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HISTORIC TAX CREDIT TOOL BOX

Retaining Character: Tying History into Interior Design



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A common misconception about historic tax credit (HTC) rehabilitation projects is that the state historic preservation office (SHPO) and National Park Service (NPS) only have purview over exterior work, when in reality, interior design is a critical component in the review process, which may lead to approval or denial.

In reviewing developments for HTCs, the SHPO and NPS evaluate proposed work under the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation (Standards). While the Standards are general in nature, there is published guidance to illuminate how the Standards are applied to properties, including guidance on rehabilitating interiors in historic buildings. Following this guidance, proposed floor plans and finishes are evaluated to assess impact on character-defining features. What can seem like a relatively minor aspect of a project, such as a proposed floor or ceiling treatment, can become more complicated if the treatment is determined to be incompatible with the historic character of the building, and can lead to denial, even when historic materials are not involved.

It is important to anticipate at the onset of a project that a significant departure from the historic aesthetic might not ultimately be approvable. Complications arise if the desired aesthetic or programmatic needs conflict with the historic configuration or character of an interior space. This article identifies how SHPO and the NPS evaluate interior spaces and finishes, using The Adelphi Hotel in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., as a case study.

Identifying Character-Defining Elements in Historic Interiors

At the crux of the HTC program is the notion that buildings derive their overall character from the collection of features that are illustrative of a period or style of architecture and use, and in turn, those features must be identified, retained and preserved for a building to maintain integrity. As stated in

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NPS Preservation Brief 18: Rehabilitating Interiors in Historic Buildings, a rehabilitation project should be designed so that the defining characteristics of a building are not radically changed, obscured, damaged or destroyed. It is important to keep in mind that the HTC review extends to the entire project—including the interior, exterior and site, each of which have inherent character-defining features. While the exterior may be a building’s public face, the interior can be considered even more vital to convey its history and changes over time.

Since the HTC review extends into the interior, it is important to anticipate at the start of the project which aspects of the interior might be considered character-

defining. Interior floor plans, encompassing the arrangement and sequence of spaces, along

Image: Courtesy of The Adelphi Hotel
The Adelphi Hotel in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., is a historic hotel updated with the use of historic tax credits.

with finishes, are considered in determining which features are character-defining. Interiors are generally comprised of a series of primary and secondary spaces and within each space, the NPS considers the size, configuration, proportion and architectural detailing of each room in determining what defines a building’s character. Individual rooms may contain character-defining features, including spatial volume, ornamental plaster work, millwork, floors and even hardware. There may not be much latitude to make change in spaces that are fully intact; greater opportunity for change is generally afforded in spaces that have been significantly altered over time.

In approaching a project, the development team should understand the history of the building and assess what changes have occurred. It is also important to identify the hierarchy of a building interior so that the program can be designed to permit minimal changes

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to the sequence of spaces. Beyond floor plan, the NPS evaluates interior features and finishes and items deemed character-defining will generally need to be retained in a rehabilitation project.

Even when rehabilitating an historic building for its original purpose, a development may face challenges. Modern expectations for room size and finishes may conflict with the historic character of a building and creative solutions are required to meet key counts while retaining historic spaces and features. One property that overcame these challenges was The Adelphi Hotel in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., where a historic hotel was updated for continued use as a hotel, which necessitated extensive updates to the interior.

Image: Courtesy of The Adelphi Hotel
The Adelphi Hotel in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., was modernized with extensive updates that required working with the National Park Service.

Case Study: The Adelphi Hotel, Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Built in 1877, The Adelphi Hotel is on the west side of Broadway in downtown Saratoga Springs and is part of the Broadway National Register Historic District. Richbell Capital, a real estate developer in Saratoga Springs, recently completed a HTC rehabilitation of the building for continued hotel use.

The four-story Adelphi Hotel had been a prominent presence on Broadway since its completion. The Adelphi was iconic, frequented by famous local figures such as John Morrissey, who is credited with bringing horse racing to Saratoga Springs. Known for its three-story “Saratoga porch,” the three-story porch’s tall slender columns extend to the elaborate cornice, creating a piano nobile space for the hotel’s guests to gather and socialize. The Adelphi Hotel’s Italianate design was typical during the decades of Saratoga Springs’ peak development in the mid- to late-19th century.

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The Adelphi continuously operated as a hotel throughout the late-19th century, 20th century and into the early 21st century and, consequently, had been significantly altered throughout the interior to keep up with changing tastes and styles. The vestibule, lobby and flanking public spaces reflected a succession of changes to floor plan and modern finishes existed throughout the building, which were tired and dated. On the upper floors, the corridors remained largely intact, though the guest rooms were extensively altered by previous owners. After nearly a century-and-a-half, the building has undergone a series renovation campaigns and little historic fabric remained intact. Overall, the building did not present the image of a luxury hotel.

In order to meet the needs of a modern hotel and rejuvenate the tired spaces, the design team developed

plans that sought to capture its former glory while presenting a modern, upscale appearance that incorporated modern hotel amenities. Historic

Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group
The Adelphi Hotel in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., recently opened with modern amenities, created despite using historic tax credit equity.

research was undertaken and determined that extensive changes over time had occurred, particularly at the first floor. On the upper floors, it was determined that the corridors remained intact, though the guest rooms were modified in both plan and design. Understanding what was historic and what was added later was critical to informing the project team where latitude for change could be reasonably anticipated and where extensive change was not likely to be approved.

Plans were developed for the first floor for continued public use as the main hotel lobby, bar, restaurant and ballroom. Since there was ample documentation that these spaces significantly changed over time with limited character-defining features, the proposed design called for modifications to the floor plan and incorporation of modern features and finishes. The proposed interior design was largely approved with some modifications required. One area where the NPS required design changes was in the proposed ceiling treatments on the first floor. Initially, it was proposed that the lobby

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would contain elaborate beamed ceilings and the ceiling in the bar would have a shallow oval insets with integral lighting. In its review, the NPS determined that the proposed ceiling treatments were too modern in appearance and too much of a “design statement,” and required that the ceilings treatments be simplified to be more in keeping with the historic aesthetic. The subsequent design, which responded to the NPS concerns, was ultimately approved. While different from the original proposal, the revised ceiling design met the developer’s design requirements and ultimately provided the luxurious design that was desired, while maintaining the historic character of the hotel.

On the upper floors, it was determined that the corridors were historic and that many historic doors with transoms survived. As a result, the NPS required that the corridors remain intact, including historic doors and transoms, which could be fixed in place where the locations did not correspond to the proposed layout of the updated guestrooms. The design team worked in concert with the existing historic features, incorporating new features and finishes that were stylistically appropriate. Since it was determined that guest rooms had been significantly modified in plan and design over time, the design team had more latitude to make changes, though again, the overall design had to be compatible with the historic character of the Adelphi.

The Adelphi Hotel recently reopened after a multiyear rehabilitation, which re-established its grandeur with modern upscale amenities. The success of the development lies largely in the flexibility and creativity of the project team, which embraced the building’s historic character while achieving a design that evokes the aesthetic of a modern luxury hotel.

Conclusion

In approaching HTC projects, the project team should seek to identify the interior spaces and features that will likely be determined to be character-defining, as significant alteration to those spaces and features will be a challenge. When alterations to these spaces are necessary, a degree of flexibility in the design is necessary as the reviewers are not likely to approve a dramatic design departure. As seen in the case of the Adelphi Hotel, retaining the interior character-defining spaces and features, and developing a design that is compatible, leads to a successful HTC project. ❖

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