Trends in Accessibility at Historic Sites

by Sharon C. Park, AIA

The trend toward greater access for persons with disabilities to historic buildings and at historic sites is certainly good news. Greater numbers of visitors are now traveling the universal path to a primary entrance. The result is that more people can visit historic sites with their families and other visitors without ever being relegated to the “back door” which was typical of earlier attempts to provide access to persons unable to ascend steps, pass through narrow doorways or navigate sloped walkways. With careful planning and a knowledge of appropriate materials and technologies, more accessibility solutions are being sensitively integrated into our historic resources. And so we are not only seeing more principal entrance solutions, but we are also getting rid of the ugly wooden ramps that have been a visual blight for many historic buildings.

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) not only had an immediate effect on state and local governments who were required to assess publicly owned buildings and plan for the removal of accessibility barriers, but it de facto forced federal agencies to revisit their own properties and programs. The federal government, not covered by the ADA, has been covered by legislation going back to the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1974. While most of these provisions affected new construction and renovations using federal funds, it is probably fair to say that accessibility in these earlier times, if addressed at all, was rarely comprehensive. As identified in other articles in this issue of TRENDS, it is no longer acceptable to avoid making readily achievable modifications or to forego reasonable changes when renovation work is planned by asking for waivers for historic buildings. While the ADA is not a retrofit law requiring all buildings to be made accessible, the ADA does require that for most buildings and sites open to the public and undergoing renovation, that the needs of persons with disabilities have to be considered. This includes historic properties. This article will illustrate a number of successful solutions to provide access to historic buildings and sites through entrances that can be used by all visitors.

Historic buildings, however, have been placed in a special category by the Department of Justice in order to protect them from insensitive changes. The Department of Justice, aware that there are laws that require preservation of historic properties, specifically the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, acknowledged in both earlier federal legislation and in the ADA that it would be difficult to make existing historic buildings accessible as new buildings. Compliance with the law to make historic buildings fully accessible during renovation or planned physical improvements would probably “threaten or destroy” the significance of the building or resource. This protective language was put into the ADA to ensure that every effort would be made to make the buildings as accessible as possible while recognizing that physical and structural changes such as modifying entrances, widening doors and corridors, eliminating level changes, reconfiguring bathrooms and installing elevators—if cumulatively incorporated—could have a major negative impact on the historic character of the resource. And so the Department of Justice identified minimum requirements for access to historic buildings when work is planned with the stated goal that improving access over time should be a continuing effort by the owner. For buildings not undergoing rehabilitation, the ADA encourages making readily achievable changes to remove physical barriers to the extent possible. Even if physical modifications are not possible because they would “threaten or destroy” significant features, actions are required to assure that the “program” is made available in some other way.

The ADA expects, at a minimum, that there is access to a historic building through a public entrance. In addition, site access to the building and access within the building to primary spaces, services and amenities are to be achieved, if possible. Whenever feasible, access to upper spaces should be included. To protect historic buildings from insensitive alterations, it is important to understand what elements of the
The Castle Building, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. The use of automatic door openers can save historic materials, such as the narrow double-leaf doorways. Neither leaf meets the 32" clear dimension for entrances, but the installation of the electronic eye over the doorway allows both leaves to open automatically providing a generous amount of clear space.

Houghton Chapel, Wellesley, MA. This chapel used a temporary ramp which was steep and detracted from the historic appearance of the front entrance. After careful study and evaluation, it was determined that the adjacent landscape was not so significant as to preclude changes.

Arts and Industries Building, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Site conditions often allow the integration of a new walk without removing existing steps. Using a combination ramp with rails and an inclined sidewalk, the plaza in front of this building can be reached by all.

The grade was raised, burying steps intact, to provide an integrated entrance for all. No historic material was destroyed, the treatment is reversible, and the scale and historic character of the entrance was not destroyed by the alteration.
House Museum Interior. When changes are not planned, for instance at a house museum, the path of travel can often be improved by removing an unessential door or by using off-set hinges to swing the door panel out of the clear opening of the frame. Most wheelchairs are not wider that 27" and so 32" is the minimum width for clearing an opening.

Rose Cliff Mansion, Newport, R1. There are a number of new technologies being developed to help overcome different level changes when ramps are not feasible or desirable. In this case, a retracting lift element, housed under the first floor, can be automatically activated to lift a wheelchair to the lobby level. When not in use, the only visible feature is the metal cover plate that in fact is the top rail of the lift.

Charlestown Navy Yard, MA. New elements or features can be added to buildings to help eliminate barriers without seriously altering the historic appearance of a building. In this case, small nondescript steps were removed and replaced with a simple contemporary fabricated metal combination stair and ramp. It is clearly contemporary, it does not remove or damage historic wall or door materials, and it is an appropriate material for the historic dockyard district in which it is located.

Calvary Baptist Church, Washington, DC. Sometimes it is necessary to redesign existing features to incorporate ramps or lifts. In most cases, the rebuilding of steps to raise the platform flush with the entrance door, to provide a turning radius for a wheelchair, and to make a transition to a ramp will not alter the entrance to destroy its character. In this large church building, the flanking ramps on each side of the rebuilt steps provide a dignified, symmetrical entrance which can be used by all.
Department of Agriculture, South Building, Washington, DC. New technologies can be incorporated into buildings undergoing substantial rehabilitation to provide integrated access. If the front monumental steps had been removed, it would have destroyed a major prominent architectural feature of the building. Instead, an elevator was installed into a new shaft just inside an existing opening immediately adjacent to the front steps.

School Auditorium. The list of new products addressing access and overcoming physical barriers is dramatically increasing. Pictured here is a portable wheelchair lift designed for schools and auditoriums. The lightweight lift can also be housed in a supply closet or under a stage area and brought out when needed. The electrical motor, integral to the unit, runs on regular current.

Exhibits. Alternative experiences for visitors who cannot visit all parts of a resource can and should be provided at a nearby accessible location. It is important to consult the design guidelines for the height of exhibits, letter sizes, contrasting colors, tactile models and other aids for persons with visual and hearing impairments as well as those with limited mobility.

Mayflower Hotel, Washington, DC. For larger buildings, it is often possible to incorporate a ramp to make a smooth transition between levels. In this case, the cascading staircase was modified to incorporate a ramp against the edge. The staircase still has a grand, spacious feeling while allowing independent access between the lobby and the dining areas by visitors with disabilities.
building are historic and need protection and what design tools and techniques are available to modify the building or site while preserving those elements that impart the historic significance to the resource.

With careful planning, it is generally possible to incorporate sensitively designed and integrated solutions to provide the highest level of access for persons with disabilities with the lowest level of impact to the historic resource. A 3-step evaluation and consultation process is recommended and this is more fully described in Preservation Briefs 32: Making Historic Properties Accessible available from the National Park Service, Heritage Preservation Services Office in Washington, D.C. Briefly outlined, however, this 3-step process starts with an evaluation of the historic property itself and sets out a priority list of what is significant about a building that must be kept and which features could possibly be modified. For example, a front entrance with monumental stairs might be considered absolutely essential to remain unaltered, but an adjacent area might be less significant and could sustain some modification to provide an accessible entrance.

Secondly, a physical evaluation of the property must be made to identify barriers to access to both public spaces within a building and the services provided in those spaces. Usually an historic preservation architect familiar with both The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties and the Americans with Disabilities Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) can undertake the first two types of evaluation.

The consultation process, the third step, is often the most important. It requires the input of persons with a variety of experience and viewpoints. When evaluating options for making an historic building or site more accessible, it is important to include the architect, consultants, persons with disabilities, local preservation specialists and most specifically, if consensus cannot be achieved, the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO). The SHPO has been identified by the Department of Justice as the resource for consultation to determine if certain proposed treatments would “threaten or destroy” the resource and if special alternative access provisions can be applied to historic properties which cannot be made accessible. Often looking at various options in consultation with all parties can lead to practical solutions that do not impact the historic qualities of a building while still providing access through a public entrance.

When it is not possible to make the minimum number of physical changes required for access due to the rare historic nature of the resource or technical or economic considerations, at least a programmatic solution is required that provides the service to the public in an alternate way. The primary reason that historic sites and museums have been looking for ways to make themselves more accessible to the public is that when the visitation of the building or the site is “the program”, it is difficult to move it to an alternative site. Visiting a famous national park feature or a president’s home is a specific activity that only happens at that place, which makes substituting an alternate experience disappointing to the visitor. What the ADA is asking for is that, to the greatest extent possible, without destroying the significance of the resource, efforts be made to integrate access into everyone’s experience. While access to the second floor of an historic building, such as a President’s home, may not be feasible without threatening or destroying the resource with modern intrusion, certainly the first floor must be made accessible if at all possible. For those areas of a building or site not accessible, there are some excellent examples of video and other media that can be used to make the experience for the visitors not able to go up stairs as close as possible to the real experience.

You have seen, on previous pages, several examples of buildings made accessible after careful planning that achieved independent access at primary entrances. Some represent simple changes while others are major rehabilitations that involve substantial financial investment, but all exhibit a systematic approach using a positive proactive attitude and a willingness to seek the appropriate balance that still preserves the resource. Historic buildings can be made more accessible to all. Universal access and appropriately designed features are clearly achievable in historic buildings and is a positive trend for all.

Preservation Briefs 32: Making Historic Properties Accessible, by Thomas C. Jester and Sharon C. Park, AIA. This 14-page publication with 43 illustrations introduces the complex issue of providing access to historic properties for persons with disabilities. Available from the Government Printing Office for $1.50 per copy, the Stock Number is 024-005-01121-8. Send check payable to the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, PO Box 371954, Pittsburgh, PA 15250-7954 or call GPO information with questions at (202) 512-1800.

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