

Treatments Resource Guide: Interior Finishes

The interior space, configuration, and finishes of a building are oftentimes considered character-defining features. The interior of a building can be further considered as primary and secondary spaces based on the building's historic use. Alterations should remain minimal so as not to impact the building's historic character. To meet the *Standards for Rehabilitation*, any changes or additions made to the interior of a historic building during work should not result in damaging, destroying, or obscuring those character-defining spaces and features identified at the beginning of work. The distinctive interior character should remain at the completion of the rehabilitation.

Alterations or finishes that convey a false sense of history or character should be avoided.

Standard 1: A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.

Standard 2: The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.

Standard 3: Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.

Standard 5: Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterized a property will be preserved.

Identifying Character-Defining Features

[Preservation Brief #17: Architectural Character: Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving Their Character](#)

[Preservation Brief #18: Rehabilitating Interiors in Historic Buildings: Identifying and Preserving Character-defining Elements](#)

[Preservation Brief #35: Understanding Old Buildings: The Process of Architectural Investigation](#)

[Walk Through Historic Buildings: Learn How to Identify the Visual Character of a Historic Building Inside + Out](#)

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #55: Retaining Industrial Character in Historic Buildings](#)

Preservation Briefs:

[Preservation Brief #17: Architectural Character: Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving Their Character](#)

[Preservation Brief #21: Repairing Historic Flat Plaster—Walls and Ceilings](#)

[Preservation Brief #23: Preserving Historic Ornamental Plaster](#)

[Preservation Brief #28: Painting Historic Interiors](#)

[Preservation Brief #34: Applied Decoration for Historic Interiors—Preserving Composition Ornament](#)

[Preservation Brief #40: Preserving Historic Ceramic Tile Floors](#)

[Preservation Brief #41: The Seismic Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings](#)

Interpreting the Standards Bulletins:

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #4: Inappropriate Replacement Doors](#)

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #5: Removing Interior Plaster to Expose Brick](#)

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #7: Painting Previously Unpainted Woodwork](#)

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #15: Treatment of Interiors in Industrial Buildings](#)

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #19: Deteriorated Plaster Finishes](#)

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #25: Altering the Character of Historically Finished Interiors](#)

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #46: Modifying Historic Interior Railings to Meet Building Code](#)

[Interpreting the Standards Bulletin #55: Retaining Industrial Character in Historic Buildings](#)

Preservation Tech Notes:

[Preservation Tech Notes—Finishes #1: Process-Printing Decals as a Substitute for Hand-Stenciled Ceiling Medallions](#)

Additional Resources:

[Exposing Interior Masonry Walls and Ceilings](#)

[Historically-Finished Secondary Spaces—Avoiding Problematic Treatments at Project Completion](#)

[Interior Spaces, Features, and Materials in Highly Deteriorated Condition and Standard 2](#)

[Metals in America's Historic Buildings: Uses and Preservation Treatments](#)

Treatment Tips for Interiors:

- Historically finished interiors should remain finished. If finishes are in a deteriorated state, they should be repaired before replacement. Removing historic ceiling finishes or exposing overhead structural systems can significantly alter the historic character of certain interior spaces.
 - Removing plaster to expose historically unexposed brick or lath is not appropriate.
 - Leaving plaster in a deteriorated or patched state is not appropriate.
 - Mechanical, electrical, and fire protection systems should not be exposed in historically finished spaces.
- Typical character-defining features in unfinished, or exposed, interiors of industrial and utilitarian buildings include structural systems, open spaces, and, potentially, lack of finishes.

Interior Finishes in Finished Spaces



Deteriorated finishes, such as plaster on walls (left) and ceilings (right), must be repaired and the space must be finished to match the historic character. “Cow-patching,” or leaving spots of deteriorated plaster, to give a “rustic” look, is not an approved treatment.



Historically finished spaces must remain finished, such as this space within a former YWCA building that had previously been used as a conference space (left) and was converted to an apartment as part of the rehabilitation work (below).



Examples of Interior Finishes Rehabilitation: Former Industrial Buildings



Exposed brickwork (above) or floor joists (right) are acceptable treatments in buildings that were historically unfinished spaces, such as former industrial buildings. In the photo on the right, exposed brickwork and joists are maintained, while gypsum was used for new partition walls. In historically unfinished spaces, systems can remain exposed as well. For more information about systems and interior finishes, see [Treatments Resource Guide: Systems, Codes, and Energy Efficiency](#).