



ITS  
NUMBER 52

# Interpreting The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation

## Subject: Incorporating Solar Panels in a Rehabilitation Project

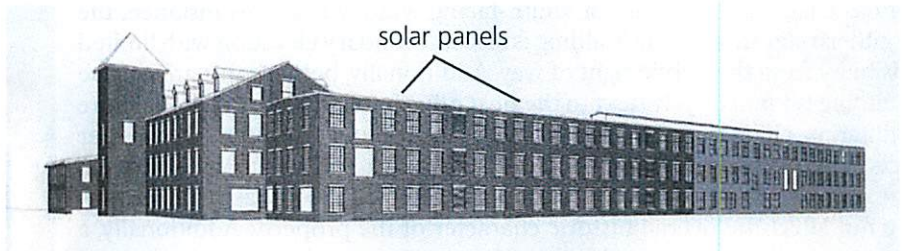
Applicable Standards: 2. Retention of Historic Character  
9. Compatible Additions/Exterior Alterations

**Issue:** Enhancing the energy efficiency of a historic building is important. To that end, it is often possible to install features such as solar panels and photovoltaic cells provided they are installed in a sensitive manner. Because these elements must be positioned to take advantage of unobstructed sunlight, the roof of a historic structure is an obvious location. The roofline of a historic building is often a distinctive feature. Therefore, the installation of solar panels should conform to guidance regarding rooftop additions, i.e. that they be minimally visible, to avoid altering the historic character of the building. Historic buildings with a flat roof or parapet can usually accommodate solar panels because the panels will be hidden, while properties with a hipped or gabled roof are generally not good candidates for a rooftop solar installation. Solar panels on historic buildings should not be visible from the public right of way such as nearby streets, sidewalks or other public spaces.

In circumstances where solar collectors are not placed on rooftops, they should only be positioned in limited or no-visibility locations in secondary areas of the property. Vegetation or a compatible screen may also be an option to further reduce the impact of these features on a historic property. For some historic buildings, it may not be possible to incorporate solar panels and meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

### Application 1 (Compatible treatment):

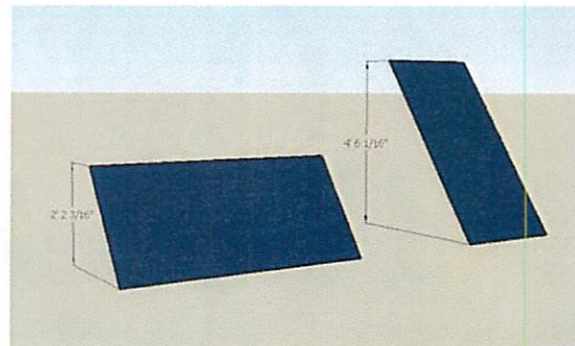
The rehabilitation of this mid-nineteenth century mill incorporated a large, roof-mounted photovoltaic installation. Although the historic building does not have a parapet wall at the roofline, the height of the building and the arrangement of the panels render the entire installation invisible from the ground. It is important to note that the panels are placed horizontally. Had the panels been installed with a vertical tilt, the angle required to maximize efficiency would have caused the panels to extend significantly higher above the roof. Simply changing the direction in which the panels are tilted can affect their visibility and reduce their impact on the character of the historic property.



*Because of the size of this historic mill, a large array of solar panels could be installed on the flat roof without being seen from the ground.*



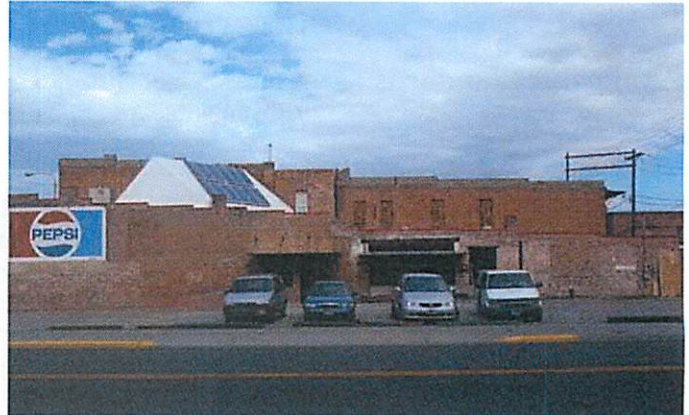
*Solar panels installed on the flat roof.*



*By placing the panels horizontally, the overall height of the installation and its visibility is reduced.*

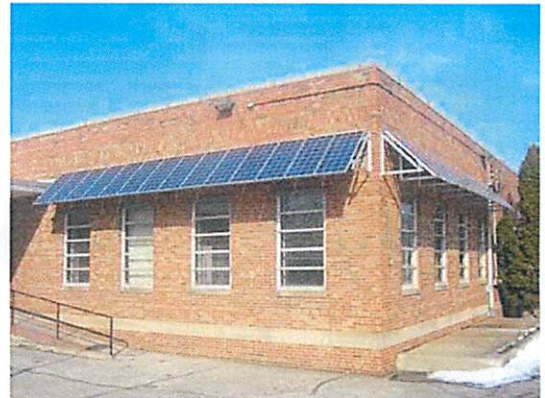


**Application 2 (*Incompatible treatment*):** During the rehabilitation of this late-nineteenth century commercial building, a conspicuous rooftop monitor with prominent solar panels and skylights was constructed on the one-story structure. The size and finish of this rooftop addition are incompatible with the historic character of the building. However, the building could have accommodated both skylights and solar panels if they had been installed differently. An alternative design that could have met the Standards would have included low-profile skylights and solar panels concealed behind the parapet wall.



*The addition of a large rooftop monitor featuring skylights on the front slope and solar panels on the rear slope is not compatible with the historic character of this small, one-story commercial building.*

**Application 3 (*Compatible treatment*):** The rehabilitation of this historic post office incorporated solar panels as dual-function features: generation of electricity and shading for south-facing windows. In this instance, the southern elevation of the building is also a secondary elevation with limited visibility from the public right of way. Additionally, because this area of the building is immediately next to the post office's loading dock, it has a more utilitarian character than the primary facades and, therefore, can better accommodate solar panels. Because the panels are in a suitable location at the rear of the property and are appropriately sized to serve as awnings, they do not affect the overall historic character of the property. Additionally, a screen of tall plantings shields the solar panels from view from the front of the building, further limiting their visibility.



*Above: Shown from the rear of the property, these solar panels serve a secondary function as awnings to shade south-facing windows. Because of their location at the back of the building immediately adjacent to a loading dock, the installation of these panels does not affect the historic character of the property.*



*Left: The solar panels are not visible from the front of the building. Additionally, even if the vegetation were removed, the installation would only be minimally visible along an alley at the rear of a secondary side elevation.*

Jenny Parker, 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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