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PRESERVATION BRIEFS

17

Architectural Character—Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving their Character

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Close-up of stone wall, showing craftsmanship. Photo: NPS files.

Three-Step Process to Identify the Visual Character

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***The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* embody two important goals: 1) the preservation of historic materials and, 2) the preservation of a building's distinguishing character.** Every old building is unique, with its own identity and its own distinctive character. Character refers to all those visual aspects and physical features that comprise the appearance of every historic building. Character-defining elements include the overall shape of the building, its materials, craftsmanship, decorative details, interior spaces and features, as well as the various aspects of its site and environment.

The purpose of this Brief is to help the owner or the architect identify those features or elements that give the building its visual character and that should be taken into account in order to preserve them to the maximum extent possible.

There are different ways of understanding old buildings. They can be seen as examples of specific building types, which are usually related to a building's function, such as schools, courthouses or churches.

Buildings can be studied as examples of using specific materials such as concrete, wood, steel, or limestone. They can also be considered as examples of an historical period, which is often related to a specific architectural style, such as Gothic Revival farmhouses, one-story bungalows, or Art Deco apartment buildings.

There are many other facets of an historic building besides its functional type, its materials or construction or style that contribute to its historic qualities or significance. Some of these qualities are feelings conveyed by the sense of time and place or in buildings associated with events or people. A complete understanding of any property may require documentary research about its style, construction, function, its furnishings or contents; knowledge about the original builder, owners, and later occupants; and knowledge about the evolutionary history of the building. Even though buildings may be of historic, rather than architectural significance, it is their tangible elements that embody its significance for association with specific events or persons and it is those tangible elements both on the exterior and interior that should be preserved.

Therefore, the approach taken in this Brief is limited to **identifying those visual and tangible aspects of the historic building**. While this may aid in the planning process for carrying out any ongoing or new use or restoration of the building, this approach is not a substitute for developing an understanding about the significance of an historic building and the district in which it is located. If the various materials, features and spaces that give a building its visual character are not recognized and preserved, then essential aspects of its character may be damaged in the process of change.

A building's character can be irreversibly damaged or changed in many ways, for example, by inappropriate repointing of the brickwork, by removal of a distinctive side porch, by changes to the window sash, by changes to the setting around the building, by changes to the major room arrangements, by the introduction of an atrium, by painting previously unpainted woodwork, etc.

Three-Step Process to Identify the Visual Character

This Brief outlines a three-step approach that can be used by anyone to identify those materials, features and spaces that contribute to the visual character of a building. This approach involves first examining the building from afar to understand its overall setting and architectural context; then moving up very close to appreciate its materials and the craftsmanship and surface finishes evident in these materials; and then going into and through the building to perceive those spaces, rooms and details that comprise its interior visual character.

Step 1: Identify the Overall Visual Aspects

Identifying the overall visual character of a building is nothing more than looking at its distinguishing physical aspects without focusing on its details. The major contributors to a building's overall character are embodied in the general aspects of its setting; the shape of the building; its roof and roof features, such as chimneys or cupolas; the various projections on the building, such as porches or bay windows; the recesses or voids in a building, such as open galleries, arcades, or recessed balconies; the openings for windows and doorways; and finally the various exterior materials that contribute to the building's character.

Step One involves looking at the building from a distance to understand the character of its site and setting, and it involves walking around the building where that is possible. Some buildings will have one or more sides that are more important than the others because they are more highly visible. This does not mean that the rear of the building is of no value whatever but it simply means that it is less important to the overall character. On the other hand, the rear may have an interesting back porch or offer a private garden space or some other aspect that may contribute to the visual character. Such a general approach to looking at the building and site will provide a better understanding of its overall character without having to resort to an infinitely long checklist of its possible features and details. Regardless of whether a building is complicated or relatively plain, it is these broad categories that contribute to an understanding of the overall character rather than the specifics of architectural features such as moldings and their profiles.

Overall Visual Character: Shape

The **shape** of a building can be an important aspect of its overall visual character. The building illustrated here, for example, has a distinctive horizontal boxlike shape with the middle portion of the box projecting up an extra story.

This building has other visual aspects that help define its overall character, including the pattern of vertical bands of windows, the decorative horizontal bands which separate the base of the building from the upper floors, the dark brown color of the brick, the large arched entranceway, and the castle-like tower behind the building.

Left Photo—Overall Visual Character: Shape. Right Photo—Overall Visual Character: Openings.

Overall Visual Character: Openings

The **opening** illustrated here dominates the visual character of this building because of its size, shape, location, materials, and craftsmanship. Because of its relation to the generous staircase, this opening places a strong emphasis on the principal entry to the building. Enclosing this arcade-like entry with glass, for example, would materially and visually change the character of the building.

Overall Visual Character: Roof and Related Features

This building pictured on the left has a number of character-defining aspects which include the windows and the decorative stonework, but certainly the roof and its related features are visually important to its overall visual character. The **roof** is not only highly visible, it has elaborate stone dormers, and it also has decorative metalwork and slatework. The red and black slates of differing sizes and shapes are laid in patterns that extend around the roof of this large and freestanding building. Any changes to this patterned slatework, or to the other roofing details would damage the visual character of the building.

Overall Visual Character: Roof and Related Features

Overall Visual Character: Roof and Related Features

On this building pictured on the right, the most important visual aspects of its character are the **roof and its related features**, such as the dormers and chimneys. The roof is important to the visual character because its steepness makes it highly visible, and its prominence is reinforced by the patterned tinwork, the six dormers and the two chimneys. Changes to the roof or its features, such as removal or alterations to the dormers, for example, would certainly change the character of this building. This does not discount the importance of its other aspects, such as the porch, the windows, the brickwork, or its setting; but the roof is clearly crucial to understanding the overall visual character of this building as seen from a distance.

Left Photo—Overall Visual Character: Projections. Middle Photo—Overall Visual Character: Trim. Right Photo—Overall Visual Character: Setting.

Overall Visual Character: Projections

A **projecting porch or balcony** can be very important to the overall visual character of almost any building and to the district in which it is located. Despite the size of this building (3-1/2 stories), and its distinctive roofline profile, and despite the importance of the very large window openings, the lacy wrap-around iron balcony is singularly important to the visual character of this building. It would seriously affect the character to remove the balcony, to enclose it, or to replace it with a balcony lacking the same degree of detail of the original material.

Overall Visual Character: Trim

If one were to analyze the overall shape or form of this building, it would be seen that it is a gable-roofed house with dormers and a wrap-around porch. It is similar to many other houses of the period. It is the **wooden trim** on the eaves and around the porch that gives this building its own identify and its special visual character.

Although such wooden trim is vulnerable to the elements, and must be kept painted to prevent deterioration; the loss of this trim would seriously damage the overall visual character of this building, and its loss would obliterate much of the closeup visual character so dependent upon craftsmanship for the moldings, carvings, and the see-through jigsaw work.

Overall Visual Character: Setting

Even architecturally modest buildings frequently will have a **setting** that contributes to their overall character. In this very urban district, setbacks are the exception, so that the small front yard is something of a luxury, and it is important to the overall character because of its design and materials, which include the iron fence along the sidewalk, the curved walk leading to the porch, and the various plantings. In a district where parking spaces are in great demand, such front yards are sometimes converted to off-street parking, but in this instance, that would essentially destroy its setting and would drastically change the visual character of this historic property.

Step 2: Visual Character at Close Range

Step Two involves looking at the building at close range or arm's length, where it is possible to see all the surface qualities of the materials, such as their color and texture, or surface evidence of craftsmanship or age. In some instances, the visual character is the result of the juxtaposition of materials that are contrastingly different in their color and texture. The surface qualities of the materials may be important because they impart the very sense of craftsmanship and age that distinguishes historic buildings from other buildings. Furthermore, many of these close up qualities can be easily damaged or obscured by work that affects those surfaces. Examples of this could include painting previously unpainted masonry, rotary disk sanding of smooth wood siding to remove paint, abrasive cleaning of tooled stonework, or repointing reddish mortar joints with gray portland cement.

There is an almost infinite variety of surface materials, textures and finishes that are part of a building's character which are fragile and easily lost.

Arm's Length Visual Character: Materials

At arm's length, the visual character is most often determined by the surface qualities of the **materials and craftsmanship**; and while these aspects are often inextricably related, the original choice of materials often plays the dominant role in establishing the close range character because of the color, texture, or shape of the materials.

Arm's Length Visual Character: Materials

In this instance, the variety and arrangement of the materials is important in defining the visual character, starting with the large pieces of broken stone which form the projecting base for the building walls, then changing to a wall of roughly rectangular stones which vary in size, color, and texture, all with accentuated, projecting beads of mortar, then there is a rather precise and narrow band of cut and dressed stones with minimal mortar joints, and finally, the main building walls are composed of bricks, rather uniform in color, with fairly generous mortar joints. It is the juxtaposition and variety of these materials (and of course, the craftsmanship) that is very important to the visual character. Changing the raised mortar joints, for example, would drastically alter the character at arm's length.

Arm's Length Visual Character: Craft Details

Arm's Length Visual Character: Craft Details

There are many instances where **craft details** dominate the arm's length visual character. As seen here, the craft details are especially noticeable because the stones are all of a uniform color, and they are all squared off, but their surfaces were worked with differing tools and techniques to create a great variety of textures, resulting in a tour-de-force of craft details. This texture is very important at close range. It was a deliberately contrived surface that is an important contributor to the visual character of this building.

Step 3: Identify the Visual Character of Interior Spaces, Features and Finishes

Perceiving the character of interior spaces can be somewhat more difficult than dealing with the exterior. In part, this is because so much of the exterior can be seen at one time and it is possible to grasp its essential character rather quickly. To understand the interior character, Step Three says it is necessary to move through the spaces one at a time. While it is not difficult to perceive the character of one individual room, it becomes more difficult to deal with spaces that are interconnected and interrelated. Sometimes, as in office buildings, it is the vestibules or lobbies or corridors that are important to the interior character of the building. With other groups of buildings the visual qualities of the interior are related to the plan of the building, as in a church with its axial plan creating a narrow tunnel-like space which obviously has a different character than an open space like a sports pavilion. Thus the shape of the space may be an essential part of its character.

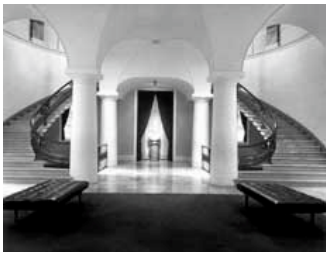
With some buildings it is possible to perceive that there is a visual linkage in a sequence of spaces, as in a hotel, from the lobby to the grand staircase to the ballroom. Closing off the openings between those spaces would change the character from visually linked spaces to a series of closed spaces. For example, in a house that has a front and back parlor linked with an open archway, the two rooms are perceived together, and this visual relationship is part of the character of the building. To close off the open archway would change the character of such a residence.

The importance of interior features and finishes to the character of the building should not be overlooked. In relatively simple rooms, the primary visual aspects may be in features such as fireplace mantels, lighting fixtures or wooden floors. In some rooms, the absolute plainness is the character-defining aspect of the interior. So-called secondary spaces also may be important in their own way, from the standpoint of history or because of the family activities that occurred in those rooms. Such secondary spaces, while perhaps historically significant, are not usually perceived as important to the visual character of the building. Thus we do not take them into account in the visual understanding of the building.

Interior Visual Character: Interior Features

Interior Visual Character: Individually Important Spaces

In assessing the interior visual character of any historic building, it is necessary to ask whether there are spaces that are important to the character of this particular building, whether the building is architecturally rich or modest, or even if it is a simple or utilitarian structure.



Interior Visual Character: Individually Important Spaces

The character of the **individually important space**, which is illustrated here, is a combination of its size, the twin curving staircases, the massive columns and curving vaulted ceilings, in addition to the quality of the materials in the floor and in the stairs. If the ceiling were to be lowered to provide space for heating ducts, or if the stairways were to be enclosed for code reasons, the shape and character of this space would be damaged, even if there was no permanent physical damage. Such changes can easily destroy the visual character of an individually important interior space. Thus, it is important that the visual aspects of a building's interior character be recognized before planning any changes or alterations.

Interior Visual Character: Related Spaces

Many buildings have interior spaces that are visually or physically related so that, as you move through them, they are perceived not as separate spaces, but as a sequence of **related spaces** that are important in defining the interior character of the building. The example which is illustrated here consists of two spaces that are visually linked to each other.

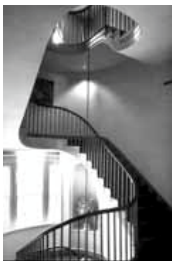
Interior Visual Character: Related Spaces

The photo shows a vestibule which is of a generous size and unusual in its own right, but more important, it visually relates to the staircase off of it.

The stairway, bottom photo, is the second part of this sequence of related spaces, and it provides continuing access to the upper floors. These related spaces are very important in defining the interior character of this building. Almost any change to these spaces, such as installing doors between the vestibule and the hallway, or enclosing the stair would seriously impact their character and the way that character is perceived.

Interior Visual Character: Interior Features

Interior features are three-dimensional building elements or architectural details that are an integral part of the building as opposed to furniture. Interior features are often important in defining the character of an individual room or space. In some instances, an interior feature, like a large and ornamental open stairway may dominate the visual character of an entire building. In other instances, a modest iron stairway (like the one illustrated here) may be an important interior feature, and its preservation would be crucial to preserving the interior character of the building.



Interior Visual Character: Interior Features

Such features can also include the obvious things like fireplace mantles, plaster ceiling medallions, or paneling, but they also extend to features like hardware, lighting fixtures, bank tellers cages, decorative elevator doors, etc.

Interior Visual Character: Surface Materials and Finishes

When identifying the visual character of historic interior spaces one should not overlook the importance of those materials and finishes that comprise the **surfaces of walls, floors and ceilings**. The surfaces may have evidence of either handcraft or machine made products that are important contributors to the visual character, including patterned or inlaid designs in the wood flooring, decorative painting practices such as stenciling, imitation marble or wood grain, wallpapering, tinwork, tile floors, etc.

Interior Visual Character: Surface Materials and Finishes

The example illustrated here involves a combination of real marble at the base of the column, imitation marble patterns on the plaster surface of the column (a practice called scagliola), and a tile floor surface that uses small mosaic tiles arranged to form geometric designs in several different colors. While such decorative materials and finishes may be important in defining the interior visual character of this particular building, it should be remembered that in much more modest buildings, the plainness of surface materials and finishes may be an essential aspect of their historic character.

Interior: Exposed Structure

Interior: Exposed Structure

If features of the **structural system** are exposed, such as loadbearing brick walls, cast iron columns, roof trusses, posts and beams, vigas, or stone foundation walls, they may be important in defining the building's interior visual character.

Fragility of A Building's Visual Character

Some aspects of a building's visual character are fragile and are easily lost. This is true of brickwork, for example, which can be irreversibly damaged with inappropriate cleaning techniques or by insensitive repointing practices. At least two factors are important contributors to the visual character of brickwork, namely the brick itself and the craftsmanship. Between these, there are many more aspects worth noting, such as color range of bricks, size and shape variations, texture, bonding patterns, together with the many variable qualities of the mortar joints, such as color, width of joint and tooling.

Fragility of A Building's Visual Character

These qualities could be easily damaged by painting the brick, by raking out the joint with power tools, or repointing with a joint that is too wide. As seen here during the process of repointing, the visual character of this front wall is being dramatically changed from a wall where the bricks predominate, to a wall that is visually dominated by the mortar joints.

The Architectural Character Checklist/Questionnaire

This checklist can be taken to the building and used to identify those aspects that give the building and setting its essential visual qualities and character. This checklist consists of a series of questions that are designed to help in identifying those things that contribute to a building's character. The use of

this checklist involves the threestep process of looking for: 1) the overall visual aspects, 2) the visual character at close range, and 3) the visual character of interior spaces, features and finishes.

Because this is a process to identify architectural character, it does not address those intangible qualities that give a property or building or its contents its historic significance, instead this checklist is organized on the assumption that historic significance is embodied in those tangible aspects that include the building's setting, its form and fabric.

STEP ONE

1. Shape

What is there about the form or shape of the building that gives the building its identity? Is the shape distinctive in relation to the neighboring buildings? Is it simply a low, squat box, or is it a tall, narrow building with a corner tower? Is the shape highly consistent with its neighbors? Is the shape so complicated because of wings, or ells, or differences in height, that its complexity is important to its character? Conversely, is the shape so simple or plain that adding a feature like a porch would change that character? Does the shape convey its historic function as in smoke stacks or silos?

2. Roof and Roof Features

Does the roof shape or its steep (or shallow) slope contribute to the building's character? Does the fact that the roof is highly visible (or not visible at all) contribute to the architectural identity of the building? Are certain roof features important to the profile of the building against the sky or its background, such as cupolas, multiple chimneys, dormers, cresting, or weather vanes? Are the roofing materials or their colors or their patterns (such as patterned slates) more noticeable than the shape or slope of the roof?

3. Openings

Is there a rhythm or pattern to the arrangement of windows or other openings in the walls; like the rhythm of windows in a factory building, or a threepart window in the front bay of a house; or is there a noticeable relationship between the width of the window openings and the wall space between the window openings? Are there distinctive openings, like a large arched entranceway, or decorative window lintels that accentuate the importance the window openings, or unusually shaped windows, or patterned window sash, like small panes of glass in the windows or doors, that are important to the character? Is the plainness of the window openings such that adding shutters or gingerbread trim would radically change its character? Is there a hierarchy of facades that make the front windows more important than the side windows? What about those walls where the absence of windows establishes its own character?

4. Projections

Are there parts of the building that are characterdefining because they project from the walls of the building like porches, cornices, bay windows, or balconies? Are there turrets, or widely overhanging eaves, projecting pediments or chimneys?

5. Trim and Secondary Features

Does the trim around the windows or doors contribute to the character of the building? Is there other trim on the walls or around the projections that, because of its decoration or color or patterning contributes to the character of the building? Are there secondary features such as shutters, decorative gables, railings, or exterior wall panels?

6. Materials

Do the materials or combination of materials contribute to the overall character of the building as seen from a distance because of their color or patterning, such as broken faced stone, scalloped wall shingling, rounded rock foundation walls, boards and battens, or textured stucco?

7. Setting

What are the aspects of the setting that are important to the visual character? For example, is the alignment of buildings along a city street and their relationship to the sidewalk the essential aspect of its setting? Or, conversely, is the essential character dependent upon the tree plantings and out buildings which surround the farmhouse? Is the front yard important to the setting of the modest house? Is the specific site important to the setting such as being on a hilltop, along a river, or, is the building placed on the site in such a way to enhance its setting? Is there a special relationship to the adjoining streets and other buildings? Is there a view? Is there fencing, planting, terracing, walkways or any other landscape aspects that contribute to the setting?

STEP TWO

8. Materials at Close Range

Are there one or more materials that have an inherent texture that contributes to the close range character, such as stucco, exposed aggregate concrete, or brick textured with vertical grooves? Or materials with inherent colors such as smooth orange colored brick with dark spots of iron pyrites, or prominently veined stone, or green serpentine stone? Are there

combinations of materials, used in juxtaposition, such as several different kinds of stone, combinations of stone and brick, dressed stones for window lintels used in conjunction with rough stones for the wall? Has the choice of materials or the combinations of materials contributed to the character?

9. Craft Details

Is there high quality brickwork with narrow mortar joints? Is there hand tooled or patterned stonework? Do the walls exhibit carefully struck vertical mortar joints and recessed horizontal joints? Is the wall shinglework laid up in patterns or does it retain evidence of the circular saw marks or can the grain of the wood be seen through the semitransparent stain? Are there hand split or handdressed clapboards, or machine smooth beveled siding, or wood rusticated to look like stone, or Art Deco zigzag designs executed in stucco?

Almost any evidence of craft details, whether handmade or machinemade, will contribute to the character of a building because it is a manifestation of the materials, of the times in which the work was done, and of the tools and processes that were used. It further reflects the effects of time, of maintenance (and/or neglect) that the building has received over the years. All of these aspects are a part of the surface qualities that are seen only at close range.

STEP THREE

10. Individual Spaces

Are there individual rooms or spaces that are important to this building because of their size, height, proportion, configuration, or function, like the center hallway in a house, or the bank lobby, or the school auditorium, or the ballroom in a hotel, or a courtroom in a county courthouse?

11. Related Spaces and Sequences of Spaces

Are there adjoining rooms that are visually and physically related with large doorways or open archways so that they are perceived as related rooms as opposed to separate rooms? Is there an important sequence of spaces that are related to each other, such as the sequence from the entry way to the lobby to the stairway and to the upper balcony as in a theatre; or the sequence in a residence from the entry vestibule to the hallway to the front parlor, and on through the sliding doors to the back parlor; or the sequence in an office building from the entry vestibule to the lobby to the bank of elevators?

12. Interior Features

Are there interior features that help define the character of the building, such as fireplace mantels, stairways and balustrades, arched openings, interior shutters, inglenooks, cornices, ceiling medallions, light fixtures, balconies, doors, windows, hardware, wainscoting, panelling, trim, church pews, courtroom bars, teller cages, waiting room benches?

13. Surface Finishes and Materials

Are there surface finishes and materials that can affect the design, the color or the texture of the interior? Are there materials and finishes or craft practices that contribute to the interior character, such as wooden parquet floors, checkerboard marble floors, pressed metal ceilings, fine hardwoods, grained doors or marbleized surfaces, or polychrome painted surfaces, or stenciling, or wallpaper that is important to the historic character? Are there surface finishes and materials that, because of their plainness, are imparting the essential character of the interior such as hard or bright, shiny wall surfaces of plaster or glass or metal?

14. Exposed Structure

Are there spaces where the exposed structural elements define the interior character such as the exposed posts, beams, and trusses in a church or train shed or factory? Are there rooms with decorative ceiling beams (nonstructural) in bungalows, or exposed vigas in adobe buildings?

This concludes the three-step process of identifying the visual aspects of historic buildings and is intended as an aid in preserving their character and other distinguishing qualities. It is not intended as a means of understanding the significance of historical properties or districts, nor of the events or people associated with them. That can only be done through other kinds of research and investigation.

Summary and References

Using this three-step approach, it is possible to conduct a walk through and identify all those elements and features that help define the visual character of the building. In most cases, there are a number of aspects about the exterior and interior that are important to the character of an historic building. The visual emphasis of this brief will make it possible to ascertain those things that should be preserved because their loss or alteration would diminish or destroy aspects of the historic character whether on the outside, or on the inside of the building.

Acknowledgements

This Preservation Brief was originally developed as a slide talk/methodology in 1982 to discuss the use of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation in relation to preserving historic character; and it was amplified and modified in succeeding years to help guide preservation decision making, initially for maintenance personnel in the National Park Service.

A number of people contributed to the evolution of the ideas presented here. Special thanks go to Emogene Bevitt and Gary Hume, primarily for the many and frequent discussions relating to this approach in its evolutionary stages; to Mark Fram, Ontario Heritage Foundation, Toronto, for suggesting several additions to the Checklist; and more recently, to my coworkers, both in Washington and in our regional offices, especially Ward Jandl, Sara Blumenthal, Charles Fisher, Sharon Park, AIA, Jean Travers, Camille Martone, Susan Dynes, Michael Auer, Anne E. Grimmer, Kay Weeks, Betsy Chittenden, Patrick Andrus, Carol Shull, Hugh Miller, FAIA, Jerry Rogers, Paul Alley, David Look, AIA, Margaret Pepin-Donat, Bonnie Halda, Keith Everett, Thomas Keohan, the Preservation Services Division, MidAtlantic Region, and several reviewers in state preservation offices, especially Ann Haaker, Illinois; and Stan Graves, AIA, Texas; for providing very critical and constructive review of the manuscript.

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