

Additions

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Introduction

Historic buildings come in many different styles and each addition project is unique whether it is a horizontal or vertical addition, a dormer, garage or a porch. As a result, this practical guide is quite general, so that it can be applied to a wide variety of building types and situations.

The information in this guide was largely adopted from the US National Park Service Preservation Brief #14, “New exterior additions to historic buildings: Preservation concerns” and the Standards & Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada.

A “sensitive addition” is a major alteration or expansion that respects the architecture and detailing of a historic structure, and should strive to:

1. Preserve significant historic materials, features and forms. Damaging or destroying original materials and craftsmanship should be avoided as much as possible.
2. Be compatible by preserving the historic character.
3. Differentiate from the historic building by making it clear which portion is old and new. The new addition should take its design cues from, but not copy, the historic building.

How these guidelines are implemented rests on the skills of a good designer and builder. Studying the original structure thoroughly and observing time-honored concepts and commonly employed best practices can help. The most important point to take away from this guidance is the concept that an addition needs to be subordinate and complimentary to the historic building.

Standards & Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada

The Standards & Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada is a pan-Canadian benchmark for heritage conservation practice in the country. The Standards & Guidelines offer results-oriented guidance for sound decision-making when planning for, intervening on and using historic places.

The specific standards and guidelines that relate to additions are listed below:

- Aim for minimal intervention
- Make sure the new work is physically and visually compatible with, subordinate to and distinguishable from the historic place
- Design new work so that it could be removed in the future (reversibility)
- Select the location for a new addition so that the heritage value of the original building is maintained
- Design the new addition in a manner that draws a clear distinction between what is historic and what is new
- Design the addition so that it is compatible in terms of materials and massing with the exterior form of the historic building and its setting
- Find solutions to meet accessibility requirements that are compatible with the exterior form of the historic building, i.e. introducing a gently sloped walkway instead of a constructed ramp with handrails in front of an historic building
- Work with accessibility and conservation specialists and users to determine the most appropriate solution to accessibility issues with the least impact on the character-defining elements and overall heritage value of the historic building

Note

Although accessibility is an important priority, accessibility standards do allow exceptions if compliance may cause substantial harm to cultural, historic, or significant natural features or characteristics.

Documentation

Before beginning a major alteration or expansion project, document the existing building and materials and take measurements of the floor plan, vertical heights, and the components of the structure – its windows, doors, and cladding.

Architectural Massing and Rooflines

When adding to or altering your building, consider its scale (apparent size), actual dimension, and massing (proportion/balance). Many additions to old houses fall into one of three general types: wings, garages and dormers.

Wings

Adding a wing or two increases the liveable space and complexity of the house, and provides the opportunity to enhance the interest of the structure if done sensitively. Connecting the wing to the main house by means of a hyphen (recessed connector or passageway) helps reduce its impact visually and structurally and, where practical, is a favoured conservation approach.

To minimize the loss of the original structure, limit the size and number of openings between the old and new sections of the building and/or use existing doors or enlarged windows.



Good



Bad

Illustrations: “Good” and “bad” examples of wings added to a heritage building. The “good” example shows a wing addition that respects the existing scale and massing of the house, not overpowering it. The “bad” example of an addition does not match the style, massing or materials of the original portion of the structure and detracts from the overall appearance of the structure (Amanda Sherrington, 2013).

Garages

Garages tend to look best when they are smaller than the main house. If the house is on a corner lot, the side street becomes the natural place to face the garage. Attached garages are effectively wings and should be treated with the same guidelines, including a setback equal to their width. One-car versions are best for old houses, not only because of their historic precedents but also because they reduce the opportunity for massing problems.



Illustration: Two examples of garage additions to a heritage building. One has been added below the building's façade and the other is detached and placed behind the structure. Both examples are in keeping with the scale and massing of the original buildings as they are subordinate to the houses and designed for one car (Amanda Sherrington, 2013).

Dormers

Dormers are typically added to a building to increase the usable space and natural light in the top story of the building. Dormers should be similar in style and placement to the building's existing openings. A common practice is following the bays of the house so that dormers are in line with windows and doors on the story below them. Dormers should use windows consistent with the rest of the house. Also, if there are no dormers in the main house, chances are dormers will look odd on an addition. Generally, maintaining the same roof pitch not only as the main roof, but also among dormers is a very good idea. Examples of "good" and "bad" dormer window additions are shown on the following page.



Good



Bad



Bad

Illustrations: “Good” and “bad” examples of dormer window additions to heritage buildings. The “good” example on the left features a dormer window that is of a similar style to the house and placed in line with the existing window openings. Both “bad” examples show the addition of a dormer window to a house of an architectural style that would not have a dormer window in its design. The second “bad” example on the far right shows a dormer window constructed in at a scale far too large for the house, resulting in a dormer window that overwhelms the roof line and general massing of the structure (Amanda Sherrington, 2013).

Placement

Placement is a key consideration when planning an addition. A good rule of thumb is to subordinate the addition in one or more ways. Less important portions of old buildings, such as additions, make the most visual sense when they are subordinate to the most important portion of the house – the main, original body. Most successful additions to old houses keep the size and scale smaller so that they “read” as secondary.

How to subordinate an addition

1. **Reduce the scale:** Make sure the addition is significantly smaller. Height is especially important, and is best kept below the eave line of the original building. A common example is a one-storey addition to a two-storey house.
2. **Secondary position:** The street side or front façade holds the most important features, materials, and character defining elements, and carries a lot of weight. The secondary or rear elevations, where there are typically fewer details to impact and less visibility to be concerned with, are the non-primary façades and the first places to consider placing an addition. Adding on to the back preserves the public façade of the house, thereby maintaining the historic character of the home and the context of the neighbourhood. Limiting impacts to the primary elevation of an old house reduces the risk of compromising its historic character.

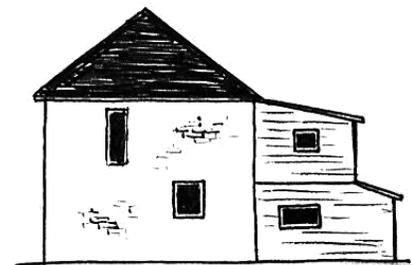
3. **Setbacks:** An addition should be setback to maintain views of the outer edges and historic form of the original house.
4. **Subordinate materials:** Materials used in the new addition should not detract from, but should resemble and complement, those used in the original portion of the structure.
5. **Similarity of purpose:** Maintain a similarity of shape among the parts that share the same purpose. Windows, for example, are a prime concern in making sensitive additions and work best when they take their cues from the old fenestration. Sizes can vary if the general proportions of the originals are continued. Please refer to the Region of Waterloo's [Practical Guide: Windows, Shutters & Doors](#) for additional guidance.
6. **Similarity of roofs:** A helpful rule of thumb is to make sure that all roofs on a building are of the same pitch, ensuring similarity. Roof form, pitch, and eave/cornice lines are the critical parameters to watch. Please refer to the Region of Waterloo's [Practical Guide: Roofs](#) for more guidance.



Good



Good



Bad

Illustrations: These illustrations show “good” and “bad” examples of additions to heritage buildings. The “good” examples on the left depict additions that have been placed or setback in positions subordinate to the main structure. They have been designed at a size and scale to ensure that they read as “secondary” to the original façade. The “bad” example on the right shows an addition at a scale too large for the original structure. At almost the same size, the addition overwhelms the building. The materials used to construct the addition are also not consistent with those used on the main building (Amanda Sherrington, 2013).

Materials

Use materials, textures, and colours (see [Practical Guide: Paint & Colour](#)) similar to those of the historic building. The materials don't need to be the same as those on the original building, but they should not be so different that they stand out or distract from the historic building.

A new addition to a historic building can damage or destroy significant materials and can change the building's character, and should only be considered after it has been determined that the new use can't be met by altering non-significant, or secondary, interior spaces.

A good way to maintain continuity between the old and new is to incorporate salvaged materials.

Architectural Details

It may be desirable to replicate details from the original house into the new addition, but well-done projects make sure to leave enough clues to let the next generation know where the original structure ends and the new one begins. The addition should be subtle but clear.

Landscape

During the completion of a sympathetic addition, it is important to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment. Historic landscape features, including clear grade variations, pathways and vegetation need to be respected. Any new landscape features, including plants and trees, should maintain or replace a scale and density that complements the historic resource. For example, a traditionally landscaped property should not be covered with large paved areas for parking, which would drastically change the character of the site. For more information, please refer to the Region's [Practical Guide: Landscaping](#).

Archaeological Discoveries

It is possible that while making alterations to your historic property archaeological material may be unearthed. These objects can include foundations of previous structures, cisterns, ceramics, bottles, coins and tools. Archaeological artifacts are important for the information they yield about past human activity on the property. If you find significant archaeological material on your property, contact the [Ministry of Tourism, Culture & Sport](#) for guidance on how to proceed.

Summary

Additions to historic buildings should be constructed in a manner that preserves significant materials, features and form, and conserves the buildings' historic character. An addition should be differentiated from the historic building so that the new work is compatible with but distinguishable from the historic building, and can't itself be confused as heritage.

References

If you would like to learn more about constructing an addition on your heritage building, please refer to the following primary sources:

Grimmer, A.E. & Weeks, K.D. (2010). "National Parks Services Preservation Brief #14 – New exterior additions to historic buildings: Preservation concerns." <http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/14-exterior-additions.htm>

National Trust for Historic Preservation. (2013). "Restore vs. Rehabilitate: Which is right for your historic house?" <http://blog.preservationnation.org/2013/05/14/10-on-tuesday-restore-vs-rehabilitate-which-is-right-for-your-historic-house/>

Old House Online. (n.d.). "Additions." <http://www.oldhouseonline.com/additions-101/>

Old House Online. (2006). "How to create sensitive additions." <http://www.oldhouseonline.com/how-to-create-sensitive-additions/>

Standards & Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada. (2011). <http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/pages/standards-normes.aspx>

Alternate formats of this document are available upon request. Please contact Lindsay Benjamin at LBenjamin@regionofwaterloo.ca, 519-575-4757 ext. 3210, TTY 519-575-4608 to request an alternate format.

Disclaimer

This practical guide contains useful information on restoring and preserving heritage buildings, but it is intended as a general resource only. Content from third parties with specific expertise has been heavily relied upon and their original works have been acknowledged in the list of references included at the end of this document. The Region of Waterloo has taken all reasonable steps to ensure the accuracy of the information in this publication. However, it is recommended that building owners consult with trained specialists, such as contractors, builders, plumbers, heating and air professionals and electricians, before undertaking any renovations, repairs or construction on their properties. The Region does not assume responsibility for any loss or damage resulting from adherence to the information in this practical guide.