

CHAPTER 4

Architectural Access to Historic Properties

This chapter is excerpted with permission from “Making Historic Properties Accessible,” Preservation Brief 32 by Thomas C. Jester, architectural historian, and Sharon C. Park, AIA, senior historical architect, Preservation Assistance Division of the National Park Service. Download the complete brief at www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief32.htm

Historic properties are irreplaceable and require special care to ensure their preservation for future generations. With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, access to historic properties open to the public is now a civil right and owners of historic properties must evaluate existing buildings to determine how they can be made more accessible. It is a challenge to evaluate properties thoroughly, to identify the applicable accessibility requirements, to explore alternatives and to implement solutions that both provide independent access and are consistent with accepted historic preservation standards.

This chapter introduces historic property owners, design professionals and administrators to the issues of evaluating historic properties to provide the highest level of accessibility while minimizing changes to historic materials and features. Because many projects encompassing accessibility work are complex, consultation with experts in the fields of historic preservation and accessibility is advisable before proceeding with permanent physical changes to historic properties.

“Preservation of our historic structures; presentation of an early 19th century community complete with earthen paths and roadways and narrow entries with stone steps provided a challenge of the greatest magnitude. With the assistance of our Accessibility Advisory Council, however, we found our successes in adopting the broadest perspective while developing solutions. Operationally, it had to become a way of thinking for all of us, if we were to achieve our goals for an accessible environment.”

Alberta Sebolt-George, President and CEO, Old Sturbridge Village
(1971-2002)

Solutions for accessibility should not destroy a property's significant materials, features and spaces, but should increase accessibility as much as possible. Remember, most historic buildings are not exempt from providing accessibility. With careful planning, owners can make historic properties more accessible, so that all people can enjoy their significance.

Historic properties are not exempt from the ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG). The ADA requires barrier removal in historic buildings, if the removal is readily achievable. The ADA, however, takes into account the national interest in preserving significant historic structures. Barrier removal would not be considered "readily achievable," if it would threaten or destroy the historic significance of a building or facility that is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under the National Historic Preservation Act (16 U.S.C. 470, et seq.), or is designated as historic under state or local law.

Planning Accessibility Modifications

Features, materials, spaces and spatial relationships that contribute to historic character, distinguish historic properties. Often these elements, such as steep terrain, monumental steps, narrow or heavy doors, decorative ornamental hardware, narrow pathways and corridors, pose barriers to people with disabilities or who are older, particularly to people who use wheelchairs or have limited mobility.

Three Steps to Accessibility

Use a three-step approach to identify and implement accessibility modifications that protect the integrity and historic character of historic properties:

First: Review the historical significance of the property and identify character-defining features.

Second: Assess the property's existing and required level of accessibility.

Third: Evaluate accessibility options within a preservation context.

1. Review the Historical Significance of the Property

If the property has been designated as historic (properties in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or designated as such under state or local law), review its nomination file to learn about its significance. Supplement the documentation review with physical investigation to identify which character-defining features and spaces must be modified.

Also, identify secondary spaces, finishes and features of less importance to the historic character; these generally may be altered without jeopardizing the property's historical significance. It is often possible to modify non-significant spaces, secondary pathways, later additions, previously altered areas, utilitarian spaces and service areas without threatening or destroying a property's historical significance.

2. Assess the Property's Existing and Required Level of Accessibility

A building survey or assessment provides a thorough evaluation of a property's accessibility. People with disabilities should be included in building assessments. Such surveys or assessments should identify accessibility barriers including, but not limited to: building and site entrances, ramp and walkway surface textures, widths and slopes of ramps and walkways, parking, grade changes, size and weight of doors, configuration of doorways, interior corridors and path of travel restrictions, elevators, public restrooms and amenities.

Review all applicable accessibility requirements—state codes, local codes and federal laws—before undertaking any accessibility modification. Many states and localities have their own accessibility regulations and codes (each with its own requirements for dimensions and technical requirements). Use the most stringent accessibility requirements when implementing modifications.

3. Identify and Evaluate Accessibility Options within a Preservation Context

Once owners have identified a property's significant materials and features and established both existing and required levels of accessibility, solutions can be developed. Solutions should provide the greatest accessibility without threatening or destroying the materials and features that make a property significant. All proposed changes should conform to the Department of the Interior's "Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties," which was created to guide property owners' preservation work.

Owners may phase in modifications over time and can consider interim solutions. A team comprising older adults and people with disabilities,

“Accessibility and respect for the integrity of historic sites are important priorities. We had always dealt with these as separate issues until our recent renovation of Charleston’s 1836 MacFarland-Hubbard House, when suddenly, both were at the top of the agenda. Working with a dedicated team we found surprisingly simple solutions to creating accessibility by raising a back porch floor and re-grading the surrounding yard to create an effectively invisible wheelchair ramp.”

Ken Sullivan, Executive Director, West Virginia Humanities Council

accessibility and historic preservation professionals and building inspectors should consult on the development of accessibility solutions.

Priorities for Modifications to Improve Accessibility

First: Make accessible the main or a prominent public entrance and primary public spaces, including a path to the entrance.

Second: Provide access to goods, services and programs.

Third: Provide accessible restroom facilities.

Fourth: Create access to amenities, secondary spaces and emergency egress.

Accessibility Solutions

The goal in selecting appropriate solutions for specific historic properties is to provide a high level of accessibility without compromising significant features or the overall character of the property. Consider all of the historic property's components.



Primary Public Entrance

Entrances

Access to historic buildings should be through a primary public entrance. If this cannot be achieved without permanent damage to character-defining features, the owner should make at least one entrance used by the public accessible. Directional signs at all inaccessible entrances should direct visitors to the accessible entrance.

Possible modifications to create an accessible entrance include re-grading an entrance, incorporating ramps, retrofitting doors, altering door thresholds, adapting door hardware, converting an existing window to a new entrance or, as a last resort, installing wheelchair lifts.



Entrance with Re-graded Landscape

Historic Interiors

Primary spaces are often more difficult to modify without changing their character. Generally, secondary spaces may be changed without compromising a building's historic character. Signs should clearly mark the route to accessible restrooms, telephones and other accessible areas. Some modifications that may help create access to interior spaces without changing their character include installing ramps, upgrading elevators, modifying interior stairs and retrofitting doorknobs.

Building Amenities

Some amenities, such as restrooms, seating, telephones, water fountains and counters may contribute to a building's historic character. They often will require modification to improve their use by people with disabilities. In many cases, supplementing existing amenities, rather than changing or removing them, will increase access and minimize changes to historic features and materials.

New Additions

New additions create opportunities to provide access for older people and individuals with disabilities by incorporating modern amenities such as accessible entrances, elevators, ramps, restrooms, food service areas and gift shops. Consider the location carefully so that it is near parking and connected to an accessible route. New additions can increase accessibility and reduce the level of change to historic features, materials and spaces.



New Addition

Programmatic Access

“Programmatic access” for historic properties refers to alternative methods of providing services, information and experiences when physical access cannot be provided. It may mean offering an audio-visual program or computerized virtual tour showing an inaccessible upper floor of an historic house museum, providing interpretive panels from a vista or overlook at a terraced garden or creating a tactile model of a historic monument for people who are blind or have low vision.

Making Historic Landscapes Accessible

The planning process for incorporating access into historic landscapes is similar to that of other historic properties. Undertake careful research and inventory to determine which materials and features convey the landscape's historic significance. Identify features that are character defining, such as topographical variation, vegetation, circulation, structures, furnishings and objects.

Document and evaluate historic finishes, details and materials that contribute to a landscape's significance before determining an approach to landscape accessibility. For example, understand all aspects of the pedestrian circulation system including walk width, aggregate size, pavement pattern, texture, relief and joint details. Note the context of the walk, including its edges and surrounding area.

Additionally, identify areas of secondary importance, such as altered paths—especially those where the accessibility modifications will not destroy a landscape's significance. Identifying those features that do or do not contribute to accessibility is essential in developing a sympathetic circulation pattern.

After assessing a landscape's integrity, consider accessibility solutions. When a landscape is uniformly steep it may be possible to make discrete portions of the historic landscape accessible. For example, viewers may experience the landscape from selected vantage points along a prescribed pedestrian or vehicular access route. Define this route by considering the interpretive value of the user's experience: does the route provide physical or visual access to areas that are critical to understanding the meaning of the landscape?

RESOURCES

ACCESSIBILITY AND HISTORIC PROPERTIES

“Comply with Accessibility Requirements”

Whole Building Design Guide, National Institute of Building Sciences
(NIBS)

1090 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 700

Washington, D.C. 20005

(202) 289-7800 voice

(202) 289-1092 fax

www.wbdg.org/design/comply_requirements.php

“Preserving the Past and Making it Accessible for People with Disabilities”

www.nps.gov/hps/freepubs.htm

“Preservation Brief 32: Making Historic Properties Accessible”

www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief32.htm

“Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties”

www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/standguide/

Heritage Preservation Services, National Park Service

1849 C Street NW, (2255)

Washington, D.C. 20240

(202) 513-7270 voice

NPS_HPS-info@nps.gov

www.nps.gov/hps

PARKS, RECREATIONAL AND OUTDOOR FACILITIES

National Center on Accessibility

Provides technical assistance on design and retrofitting leisure areas and park facilities.

Indiana University Research Park

501 North Morton Street, Suite 109

Bloomington, IN 47404

(812) 856-4422 voice

(812) 856-4421 TTY

(812) 856-4480 fax

nca@indiana.edu

www.ncaonline.org

“Forest Service Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines”

USDA Forest Service

Accessibility Program

1400 Independence Avenue SW

Washington, D.C. 20250-0003

(800) 832-1355 voice

info@fs.fed.us

www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/accessibility/