



# TECHNICAL PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS AT HISTORIC BUILDINGS

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### GENERAL NOTE

These recommendations are intended to be consistent with the general objectives of the First Impressions Program which is a federal initiative to improve the architectural integrity of visitor and tenant gateways into federal buildings. The purpose of this guide is to provide specific design guidance to ensure that changes are consistent with the building's original design and materials.

### DESIGN PRINCIPLES

- 1. Direct visitors' focus to the original space:** Changes to an historic space should help visitors appreciate the original design including volume, spatial quality, and materials. Preserve original materials in place.
- 2. Use original documentation:** Where it exists, use historic documentation to draw design ideas. For example, new signage for Department of Justice is replicated from existing sign frames. (Fig. 1) New work may be a simplified version of more elaborate historic work.
- 3. Design contextually:** Design should respond to materials, colors, texture, and detailing of an historic space. Design using comparable quality materials and construction. (Fig. 2)



Dept. of Justice, DC.  
Original directional sign.

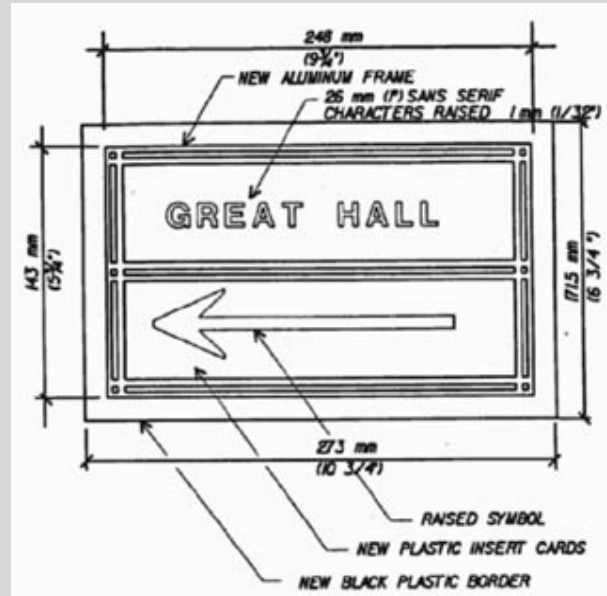


Fig. 1: Dept. of Justice, DC. New sign drawing adapted from original sign design. (Burt Hill Kosar Rittlemann)



Fig. 2: National Archives, DC. Round security/information desk designed for round lobby space.

- 4. Create opportunities to restore:** Use First Impressions as an opportunity to restore historic features. For example, if a lighting upgrade is necessary in an historic space, use the opportunity to replicate historic fixtures, if possible. (Fig. 3)

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS IMPROVEMENTS

- 1. Functions and furnishings in public space:** Limit furnishings to support only functions necessary to welcoming, informing, and securing both visitors and tenants. For example, vendors and commercial activities should be located elsewhere (e.g. near cafeteria). Temporary furnishing for receptions and other events should be promptly removed and stored. (Fig. 4)
- 2. Signage:** Use original signage typeface. For pre-war buildings, signage almost always uses a serif typeface. ADA gen-



Fig. 3: Indianapolis, IN. Historic lighting in main corridor. (Carol Highsmith Photography)



Fig. 4: Inappropriately placed vending machines in lobby obscure spatial configuration of space.

erally recommends sans serif typeface but serif is permitted as long as letter contrast and size is sufficient to ensure visibility. Attach signage systems in a manner that does not damage original finishes.(Fig. 5)

- 3. Security:** Design guard booth and guard desk architectonically (as built in architectural furniture), matching original detailing and materials in the space. Design desk to conceal computer monitors and equipment. (Fig. 6)
- 4. Temporary displays:** Design displays to work with the materials and colors

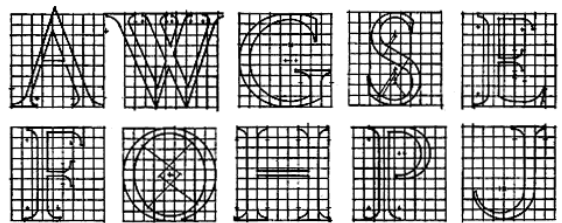


Fig. 5: Example of a serif font (Architectural Graphic Standards, Third Edition, Ramsey & Sleeper, 1948.)



GSA Central Office, DC. Old security desk.



GSA Central Office, DC. New security desk, designed to complement historic surroundings.

Fig. 6

original to the space. Install in a manner that does not harm historic materials. (For example: never bolt banners into masonry units; instead, use spring loaded rods or mounting rings held by friction around columns.)

**5. Permanent and semi permanent displays:** See #4, Temporary Displays. In



Fig. 7: Kinneary Courthouse, Cincinnati, OH. Original cases, salvaged from storage, display building history exhibit.

addition, use historic features as showcases. For example, abandoned directories can be effectively converted to house exhibits or interpretive displays (describing nearby artwork). (Fig. 7.)

**6. Utilitarian items and equipment:** Locate utilitarian items and equipment such as ATMs and trash receptacles outside of lobby areas and primary spaces whenever possible. When not possible, use smallest apparatus in finishes sympathetic with space, consolidating the equipment to the greatest extent possible. (Fig. 8)

**7. Lighting:** Maintain original fixtures wherever possible. Where necessary, to meet required light levels, install low-energy, high output bulbs (where concealed by globes). Use torcheres, free-standing lights, task lighting and other discreet supplementary light rather than permanently mounting new contemporary lights on ornamental walls and ceilings.



Location of telephones obscures historic detail. Aluminum finish clashes with that of grille and door hardware.



Empty phone niche near new phones, above.



Fig. 8

**8. Doors and other original features:** Retain original doors and trim. Where missing, replicate originals. Do not remove original doors. (Fig. 9)

### RECOMMENDED READING

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (*general guidance*)  
[www.achp.gov](http://www.achp.gov)

GSA Environmental Book (*helps explain Section 106 process*)  
[www.gsa.gov/pbs/pt/call-in/envbook/page63.htm](http://www.gsa.gov/pbs/pt/call-in/envbook/page63.htm)

*Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines* (see *Preservation*, P. 40, 44)  
[www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/standards/index.htm](http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/standards/index.htm)

First Impressions Web Site (*GSA access only*)  
<http://insite.gsa.gov/firstimpressions/takingaction>

All Photos by GSA unless otherwise noted.



Historically incompatible computer room doors.

Ariel Rios Federal Building, DC.  
New wood fire door simulates original doors.

Fig. 9

### NOTE

The Center for Historic Buildings is collecting examples of design solutions for historic buildings to include in future updates to this guide and for GSA's best preservation practices database. Please contact Caroline Alderson at (202) 501-9156 or by e-mail at [caroline.alderson@gsa.gov](mailto:caroline.alderson@gsa.gov) if you have images or documentation to share.