

Retrofitting Historic Structures to Support Lifelong Communities: Downtown and Community Revitalization for Impact



Does your community have a historic downtown or historic structures (homes, factories, schools) that are vacant, inaccessible, or need to be retrofitted to meet the needs of your community’s changing demographic profile? Historic preservation is not just about preserving the past. It is an economic development tool that enables residents to live in your community throughout their lifetimes and allows future generations to discover their own connections to your community.

You may pass historic structures every day as you travel your community and wonder how they might be utilized to fulfill a community need. Policymakers, investors, and citizens often struggle with decisions such as when to rehabilitate or demolish a historic structure, whether an old YMCA can be converted into a senior housing development, or how an elderly citizen can make necessary modifications to stay in his or her historic home. These decisions often turn problem properties into assets that stabilize and revitalize neighborhoods and improve residents’ quality of life.

Adaptive reuse and retrofit of historic buildings are not nearly as onerous, expensive, or scary as most communities, funders, and developers imagine, although a thorough understanding of the rehabilitation process is necessary for a successful project. Innovative design techniques are expanding the range of options for reuse. And as communities experiment with creative new uses for vacant or dilapidated properties, they are determining which strategies work and which do not, which are most cost-effective, and which are most sustainable. IPA’s issue brief on universal design treats this topic more deeply: <https://www.inphilanthropy.org/resources/universal-design-and-visitability>.

This brief outlines some of the benefits and challenges of repurposing and modifying historic structures, including ideas and resources to use when planning a project.

Fast Facts

57,000

Approximate number of Indiana sites on the National Register of Historic Places
-Indiana Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology

\$7.49 million

Amount IHEDA invested in rehabs of historic buildings during their most recent round of grants
-Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority

1990

Year the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, increasing public access and equity for persons with disabilities



Why Retrofit?

So why should your community decide to preserve or retrofit a historic building, or encourage individuals to retrofit their historic homes? Historic preservation projects can successfully meet several community goals, including social justice for the disabled, tourism, economic development, and connecting to the past. Attractive and accessible homes and buildings increase your community's quality of life and make your community an attractive and meaningful place to live, work, and play.

- **Sustainability.** Preservation Green Lab at the National Trust for Historic Preservation published their study, "The Greenest Building: Quantifying the Environmental Value of Building Reuse." This study confirms that reusing and retrofitting large buildings with an average level of energy performance almost always offers environmental savings over demolition and more energy-efficient new construction. This is due in large part to the fact that it requires 35 to 50 years for the carbon emissions invested in new construction to be recovered, even with extremely high-performing buildings.
- **Aging in Place.** Accessible homes and buildings help keep residents in your community throughout their lifespan, and contribute to your community's property tax base.
- **Tourism.** Communities with a sense of place and connection to their past act as magnets for tourism dollars, boosting economic development.
- **Commerce.** More than 50 million Americans with disabilities - 18% of our population - are potential customers for businesses of all types across the United States. This group has \$175 billion in discretionary spending power, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. That figure is more than twice the spending power of American teenagers and almost 18 times the spending power of the American "tweens" market. This market is growing fast. By the year 2030, 71.5 million Baby Boomers will be over the age of 65 and demanding products, services, and environments that address their age-related physical changes.
From ADA.gov.
- **Cost Savings.** Accessible buildings and homes help reduce falls that increase the cost of care for the elderly.
- **Turn Liabilities to Assets.** Vacant and abandoned properties challenge Indiana communities. Studies show that vacant and abandoned properties limit local economies, slow population growth, lower property values, increase crime, and impose heavy cost burdens on local governments.

The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation recently released a report on historic preservation and rightsizing, the result of three years of research and discussions.

"...Protecting historic buildings, repurposing land, preserving neighborhoods, redeveloping downtowns, and connecting historic resources to regional plans through cooperative efforts will enable cities to transition to healthy communities that attract new residents and new businesses to meet the needs of the 21st century. Historic assets that are preserved and reused are the foundation for the future."

(Managing Change: Preservation and Rightsizing in America)

What is a historic structure?

Typically, buildings constructed at least 50 years ago are considered historic. These buildings, which may be modest dwellings or commercial buildings, contribute to the character of your community. The National Register of Historic Places is the federal list of historic properties that have been recognized by the National Park Service for architecture, connections to important events, or links to significant people. The Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology reviews and maintains the nominations for Indiana. Some communities have also recognized buildings of note through designation by local historic preservation commissions or review boards.



National Register of Historic Places Information:

http://www.indianalandmarks.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/Publication%20PDFs/NatRegBro_15_FINAL.pdf

<http://state.in.us/dnr/historic/3654.htm>

Some tax incentives and grants may be available for National Register-listed properties:

<http://www.state.in.us/dnr/historic/2794.htm>



“Instead of cities focusing so much on growing, they should really focus on making themselves attractive and having the market respond to that,” says Justin Hollander, associate professor of urban and environmental policy and planning at Tufts University. “If a place becomes more desirable, it likely will lead to further growth in the future.”

In the image to the left: Lobby of the historic Seitz Hotel, part of the Historic Greensburg Square Development in Greensburg, Indiana, showing an accessible entry, elevator, and a refurbished historic saloon entrance. The building now provides 14 affordable housing units for seniors.

Questions Communities Should Ask

Not all buildings are suited to retrofitting, adaptive reuse, or rehabilitation. All renovated buildings intended for public use must comply with accessibility requirements (including parking, accessible entry, accessible public restrooms, accessible living units in multi-family dwellings, and all common area amenities), and the location of a building needs to be relevant to its intended use.

Communities can work to answer the following questions in a cohesive and singular thought process.

Is the structure salvageable?

Can the building be saved?

Sometimes buildings are too far gone to salvage. If a building cannot be saved, saving the facade and constructing a new building behind it is not uncommon, but it is costly and complex.

What is the value of the structure to the community?

The community should care about this building. Broad support for “saving the building” will be helpful throughout the project, and in the case of housing retrofits, such support could help when it comes time to lease the units.

What is the viability of the intended use?

Not all historic structures are compatible with new uses. For example, inserting large open-space functions such as a theatre into a building of narrow bays of load-bearing walls could be difficult. Will an elevator be required? Is it feasible to put one in the building? Are the windows appropriate for the intended use? For housing, will the existing building configuration translate into livable units?

Accessible homes and buildings, no matter what function they serve or when they were built, can help your community become a Lifelong Community, a community where residents can live well and be connected.

Is it viable to make the structure accessible?

What are the viable access points into the building?

Look at factors like the relationship of the main floor level to the exterior grade, available space for an entrance ramp, and parking availability.

What are the funding sources for the project?

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation determine ADA compliance when accessing historic tax credits as a funding component of the project. The design team needs to understand the following implications: how the standards apply to the project; the review process; and how to work 'with' the standards to find solutions. The standards have flexibility, which is often critical.

Can we balance aesthetics and accessibility?

In public projects, accessibility is not optional. Implementation of accessibility should be aesthetically pleasing, but access takes precedent over non-functional design.

Can we balance cost and complexity?

The bottom line to all projects is the balancing of costs of the work, the viability of the final product, and compliance with the law.

Can the project be successful after evaluating all of the above factors?



The image to the left shows the retrofit of the former Seitz Hotel, part of the Historic Greensburg Square Development in Greensburg, Indiana. This senior housing building was viable because of the corner location and simple floor layout of the 4-story structure and the availability of tax credits awarded by IHCA.

Questions Funders Can Ask:

- Instead of directly funding the restoration costs of this structure, can the foundation fund a feasibility study, a capital campaign study, or a team of experts to assist with the project?
- Is the restoration viable given the building's current condition?
- How, specifically, is the community supporting the project? Is this a passionate project of just a few residents or a project that will transform a community liability into a community asset?
- If retrofitting a historic museum or site for accessibility, what will be the increase in attendance to the site?
- Are there alternative sources of funds to complete the historic project?



On the left: An accessible entrance of the renovated 1928 YMCA building in Greensburg, Indiana. This is a strong example of an unobtrusive accessibility retrofit to this multi-story building that now contains 14 affordable housing units for seniors.

Resources:

Preservation Resources

[Indiana Landmarks](#) and their regional offices are experts in historic renovations, reuse, and rehabilitation. In addition to technical assistance, the organization offers small grants to nonprofits for feasibility studies for endangered properties.

[The National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) provides information on national programs and efforts.

[Measuring Economic Impacts of Historic Preservation](#) and [Historic Preservation and Green Building: A Lasting Relationship](#) are good sources for research about historic preservation.

Lifelong Community Resources

To learn more about how your community can be a lifelong community where residents can live well and be connected, visit [Lifelong Indiana Coalition](#).

Americans with Disabilities Act and Accessibility Resources

To understand what small community businesses need to become accessible, refer to the [ADA Small Business Primer](#).

[Information and Technical Assistance on the Americans with Disabilities Act](#) can help you learn more about ADA.

The [Americans with Disabilities Act National Network](#) provides information, guidance, and training on the ADA. They also provide several ADA fact sheets.



Main Street businesses, like this building in the Historic Greensburg Square Development in Greensburg, Indiana, can add ramps that provide accessibility while maintaining the historic integrity of the building and the streetscape.

Community AGEnda

Community AGEnda is a partnership with five American communities to accelerate their efforts to become great places to grow up and grow old. Community AGEnda was launched in 2012 with a \$1.3 million grant from the Pfizer Foundation to Grantmakers In Aging (GIA), then renewed in 2013 with a second grant totaling \$1.35 million and renewed again in 2014 with a third grant for \$1.49 million. The initiative awarded grants to local organizations in five regions to fund activities (some planned and some already underway) to make those communities more age-friendly. Because each community has its own dynamics, assets, and challenges, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to making a place more age-friendly.

The Indiana Philanthropy Alliance has been pleased to participate in the Community AGEnda partnership, investing more than \$500,000 to help Indiana communities live well and be connected.

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Gregory S. Fehribach, Attorney-at-Law, The Fehribach Group, Indianapolis, Indiana
<http://www.thefehribachgroup.com>

Brian Hollars, AIA, S3Architects, Muncie, Indiana
<http://www.s3architects.com>



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