

Awnings

Historic photographs from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer ample precedent for the use of awnings on windows, above storefronts, and at entrances. They afforded a measure of protection from the elements, and helped reduce glare in interior spaces. While they can serve the same functions today, awnings are more often installed for decorative or marketing purposes. The result can be oversized or inappropriately detailed awnings that detract measurably from the historic character of the building by hiding significant features, by imposing a radically new and incompatible design element, or, in extreme cases, by altering the visible form of the building. New awnings that have impaired the historic character of a structure have resulted in a project not meeting the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

While awnings may detract significantly from the historic character of buildings undergoing rehabilitation, they do not invariably do so, and their use should not be discouraged as a matter of policy or practice. Furthermore, they are not without advantages, and can even be encouraged in some situations. As *Preservation Tech Note: Windows Number 7* substantiates, awnings can successfully reduce the size of new air conditioning systems. Since installation of new and large HVAC equipment has great potential for causing damage to historic fabric, awnings may thus save historic structures from harmful or more permanent damage. Similarly, awnings reduce glare and solar heat gain, and can therefore lessen the need for insulating glass, tinted glazing, applied films, or entire new windows.

As always, decisions on particular projects must be based on the circumstances of each building, but as a general rule, awnings are acceptable when the physical evidence or documented research clearly shows they were once on the building, and the historic appearance is being accurately restored. Even on buildings that lacked awnings historically, awnings may be acceptable when they do not negatively affect the historic character of the building.

The following criteria should govern whether the historic character will be maintained in a rehabilitation project that proposes the installation of awnings:

1. Awnings should not obscure character-defining features.
2. The potential for harm is greatest on the most articulated elevations of a building, but awnings installed on secondary elevations may also impair historic character by giving such elevations a new prominence that may diminish the prominence of the facade, or even reorient the public perception of the building.
3. Awnings should be installed in the least destructive manner. However, it must be recognized that installation of even the most sensitive awning systems may result in some damage to historic fabric. Special care should be taken to avoid harm to decorative features or historic materials like terra cotta, which are more difficult to repair than plain brick, stucco, or wood siding.

4. Awnings should be made of fabric, rather than of plastic or aluminum. Rigid awnings of metal or wood should be based on historic documentation.
5. Awnings that cannot be raised normally require heavier framing and stronger attachments in order to withstand high winds, hail and other forces. However, if such awnings meet the primary criteria outlined above, namely, that they do not obscure character-defining features, introduce radically incompatible design elements, or damage substantial amounts of historic fabric, then they should not be rejected merely because they are fixed open.

May 1997

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