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HISTORIC TAX CREDIT TOOL BOX

Assembling an Effective Team for Window Replacement on Historic Tax Credit Projects

JOHN TESS

HERITAGE CONSULTING GROUP

Windows are among the most challenging aspects of a historic tax credit (HTC) project. Replacement is not automatic—an owner must make a strong case for replacement by documenting that the existing windows are beyond repair. Identifying an appropriate replacement window and presenting that window for approval can be a time-consuming process that can lead to project delays. After a replacement window is approved, the lead time for manufacturer can add months to a project schedule. Attacking the issue early is crucial to keep projects on schedule and on budget.

The styles and materiality of landmark structures are many and varied. The masonry components—brick, sandstone, marble, stone, travertine or cast stone—may change from region to region and from time to time. The components and decorative features of architectural eras evolve and overlap.

Classical pilasters, garland motifs and unbroken pediments help define the Colonial Revival. Crockets, modillion cornices and floral ornament provide some of the Beaux Arts character. Terraced pyramids, repeated geometry and illusionary pillars grace the Art Deco. Heavy timber, brick veneer and building corner or center of elevation towers characterize classic riverside mill buildings. Broad stroke, poured steel reinforced concrete grids with brick or block infill distinguish many industrial buildings.

But unless the building is a mausoleum or Scrooge McDuck's money bin, the one constant in this heterogeneous wallscape is that no matter the style and regardless of material, the building's surface will be punctuated by window openings and these glazed penetrations will have a character that has been refined, defined and articulated to complement the variously articulated building facades.

Window Replacement Requirements on HTC Projects

Charles E. Fisher, a recognized window expert at the National Park Service (NPS), asserts that “for most historic properties, the fenestration is an important character defining feature. Windows have been described as the “eyes” of a building—a prominent and distinctive feature.”

Elliptical brick molds—in shadow and shadows in their own right—recede from the aperture's masonry edge, curve inward and settle on a blind stop that defines the outer bounds of a travel path for the sash, within. On a complimentary plane, the sash surface moves briefly and slightly toward the center of the opening and then angles on an integral painted putty bevel to the outermost surface of glass. The glass is captured there and typically by a grid of muntins that mirror and mirror again the beveled edge introduced at the side rail. There is elemental artistry in the components of fenestration. With a series of graceful steps, the window components refocus the building's structural features inward.

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If replacement of the deteriorated or missing original window material is warranted in HTC developments, those efforts must be designed to sustain and maintain that quality and are guided by Standard 6 of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, which states: "Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical or pictorial evidence." (Technical Preservation Services: Documentation Requirements for Proposed Window Replacement, p. 1).

In order to satisfy these standards, both the existing historic windows and the proposed replacement windows must be thoroughly documented. Fisher underscores this point by saying, "When historic windows are being substantially replaced throughout a historic building, documentation should be provided to convincingly and objectively show that the historic windows are beyond repair. Then detailed drawings should be prepared of representative examples of the most significant historic window types set side-by-side with the proposed replacement windows. These drawings are usually required for government review both at the local permitting level and at the federal and state level when tax incentives are being pursued."

Typically for HTC review, the NPS requires that, "drawings should be at the same scale and large enough to clearly show construction details. Scale should be provided, measurements noted and materials indicated for the main components of the window. Drawings of the existing historic window should be accurate, based on field measurement." (Technical Preservation Services: Documentation Requirements for Proposed Window Replacement, p. 1).

For the developer or owner embarking upon a certified rehabilitation project, this level of documentation can appear to be daunting and certainly is a specialized task. The question becomes who on the project team is best suited to the task? The answer is not as easily formulated, but there are some resources available that may be able to get the job credibly done.

The point person for this cataloging effort could be chosen from a roster comprised of the architect, a window



Photo: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group

Boston's Custom House included the restoration of copper-clad wood windows in the upper floors and replication of fenestration in aluminum in the lower floors.

subcontractor, a manufacturer's representative or an independent window consultant.

Placing the burdens of these efforts upon the already diversely full plate of the architect constitutes the least likely choice as those team members are, except on the smallest of projects, probably going to confer these duties to one or more of the other three options. Fisher echoes this assertion by saying that "unless an architectural firm routinely works on historic buildings, chances are good that their knowledge of the historic window market is pretty limited."

If the tasks are passed along to a window subcontractor, the importance of securing references for past performance on these types of undertakings cannot be overemphasized. Special attention should be paid to the diversity of resources that might be available to the window subcontractor. Does that entity have access to a broad range of window fabricators with an acceptable track record?

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Photo: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group
From left to right:

Photo 1. The windows on Boston's Custom House required photographic backup to help guide restoration on the upper floors, replication on the lower floors. **Photos 2-3.** Boston's Custom House featured the restoration of both the copper-clad wood windows on the upper floors and a replication of fenestration in aluminum in the building's two-story base.

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If a manufacturer's representative is brought on board, that recruitment will most likely have been undertaken by the architect or by the general contractor. In this situation, the owner/developer will be a degree of separation away from this important involvement. In many cases, representatives are predominantly focused on new construction and act principally as conduits from the marketplace to the factory. They disseminate literature, manage material takeoffs from the field and funnel pricing back to their customer base. In this eventuality, it is very important to be involved in the vetting process for this service.

Another option would be to engage the services of an independent window consultant. This person should understand construction, be capable of conducting the necessary survey work and have the skills to produce the drawings of the existing conditions and profiles and the ability to secure proposals from a number of potential window manufacturers. This person should also have the kind of clout that will enable him or her to prod manufacturers to work creatively both within and outside of their standard product catalogue. In support of this option, Fisher asserts that "an experienced preservation consultant usually can be helpful in the planning process in regards to the window treatment, bringing an objective

assessment of what is appropriate for the specific historic building and what market solutions are appropriate and likely will obtain government approval."

Window Replacement at the Boston Custom House

This type of teamwork led to a highly custom response on Boston's Custom House. The architectural firm of Jung Brannen engaged the services of a manufacturer's representative with building experience and an architectural background. The project, which utilized HTCs, involved the restoration of copper-clad wood windows at the upper floors and a replication of that fenestration in aluminum at the building's two-story base, where the historic material had been unsympathetically replaced.

With photographic backup, a contour gauge survey was conducted on one of the few remaining lower-floor, copper-clad windows. An aluminum manufacturer was encouraged to create custom extrusions to replicate the specific the brick mold and blind stop and also to provide custom extrusions for a true divided light that faithfully replicated the appearance of the historically significant sections.

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The NPS pays particular attention to windows on “the street-facing façade” and to “windows at or near ground level” and states that fenestration that is “part of the base of high-rise buildings must match the historic windows in all their details.” Sandra Smith, the design point woman on the windows at Jung Brannen, said that, “It was clear from the onset of design that the window replacement at the podium of the building would be a key element of the design and approval process.” In this case, a “manufacturer’s representative was instrumental in aiding the design team in replicating the original windows. He provided the team with a viable technical design that passed muster with the numerous historic preservationists. As a window specialist, he definitely was a significant player in the success of the project.” The team conduct of this work was expeditious and seamless in a situation wherein all elevations were prominently at street level and wherein all of the windows in question were on the bottom two floors, which comprise the distinct base of Custom House high-rise.

Whoever is assigned the tasks of documenting conditions in the field, and the concurrent job of developing an appropriate response, should be required to submit a resume that includes a list of the tools, terms and skills he or she will use to get the job done.

Designers and developers should keep a close eye on the eyes of the building. Fisher says that “when a project team initially pays only lip service to the importance of windows in historic buildings or is driven principally by price consideration, chances are that the chosen window solution may not meet approval by preservation review officials. This can result in project delays and related additional costs simply because of poor planning.”

When a certified rehabilitation has been completed by a well-structured team of concerned and sensitive experts, the renovated visage should be a fresh iteration of the original. The eyes of the building need not clunky corrective lenses. They need, rather, an unobtrusive upgrade; a renovation akin to the invisibility of contact lenses. No clunky corrective lenses as the windows should assume their unblinking supportive role within the face of the project. ♦

John M. Tess is president and founder of Heritage Consulting Group, a national firm that assists property owners seeking local, state and federal historic tax incentives for the rehabilitation of historic properties. Since 1982 Heritage Consulting Group has represented historic projects totaling more than \$3 billion in rehabilitation construction. He can be reached at 503-228-0272 or jmtess@heritage-consulting.com.

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alex.ruiz@novoco.com

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