

First Steps for Rehabilitating or Replacing a Porch



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The first step in undertaking a rehab project is research. You should tap such sources as previous owners, local libraries, and magazine and newspaper accounts to learn as much as possible about the history of your building. On occasion, even the most thorough research fails to yield answers to important questions. For example, if you have been unable to find an historic photo of the original appearance of a long-gone front porch, how should you proceed?

The Secretary [of Interior's] Standards [for rehabilitating historic buildings] suggest the new porch should match what it replaces in composition, design, color, and texture. But the standards also state that the porch should not be conjectural—based on what you think it might have been like—or on the availability of a porch replacement that seems to fit the house. The appearance of the replacement porch should have an historical basis.

Should you forgo a front porch completely? This seems an extreme approach, especially for your own house where you want to enjoy a front porch. A middle ground relying on a little detective work seems the best approach. Look at the “footprint” of the porch as it relates to the house on fire insurance maps, such as those by the Sanborn Company. This will give you an idea of the location and general size. Look for pieces re-used or stored in the attic and basement or under the floor of an enclosed or altered porch. “Shadows”—clues such as nail holes from where the porch met the house or varying thicknesses of paint—may reveal the basic shape and extent of the porch. You might also look around for very similar houses in your community to see the range and similarities of those

porches. Also study styles from the period to see what captures the main characteristics of the time.

By all means, exhaust your research leads for old photographs showing your porch, because it is expensive to redo the porch later to conform to the original appearance. Any new porch without historic documentation of what it replaces should have a simple, compatible design. Otherwise it provides a false sense of the history of your house. Note that these approaches to respectful rehabilitation may need to be more rigorous in a Tax Act project where a certified rehabilitation is necessary. . . .

It is important to document the history of the changes to the house for future owners. . . . This evidence can also be useful for subsequent repairs or changes. . . .

The emphasis in a successful rehabilitation project is on repairing, retaining, and respecting the significant historic materials and features. However, new construction is certainly possible. New additions must preserve and not obliterate the significant historic materials and features of the building as well as the historic character of it within its surroundings. New construction should be compatible with the size, scale, materials, and character of both the building and its surroundings. . . . Otherwise, the effect is jarring and intrusive. Inappropriately designed new construction does not respect the appearance of older buildings around it.

On most older houses, porches are a vital part of the design. They lend character to the house and are a critical part of the first impression we have of it. Thus, it is very important to retain porches and as many original architectural elements as possible. If replacement parts—columns, brackets, spindles, balustrades—are necessary, they should resemble the originals. [For example,] using plain 4x4 foot posts is highly inappropriate, unless the original porch had such posts. ❖

This information was excerpted from *Historic Preservation in Iowa: A Handbook for Communities*, prepared by Barbara Beving Long and published by the State Historical Society of Iowa. To request more specific or technical information on historic preservation, contact Community Programs, State Historical Society of Iowa, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, Iowa 50319, 515-281-8741.