



Subject: Converting Historic School Buildings for Residential Use

- Applicable Standards:**
2. Retention of Historic Character
 5. Preservation of Historic Features, Finishes and Craftsmanship

Issue: Redundant school buildings are often rehabilitated into residential apartments. The key to a successful conversion that meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation of any historic building is to preserve as much as possible of its character-defining features and spaces. In a school building, these usually include: entrances and stairways; corridors—their configuration, height and width; special features, such as lockers, doors and transoms, and trim; classroom spaces, large windows, high ceilings and blackboards; and gymnasiums and auditoriums.

Rehabilitation as a treatment acknowledges the need to make compatible alterations to a historic building which may be necessary for a new or a continued use. However, these changes must respect the historic building and, therefore, must retain as much as possible of its character-defining features, finishes and spaces. Consequently, while new systems are usually needed for the historic building to function effectively in its new use, they must be installed in a sensitive manner in order to meet the Standards. Preserving the multi-story volume of school auditoriums and gymnasiums presents a special challenge. Although some auditoriums can be quite decorative, more commonly it is the volume of space itself that is the primary character-defining aspect of the majority of auditoriums and gymnasiums. Keeping these kinds of spaces in their historic or a similar use is certainly the preferred treatment because it requires little or no change. However, in some instances, it may be possible to make changes in such a way that enough of the historic character of the space remains so that its original use is still clearly evident.

Application 1 (*Compatible treatment, retention of character of auditorium*): This 1914 school building was rehabilitated as residence/work spaces for artists. Twenty-eight apartments were created out of former classrooms and the auditorium was retained, with very little change, as an exhibition space for the residents. Despite the extremely deteriorated condition of the interior of the school which had been vacant for years, all wood features were repaired, or replaced in kind, if necessary. These included: floors; staircases; windows; historic trim—doors, transoms, moldings, chair rails and picture rails, and wainscoting. Coved plaster ceilings, and even decorative radiators were retained throughout. The HVAC systems were installed discretely and, along with the sprinkler system, left exposed, which kept ceilings at their original height. The simple, industrial-style kitchen units containing the sink, counter top and shelving, and a minimum of new partitions also helped to preserve the character of the classroom spaces.



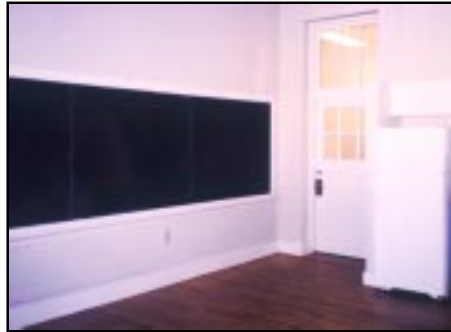
A derelict 1914 high school building was converted into residential/work studios for artists. All distinctive features and spaces were repaired and preserved in the corridors and in the classrooms. The auditorium was also retained virtually intact for use as an exhibition space for the resident artists.



Application 2 (*Compatible treatment, retention of character of gymnasium*): A 1925 high school annex, which included a gymnasium, was also converted successfully into combined living/work units. The rehabilitation retained and repaired all significant features in the corridors, including decorative relief-plaster molding, door transoms and trim, flooring, ceiling height, lockers and staircases. In the classrooms, trim, flooring, and even blackboards—where extant—were also kept. Here, too, the combined live/work use worked in favor of maximum retention of the historic character-defining features and spaces in the school building. Approximately one-third of the gymnasium was reconfigured into four apartments—two on the first floor and two on a new second floor installed at the same level as the second floor classroom corridor. A pair of doors which had provided access to a no-longer extant balcony in the gymnasium was adapted as an entry to one of the second floor apartments, and a window was modified to create an entrance for the other. Two-thirds of the gymnasium was retained intact with its full height and truss system visible for use as a gallery space.



This 1925 high school annex was rehabilitated as residential/work units.



Doorways, transoms and lockers were retained in the corridors and blackboards were kept in the classrooms.



One-third of the gymnasium was converted into four apartments by adding a second floor. The remaining full-height portion of the gym was retained as a gallery space.

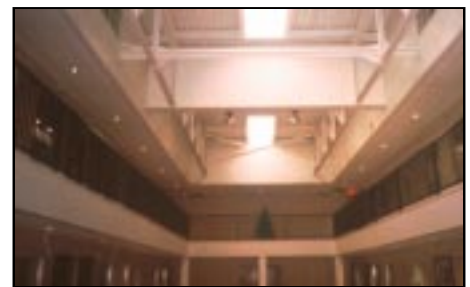
Application 3 (*Compatible treatment, retention of character of gymnasium*): When another, early-twentieth century school building was rehabilitated for use as senior housing, primary character-defining features were preserved in the classrooms. Part of its gymnasium was also adapted for apartments. Two rows of apartments were created on two sides of the gymnasium leaving the center section with its full height and exposed truss system clearly visible as an atrium-like, open space. Like the previous example, by converting only a portion of the gymnasium to apartments, enough of the gymnasium was retained intact so that its essential character and spatial volume were still apparent.



This 1930 school was rehabilitated for use as elderly housing.



Character-defining features were retained in the corridors and former classrooms.



Two-thirds of the gymnasium was converted into apartments on two levels leaving the roof truss system visible in the open space in the center.

Anne Grimmer, Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service

These bulletins are issued to explain preservation project decisions made by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The resulting determinations, based on the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation](#), are not necessarily applicable beyond the unique facts and circumstances of each particular case.

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