



Subject: Removing Interior Plaster to Expose Brick

- Applicable Standards:**
- 2. Retention of Historic Character
 - 6. Repair/Replacement of Deteriorated or Missing Features Based on Evidence

Issue: A popular, contemporary treatment in both residential and commercial historic interiors exposes historic interior brick walls. Traditionally, masonry walls in most historic buildings were finished in plaster, and sometimes wainscoting. Removing wall finishing materials from masonry walls in historic houses and commercial buildings, not only causes a loss of historic fabric, but it creates a new and inappropriate finish incompatible with the building's historic character. Moreover, removing plaster reveals walls that were never meant to be seen, constructed of poor quality common brick with wide and badly struck mortar joints. In some cases, the removal treatment also causes the brick to "powder". (Methods to seal the exposed brick frequently result in an undesirable change to the color and surface of the brick.) Since exposing interior masonry walls is out of character with most historic building types, including residential, commercial, retail, institutional and public structures, this treatment generally does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards.



Built in 1916, this light industrial structure is a typical example of utilitarian industrial buildings constructed in the early 20th century.



The masonry walls were historically left unfinished. Exposed brick would therefore be an appropriate treatment for the rehabilitation of this building.

On the other hand, industrial buildings, e.g. warehouses and factories, are a building type where interior brick walls were not traditionally finished but rather were left exposed or merely painted. The walls were usually left unfinished to suit the utilitarian function of the building, as well as to limit the initial construction costs. In this case, the unfinished interior brick is a significant architectural feature contributing to the historic character of the structure. Thus, keeping the brick exposed preserves the character, and is an appropriate rehabilitation treatment for this historic building type.

Application (*Incompatible treatment*): This two-story mid-Victorian commercial building was built in 1879 by a lawyer to house his law office on the first floor with living space on the second floor. It underwent a number of renovations in 1910, 1936, and 1958, and was abandoned in 1982. The recent rehabilitation restored it for commercial/residential use. While the rehabilitation retained most of the character defining interior features, including the Italianate fireplace surround, deep molded baseboards, articulated stairway, and paneled doors, the equally significant plaster was removed from the interior masonry walls leaving the brick inappropriately exposed. Although popular as a current decorating trend, exposing traditionally plastered interior masonry walls is not appropriate for this historic building type. In order to bring this project into compliance with the Standards, remedial work was required. Since it was documented in the “before” photographs that the plaster was deteriorated, the owner was given the option of either replastering that masonry or replacing it with a modern material to approximate the original finish (e.g. gypsum drywall).



Built in 1879, this commercial/residential structure is an example of a building type where exposed brick is not an appropriate interior wall treatment.

Before Rehab...

Before photographs document the original finished quality of the stairhall and second floor with plastered walls, an Italianate cast iron fireplace surround, and deep molded baseboard.



After Rehab...

The removal of plaster to expose brick walls historically finished is however a wholly contemporary practice that gives the spaces affected a new character incompatible with the historic one. To bring the project into conformance with the Standards, the walls will be replastered or covered with gypsum wallboard.

