

Vulnerable Vermont

Changes are routinely made to historic buildings by property owners in Vermont and in communities across the nation. These changes generally go unnoticed; however, as they accumulate, they alter a valuable record of the past. Eventually, they may erase the visible heritage of an entire community.



In 1990, the University of Vermont Historic Preservation Program in cooperation with the Division for Historic Preservation undertook a study *Vulnerable Vermont: A Study of Changes to Historic Buildings in Three Vermont Communities* measures the pace and impact of changes made to historic buildings over a fifteen-year period in three very different northwestern Vermont communities. The communities studied were: The Battery Street Historic District, an urban neighborhood near Burlington's waterfront; Hinesburg, an exurban town which is rapidly becoming suburban; and Fletcher, a rural community. Graduate students visited each study community to compare the present appearance of buildings with photographs and data of the same buildings gathered by the Division. The students also interviewed property owners about changes made to their buildings.

Small Changes Can Add Up to Big Changes in Only Fifteen Years

Most property owners interviewed in the study noticed the large-scale changes made in their communities - buildings demolished for parking lots, condominiums built in fields at the edge of town. Far less obvious, but of equal impact in the long run, were the gradual changes made to places - porches lost here, original windows replaced there. As seen in the composite illustrations above, seemingly small changes to buildings can lead to drastic alterations in the appearance of Vermont's landscape.

Could This Happen to Buildings in Your Community?

While the study revealed a number of unsettling trends, it also uncovered alternatives available to building owners. Here are a few examples:

Windows

Windows were frequently replaced on buildings in the three communities studied. Instead of removing their building's original windows, some owners repaired and caulked the original sash for energy efficiency. If repair was not possible, replacement windows were located to match the originals.

Porches

While many owners in the study replaced their decorative porches with concrete steps and plain unpainted lumber railings, others made the effort to regularly paint and maintain their original porches. Many addressed related problems such as leaky roofs which can eventually cause porches to rot. Others replaced failed original features with matching parts.

Siding

The covering of exterior walls with synthetic siding was one of the changes found to have the most dramatic impact on the appearance of historic buildings. However, some building owners preferred the traditional option of regularly repairing and painting their buildings. This approach had the additional benefit of allowing them to check for and correct problems such as rot or insect infestation.

Buildings, Farms, Downtowns and Villages Are Part of The Environment Too!

Probably the most important overall message learned from this study is that buildings, streets, neighborhoods, farms, villages, towns, and cities are as much a part of Vermont's environment as forests, wetlands and air. The decisions made by the individual citizen concerning buildings have a direct and immediate effect on preserving the larger environment.

For more information on local historic preservation, community workshops and preservation of buildings, please feel free to contact us.

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