



Interpreting The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation

Subject: Rooftop Additions on Mid-Size Historic Buildings

Applicable Standards:

2. Retention of Historic Character
5. Preservation of Distinctive Features, Finishes, and Craftsmanship
9. Compatible New Additions/Alterations

Issue: The roofline is often an important character-defining feature of a historic building. A large cornice, tall tower, or a projecting dormer can identify a building in the skyline. Even a simple roofline defines a building's character. Accordingly, rooftop additions proposed as part of a rehabilitation project must be carefully designed in order to preserve the building's historic character. Although a rooftop addition is not appropriate for all historic buildings, under certain circumstances a compatible rooftop addition may be constructed that meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. A successful rooftop addition does not significantly impact the character of the historic building. It is subordinate to the historic building in size and design, and compatible with its massing, scale, materials and features. It must be set far enough back from the primary elevation(s) of the building — usually at least one bay, so that it is not highly visible from the public right-of-way. In most cases, rooftop additions should not be more than one story and, generally, they are not appropriate for buildings consisting of three stories or less.



Mid-19th century commercial building with rooftop addition as it appeared after rehabilitation (center).

to reduce the impact of the addition and allow it to blend in with the adjacent rooflines. This rooftop addition does not detract from the historic character of the building and, therefore, meets the Standards.

Application 2 (*Incompatible treatment*): This three-story commercial building, originally constructed in 1847 but greatly altered in 1907, underwent rehabilitation for mixed commercial, office, and residential use. The rehabilitation included a substantial new rooftop addition.

Application 1 (*Compatible treatment*): The rehabilitation of this mid-19th century commercial building included a rooftop addition as part of the project. Though the building is only four stories in height, this rooftop addition is compatible with its historic character. It is set back substantially—almost halfway from the front façade and, thus, it is minimally visible from the public street and from within the district. High party walls on either side also help



Three-story commercial building prior to rehabilitation.

Contrary to National Park Service guidance which states that rooftop additions should be limited to one story and are rarely acceptable for low-rise buildings, this addition rises a full story and a half above the roof. The prominent cornice, an important character-defining feature of the primary elevation of the historic building, is overwhelmed and greatly diminished by the new rooftop addition. Not only is the addition barely set back from the front of the building, its asymmetric, modernist design further detracts from the character of the building's classically-styled façade. The rooftop addition competes for attention with the historic building and it is also out of character with the surrounding district. This rooftop addition is not compatible with the historic character of the building and, therefore, does not meet the Standards.



Drawing of front elevation with proposed rooftop addition.



Three-story commercial building showing rooftop addition under construction.

Liz Creveling, 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.