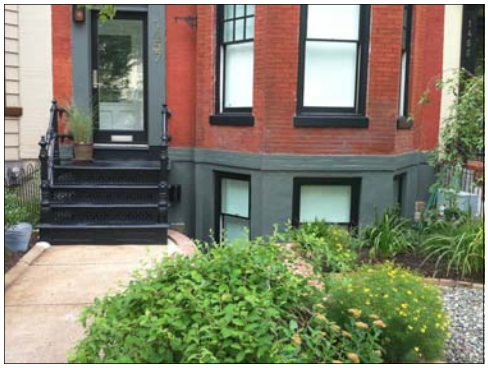


PRESERVATION AND DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR BASEMENT ENTRANCES AND WINDOWS

D.C. HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Introduction

Renovating a basement can be a relatively inexpensive and low-impact way to expand a house's living space, while conversion of a basement to a separate living unit can provide valuable income for homeowners and increase housing options in existing neighborhoods. This type of work may result in the desire to create an exterior basement entrance or to modify basement windows for light and emergency egress. For historic property, these exterior alterations must be compatible with the character of the property and their surroundings.

Historically, many of Washington's houses were designed with exterior basement access. Where such access does not currently exist, it may be possible to accommodate a new basement entrance or to expand basement windows if those features are designed to retain existing architectural and topographic characteristics. While not all properties and sites can compatibly accommodate a new exterior basement stair, basing the design of a new basement entrance on original examples on similar properties may provide a good model for this type of alteration.

This guideline is intended for property owners seeking to provide exterior access or larger windows to a basement on designated historic property. The guideline explains the design and preservation principles applied in the historic preservation review process for this type of work to ensure that these changes are compatible.

Preservation Considerations

The city's preservation law establishes the fundamental purposes for the review of work affecting historic properties. These include **retaining and enhancing** historic properties, **ensuring that changes are compatible** with the character of the historic district, and **encouraging adaptation** of historic property for current use. The purpose of design guidelines is to establish the principles applied for achieving these purposes.

As these design principles are applied, the following are important considerations in the design and review of work affecting historic property:

Visibility or prominence from the street: Changes to historic property that are visible to the public are more likely to affect a property's character. As a general rule, changes that are prominent or visible from a street are given more scrutiny, while changes that are minimally visible or not visible from the street are given greater flexibility.

Temporary and additive change vs. permanent and destructive change: Alterations that are temporary or easily reversible have less of a lasting impact on the character of historic property, while alterations that permanently change or remove features have a greater impact. Adding a new element to historic property while retaining significant characteristics, is a better preservation solution than destroying and replacing characteristic features.

Contextual and compatible design: The design of features for historic property should display an awareness of and response to the specific qualities of their property and environment.

Quality of design and materials: Historic buildings typically display a high quality of design and materials that should be retained. Additions and alterations to historic property should exhibit this tradition of building excellence.

Design Principles

1. New basement entrances should be visually discreet and subordinate to the main Entrance

Basement entrances and stairs on historic property service secondary entrances and are designed accordingly. They are typically obscured or entirely hidden from public view, and are often located directly below the main stair and entrance. Historic basement entrances are almost never a focus of the building's façade composition. To be compatible, new basement stairs and areaways for historic property should conform as much as possible to the design principles of historic conditions on similar properties.

- New basement doors should typically be positioned directly below the primary entrance and stair or, if this is not possible, in an otherwise inconspicuous location.

- Basement entrances in a projecting bay are almost never appropriate because they cannot be shielded from public view, result in excavation that disrupts the visual grounding of the bay, and become a primary focus of the façade.

This bay-front basement entrance visually competes with the original door and has eliminated the raised front yard garden.

This basement entrance below the front door is visually discreet and accessed by a shared walkway that minimizes paving and retains a front garden. The original stair has been maintained.

- Walkways to basement entrances should be shared with the walk serving the main entrance to retain the maximum amount of green space in the front yard. Separate walks for main and basement entrances are generally not appropriate.

- Stairs to basement entrances should typically run parallel to and not project substantially further than the main entrance stair.

- Basement stairs are restricted by code as to the extent that they can project from the building line based on the width of the street. The maximum projection for basement stairs ranges from three to ten feet based on the width of the street (see "Building Code Considerations for Basement Entrances and Windows").

2. New basement entrances should not result in alterations to main entrance stairs, porches, or projecting bays

Primary entrance stairs, porches and projecting bays are among the most significant character-defining features of historic property, possessing a high degree of craftsmanship, material richness and architectural styling. They should not be disfigured to add basement entrances. Even if a deteriorated stair or porch requires repair, selective replacement of elements, or disassembly for reconstruction, this does not constitute grounds for altering these features to provide new basement entrances. Repaired historic stairs and porches should be reconstructed to the same level of craftsmanship and should accurately replicate the original or historic condition.

- Original or character-defining entrance stairs, porches and projecting bays should be preserved and not be altered to accommodate new basement entrances.

- Changing the rise to run ratio, narrowing treads or landings, reconfiguring the orientation or shape, and raising the elevation of stairs or landings are not appropriate alterations for historic entrance stairs.

Altering or removing an original porch to create a new basement entrance is not appropriate for historic property.

This new stair replicates the form of the missing original. The basement entrance and stair are visually discreet and secondary to the primary entrance.

- On properties where no original or historic stair remains, and for non-historic property in an historic district, a new basement stair should be compatible with the building and its context.

- Altering the shape, dimensions, materials or other visual characteristics of a projecting bay to accommodate a new basement entrance is not appropriate.

Original stairs should not be removed from historic property to accommodate basement access or to turn the basement door into the primary entrance.

3. New basement entrances should respect existing topography and site characteristics

The relationship of a building to its site, topography, and neighboring properties is an important characteristic of historic property. Raised or terraced front yards and the linear strip of landscape that is formed by continuous front yards are distinctive features that define the setting for buildings in most of the city's historic districts. The depth of the front yard, the relationship of the building to grade, and the relationship of the building to sidewalk grade all affect the visibility and impact of basement entrances on a building and its site.

- Basement entrances and areaways should be subordinate to and not dominate the setting of historic property unless significant alterations to the site or street have fundamentally changed the original condition.

- Lowering the front yard of historic property to provide an at-grade entrance is generally not appropriate. New entrances should be designed to minimize disruption of existing topography.

This basement entrance and patio dominate the site and have resulted in the loss of the site's raised front yard.

- It may not be possible to provide an exterior stair on properties where the first floor is close to grade, where the building is close to the sidewalk, or where the basement stair would be exposed at eye level from the sidewalk. In such instances, the extent of excavation may alter the relationship of the building to grade, overwhelm the site, or become such a prominent element that it detracts from the property's character.

This property's first floor is essentially at grade and cannot compatibly accommodate an exterior basement stair.

- Basement areaways should be kept to a minimum size, typically projecting no more than 36" from the face of the building. The creation of large sunken patios or outdoor living areas in front of a primary elevation of historic property is not appropriate.

- Some increase in the minimum size of areaways for trash storage or utility meters may be appropriate if they can be accommodated by no other means.

- Fences around areaways are discouraged because they are obtrusive and out of character with historic site conditions. Decreasing the depth of an areaway or providing an alternative means of protection can eliminate the need for fences around areaways and window wells.

- Evergreen landscape plantings are encouraged to screen or lessen the visual impact of basement stairs and areaways and may be required as a condition of approval.

Evergreen planting in front of this basement stair effectively screens it from the street.

4. Basement windows should be compatible with the architectural character of the building, and window wells should have minimal visual impact on the site

Basement windows are typically organized as part of the overall composition of a façade, but are usually smaller than upper story windows. Alterations to basement window openings should be done in a manner that does not change the basic window pattern, apparent size, or relationship with upper story windows. Like basement areaways, window wells should be the minimum size necessary and clearly subordinate to a property's site.

- Lowering the sills of existing basement windows can be achieved when it has minimal visual impact on the building's façade and does not result in a perceptible increase in window dimensions as seen from the street.

- Windows should remain smaller than and subordinate to upper story windows even if basement sills are lowered.

- Raising the lintel height and widening basement window openings are generally not compatible alterations for historic property.

- Creating new basement windows may be appropriate if they are unobtrusive and aligned with fenestration of upper stories.

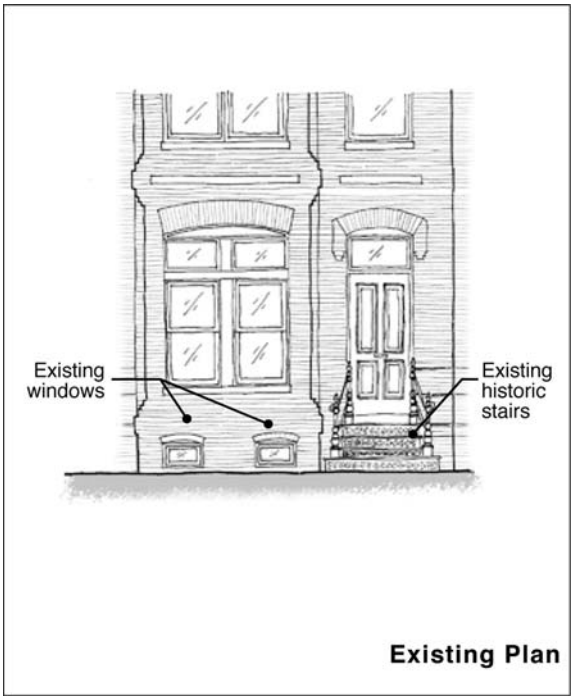
- New or replaced basement windows should be compatible with the character of the property and consistent with the requirements for replacement windows on historic property, matching the general appearance, profiles and dimensions of historic windows.

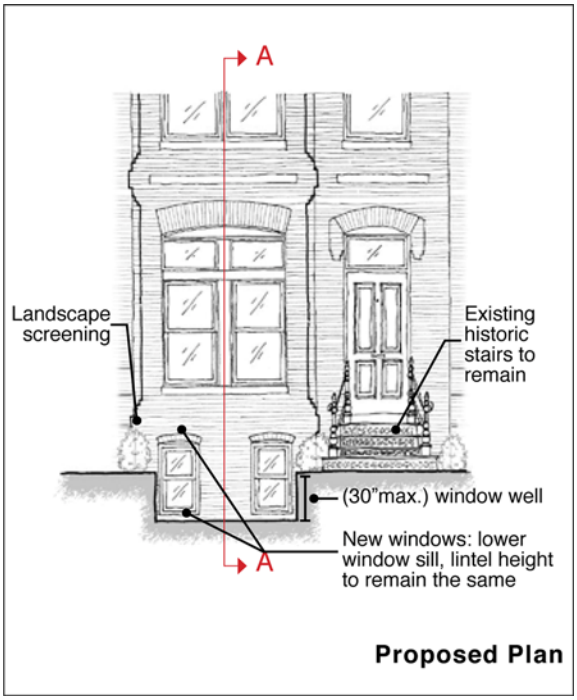
- Window wells for basement windows should be kept to the minimum dimensions required by code.

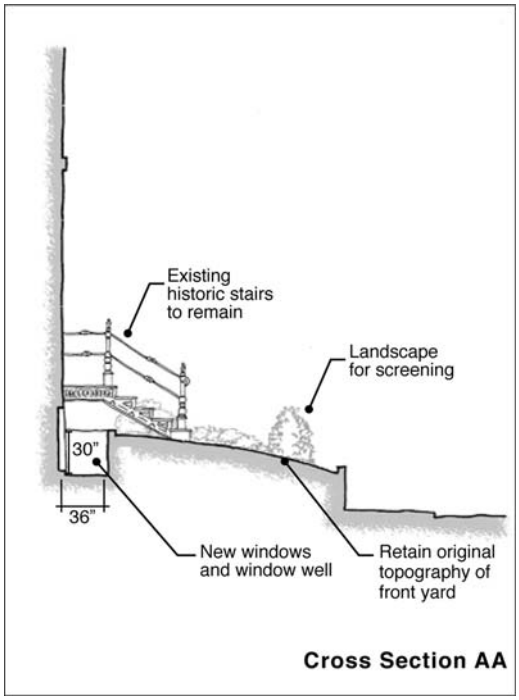
- Fences around window wells are discouraged. Decreasing the depth of a window well or providing an alternative means of protection may be required.

The windows on this school building have been lowered within new window wells that are unobtrusive to the building and site.

Basement Window Wells







Building Types

Flat Front Houses

Houses with flat facades (without a projecting bay or porch) and especially mid-19th century frame houses rarely had basement entrances. For a basement entrance to be acceptable for a flat-fronted house, it should be largely hidden from public view and not result in a large areaway or well in front of the house that is prominently visible from the street.

DO:

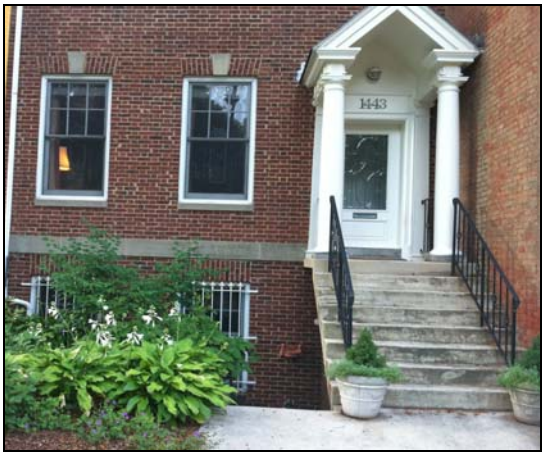
- Retain original topography and grades of the front yard
- Retain and enhance the landscaped nature of the front yard to screen basement areaways and window wells
- Limit paving so the majority of the site remains planted
- Retain original or historic stairs and landings
- Locate the basement entrance under the primary entrance or, if possible, on a side elevation
- Use the existing primary walkway for access to the new entrance, rather than creating a new separate walkway

DON'T:

- Alter the original or historic entrance stair or door
- Alter how the building is perceived as sitting on its site
- Expose large portions of buried foundation or basement walls to public view

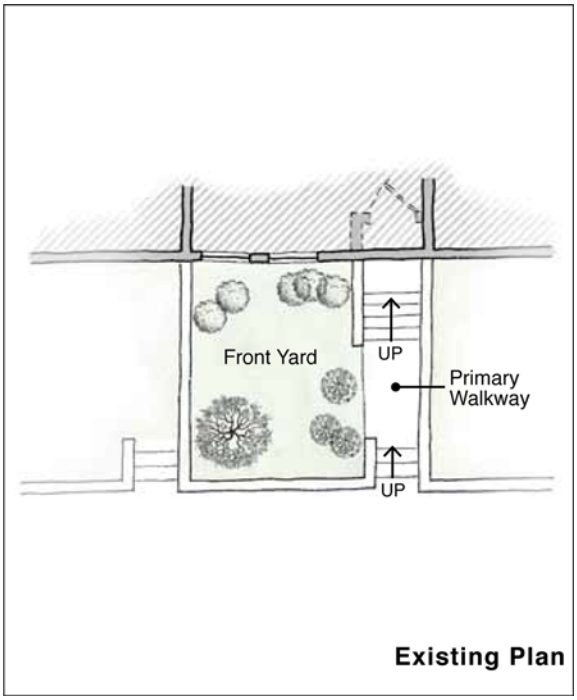
The modestly sized areaway on this flat-front house is original and has been partially screened with landscaping.

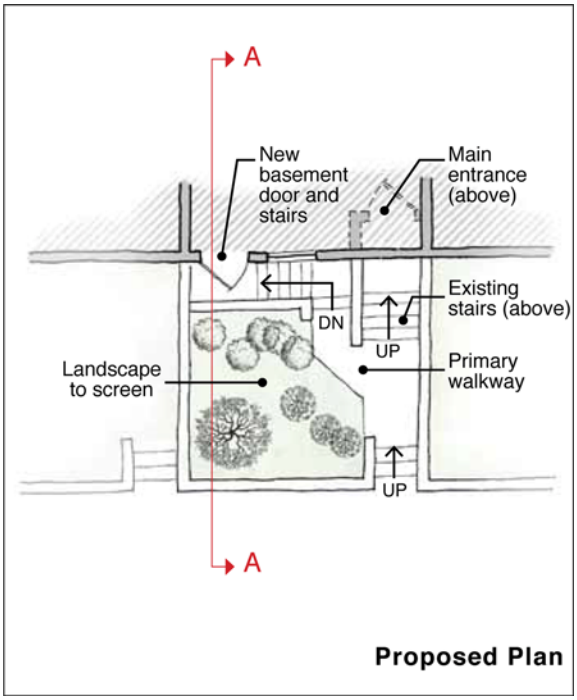
This large areaway results in the house sitting in a pit, exposes large portions of the structure's foundation walls, and changes the relationship of the house to the street.

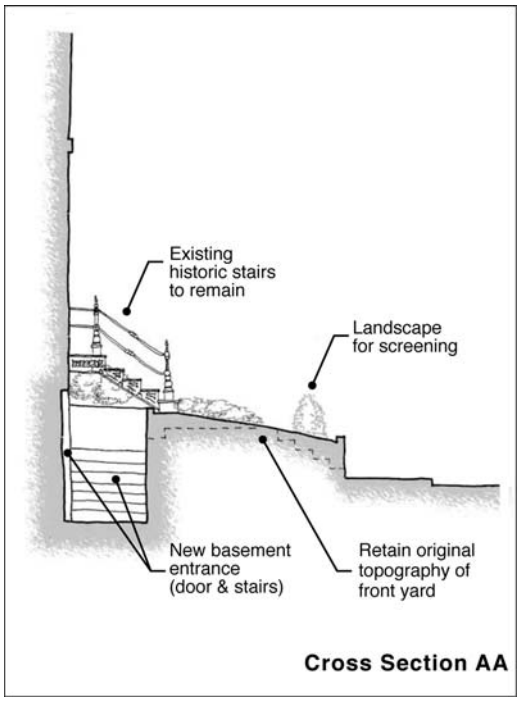


The basement areaway in front of this house retains the majority of the front yard as green space, which serves to screen the areaway from view.

Flat Front Houses







Bay Front Houses

Bay front rowhouses, particularly those with raised basements, often historically had basement entrances. Houses with similar characteristics to those that originally had basement entrances may lend themselves to having new entrances added if they adhere to the same historic design principles. Houses with square bays, original masonry stairs, or which were built with the first floor close to grade may not be able to accommodate an exterior entrance.

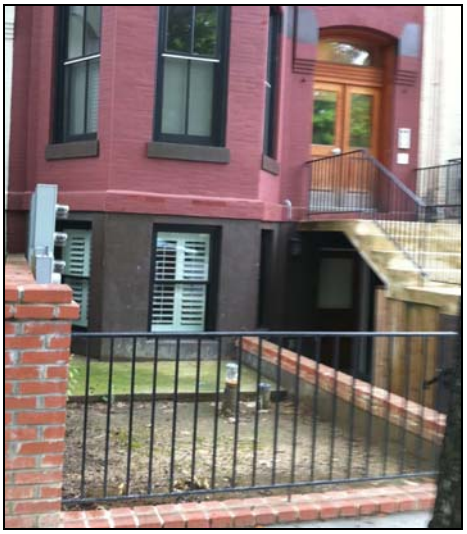
DO:

- Retain original topography and grades of the front yard
- Retain and enhance the landscaped nature of the front yard to screen basement entrances and window wells
- Limit paving so that the majority of the site remains planted
- Retain original or historic stairs and landings
- Locate the basement entrance under the primary entrance
- Use the existing primary walkway for access to the new entrance, rather than creating a separate walkway

DON'T:

- Alter the original or historic entrance stair or door
- Alter or cut into the projecting bay
- Locate the basement entrance in the projecting bay

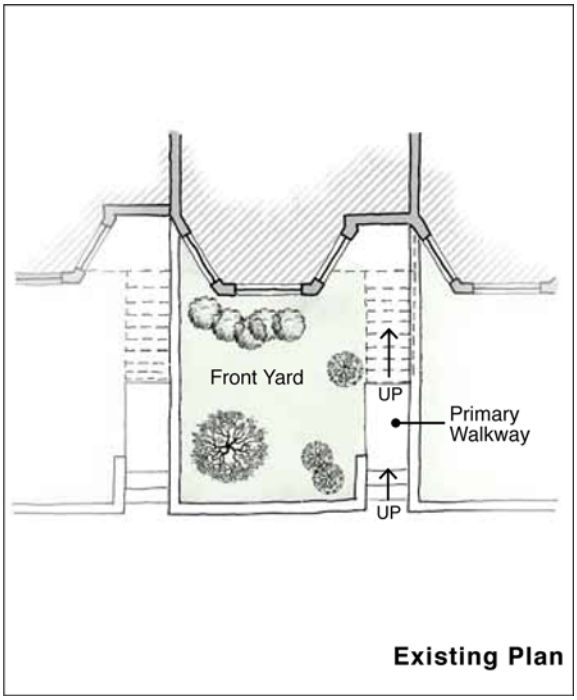
This new basement areaway was designed to replicate original areaways on similar houses in the area.

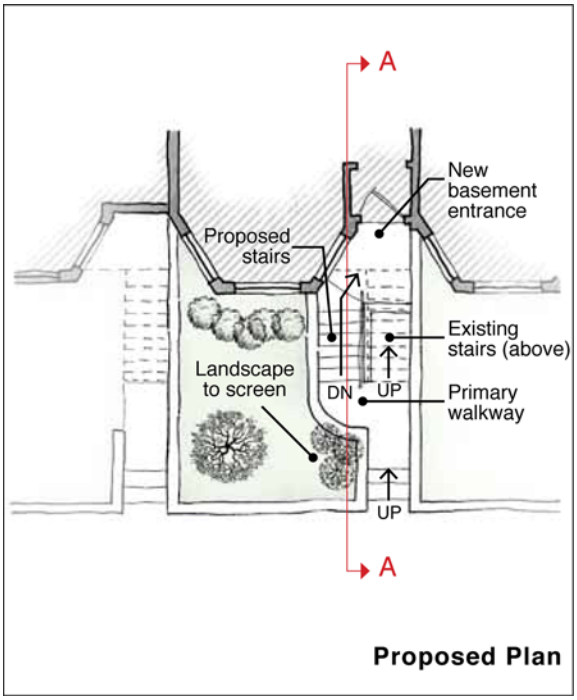


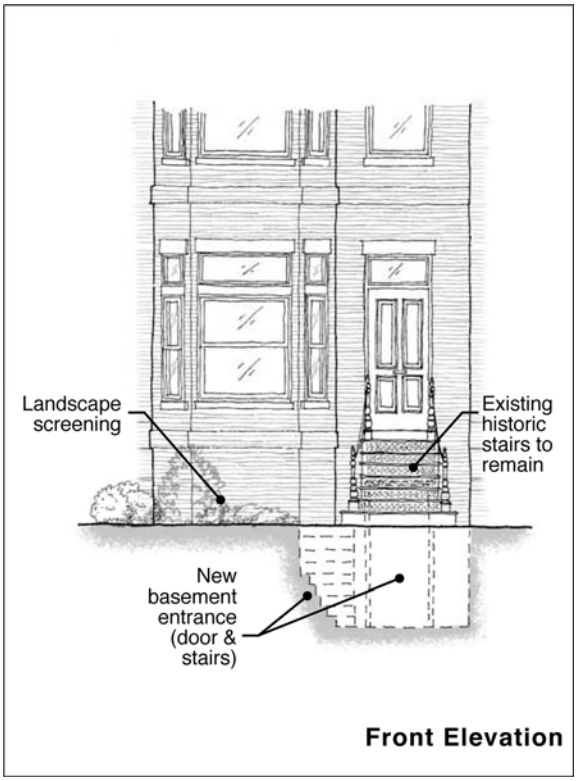
Altering the topography of the front yard should be avoided.

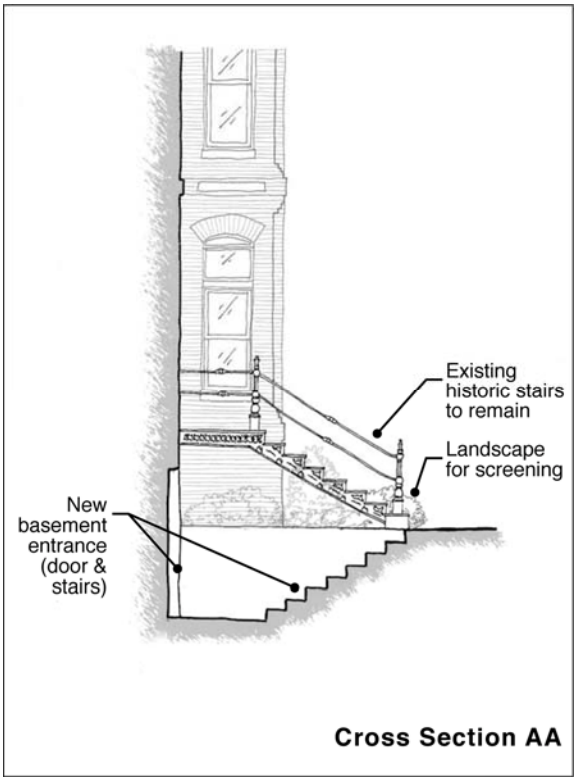
A small window well, screened with landscaping, may allow basement windows to be lowered for additional light.

Bay Front Houses









Porch Front Houses

Porch front houses typically did not have basement entrances, and they can be difficult to accommodate compatibly. The depth of the front yard, the change in grade between the house and the public sidewalk, and the ability to screen new entrances from public sidewalk are all important considerations. Most importantly, basement entrances on porch-fronted houses should not alter character-defining features of the porch.

DO:

- Retain existing or original topography and grades of the front yard
- Retain and enhance the landscaped nature of the front yard and limit paving
- Retain original or historic stairs, landings and porches
- Retain character-defining features of front porches, including masonry piers, decking, and railings; removal of a portion of the porch skirt (lattice) may be acceptable
- Use the existing primary walkway for access to the new entrance, rather than creating a separate walkway

DON'T:

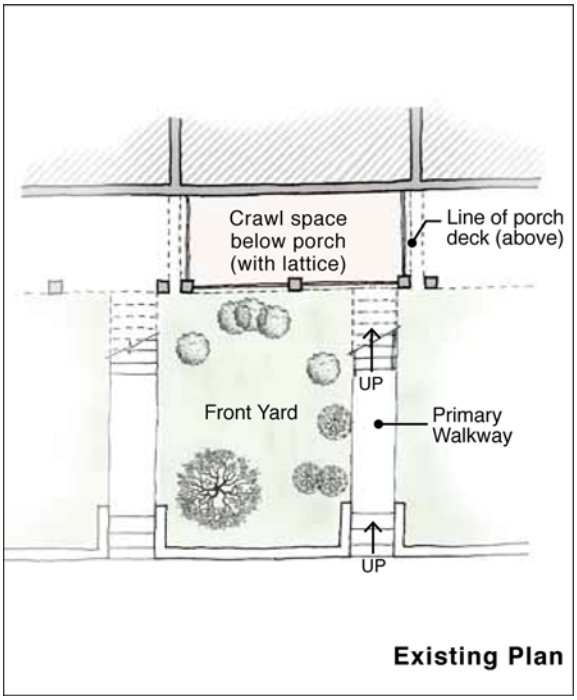
- Excavate front yards for at-grade access from the sidewalk
- Remove character-defining features of porches, such as piers, decking or railings
- Project basement stairs out from the front of the porch where it becomes a dominant element in the landscape

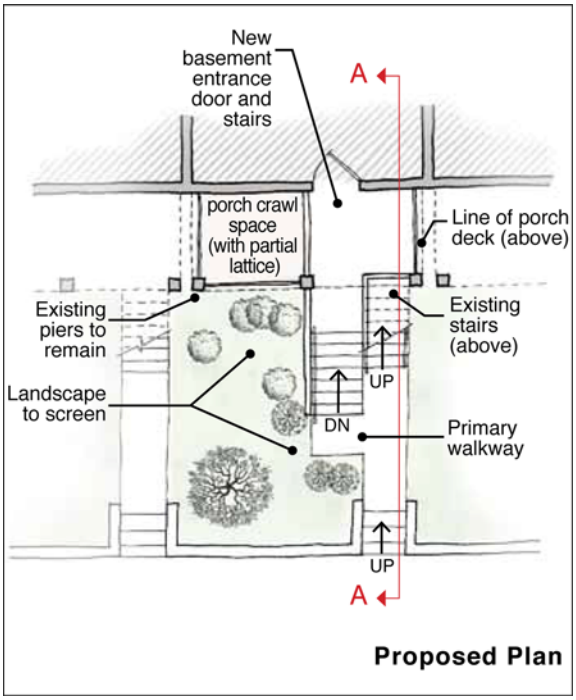
This front basement entrance only resulted in the removal of a portion of the lattice skirt and preserved the character defining features of the porch.

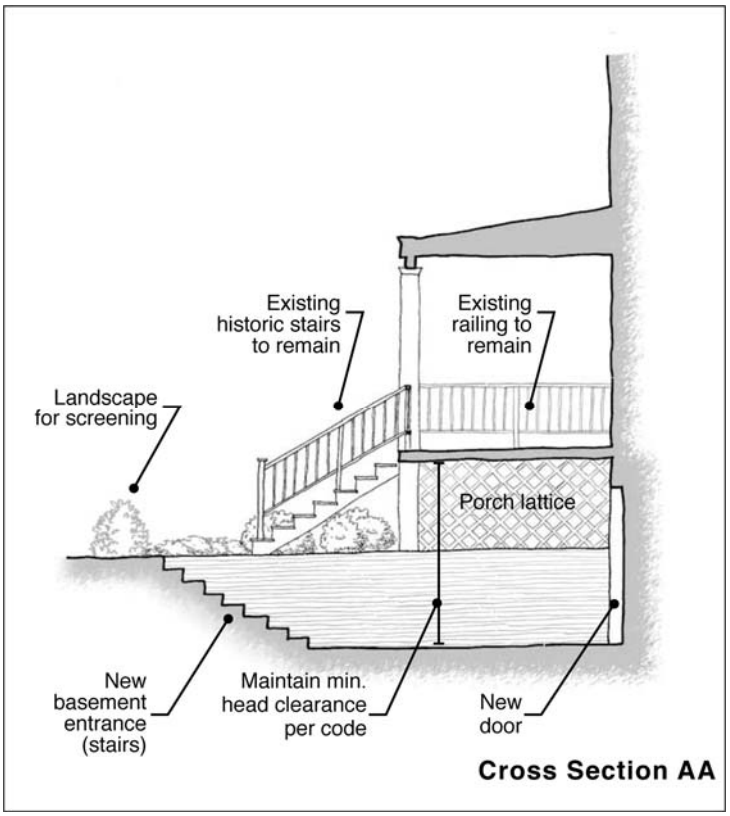
Excavating front yards and removing porch piers for at-grade access to the basement is not appropriate.

On a partial-width front porch house, locating the basement entrance at the front wall of the house or on the side of the porch can minimize its visual impact. The new door is secondary to the porch and main entrance.

Porch Front Houses







Code Considerations

The following building code restrictions may be applicable and should be considered in planning basement alterations:

Doors in projections:
Doors in projections are restricted or prohibited in certain circumstances, including doors that swing out beyond the projection or that open outward on public space less than 12 feet in width. DCMR 12 Building Code Supplement, 2008, Chapter 32A "Encroachments into the Public Right-of-Way," section 3202.10.3.4

Maximum projection dimensions:
The DC building code restricts the extent that basement stairs, areaways, window wells and other projections can project from the building line; the extent of projection is based on the width of the street. On streets measuring 40 feet in width, the maximum projection is three feet; for streets where front yards are public space (such as those primary streets in the L'Enfant plan), the extent of projection is restricted to ten feet. DCMR 12 Building Code Supplement, 2008, Chapter 32A "Encroachments into the Public Right-of-Way," section 3202.11.3.2.

Egress window requirements:
The current International Residential Code requirements for egress windows include a minimum height of 24 inches in height, 20 inches for width, and 5.7 feet of "net clear" area. Window wells must be 36 inches in width (projection from window) and 9 square feet in area. A step is needed if a window well is more than 44 inches deep; a single 6 inch step can project into the 36 inch well width.

Guard railings:
A guard rail not less than 36 inches in height may be required around areaways or window wells that are more than 30 inches below grade. IRC Section 312, IBC 1013.

Permit Review Process

How Historic Preservation Review Works
Historic preservation review takes place as part of the D.C. building permit process. It is one of the steps in reviewing a building permit application. Preservation review is intended to ensure that building projects are compatible with the character of historic landmarks and districts.

Who Conducts the Review?
The Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) is the body of professional experts and public representatives responsible for reviewing proposed work for compatibility. HPRB members are appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the D.C. Council.

HPRB adopts design guidelines such as these to allow the city's Historic Preservation Office (HPO) to conduct preservation reviews on its behalf. The policies and principles established by the HPRB enable HPO to evaluate projects consistently and fairly, and to approve projects without referral to HPRB if projects are consistent with the design and preservation principles.

Consultation with HPO
Property owners are strongly encouraged to consult with the HPO staff prior to applying for a building permit. An informal discussion on the phone, in person, or at the property allows the property owner to obtain information on the review standards prior to the preparation of final construction plans and to ensure an expeditious approval once plans are submitted. HPO will explain the applicable preservation standards and review process, identify any concerns a project may raise, and, if necessary, suggest alternative solutions. If it is necessary to forward a project to HPRB for review, HPO staff will advise property owners on preparing their submission and presentation.

Building Permit Review
Constructing exterior access to a basement, excavating a front yard, expanding an existing basement areaway, and creating or expanding openings in an exterior wall for basement windows or doors are alterations that require a DC building permit.

The following is needed for the review of a permit for basement entrances and window alterations:

- Photographs of the building sufficient to show the building, site, and surroundings. Photographs of similar properties that have a condition that an owner seeks to replicate may also be included.
- A measured site plan with accurate dimensions of the existing conditions of the front yard or area affected by the work. Existing features such as the public sidewalk, walkways, steps, porches, projections, and retaining walls should be included.
- A measured site plan with accurate dimensions of the proposed conditions of the front yard or area affected by the work, including existing and proposed features.
- Existing and proposed elevation drawings should be included if alterations are proposed to the building (such as changes to window or door openings).
- An application for a DC Building Permit for Construction on Private Property. Permit applications are provided at the Permit Center, or can be downloaded at www.dcra.dc.gov.

Permit applications and support materials should be submitted at the HPO desk at the DCRA Permit Center at 1100 4th Street, SW, on the 2nd Floor (Waterfront Metro). To make an appointment to discuss a project in concept prior to submission for a building permit, please call HPO at 442-8800 to speak to a preservation specialist.

Public Space Review
Washington's neighborhoods are unusual in that the property line most often ends at the front plane of the building. Everything forward of the building's front façade—including bay windows, porches, and front yards—rests in public space that is owned and regulated by the District of Columbia. Individually, these public space front yards are for the use and enjoyment of owners whose property abuts them; collectively, they form a linear, park-like green space that runs through the city's residential neighborhoods.

Alterations and construction in public space, such as construction of a basement stair or window well, requires a public space permit from the DC Department of Transportation (DDOT), in addition to the required construction permit from the DC Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA).

For more information on the public space permit review process, please see www.ddot.dc.gov (see "public space permits") or visit the Public Space Administrator in the Permit Center at 1100 4th Street, SW.

Public space front yards are an important characteristic of Washington's residential neighborhoods that should be retained primarily as green space.

Illustrations courtesy of Claudia Barragan, APA and Jose Valcarcel, LEED AP

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District of Columbia Office of Planning – Historic Preservation Office
1100 4th Street, SW, Suite E650
Washington, DC 20024
www.preservation.dc.gov
(202) 442-8800

District of Columbia
Office of Planning