

How to stay ahead of preservation constraints

BY THE ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS
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The historic character of New York City provides architects with visual inspiration and a rich cultural backdrop, as well as a number of special challenges. The city is filled with culturally significant buildings – some from as far back as the 17th century, some very recent – that are protected by a number of federal, state and local regulations. Because they govern the context of historic buildings as well as the resources themselves, these regulations can raise complicated issues for architects. To resolve these issues, architects need more than a design sensibility that respects historic resources – they also need a clear understanding of the regulations that affect their project site.

A common situation faced by architects is adapting a historic building for new use. The federal Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties specify that a property should be used as it was historically or for a new use that minimizes alterations. If alterations or additions are made, most guidelines for adaptive re-use (including the Secretary's Standards) require that new features be differentiated from the old. In these cases, the architect is faced with the

challenge of designing new features that do not imitate the original structure, but that relate harmoniously to its remaining fabric. For example, new windows in historic buildings typically should match the character and visual appearance of the original windows. Replacements for deteriorated features that cannot be repaired may be required to match the old in design, color, texture and, if possible, materials. Depending on the nature of the project and the regulations that guide it, preservation concerns – and the design challenges that go with them – may be centered on interior details; in other situations, the focus may be the exterior of the building.

Since some regulations protect the context of historic buildings, architects may also face historic resource issues when designing new construction adjacent to a historic building or located in a historic district. Under the New York City Landmarks Law, the design of new buildings in designated New York City Historic Districts is regulated. In other cases, it is up to the architect or design team to consider a site's surroundings and develop a new building that is true to the modern period yet relates harmoniously to its historic context. This does not mean a new building should mirror the design of the nearby historic structures, but

rather draw from it. Significant characteristics of the historic structure should be considered, including scale, materials, fenestration, style and relationship to the street. A modern building can be successfully placed in a historic context if it relates appropriately in terms of scale and cornices, window shapes, or if other architectural elements establish a sense of visual continuity.

Architects need to know early in the design and planning process whether historic resource issues may affect their project. For example, if a project involving historic resources is federally funded, the federal Section 106 review process would be triggered. Similarly, if a project requires discretionary approvals from the city or state, it would follow historic resources regulations under New York City Environmental Quality Review, the New York State Environmental Quality Review Act and the New York State Historic Preservation Act of 1980. The applicable regulations vary from site to site, depending on the landmark status of the historic resource, its ownership, the funding

source of new construction and other factors. While all of these regulations have the same overall purpose – to require that effects on historic properties be considered – they differ in their specific guidelines and review procedures. For example, federal regulations for adaptive re-

use may protect interior features of a historic building from alteration, but local laws may not.

By knowing which regulations affect their project, the architect and development team can avoid delays and design modifications. AKRF has provided regulatory guidance to numerous projects involving historic resources. In addition to maintaining up-to-date information on buildings that are already protected, AKRF

identifies structures that are eligible for local, state, and/or federal landmark designation and may affect new construction. The firm also consults with the appropriate city, state and federal agencies if a project is likely to have impacts to historic resources. A strong working relationship with these agencies is essential to facilitate the approval of designs that respect the character of historic resources. ■

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