

A Guide to Design Review in Huntsville's Historic Districts

THE DESIGN REVIEW PROCESS

Huntsville's historic resources make an important contribution to the city's character, economy and quality of life. In recognition of this, the City of Huntsville officially designates local historic districts and has established a design review process to help insure the preservation of the character of these districts. Within each historic district, all projects that result in exterior changes to buildings or their settings are required to obtain a "certificate of appropriateness" from the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission before a building permit may be issued. The Commission is a city board consisting of six appointed volunteer members and three city officials. As property owners and members of the community themselves, commission members recognize their responsibility to promote the commission's purposes through a cooperative and reasonable approach to working with applicants and the owners of the city's historic resources. Through their efforts, the city's historic preservation ordinance has proven to be a highly successful tool for maintaining and enhancing both the character and value of the designated historic neighborhoods since its adoption in 1972.

Every historic building has its own character and relates to its surrounding neighborhood in a different way. Because of this, historic district commissions typically use a set of "design review guidelines" to guide them in making reasonable and consistent decisions regarding how proposed changes will affect the overall historic character of a building and its neighborhood. This Guide describes the Huntsville Historic District Commission's design review process and guidelines. The guidelines are based upon the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Rehabilitation, widely accepted standards developed by the National Park Service, as well as preservation principles and practices developed over more than seventy years of historic district designation in the United States. This Guide is intended to help property owners in Huntsville's designated historic districts apply the guidelines in a manner that provides ample flexibility to meet most economic circumstances and personal preferences while still insuring the preservation of the historic character of the districts.

Historic Preservation Commission

The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission was created by Ordinance No. 72-47, adopted March 23, 1972. The Commission consists of nine members, six of whom are appointed by the Mayor to serve six-year staggered terms. The remaining three members include the Director of the City Planning Department, the City Building Official, and one member of the City Council, whose terms correspond with the terms of their office.

Meetings are held on the second Monday of each month at 4:30 p.m.

1.1 Why Design Review?

Real estate is often the most important investment people make. In addition to economic value, the properties which we choose for our residences or for our businesses have value as expressions of our individuality and the role we play in our community. Additional layers of intrinsic value are added to historic properties such as their ability to tell something about the history of the community and its people, their patriotic value, the value of their design and materials, and their relative rarity.

The protection afforded by local historic designation maintains the essential historic character of our neighborhoods. By establishing a reasonable set of design guidelines based upon national historic preservation standards, historic district designation protects the character of historic neighborhoods by helping to insure that work completed on the exteriors of individual buildings is consistent with the historic character of the building and its surrounding neighborhood.

*For the time period 1975-2000, the average annual rate of return for residential historic properties within the **Old Town District in Huntsville** was **13.45 percent**, compared to **6.02 percent**, for residential properties in the Huntsville area (counting all properties sold), and **20.05 percent**, compared to **6.02 percent**, for properties that were listed as sold two or more times by the MLS books.*

Property Value Appreciation for Historic Districts in Alabama

While the maintenance of any piece of real estate carries with it a financial obligation for its owner, historic properties have their own characteristics that require a specialized understanding of the technology and materials with which they were built. Without this understanding, the cost of maintaining a historic building can often be comparatively higher than that of a non-historic building. The good news is that historic buildings were most often well built by skilled craftsmen using excellent and durable materials. For this reason, the cost of maintaining historic buildings is often quite reasonable when care is taken to retain existing materials and features.

Huntsville's character, identity and sense of place are largely defined by its rich historic architectural legacy. Investment in the preservation of the city's historic districts will insure that this legacy is passed on to future generations.

1.2 Planning a Project

Since the overall intent of these guidelines is to maintain the character of the historic districts, it is essential that planning for all rehabilitation and maintenance work consider the impact of the work on the character of the building and its surrounding neighborhood.

Understanding Architectural Character

Each historic building has its own individual character and contributes to its historic district in a unique way. Understanding what defines a particular building's character is therefore a critical step in the design review process. Historic character is defined by a mix of factors, typically including architectural period and style, architectural integrity, how the building has changed over time, use of materials, condition of the materials, how the building is sited, and its overall setting. Huntsville's historic districts retain rich collections of historic architecture spanning many periods and reflecting the evolution of America's building traditions. Through these districts, a person can readily experience a broad spectrum of history, changes in popular design, and the evolution of building technology.



Both of these houses are contributing historic resources. The character of each house is quite different. The style, design, materials, and setting of each house helps to define its individual historic character. Features appropriate to one would be out of place on the other.

Architectural Period and Style. Huntsville’s historic districts retain excellent examples of most of America’s historic architectural styles, each of which was popular at a certain period of time. Each style has its own particular features. In many cases, features that are appropriate for one style may not be appropriate for another. For more information about the architectural styles found within the district, please refer to [A Field Guide to American Houses](#) by Virginia and Lee McAlester. Another useful source is the [Alabama Preservation Manual](#). Both publications are available at the Huntsville Public Library.

Architectural Integrity. Architectural integrity refers to the degree to which a particular building reflects its historic character and retains its materials. Integrity is lost through alterations and the replacement of materials.



Note how changes in materials and architectural elements can alter the architectural integrity of a historic building. Integrity affects the architectural character of these buildings

Architectural History. Buildings tend to change over time and these changes can become significant to an understanding of the history of the building and the district. Being familiar with the history of a building can help answer questions about appropriate rehabilitation and maintenance strategies. It is also important to respect and maintain historic alterations.

Materials. Materials help to define the visual character of a building through the types of materials used, their placement on the building, and the craftsmanship that went into the construction. Materials provide the fabric and texture of a building and often help to relate the building to surrounding buildings. The condition of a building’s materials can also help to define its character through the rich patina of age that historic materials often acquire. Much like an antique piece of furniture, historic buildings gain value through the retention of their authentic historic materials.



The character of historic buildings is largely defined by the materials used in their construction and decoration. Materials give buildings texture. The craftsmanship that went into the construction of a building is often most evident in its materials.



Site and Setting. The relationship of a building to its site and its surrounding neighborhood is a significant dimension of its character. The setback of the building from its front and side property lines, the topography of the property and how the placement of the building responds to that topography, the surrounding landscaping, and how these features are similar or different from neighboring properties play a substantial role in defining the character of the property and the district.



Notice how the siting and setting of each of these houses affects its overall character. Each building relates differently to its street and surrounding neighborhood.

For additional information about identifying what defines the historic character of a building in Huntsville's historic districts, please refer to [Preservation Brief #17: Architectural Character: Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving Their Character.](#)

Understanding the character of a particular building, what defines that character, and how that character relates to the surrounding district is critical not only to the preservation of the individual

historic resource, but also the preservation of the overall historic district. Alterations that destroy or alter the character of the building or its relationship to the district often have a serious impact on the overall integrity of the district, and hence its overall intrinsic value.

Contributing and Noncontributing Resources

Within the districts, buildings can be classified as follows:

Contributing - Contributing buildings are those which contribute to the district's overall historic character and that were constructed during the district's period of significance. Contributing buildings also retain integrity. A building has integrity if it retains sufficient historic fabric and features to continue to reflect the overall character it had during its period of significance.

Noncontributing - Noncontributing buildings are buildings that do not contribute to the district's overall historic character. Typically, these buildings were either constructed after the end of the district's period of significance or are earlier buildings that have lost integrity through alterations. Noncontributing properties can be either compatible with or intrusive to the character of the district in terms of scale, massing, materials and other architectural characteristics.

The goal of projects involving contributing buildings should be to maintain the primary character-defining elements of the building by retaining and repairing distinctive features and respecting historic alterations. When new additions or other alterations are proposed, they should be designed to be reversible in the future. The goal for a project involving compatible noncontributing buildings should be to retain those features that are consistent with the historic character of the neighborhood. When working with intrusive buildings, the goal should be to improve the building's compatibility with the district to the greatest practical degree.



The house on the left contributes to Huntsville's historic districts through its history and historic character. Maintaining the historic character of this house is important to the preservation of the overall historic district.

The center house (not located in Huntsville) is an example of a noncontributing building. While generally architecturally compatible with its surrounding historic neighborhood, it was constructed outside that district's period of significance. Aspects of the character of a house like this that are compatible with the district should be retained. Any new work should be consistent with the character of the surrounding neighborhood.

The metal industrial building at right (not located in Huntsville) is both noncontributing and intrusive to the historic residential character of the historic district in which it is located. The historic district in which this building is located would be enhanced if this building were made more architecturally compatible or if it could be concealed from principal vantages.

1.3 Definitions

The following terms are used throughout this Guide. The words “appropriate” and “inappropriate” are used because they relate to the city’s ordinance which requires a “certificate of appropriateness” from the Commission before a building permit can be issued for exterior work in the locally designated historic districts.

Adaptive Use	Adapting a building to a different use than that for which it was built or has historically been used.
Alteration	Any act or process that changes one or more of the exterior architectural features of a building, including but not limited to the erection, construction, reconstruction or removal of any building.
Appropriate	A proposed activity that is consistent with the guidelines.
Certificate of Appropriateness	A document evidencing approval by the Historic Preservation Commission of an application to make a material change in the exterior appearance of a designated historic property or of a property located within a designated historic district.
Demolition	The removal of a building, or a portion of a building, either by direct action or by neglect.
Inappropriate	A proposed activity that is not consistent with the guidelines and may result in the Historic Commission withholding a Certificate of Appropriateness.
Neglect	The failure to maintain a building’s weather tight condition and/or the failure to prevent or correct deterioration of a building’s structure, materials or finishes.
Preservation	To sustain the existing form, integrity, and material of a building or structure.
Primary Elevation	An elevation of a building that faces either a front or side street or that is otherwise prominently visible from public vantages within the district.
Recommended	A proposed activity that is recommended but is not required.
Rehabilitation	Returning a property to a state of utility through repair or alteration which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions or features of a property which are significant to its historical, architectural, and cultural values.
Restoration	Accurately recovering the form and details of a building and its setting as it appeared at a particular period of time by means of the removal of later work or by the replacement of missing earlier work to match documented conditions.
Secondary Elevation	An elevation of a building that faces a rear or side yard or that is otherwise not prominently visible from public vantages of or within the district.
Stabilization	To reestablish a weather resistant enclosure and the structural stability of an unsafe or deteriorated property while maintaining its essential form as it exists at present.

1.4 Additional Information

These guidelines reference other publications that may be useful in providing additional background information and explanation. The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission maintains a library of these publications at the Huntsville City Hall and they are available for public review. The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and Illustrated Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings and the National Park Service’s Preservation Briefs series are also available for review on the National Park Service’s internet website. They are also available for purchase from the National Park Service.

1.5 Secretary of the Interior's Standards

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards form the basis for Huntsville's Design Guidelines. The Standards were developed by the National Park Service and are generally accepted nationwide as standards for the rehabilitation of historic buildings. The basic purpose of the Standards is to maintain the primary character-defining elements of a building by: recommending that distinctive features be retained and repaired rather than replaced, historic alterations be respected, and, where new additions or other alterations are required, they be made in such a way as to be reversible in the future. The Standards generally do not require the restoration of missing elements; rather, they are designed to allow for changes that are needed to adapt a building to a new function.

- Standard #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.
- Standard #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.
- Standard #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.
- Standard #4: Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.
- Standard #5: Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a historic property shall be preserved.
- Standard #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.
- Standard #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.
- Standard #8: Significant archeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.
- Standard #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.
- Standard #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.

For a more detailed description of the Standards and how to apply them, please see [The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Illustrated Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings](#) (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1992). Additional information can be found on the internet at the National Park Service website.