

MAKING OLD PLACES NEW AGAIN

While old buildings have literally stood the test of time, they still need ongoing repairs, and many require alterations and improvements to meet contemporary needs (and code!). This handout is intended as a starting point for understanding the best approaches to rehabilitating historic buildings, including strategies for their adaptive reuse and modernization to achieve the economic and sustainability goals of both your property and community.

Where to Start

It is critical to first understand the scope of the project at hand because simple repairs to a historic building can quickly become not so simple. Our Field Services staff provides initial guidance to property owners and recommends services provided by licensed architects, engineers, and qualified contractors. Maine Preservation maintains a [Preservation Professionals Directory](#), that includes experts like historic architects, steeplejacks, timber framers, and window restorers.

Property owners and building professionals who may have less experience can draw upon the knowledge of resources like the National Park Service’s [Preservation Briefs](#), which provide information to help identify and solve common challenges in repairing historic buildings. The briefs cover everything from appropriate materials for repointing historic masonry and repairing plaster to designing exterior additions and making historic buildings accessible.

Public financial incentives, whether state and federal historic rehabilitation tax credits or grant programs like the Historic Preservation Fund and Community Development Block Grants, require work on historic buildings to follow the [Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties](#) (Standards) administered by the National Park Service. Similarly, properties designated through a local preservation ordinance are required to follow minimum maintenance requirements and established design guidelines that are usually based on the *Standards*.



Restoration of the port cochere at the First Amendment Museum in Augusta required careful removal, repair, and reinstallation of original wood columns. Photo: First Amendment Museum

Not all projects are created equally, and neither are the *Standards*. They are broken down into four approaches or “treatments” for historic properties: preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. The choice of treatment depends on the property and its intended use, with rehabilitation being the most common as it allows for the most flexibility.

Rehabilitation

The basic tenets of “[rehabilitation](#)” are an excellent introduction into best practices of how to repair and modernize a historic building.

- Choose a new use that will result in minimal change to its design, layout, and historic fabric.
- Preserve the historic character of a building by avoiding the removal or alteration of significant features and elements.
- Avoid adding features and elements that never existed on a building that would create a false sense of history.
- Retain and preserve changes to a property that have acquired their own significance.
- Preserve distinctive materials and examples of craftsmanship like stained-glass windows in a church and mortise and tenon joints in a timber frame.
- Repair rather than replace historic features. If the features are beyond repair, their replacement will match the old in design, color, texture, and if possible, material.
- Do no harm. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible to avoid damage to historic materials.
- Design additions and alterations to a building that will not destroy historic fabric and are compatible with the old in terms of materials and design. Additions to buildings should generally be reversible.

Compliance with modern building, life safety, and accessibility codes is often required for historic rehabilitation projects, especially when a new use for the building is intended. Achieving compliance involves a careful balance of preserving historic character while also introducing new elements like elevators, accessible bathrooms, and fire separation between spaces. While some exemptions exist for historic buildings, regulations like the [Maine Unified Building and Energy Code \(MUBEC\)](#) and the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) rightfully improve conditions for safe and comfortable use of historic buildings. The Maine Historic Preservation Commission’s [Maine Codes & Preservation](#) publication explains these requirements in detail and aims to inform prospective projects.

Energy Efficiency, Weatherization & Climate Resiliency

Although energy efficiency retrofits and climate resiliency measures require careful consideration and execution, when it comes to historic buildings, these improvements are worthwhile and often pay for themselves in savings over time.

Efficiency Maine, a quasi-governmental agency, is a clearinghouse for energy efficiency resources, including information on [energy audits](#), which is a good first step for property owners to understand their buildings and explore improvement options like storm windows, appropriately placed insulation, and upgrades to heating and cooling systems. These cost-lowering improvements can also be paired with the installation of renewable energy sources like solar panels, carefully sited and installed to limit their impact on the structure and character of older buildings.



The Queen Mary, a building integral to the National Audubon Society's historic Hog Island Camp in Bremen, was structurally reinforced and raised three feet on new pilings in response to rising seas and more intense weather events due to climate change. Photo: National Audubon Society

NPS has developed best practices adapting historic buildings to achieve sustainability goals and address the specific impact of rising seas and increased flooding due to climate change. These best practices, along with case studies and other relevant resources, are compiled online:

[Sustainability, Energy Efficiency, Resilience & Historic Buildings](#)

Maintenance

Last but not most important, preservation is maintenance. Establishing a [cyclical maintenance plan](#) is a responsible step towards long term stewardship of your building by better identifying emerging needs before they become costly problems.

Assistance

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