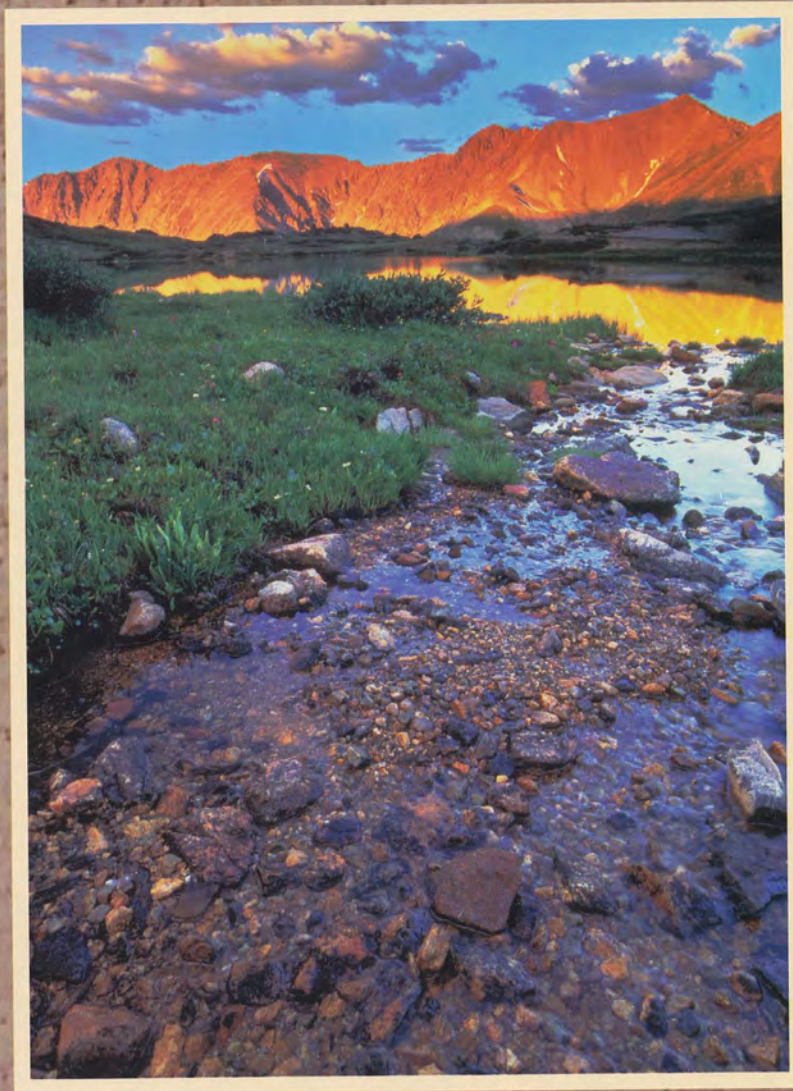


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To Live or Work in an Historic Building: Advice for the Property Owner

by Alan "Mac" Watson of *Watson Conserves*

As Americans we are finally beginning to discover and to value our past. Thirty years ago the average class of 25 college freshman would take on that slightly embarrassed dull stare of ignorance if asked the names of our two leading Civil War generals or what happened in Hiroshima in 1945. But today if you look at the list of bestseller books there'll be one or two Founding Father biographies on it; Ken Burns has become a household name for his historic television features; and the History Channel itself is one of the few predictably interesting places to stop when you're surfing commercial television.

American tourists, approaching an unfamiliar city for the first time, inevitably follow the brown signs towards the city's Historic District. That's where the activity is—the section that gives the city its own character. It is the place that distinguishes this city from all the others we've been driving through and can't distinguish one from the other. Cities and towns that have lost most of their historic core to freeway construction and urban renewal are regretting their losses and making strenuous efforts to preserve the few fragments of their history that still exist.

Charleston, Santa Fe, New Orleans, Boston, Washington, D.C.—these names are found year after year in Condé Nast's ten most popular tourist destinations in the country. And when the tourist decides to stick around and put down roots, the choice is often determined by the impressions he or she receives from the city's sense of living history.

Because they are often centrally located in cities and towns that are undertaking revival, historic homes and buildings are becoming increasingly sought after as good investments and good places to live and conduct business.

Think of the positive reasons for choosing to live and work where important events have taken place in the past. People sick of driving from the suburbs to places of recreation, business and shopping are moving back to the residential areas of town where there is a sense of community and neighborliness. They find that the houses of yesterday are better built, more comfortable and more conveniently located. They don't have to memorize their street number to be able to distinguish their home from the look-alike houses of the suburbs. They are pleasantly surprised to find that their new neighbors share a common appreciation of the values of culture and community that are part of living and working in an older neighborhood.

Businesses located in historic buildings have their own unique identity and character. These businesses have an aura of stability and dependability, of gracious living and close personal attention to clients and customers. Businesses in historic buildings attract customers and clients who want to get out of their cars and enjoy strolling on a main street that is friendlier and more relaxed than the strip malls and box stores on the edges of town.

Living and working in an historic building does not mean that you have to suffer. You don't need to shiver in the cold, to read without light, or listen to faucet drips—or even try to survive without high speed internet access. Older buildings are often quieter and of sounder construction than the trophy homes in the suburbs. They usually feature hand-crafted details that signal a time when carpenters came to the site with their own hand tools and sharpened them at home in the evening. Thus is it quite possible to have the best of both worlds—to feel the pride and satisfaction that comes with living and working in a building that is historically significant and at the same time to enjoy the amenities we have come to associate with a contemporary lifestyle.

Rehabilitating historic buildings and putting them to good use makes the soundest of environmental sense. Not only do the landfills receive less construction waste, but the resources to create new buildings are left intact. When older buildings are conserved there is less logging, mining, pollution and the consumption of such non-renewable resources as the fossil fuels that go into the manufacture and transport of building materials. Making use of the historic buildings in our towns' central districts means less sprawl into the suburbs, while undeveloped land is left for agriculture, recreation and the wild creatures.

Increasingly, municipalities in America are taking an active role in preserving their cultural and historic heritage. These efforts often involve the planning expertise of trained professionals in preservation. The voters have chosen to save their town's historic character and these staff are charged with the responsibility of carrying out that decision.

When owners—or prospective owners—of historic properties first encounter their local historic preservation planner there may be significant areas of misunderstanding. A good deal of this misunderstanding is because preservationists act on a set of assumptions and speak a kind of language that is unfamiliar and sometimes confusing to the average citizen. Preservation in America is a relatively new effort (the original National Historic Preservation Act was passed by Congress in 1967—only 35 years ago) and, like many other trends, has taken a few years to arrive in the Rocky Mountain west. Thus the language of preservation—with such phrases as “character-defining features” and “original fabric”—intimidates us in the same way that any profession-specific language does, be it legalese or the language of the particle physicist.

The keys to success in living or working in a historic building are flexibility, communication and planning.

Flexibility means taking a realistic look at one's own expectations as well as the realities of the given situation. Rather than forcing a building to meet expectations based on images from

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“Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” the owner of an historic building should be prepared to adapt his or her expectations to the potentials that are inherent in the building and its site. Furthermore, just as the as the interests of the community are a consideration with planning and zoning for new construction, so the community has a legitimate stake in the treatment of its historic heritage. Because these community interests increasingly take the form of historic ordinances, it is well to be prepared to work with these interests rather than preparing to struggle against them. What follows is a synopsis of the ins and outs of preservation and some suggestions based on years of experience on ways of reducing the stress and maximizing the success of a preservation project.

The goals of preservation in America are in constant flux. Preservation began in the mid 19th Century as a movement focussed on saving houses owned by the wealthy and influential (Monticello and Mount Vernon). More recently though, the goals have broadened to include less definable aspects of our culture such as linguistic heritage and the atmosphere of a sacred site. But preserving historic buildings is still the central business of the preservation movement.

It often comes as a surprise to the uninitiated that just because a building is beautiful does not necessarily make it worthy of a preservation effort. Instead, when a city establishes a Historic District and surveys the structures within the District, the designation attributed to each structure—“significant, contributing, or non-contributing”—represent historic rather than aesthetic values. The “significant” structure may be that falling down shack in the poorer section of town, significant simply because it is the last of its kind and serves to remind us of a time and a place that is in danger of disappearing from our memories. Significant because the structure is sufficiently intact—unchanged—to retain the look and feel of the time in history that it represents.

It is this particular “look and feel” of the building that preservation practice is trying to retain. When the Historic Preservation Act became law, it established a method for accomplishing this goal, guidelines called The Secretary of Interior’s Standards for the Preservation of Historic Buildings.

Briefly, the Secretary’s Standards give these suggestions:

- Make every effort to use the building for its original purpose.
- Do not destroy distinctive original features.
- Recognize all buildings as products of their own time.
- Recognize and respect changes that have taken place over time.
- Treat sensitively distinctive stylistic features or examples of skilled craft work.
- Repair rather than replace worn architectural features when possible. When replacement is necessary, new material should match the old in design, composition, and color.
- Clean facades using the gentlest methods possible. Avoid sandblasting and other damaging methods.
- Protect and preserve affected archeological resources.
- Compatible contemporary alterations are acceptable if they

- do not destroy significant historical or architectural fabric.
- Build new additions so they can be removed without impairing the underlying structure

The guidelines codified in the Secretary of Interior’s Standards do not, in themselves, constitute regulations that apply to every historic building in the country. They apply when public money is spent on a building or site on the National Register of Historic Places. Depending on local ordinances and on the particular building or site in question, the guidelines may be applied by local preservation planners. Or there may be no historic regulation that applies. To complicate matters, there are Standards that apply to various preservation efforts, including Standards for Preservation, and Standards for Rehabilitation, Standards for Restoration and for Reconstruction.

To find out whether your building falls under governmental regulation, the best place to begin is the local planning authority. The answers to your questions may be simple—no regulation applies—or so complex as to be confusing. If the answer is that “no regulations apply,” this may not necessarily be the best of news. If the property is not protected by regulation, there may be nothing to protect its context—the district or neighborhood—from the many threats to historic integrity that can occur. After all, who would want to invest in the purchase and rehabilitation of an historic property just to see the wonderful building next door torn down for a parking lot or strip mall?

Whether or not regulations apply, the planning process should really begin by seeking the advice of a professional in preservation, someone who not only knows the regulations but who also has experience in helping to fulfill the property owner’s needs without losing the historic character of the property itself.

The planning process is by far the most important—and often neglected—phase of accommodating the owner’s needs and the goals of preservation. Careful and deliberate planning inevitably results in savings—both financial savings and in the conservation of irreplaceable historic materials.

Ideally, a planning team is assembled consisting of an historic architect—an architect who specializes in historic projects—working with a contractor experienced in preservation. The team might also consult with an engineer, a conservator and a representative of the state historic preservation office familiar with tax incentive programs available for historic rehabilitation.

It is important that the planning process begin long before any actual work is done on the property. The danger to avoid is the temptation to begin tearing out material that looks old and weather-beaten—often precisely the material that gives the property its historic character: the old doors and windows; the old hardware; the irreplaceable flooring material that only needs a bit of cleaning to provide many more years of useful service. When these historic materials go off to the landfill that great old building you first saw has become a generic brick

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box. The job of the planning team is to determine just what needs to be saved and worked with and what might safely be eliminated.

During the planning process it is important to maintain close communication with the staff of the local planning authority. This is the time to exercise patience and diplomacy, to work out potential conflicts and sometimes to accept the necessity for compromise. It is a good time to remember how important flexibility is for the ultimate success of a project in rehabilitation.

And with that success comes the tremendous satisfaction of having saved something that may have been endangered, something precious to your local community, a small but significant part of our national heritage.

(Other useful sources of information on preservation include the websites of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (www.nationaltrust.org) and the National Park Service (www.nps.gov).

The author, Alan "Mac" Watson is the owner of Watson Conserves/Watson Constructs in Santa Fe, NM. The firm has done historic preservation and new construction since 1977.

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