

HISTORIC TAX CREDIT TOOL BOX

Sizing Replacement Windows to the Highest Standards



JOHN TESS, HERITAGE CONSULTING GROUP

Windows are an integral component of a building's exterior, which visually organize a façade and gracefully recede into and complement a building's structure.

On many building types, windows take on added importance by defining the overall character or style and signaling certain interior functions.

Window replacement is one of the most critical issues on historic tax credit (HTC) properties and, if not anticipated and properly planned, can cause significant delays in a development schedule. Approval for replacement of historic windows is not automatically granted—documented conditions must justify the need for replacement. When replacement of historic windows is ultimately approved, the sanction is only granted after National Park Service (NPS) has conducted a rigorous review of the proposed replacement window to ensure that it closely matches the historic fenestration. A manufacturer's stock-sized window will rarely satisfy the program requirements and an owner should anticipate the need for customization.

When window replacement is warranted on HTC properties, the NPS, via the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, is specific in its requirements, demanding not only matching configuration and dimension, but also mandating the inclusion of a replacement window that incorporates, "custom contour panning ... deep trapezoidal exterior muntin grids ... retention of the same glass to frame ratio," and a match of, "the historic reveal and decorative details." Due to level of scrutiny applied during window reviews, having a team that understands the specificity of the NPS requirements with a deep knowledge of the window industry is critical in identifying manufacturers that can produce a window that is likely to be approved.

Case Study of a Successful Window Replacement

The Winecoff Hotel in Atlanta (now the Ellis Hotel) was built in 1913. At 15 stories, it was one of the city's tallest buildings and the letterhead on the Hotel's

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stationary declared that the building was “Absolutely Fire Proof.” The hallmark proclamation went on to assert that the basis for design was a “European Plan.” Sadly, this Continental blueprint was one upon which fire alarms, sprinklers and fire escapes were neither drawn nor specified. The structure’s only stairway encircled the center elevator core, and in 1946 when fire broke out on the third floor, that means of egress along with an inoperable lift system acted as a chimney for a conflagration that claimed 119 lives.

As a consequence, the paired double-hung windows that punctuated the building’s facades were the only portals through which there was any chance of escape. Many people fell or jumped from those openings with tragic results, but others were rescued as they clung to windowsills or dangled on ropes fashioned from knotted bed sheets.

Because the 1946 fire moved inward and upward through the structure’s core, most of the historic

Image: Courtesy of Mark Cox
Historic windows of the 1913 Winecoff Hotel in Atlanta were replaced with matching aluminum-clad wood windows during a 2004 renovation.



windows survived the deadly blaze and were still in place in 2004, when renovations were undertaken. However, the building had been abandoned for nearly 25 years, and when the work began on the Winecoff, window replacement was clearly warranted due to the poor condition of the historic windows. Replacement windows were needed, but in order to receive HTC approvals, it was critical that the new fenestration match—as closely as possible—the profiles and sightlines of the original windows. A stock window would not have sufficiently met the NPS requirements, thus the project team sought a customized solution.

An aluminum-clad wood window was ultimately chosen. This type of window is a common solution to historic wood window replacement on HTC rehabilitations. The custom response required the creation of shapes extruded to match the existing decorative perimeter brick mold and inlaid moldings that characterized and defined the center mullion. The fashioning of these features was key to the success of the Winecoff window project. However, there was another element that was just as critical. In order for the peripheral pieces to fit, it was imperative that they surround a window that had been properly sized. The need for custom sizing was acknowledged and appreciated by the project team and the result was a nearly precise match of the original window components.

While the Winecoff Hotel was a success due to an educated project team, there may be projects where a customized historically appropriate solution is not accepted by window manufacturers. In those instances, the owner or developer must be especially vigilant in seeking an appropriate custom window. Vigilance is advised because many manufacturers of aluminum-clad wood windows have a significant presence in the residential marketplace and in that realm, their standard sized, mass produced products are calibrated to be inserted into wood stud bays of new-home construction. When considering this

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Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group
The original windows of the Winecoff Hotel in Atlanta were in poor condition and needed to be replaced during renovation.



Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group
Aluminum-clad wood windows (pictured) replaced the historic windows of the 1913 Winecoff Hotel in Atlanta.

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type of product, it is important to remember that the calibrations for sizing windows for wood-framed new construction do not calculate well when they are applied to the brick-and-mortar coursing of masonry openings that characterize many historic buildings. When manufactured wood or aluminum-clad wood windows are being considered for HTC projects, it is important to resist the temptation—often dangled by a commission-driven window representative or by a value-engineering motivated general contractor—to save money by packing out a stock sized window to fill an existing opening.

For the Winecoff Hotel development, the use of a stock window was initially explored but it was determined that the stock window would require the incorporation of wide metal extender elements between the window and masonry jamb that would have resulted in a significantly reduced glass size and the overall appearance would be noticeably different. But with the implementation of a customized window,

the discrepancies were minuscule. It was clear that a custom solution was the only solution that would result in NPS approval.

In a review process that most often measures compliance by the tiniest fractions of inches, the avoidance of a penny-wise, stock response and a close payment of custom attention to “custom contour panning … deep trapezoidal exterior muntin grids … retention of the same glass to frame ratio,” and a match of, “the historic reveal and decorative details,” could be the difference between success and failure when hoped for tax credits are in the balance. ♦

John M. Tess is president and founder of Heritage Consulting Group, a national firm that assists property owners seeking local, state and federal historic tax incentives for the rehabilitation of historic properties. Since 1982 Heritage Consulting Group has represented historic projects totaling more than \$3 billion in rehabilitation construction. He can be reached at 503-228-0272 or jmtess@heritage-consulting.com.

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