



Historic Preservation Tax Incentives Program

Technical Preservation Services
National Park Service

Subdividing Assembly Spaces in Historic Buildings

Public assembly spaces in buildings such as churches, theaters, schools, sports arenas, fraternal lodge halls, and hotels are typically the most significant interior spaces in these buildings, and proposals for subdividing them must be carefully evaluated in the context of an overall rehabilitation. As a first step, the most successful approach in these situations is to consider a use for the space that maintains the public or group activity nature of the space, in order to minimize the need for subdivision.

The following criteria come into play when making an evaluation of how much change these spaces can accommodate and how to approach subdividing them. These considerations interact and should be taken collectively, to make a balanced assessment of the impact of proposed changes.

Role of the space in defining the character of the building

In buildings such as churches and theaters, the assembly space is usually of paramount importance and the entire building is often defined largely by its interior space. Consequently, it can be difficult to subdivide such spaces without impacting the character of the building as a whole.

Other buildings such as schools or hotels may have several public assembly spaces, and they may not all be of equal importance. The subdivision of one assembly space may have less impact on the overall building, depending on its relative prominence. For example, in a school with an intact auditorium, gymnasium and cafeteria, subdividing the cafeteria would likely be less of an issue than a similar treatment in the auditorium.

Spaces should be evaluated for their importance architecturally in the building, as well as functionally. If an auditorium or lodge hall is expressed on the exterior of the building with double-height windows, for example, that speaks to its significance in the spatial hierarchy of the building. The space may still be character defining without that expression, but its existence is an indication of the primary nature of the space.

Physical layout and condition

The physical arrangement of the interior may help dictate the most appropriate options for subdivision. Even primary assembly spaces may have secondary areas such as a stage behind a proscenium or the area under a balcony. In some cases these areas can be walled off with little impact on the overall space, depending on other factors such as relationship to the larger space, dimensions of the area and degree of architectural detail. Conversely, it will be harder to divide spaces with areas that are of equal importance, or spaces with a more tightly unified design, such as a church sanctuary with a strong axial plan.

As in other areas of the interior, the existing physical integrity also will influence how much change the space can accommodate. If finishes and features are deteriorated or missing or if the space has already been significantly altered, then its importance in defining the character of the building may be diminished enough to allow further changes. However, the impact of new alterations must be evaluated in the context of what integrity does still exist, the functional or architectural importance of the space in the building, and other proposed project treatments.

Manner of subdivision

The manner in which the space will be subdivided must also be considered. Treatments such as adding full-height walls or new floors that block the sense of volume of the space do not meet the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, unless the space is a secondary or tertiary area in a building with other more important public rooms. However, divisions that do not intrude on the overall character and height of the interior may be appropriate. Lower partition walls in the main space, such as open office-height partitions in a two-story space, may be used in some instances. Also, in certain situations it may be possible to insert a mezzanine into secondary areas, if it has only a minimal impact in the space.

Existing historic features and finishes should also be retained to the maximum extent possible, and new vertical or horizontal partitions should not diminish their prominence and impact. For example, a new wall between a stage and auditorium space that is installed behind the proscenium rather than within the opening will keep the appearance of the stage boundary dominant.

For more general guidance regarding changes to interior spaces, please refer to *Changing Secondary Interior Spaces in Historic Buildings*.

For additional guidance, see *Preservation Brief 18: Rehabilitating Interiors in Historic Buildings – Identifying Character-Defining Elements*, and *Preservation Brief 17: Architectural Character – Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving Their Character*, and the *Technical Preservation Services' Publications and Online Materials* index.

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