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## The Corridor Challenge in HTC Developments

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There is often wide disagreement about the significance of—and need to preserve—upper-floor corridors in historic tax credit (HTC) developments. Upper-floor corridors were frequently utilitarian in older buildings. They were formed of hollow clay tile with a flat plaster finish. Floors were often terrazzo, though sometimes marble, with a marble or wood base. In

office settings, these walls typically included marble panel wainscots and interior transoms providing light and ventilation. A flat plaster ceiling then ran across the transom header, sometimes with a simple picture rail, but rarely with anything more decorative. Doors and casings were wood. Adjacent to the elevators was a full-height open stair. In form, the corridors are either straight or “L”-

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*Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group*

**The exterior of this U. S. Post Office building in Portland, Ore., was rehabilitated with only minor modifications.**





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shaped and double loaded (e.g., doors on both sides). Elevator lobbies also tended to be modest spaces, both in size and finishes, sometimes simply opening onto the corridor.

Building owners considered these spaces more utilitarian than not. Over time, the spaces changed with market needs. As tenants grew in size and spaces were reconfigured, doors were moved or removed as necessary—sometimes with the original door and casing, sometimes doors would be replaced with a modern compatible option and sometimes just modern. Along the walls, marble panels were removed, shifted or replaced as necessary. In the postwar years, as buildings were air conditioned, corridor ceilings were dropped. Since this aligned in the middle of the transoms, the transoms were either covered or removed. In some instances, corridors were re-lined with new, more modern-looking marble. Elevators were modernized with new doors, typically flat enameled metal, with new matching surrounds. Stairs were enclosed or replaced. Simply put, property owners did what they needed to do to make the buildings marketable.

For developers seeking HTCs, upper-floor corridors are regularly problematic. They see these areas as utilitarian and void of historic aspects that add marketable character to a project. Without question, these corridors are more low design than high design, more simple than dramatic. Rarely does an upper-floor corridor look as built and nearly always there have been significant changes over time—changes that almost always degraded the asset. For developers looking to maximize the use of finite space in a historic building, corridors are often too wide, sometimes too long and doors are never in the right place. And at the same time, the developer's general contractor is suggesting that it would be so much easier, quicker, cheaper and better to simply remove the corridors and build them in the same location.



*Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group*

**A view of a corridor in a former U. S. Post Office building in Portland, Ore., before the Pacific Northwest College of Art adapted the property into the Harold and Arlene Schnitzer Center for Art and Design.**

In contrast, where a developer or contractor might see nondescript utilitarian spaces, state and federal HTC reviewers see corridors as character-defining historic spaces with materials that must be kept. The absence of high style does not equate to the absence of historic fabric—the humble nature may even be considered character-defining. Historic preservation and the HTCs are not just about saving high design. Plaster walls and ceilings cannot simply be removed for budget or convenience. The reviewers do not simply see these materials as inherently expendable; the materials are viewed as historic and their treatment needs to be addressed.

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The [National Park Service] Secretary's Standards are quite clear about the removal of historic materials and the retention of character," said Joy Sears, restoration specialist and historic tax credit reviewer for the Oregon state historic preservation office (SHPO). "Though the finishes may be relatively plain, they are nonetheless important. That said, historic tax credit project review is not absolute. What we are looking for is demonstration by the applicant that they understand the history and significance of the resource and that they are treating it appropriately."

In tackling an issue such as upper-floor corridors, the best path is to acknowledge that the HTCs are not a matter of right and that it is on the developer to show that the proposed treatment meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. The approach is not to dismiss the corridors as having no significance, but rather acknowledging their character and place that element within the context of the entire building and the entire project. To do that, an application should start with an evaluation of the property's significance and those aspects that define that significance. It should summarize the project's cumulative effect on a property—how the project responds to that significance. Part of that discussion is an analysis of the building's sequence of space, establishing the hierarchy of the interior and addressing primary, secondary and tertiary areas.

Nearly inevitably, there is a point in a project where codes and market realities conflict with the Secretary's Standards. If the sense of historic value has been articulated, if the cumulative affect has been addressed and if the sequent of space is understood, there is a context by which a project and the proposed work is understandable to the reviewer. This context moves the discussion from a battle of wills to a one of understanding how this work item fits within the larger context.

An example of this approach is the \$34 million adaptation of the U. S. Post Office by the Pacific Northwest College



*Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group*

**The north ends of both the east and west legs of the "U" were truncated, while the rest of the corridor (seen here) was returned to an approximation of its historic look.**

The hallmark of a great HTC application is that it anticipates and addresses the concerns of reviewers. By and large, reviewers are excited to see developers tackle old buildings. It is a value shared by the historic preservation development community and the HTC reviewers. Yet, an application narrowly approached (e.g., one that simply describes the proposed work without providing the context) does not create the opportunity for the reviewers to say "yes."

of Art into the Harold and Arlene Schnitzer Center for Art and Design in Portland, Ore. The 1918, 134,000-square-foot building designed by Louis Hobart featured a dramatic lobby and a largely utilitarian postal distribution room. The exterior was rehabilitated with only minor modifications, the lobby largely returned to its original grandeur and the work space adapted to a library/media center. Floors two through six were designed for office use by government agencies. They were more or less identical, with a “U”-shaped corridor featuring what was then a fairly standard treatment of marble wainscoting, doors with transoms, and tile floors.

Over time, the corridors were modified, if not abused. Although they featured some historic materials, the space’s appearance did not meet the vision of the school and its investors. More troublesome, the length of the corridors was a problem—they consumed valuable square footage that otherwise could be incorporated into studio space. On behalf of the clients, Heritage negotiated with the reviewers to truncate the north ends of both the east and west legs of the “U” while returning the rest of the corridor to an approximation of their historic look. These discussions also allow removal of some walls between rooms.

A slightly different twist was the 1923 Campbell Court Hotel, also in Portland. The building was adapted for permanent supportive housing for mentally challenged individuals. Work on the exterior and in the lobby areas

was limited. But in order to adapt the hotel into apartment housing, walls between rooms needed to be removed and doorways also had to be removed and relocated. SHPO and National Park Service (NPS) were concerned that the proposed corridors would not have the rhythm of the historic setting. Heritage negotiated doorway-by-doorway. The result included removing some doorways, installing new doorways with historic or similar casings and making some doors false, retaining the door and casing, but not having it operate as a doorway.

Ultimately, the treatment of upper-floor corridors is resolved on a case-by-case basis. The best path is anticipating the issue, articulating the relative significance of the space, detailing the cumulative impact of the overall project, and providing justification for how the proposed corridor treatment meets the Secretary’s Standards. It does require a certain amount of preliminary work, but this approach anticipates the challenges which, in turn, will clarify the treatment of these spaces to the SHPO/NPS reviewer and presents a path to “yes.” ❖

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