



Subject: Altering the Character of Historically Finished Interiors

- Applicable Standards:**
2. Retention of Historic Character
 5. Preservation of Distinctive Features, Finishes and Craftsmanship
 6. Repair/Replacement of Deteriorated or Missing Features Based on Evidence

Issue: Removing historic ceiling finishes or exposing overhead structural systems can significantly alter the historic character of certain interior spaces. Influenced by the popularity of loft apartments in converted warehouses or industrial buildings, many office and retail buildings are now being converted into “loft” apartments. The methods by which many rehabilitations of buildings with historic finished interiors try to emulate the aesthetics of the raw and unfinished interiors of warehouses and industrial buildings often consist of removing interior finishes and leaving mechanical, electrical, and fire protection systems exposed. Whether for marketing purposes or economic savings, such alterations are not in accordance with the Standards and can often result in certification denial of a historic rehabilitation project.

Application I (*Incompatible Treatment*): Many historic office buildings, particularly those built for speculative reasons, undergo many interior changes as new tenants or owners change and update these buildings. The addition of suspended ceilings, as shown in this 1980s remodel of a 1915 office building, has been a common treatment ever since new forced air-conditioning systems began to be installed. Commonly, the original plaster ceiling finish in these buildings was installed using wood or metal lath fastened directly to the underside of the floor structure. The addition of a new suspended ceiling is frequently used to conceal the often bulky and complicated new systems and to provide a continuous, finished ceiling. Unfortunately, the new ceilings are not always installed in a manner that respects the historic character of the space.

When a previously installed suspended ceiling is removed as part of a rehabilitation project, the owner must either restore the original ceiling finish, or install a new ceiling that is compatible with the historic character of the building. The removal of a non-historic feature without appropriate replacement of the feature does not meet the Standards, especially in cases where the element or feature removed helps to define the original character of the space. After rehabilitation, the interior space shown in the 1915 structure illustrates the drastic change in character the space has undergone by exposing the underside of the upper floor structure and leaving the new systems exposed. Even though the original windows and historic plaster finish along the perimeter walls are still there, the character of the new interior is in contrast with the character of this historic office building which features a classically detailed masonry exterior. To meet the Standards, a new finished ceiling concealing the structural system would have to be added and the ductwork installed either above the new ceiling, or within a new soffit.



LEFT: Previously installed suspended ceiling.

RIGHT: Photo of another area in the same building after rehabilitation. Notice how the exposed concrete floors further add to the “warehouse loft” appearance.



Application 2 (*Compatible Treatment*): A similar conversion of another early 20th century office building for new housing use illustrates a much more sensitive rehabilitation approach where a previously installed suspended ceiling was removed. In this case, a new ceiling finish was applied directly to the underside of the flat concrete floor slab overhead. In order to minimize the impact of the new mechanical systems, they were concealed above a lower ceiling over the kitchen and bathroom areas. Locating these functions in the secondary spaces, away from the perimeter wall, made it possible to avoid dropping the ceiling below the top of the windows and to retain the sense of volume and proportion of the original space in the primary living areas. Furthermore, the finished quality of the space was maintained.



The lowered ceiling in the kitchen area conceals mechanical and other equipment in this rehabilitated 1927 office building.