

Urban Areas and Historic Buildings

By David Heide, Allied Member ASID

As urban areas rediscover their historic building stock, interesting opportunities present themselves to owners, architects and designers. Relating to these old buildings has become big business for the design industry over the past thirty years. As design professionals, we carry the responsibility to be informed and knowledgeable, or seek out specialized expertise to ensure success.

Resources are available on many levels, including firms that specialize in preservation and restoration, fabricators of reproduction products and materials, and structural engineers and knowledgeable craftspeople. Additional information can be had from the National Park Service (NPS), through a series of Preservation Briefs, providing information ranging from masonry and terra cotta restoration to painting historic interiors, and lead or contaminated products.

Though not all old buildings are considered historic, and may not fall within the purview of preservation guidelines, the principles that inform these projects remains similar. These tenets, developed by NPS and redefined by Heritage Preservation Commissions across the country, reflect standards for restoration and rehabilitation developed at the federal level.

In Minnesota we are fortunate to have a wealth of fabricators and conservation specialists. Creative and skilled craftspeople are available for everything from custom-designed light fixtures to castings of historic wall sconces. Replication of missing components—doors, windows, art glass, ceramic tile—even hardware is found locally.

For anyone who is interested, a product can be had. Countless manufacturers of reproduction products have period-appropriate fixtures, textiles, wall coverings, and lighting available. Become informed. Learn and understand the subtleties that exist between accurate reproductions, and the currently-popular 'fake-old' look, so inappropriate for restoration projects.

Finally, when designing modifications to old buildings, learn to understand the vocabulary of the building you're working with. Let it guide you through questions about scale and pattern of window openings, proportion of rooms, shape and complexity of molding and shadow line. Keep things pure and simple with respect to the integrity of the building.

Philosophically, it is important to let the new work stand apart from the old by leaving clues to the story of the building's evolution. This can come in the form of a subtle change in materials. It can be as simple as a turn-board in the floor, or as bold as a modern addition against a historic backdrop. When the modern addition is successful, it will demonstrate an understanding of the original building, its massing and structural organization.

The challenges and rewards of working with old buildings are great. It is important to realize that while a few buildings can exist in the state of museum, most of them have to be allowed to evolve and change to continue to meet the needs of their inhabitants. If a building does not move toward modern standards it risks becoming obsolete, and is then at its most vulnerable state.

It is a privilege to have a hand in the history of a structure.

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He served for five years on the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission, chairing its Design Review Committee for three years. He has served on the Board of Historic Saint Paul, organized the Grand Avenue Design Guidelines Taskforce, and was with the Historic Preservation Firm, MacDonald & Mack Architects for eleven years before starting his own firm in 1997, www.DHDStudio.com.

Resources

Preservation Briefs, www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/briefs/presbriom.htm
National Park Service, www.cr.nps.gov/nr/index.htm

A longstanding source of everything relating to old buildings is a catalogue of services, products and materials ranging from cupolas to heartwood floor planks:

Clem Labine's Traditional Building Catalogue,
www.traditionalbuilding.com