strictest interpretation of the *Standards*.

Complementary Buildings

These buildings contribute to the overall historic character of the district by providing the essential, appropriate setting for the "significant" structures. While individually they are less outstanding, they are consistent and harmonious in terms of age, materials, scale, mass, and the repetition of architectural details. The Historic District Commission will review any proposed changes to complementary buildings with some flexibility, however the strictest application of the *Standards* will be used to evaluate changes to the building's character defining features (such as those indicated in the description of the style.)

Non-contributing Buildings

These buildings do not add to the historic character of the district. Some of them are admirable buildings but are simply too new to have claimed a place in history. Some are old buildings whose historic qualities have been completely lost through alterations. Some are neither new nor very old but have been inserted into an older streetscape without care for the existing pattern, scale, or mass. Even though the buildings may not add to the district, there is potential for inappropriate changes to detract from the district. The Historic District Commission will review non-contributing buildings with respect to the impact that changes would have on surrounding significant and contributing buildings.

Many buildings that are neither in a historic district nor special enough for individual designation can nevertheless be a source of pride to the owner and to the community when they are maintained or rehabilitated with sensitivity to their historic value. The City of Northville, and the Historic District Commission encourage preservation of all historic structures. These *Standards* may be a helpful tool even if review by the Historic District Commission is not required.

What is Preservation?

Preservation activity is not an "all or nothing" pursuit. What we commonly refer to as preservation is actually divided into categories based on the amount of work—or "level of intervention"—performed on the historic materials.

Preservation

The historic character of a building's exterior is expressed through surviving features such as height, mass, roof-line, doors and windows, cladding, trim, and ornamentation. Where all or most of these have been altered, the character is effectively lost. Many buildings, even though somewhat altered, retain enough of their original features to contribute a sense of historic time and place to their communities. The goal in these cases is to keep, or **preserve**, what is left. A careful program of maintenance may be all that is required.

Some buildings may be good candidates for additional preservation efforts known in the trade as "restoration" and "rehabilitation." Each of these terms implies a different approach, although both of them are included in the overall heading of historic preservation.

Restoration

Restoration aims to return the building to its original appearance both in design *and* materials. Often, but not always, restoration is applied to the interior as well as the exterior. The decision whether to restore a building belongs entirely to the owner and is not required by any preservation ordinance. Some owners restore their homes or other properties simply because they prize historic surroundings.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation (rehab) is defined by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior as the process of returning a property to a state of utility, through repair or alteration, which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions and features of the property which are significant to its historic, architectural, and cultural values.

Whether the approach is maintenance, restoration, or rehabilitation, the following three principles are basic to historic preservation:

- If the original feature is intact, **RETAIN** it, as is, without altering it or covering it.
- If the original feature is in need of **REPAIR**, do the repair work in place, using the gentlest methods possible to avoid damaging the original materials.
- If the original feature has deteriorated beyond repair, **REPLACE** it with materials that duplicate the original in size, shape, and texture as closely as possible.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation

In order to help building owners with their preservation efforts, the Federal Government, through the Department of the Interior, published a set of standards for rehabilitation of historic buildings in 1979. These standards (listed below) elaborate on the general principals of retain, repair, and replace and set the standard for quality preservation work throughout the country. **Local** governmental units including Northville's Historic District Commission, use them as the basis for ordinances governing historic districts. The Standards in this book were drawn from the S.O.I. Standards. At the **State** level, the Michigan Bureau of History uses them to guide property owners working on historic buildings as well as to review federal and state-funded historic building projects. At the **Federal** level, Tax Act projects (certified projects that receive a 20% federal tax credit) must follow the Standards.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation

- 1 A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.
- 2 The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.
- 3 Each property shall 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 architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.
- 4 Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.
- 5 Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.
- 6 Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.
- 7 Chemical or physical treatments, such as sandblasting, that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.
- 8 Significant archeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.
- 9 New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.
- 10 New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall 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.

When do the Historic District Design Standards Apply?

Any building that is located within the boundaries of the historic district must receive the approval of the Historic District Commission before any changes to the exterior of the building are made. At this time there are no individually designated historic structures outside of the district, but alterations to such structures would also need HDC approval. Even if a building is not “historic” (less than 50 years old) it must be reviewed by the HDC if it is located in the historic district. The Commission will use the *Standards* when reviewing a project for approval. It is very important to be familiar with the *Standards* when planning for changes.

The following types of projects are exempt from HDC review:

- Partial roof repairs when the same type and color of roofing material is maintained
- Re-roofing when the same type of roofing material is used
- Minor repairs of broken or deteriorated parts of a structure when the same type of material, architecture style and color are maintained
- Re-painting when done in a conventional manner with one color with or without one contrasting color for trim
- Any temporary work necessary to protect a structure which has been damaged or weakened, until approved permanent repairs are made

Owners of buildings 50 years old and older that are not designated, or are not in the district are encouraged to use the *Standards* and may find them helpful. A careful rehabilitation can play a role in preserving Northville's heritage, and may enhance the value of a property. The application for review and associated forms are described in more detail in Part 7, “Review Processes.”

Federal Tax Credits

The tax advantages for rehabilitating historic buildings are defined in the Tax Reform Act of 1986 which established the following incentives: (1) a 20% tax credit for the substantial rehabilitation of certified historic buildings for commercial, industrial, and rental residential purposes; (2) a 10% tax credit for the substantial rehabilitation for nonresidential purposes of any buildings built before 1936; (3) a straight-line depreciation period of 27.5 years for residential property and 31.5 years for nonresidential property of the depreciable basis of the rehabilitated building reduced by the amount of the tax credit claimed.

A “certified building” is one that is on the National Register either individually or as a contributing building within a Registered Historic District, such as the Northville Historic District. “Substantial rehabilitation” is defined as a total rehabilitation expenditure that exceeds the adjusted basis of the building or \$5,000, whichever is greater.

To qualify for the 20% tax credit, the building owner must obtain certification for both the building and the rehabilitation plan. Certifications are not required for the 10% credit. The credits apply to the building costs and fees, but do not cover site work. There are no federal tax credits for non-income producing properties, such as single family residences.

How is Certification Obtained?

The building owner submits a Historic Preservation Certification Application to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). (A sample form is included in Part 7, “Review Processes.”) The application includes the rehabilitation plan and a description of the building to establish its significance. The Bureau gives the application a thorough review to ensure a certifiable project and then forwards it to the National Park Service with a recommendation for action. If the project is certified, the owner must submit a follow up report that includes a description and photos of the work.

Certification is granted to rehabilitation efforts that are consistent with the historic nature of the property and that conform with the Standards of the Secretary of the Interior. (See the preceding section, “What is Preservation?”) If the rehabilitation is incompatible or inappropriate, the project may be denied certification; therefore, it is very important to obtain certification during the planning stages of a project to be sure that it will qualify. Significant restrictions apply. For more detailed description, request “Preservation Tax Incentives for Historic Buildings” available from SHPO. (See page 7-3 for address.)