

Accessibility



St. Joseph Landmark Commission

Meeting contemporary accessibility and life safety standards at historic properties is one of the greatest design challenges facing owners of these properties. Historically most buildings and sites were not designed to be accessible to people with disabilities. Character-defining elements such as doorways, stairs, and narrow corridors can pose barriers to persons with disabilities, particularly those in wheelchairs. Extreme care must be taken to provide the desired level of safety and accessibility without compromising or destroying features that contribute to a historic property's significance.



In recent years, emphasis has been placed on making publicly accessible historic properties and the activities within them barrier-free to people with disabilities. Many local and state building codes include provisions that require this. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 created a civil rights mandate to eliminate physical barriers to “places of public accommodation” for the disabled. Religious institutions, private clubs, and private residences are not included in the legislation. Compliance deadlines are in place for state and local government-owned buildings and for newly constructed commercial and public buildings. Alterations to existing buildings must also be undertaken in a manner that ensures accessibility. Physical barriers in existing places of accommodation must be removed when it is “readily achievable” to do so. There is currently no enforcement mechanism in place to ensure compliance with ADA requirements. Compliance evaluations will be undertaken by the U.S. Justice Department when complaints are filed.

This recently added wheel chair ramp and stairway at Francis Street First United Methodist Church, Museum Hill Historic District, incorporates a railing of simple design that does not compete with the building's architecture, but discretely blends with its surroundings.

The St. Joseph Landmark Commission bases its review of proposed accessibility and life safety alterations on the impact these changes will have on the historic and architectural character of the resource in question. Design solutions that have minimal impact on character-defining elements of the historic property are encouraged. When new features are incorporated for accessibility, historic materials and features should be retained whenever possible. Accessibility modifications including wheelchair ramps, chair lifts, fire stairs, and fire doors should be in scale with the historic property and should be visually compatible and, to the extent possible, reversible. “Reversible” means that the new feature could easily be removed without causing permanent or irreversible damage to the historic property or site.



Accessibility

While interior modifications are necessary to achieve a maximum barrier-free environment for the disabled, the Landmark Commission's focus is primarily the exterior. Access into the building is typically the main area of design review. Whenever possible, access to historic buildings should be through a primary public entrance. If this can not be achieved without permanent damage to character-defining features, at least one entrance used by the public should be made accessible. Installation of directional signage to direct visitors to the accessible entrance should be included within the renovation plan.

Creating an accessible entrance often means making changes to steps, landings, doors, and thresholds. As many of these features are important historic elements, utilizing design solutions that preserve these features intact should be considered. Re-grading of entrances is one solution. As long as significant historic landscape elements are not involved, masonry stairs may be buried under fill material to eliminate elevation at the entrance. Wheel chair lifts can also be used.

Permanent ramps are perhaps the most common means to make an entrance accessible. Ramps should be located at primary entrances, if possible, and should be sited in such a manner so as to minimize the loss of historic features at connection points such as porch railings, steps, and windows. Ramps should be incorporated behind historic features such as cheek walls and windows to minimize visual impact. Ramp skirting can be faced with wood, brick, or stone, as deemed appropriate, to integrate the element with the historic property. Screening the ramp with plantings can also help to soften its presence on the building site. Unpainted pressure-treated wood should not be used to construct ramps because it conveys a temporary appearance that is not visually compatible with most historic properties. Railings on ramps should be of a simple design, distinguishable from the historic fabric, and should extend one foot beyond the sloped areas. The steepest allowable slope for a ramp is 1:12 (8%), but gentler slopes are encouraged. Ramp landings should be large enough for wheelchair users (5' X 5') and the top landing must be at the level of the door threshold.

Historic doors should generally not be replaced, nor should door frames on the primary elevation be widened. If the historic doors have been removed, the Landmark Commission may have greater flexibility in considering options. Most accessibility standards require at least a 32" door clearance with manageable door opening pressure devices. The most desirable preservation solution in evaluating entrances is to retain the historic doors and to upgrade the door pressure device or to eliminate the device altogether and to make single or double-leaf doors fully operational. Door thresholds can be removed and replaced if deemed insignificant or modified with a tapered filler piece on each side to reduce their height.

Accessibility



St. Joseph Landmark Commission

Accessibility: Guidelines

1. Choose uses for historic buildings that allow for feasible compliance with applicable building code and accessibility requirements to ensure the protection of the buildings' historic and architectural character.
2. Meet with the City's Chief Building Official to determine the extent of modifications necessary under the building code to achieve improved barrier-free access for the disabled.
3. Review proposed new uses for existing historic buildings to determine the impact accessibility and life safety code requirements will have on the historic resource. Explore a variety of design alternatives to achieve compliance and choose the one that requires the least amount of alteration to the historic resource and site.
4. Design new exits, stairs, landings, and ramps so that they are compatible with the character of the building or site. For example, wheel chair ramps may incorporate a railing of simple design that does not compete with the building's architecture, but discreetly blends with its surroundings.
5. Construct wheelchair ramps and chair lifts that are reversible in nature and do not damage or necessitate the removal of character-defining architectural features. Utilize wood, brick, or stone materials, if compatible with the existing architecture, to integrate the element with the building or site. Consider using plant materials as a means of screening the ramp and reducing its visual impact on the building site.
6. Maintain historic doors and entrances at primary elevations and modify door hardware and thresholds, if necessary, to allow for improved accessibility.



Avoid creating new building exits that compete with and/or obscure a building's architecture.