



Subject: Alterations to Rear Elevations

- Applicable Standards:
- 2. Retention of Historic Character
 - 9. Compatible New Additions/Alterations

Issue: Before initiating a rehabilitation project a building must be carefully studied to identify its distinctive characteristics in order to ensure that they are retained. While there is usually little doubt whether the primary elevation is significant, it may be more difficult to determine when rear or secondary elevations are also important. Generally, a secondary elevation is likely to be significant if it exhibits detailing, shape or form that helps to define the building type and its historic character. In this case, alterations to a secondary façade, especially if it is highly visible, must be compatible with the building's historic character.

Application 1 (*Incompatible Treatment*): An armory built in 1912, unused for many years, was converted into residential apartments. The red brick armory consists of two sections: a two-story head house in the front facing the street, and a one- and one-half story drill shed attached at the rear. The back of the drill shed is quite prominent when viewed from across the river.

The rehabilitation successfully retained the historic character of the interior and the exterior of the head house. But unsympathetic alterations were made to the exterior of the drill shed during its conversion to apartments. The original paired, nine-over-nine wood sash windows in the rear wall were removed along with a considerable amount of brick. These enlarged openings were replaced with a wood infill panel, new windows and a door to create an individual townhouse unit in each of the bays. The addition of wood decks with privacy screens further gave this elevation the appearance of a residential townhouse complex.



Above: The street elevation of the armory shows the head house on the right with a portion of the drill shed visible to the left.



Left: Before rehabilitation the rear elevation of the drill shed, which is highly visible, is distinguished by paired, multi-pane wood windows in the bays. Right: During rehabilitation the historic windows were removed and the openings were enlarged.

These changes to the rear elevation are not compatible with the utilitarian character of the drill shed. The existing historic windows could have been retained and, with a few alterations, could have provided sufficient light and access to the apartments while retaining the building's character. Instead, wholesale removal of the sash and so much brick resulted in a loss of historic building material, and replacing it with stock doors and windows and wood decks changed the character of the drill shed from utilitarian to residential. The cumulative effect of these alterations negatively impacted the historic character of this distinctive and highly visible elevation. The rehabilitation project did not meet the Standards.



Above: The enlarged openings were infilled with wood panels, stock windows and doors (left). As a result, (right) the rear elevation of the drill house row has the residential appearance of townhouses.

Application 2 (*Incompatible treatment*): Four row houses, part of a block of late-19th century brick row houses, were rehabilitated for office use. The office conversion involved some relatively minor changes to the interior layout and room configurations. Because it was done for a single business, some openings were made in the party walls that separated the individual houses in order to connect the interior spaces. The rehabilitation carefully retained the historic character of the exterior of the buildings on the front and their appearance as individual row houses. However, as part of the rehabilitation a continuous glass curtain wall was constructed across the back of the four row houses, completely obliterating their distinctive rear brick walls. As a result of this treatment the houses have lost their identity as separate buildings. In addition, the glass curtain wall is incompatible with the late 19th century historic brick row houses and with the residential character of the historic district. The rehabilitation project did not meet the Standards.

Right: Historic row houses retain their historic character on their primary elevations after rehabilitation.



Above: The rear walls of the row houses were covered with a single glass curtain wall that is incompatible with the character of the historic houses as well as the character of the historic district.

Anne Grimmer, Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service

These bulletins are issued to explain preservation project decisions made by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The resulting determinations, based on the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation](#), are not necessarily applicable beyond the unique facts and circumstances of each particular case.