

Preservation Terminology: What Does Historic Really Mean?

Not all old buildings are created equal. There is a difference between just old and “historic”. Good preservation is not about saving every old building but about protecting those that are historic and serve as a tangible experience of our history. Historic buildings and sites are identified in essentially two different ways: Listing in the National Register of Historic Places or with an historic overlay.

Listing in the National Register of Historic places, is honorary and does not change property rights. A historic overlay, which is part of Metro zoning, requires that planned alterations go through a public design review process. The designation does not prevent change but helps to guide change in a way that preserves the historic character of the district. In Nashville there are two different types of historic overlays that provide different levels of protection: Historic Preservation Districts (including Historic Landmark Districts) and Neighborhood Conservation Districts. A building can be listed in the National Register and also be included in an historic overlay.

In determining whether or not a building is historic, consideration is given to age, integrity and significance. The National Register of Historic Places argues that at least 50 years is needed in order to have enough perspective to determine if a property is important. This is just a guideline and newer buildings have been listed in the Register. Integrity means that the building looks much like it did not the past. A property is significant if it is associated with events, activities or developments that were important in the past.

A National Register of Historic Places district and a historic overlay will have what is called a period-of-significance, which includes the beginning and ending dates of the districts important history. These dates are not always firm as history is a moving target. For instance, a farm may have been subdivided in 1890 with the build-out of the majority of the lost by 1930. Then, in the 1960s, ranch buildings were constructed in the empty lots. In 1978, the district was listed in the National Register with a period-of-significance of 1890 to 1930; however, in the 1990s people began to appreciate how the newer buildings helped to tell the story of the neighborhood and expanded the period-of-significance to 1890-1964.

Within a National Register district and preservation overlay, buildings are identified as contributing or non-contributing. Certainly, all buildings and features within a district *contribute* to the overall look and feel of the district but in terms of preservation, this terminology is an identification of which buildings and features contribute to the *historic character* of the district. Whether or not a building is considered contributing is based on the same factors that were used to determine the significance of the district—age, integrity and association with events, activities and developments that were important in the past. When making decisions about changes within an historic overlay, the Metro Historic Zoning Commission will make sure that alterations to a contributing building are

appropriate for the building as well as the district, whereas alterations to a non-contributing building need only be appropriate for the district.

For more information about the National Register of Historic Places, visit www.nps.gov/nr.

This article has been provided by the Metro Historic Zoning Commission which provides Preservation Permits for exterior alterations within historic overlays. When planning a project, contact them early to save you time and money. For more information, visit www.metro.gov/mhc.