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HISTORIC TAX CREDIT TOOL BOX Exterior Signs: What Works

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From the largest billboards to tiny plaques, exterior signs immediately identify the function of a building.

Exterior signs have the potential to make or break commercial enterprises housed in a building. When undertaking a rehabilitation project utilizing historic tax credits (HTCs), all exterior signs are subject to review by the state historic preservation office (SHPO) and the National Park Service (NPS). In addition, exterior signs may be subject to additional local review if a sign ordinance exists, or if a building is under jurisdiction of a local preservation commission. Meeting the requirements of each reviewing agency creates challenges.

Due to the high cost and time-consuming nature of design and fabrication, exterior signs can lead to major hurdles for an HTC project. Consequently, it is imperative that the project team understand the types of exterior signs that the NPS typically approves on an HTC project. We will explore the challenges of selecting appropriate exterior signs for a HTC project using the recently rehabilitated Godfrey Hotel Boston (former Blake and Amory Building) as a case study.

Historical Precedent for Exterior Signage

Just as architectural styles have gone in and out of fashion over time, so too have exterior sign styles. Colonial and Revolutionary era signs chiefly marked the definition of a business concern or trade, bearing a simple emblem on a pole, or suspended from or mounted onto the building. These early signs were mainly composed of wood and were simple in design.

Nineteenth-century signs evolved beyond utilitarian plaques to include more elaborate attention-grabbing designs composed of wood or metal. Popular types included hanging or projecting signs and porcelain enamel signs, and later, rooftop signs in the latter half of the century. Gold leaf and painted signs on windows, shutters and doors were also extremely popular. In addition, signs on awnings as well as nonpermanent posters were commonly used. While some 19th-century exterior signs were lit with gas lights, with the advent of electricity in the 20th century, electric signs were revolutionary. Inexpensive and safer electric lighting was introduced to exterior signs. Electric signs were further developed with the invention of neon lighting, which allowed for a wide array of shapes and colors. Later in the 20th century,



continued on page 2



Image Courtesy of Heritage Consulting

The Godfrey Hotel Boston was the subject of a historic tax credit renovation. Its blade signs caused some difficulty.

continued from page 1

plastic signs became common along with standardized corporate signs.

Historically, signs were found on virtually every exterior surface of a building depending on the building type and era, including windows and transoms, doors, cornices, corners, atop canopies or awnings, or applied directly to the facade. Today, historic buildings may retain a combination of these sign types dating to different periods of the building's history. While some signs may be related to the historic name or tenant of the building, most signs relate directly to the businesses housed within the building.

The Necessity of Exterior Signs

The entire raison d'être of exterior signs is visibility. Architecture conveys a certain aesthetic, while signs

advertise the tenants and use of the building. While certain buildings are well-known based on their aesthetics, in general, signs are required to highlight who is located within a building and what activities are undertaken within those confines.

From institutional, to ecclesiastical, residential and commercial, a building is only as good as what occurs inside it. In order to bring people in, there must be exterior signs to explain the building's use. Without exterior signs, it is unlikely that a building's tenant will be able to attract its target clientele. Restaurants and shops require consumers, hotels require guests, and tenant office buildings require users to know who is located in that building. From the HTC point of view, the challenge is to rectify the exterior signage needs of tenants with the design requirements of the NPS.

continued on page 3



continued from page 2

Exterior Signs: Historic Design Review

During a HTC project, all exterior signs are subject to review by the NPS. While the NPS uses the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, guidance for interpreting the Standards in relation to signs is established in Preservation Brief No. 25: "The Preservation of Historic Signs."

The guidelines in Preservation Brief No. 25 emphasize that historic signs should be retained when possible. Because exterior signs can be integral in the representation of a building's history, the NPS generally recommends retention of historic signs that are significant in their own right due to association with historic figures, events, places or that have become a

local landmark. This includes cases where the sign is significant as evidence of the history of the product, business or service advertised, or is significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district. The NPS may also require retention of a sign if its design is characteristic of a specific historic period, such as gold leaf on glass, neon, or stainless steel lettering or if the sign is an outstanding example of a sign maker's work.

In addition, extant signs generally must be retained if they are integral to the building's design (i.e., removal of the sign would cause significant damage to the building) or is a character-defining feature in a district, such as a theater marquee. Even if retention of historic signs is

continued on page 4

Image Courtesy of Heritage Consulting
The Godfrey Hotel Boston's approved blade signs are shown.



continued from page 3

required, the NPS generally allows for the installation of additional new signs so long as they are compatible with the historic building. Further, existing signs may be altered and updated to meet the needs of new tenants, so long as the work is approved by the NPS.

Preservation Brief No. 25 also outlines that new exterior signs should be secondary to the building's historic character and should work with the building's existing design, not against it. This means that new signs should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building and should be composed of compatible materials. In general terms, the new exterior signs should not make a design statement that distracts from the building and should be in keeping with the overall character of the historic building. As part of its review, the NPS takes into account the proposed sign's size, location, appearance, materials, lighting and method of attachment to determine whether the sign meets the Standards.

In addition to the style and scale of the signs, the location is also important. Historical sign locations and design, often found on historic photos and postcards can be used as justification for new signs. Historical exterior sign locations are unique to each building but common locations include first floor commercial tenant signs (often in transoms or above windows and doors), building identification signs in the form of a blade sign or canopy sign, or lettering applied on the interior side of storefront glass. Signs may also be located in signboards or friezes that may have historically held signs. Moreover, exterior signs should be in areas where the building's character-defining features will not be obscured. Depending on the era and style of the building, illumination is also generally approvable. External lighting for signs such as gooseneck or halo lighting is generally approved, though internally lit signs may be approved if compatible with the building style.

Furthermore, exterior signs are also evaluated based on the method of attachment. Signs should be attached to the building in a manner that does not damage the historic fabric. The NPS generally requires minimal penetrations through exterior masonry. For instance, fittings should penetrate mortar joints rather than brick or masonry; the load that the façade material can accommodate should also be considered. Depending on the existing exterior signs programme, the use of documentary evidence may aid in making the case for sign types and locations.

Additionally, signs may be permitted in new locations so long as the signs are compatible with the historic building. Where new storefronts are installed, a retail sign system is often approvable. These signs are often located in the transoms and are composed of signboards or rails upon which signs are hung. In general, the NPS will require all signs to have a similar scale, lighting approach and materials so that a uniform appearance is maintained.

Local Design Review

Exterior signs are generally regulated by municipal code as well. This varies by municipality, with some cities dealing with signs in their zoning regulations as overlays, while others have specific sign legislation. Often, a municipality will have multiple layers of review when it comes to an historic building's exterior signs, both with sign ordinances and local historic design review. It is important to understand that local sign review may have different design requirements and there may be differing reviews from those of SHPO and the NPS. It is important to begin the design and review of signs as early as possible as it is likely that the review will be extended and revisions to the signs will be required at one of the review jurisdictions.

continued on page 5



continued from page 4

Godfrey Hotel Boston (former Blake & Amory Building)

In March Oxford Capital, in conjunction with Union Investment, completed a \$75 million HTC rehabilitation of the Blake and Amory Building in Boston. Now known as the Godfrey Hotel Boston, the project transformed the historic building into a luxury hotel with ground floor commercial space including a coffee shop and restaurant. The Blake and Amory Building is located in the heart of Boston's historic retail center, known today as Downtown Crossing.

While the area was established as a shopping district in the mid-19th century, the first decades of the 20th century were witness to the district's maturation through the construction of large department stores and commercial buildings which serviced the apparel trade. True to its location, the building's original tenants included a majority of apparel- and garment-related concerns, with wholesalers and showrooms on the office floors and retail outfits on the first and second floors.

Before the start of the project, the exterior retail tenant sign for the first floor was located in a modern metal signboard directly above the storefronts, as well as signs applied to the storefront display windows. Since these signs were modern, retention was not required. There was one historic sign above a doorway which conveyed the name and date of the building, which was retained in the rehabilitation.

As part of the rehabilitation project, it was necessary to establish exterior signs for the hotel as well as the first-floor commercial tenants. In the Part 2 application, the project team originally proposed new signboards above the storefronts with hotel identification signs at an entrance canopy. However, as the project progressed and the design evolved, it was determined that the canopy sign would not be sufficient as the narrow street

limited the sight lines. Ultimately it was decided that a projecting blade sign would provide the required visibility required by a luxury hotel. The proposed blade sign would be 23 feet tall and project 3 feet from the face of the building and would be a fabric banner supported on a steel frame. Lighting would be provided by modern fixture attached to the building.

The hotel blade sign presented some challenges in obtaining approvals. After an initial review of the proposed blade sign, the Massachusetts SHPO requested additional information regarding the method of attachment to the exterior masonry to ensure that the installation would take a sensitive approach. Thus an amendment to the Part 2 application was submitted, which outlined detailed drawings of the method of attachment to the historic façade. In addition, archival research played a large role in obtaining the necessary approvals.

To make the case for the historical appropriateness of the sign design, the project team uncovered historic photos which confirmed the prior existence of blade signs both on the subject building and throughout the neighborhood during the building's period of significance, thus supporting the appropriateness of the design. It was determined that the Downtown Crossing neighborhood, as well as the adjacent Theater District, was historically populated with numerous blade and tenant signs which projected from the Washington Street facades. With the inclusion of the requested drawing details as well as the additional research, the project team was able to obtain the necessary HTC approvals from both SHPO and the NPS.

Once approval for the hotel blade signs was obtained, updates to the coffee shop and restaurant tenant signs were also submitted. The restaurant tenant desired an additional plaque sign as well as a sign over the restaurant entrance door. These were determined to be

continued on page 6

continued from page 5

of an appropriate size and location and were approved. The coffee shop tenant desired two small blade signs within the sign band, as well as lettering applied to the interior surface of the storefront glass. These signs were applied to modern elements and were also determined appropriate for the date and style of the building and were thus approved.

Conclusion

Sign design, fabrication and installation can be time-consuming and costly. Because tenants are usually not secured until the later stages of a development and often require signs specific to their brand, gaining the necessary HTC approvals can cause delays in a project schedule. Understanding the type of exterior signs that the NPS is likely to approve can help streamline the design process. Signs that are compatible with the style,

scale and materials of the building will generally be approved. Historic research and documentary evidence can help inform the design and ultimately support approval. As was seen in the case of the Godfrey Hotel Boston project, an experienced project team that is familiar with historical research and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards can help gain the necessary approvals. ♦

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