

Houghton Township Building Design Considerations Recommendations for Owners and Residents

Historic buildings and new development

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INTRODUCTION

Question: Why have building design recommendations?

Answer: “You don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone...”

Over the years many of the buildings in Michigan’s Copper Country have gradually disappeared. Many of the towns themselves have also disappeared. Rich deposits of native copper brought people to the Keweenaw Peninsula in the mid-1800s. Dozens of mines operated in the Keweenaw including at least 30 in Houghton Township. The great Cliff Mine in adjacent Allouez Township fueled the rapid growth of the port of Eagle River. The forests were leveled to provide lumber for the mines, housing, railroads, and businesses. Today poor rock piles and foundations are all that remain of the mines themselves.

Houghton Township’s rich historical heritage is now one of its greatest assets. The lack of development has preserved many of its buildings, but development and neglect threaten what remains.

TEN DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

1. Retain and encourage a “Sense of Place”.

Houghton Township’s history is unique. It is represented today by individual structures and groups of buildings that contribute to an environment that is different from other areas of the country. This distinct “sense of place” can be retained by preserving the existing building stock and encouraging sensitive new development. Building owners should be mindful of the fact that each structure is an individual expression of its original function, its character of the period it was built, individual or regional *details* (materials or fenestration applied by its builder or users), and its *environment* (topography, climate, direction the building faces, social conditions, or how downtown developed). The demolition of a historic building is a huge loss to the Copper Country’s sense of place.

2. Retain historic building features.

As stewards of the individual buildings that contribute to a unique sense of place, building owners are encouraged to retain or repair all original materials and features. Items such as

exterior materials, windows, doors, fenestration, glass, and interior finishes of the building “envelope” that can impact the physical structure can be studied and reviewed by the owner with guidance by Houghton Township, and the Keweenaw County Historical Society. Any item lost, sold for salvage, demolished by neglect, or sent to a landfill detracts from the Copper Country’s history and sense of place.

3. Do not add elements that move the building to a different historical period.

Each building is like a window back into the time it was built. Adding design elements and additions that do not fit that original time weaken the historic fabric of the community.

4. Recognize change, some changes need to be saved.

Many of the surviving structures were simple buildings that may have served multiple purposes. Most of them were constructed with little architectural ornamentation, few of them were originally painted. Over the years, the surviving structures were altered, painted, or expanded. Many of these changes made over the years have become part of the history of the building and community and should be retained and respected.

5. Preserve distinctive features and craftsmanship.

For example, retain a well-crafted handrail even if it may not meet current code, or preserve a prominent chimney if it is structurally sound, even if it is no longer functional.

6. Try to keep and restore historical features rather than replacing them.

Sometimes an old ornate porch column can be repaired instead of being replaced with a simpler modern column.

7. Avoid harsh cleaning methods that can damage building elements.

Avoid sandblasting and harsh chemicals.

8. Protect and preserve archeological artifacts.

If old items are found, verify what they are and enlist the help of an expert through the Keweenaw County Historical Society or the Keweenaw Time Traveler Team at Michigan Tech.

9. Design new buildings and additions to respect the historic forms and scale.

Additions should be designed so they are in scale and in character with the historic building but are different and do not mask the historic structure. New buildings should be similar in size, scale, and characteristics, but designed in a way that fit with their own time period.

10. New additions and modifications should be designed so they could be removed in the future without damaging the historic structure.

In other words, if a new deck is to be built, add it without damaging the historic building.

CONCLUSION

Following these ten design considerations and recommendations will help to preserve the Township's history for future generations and make the Township a better place to live and visit.

APPENDIX

National Register of Historic Places

Currently the Houghton Township properties on the Keweenaw Peninsula listed in the National Register of Historic Places are:

- Central Mine Methodist Church
- Central Mine Historic District
- Eagle River Historic District
- Church of the Assumption, Phoenix

There are other properties in the Township that may qualify. The nomination process begins with the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). This article explains the process:

<https://www.miplace.org/4ade6a/globalassets/documents/shpo/programs-and-services/national-register-of-historic-places/guidance-and-instructions/listing-property-in-the-national-register-of-historic-places-in-michigan.pdf>

(Several properties are also listed on Isle Royale which is a part of Houghton Township and a National Park.)

References

1. KGA Studio Architects (2023). Web blog: The Golden Rules of Historic Home Renovation, Explained. <https://kgarch.com/the-golden-rules-of-historic-home-renovation>
2. Central Mine Methodist Church, National Register of Historic Places—Nomination. Certification, listed 1970
3. Central Mine Historic District National Register of Historic Places—Nomination. Certification, listed 1974
4. Eagle River Historic District National Register of Historic Places—Nomination. Certification, listed 1984
5. Church of the Assumption, Phoenix, National Register of Historic Places—Nomination. Certification, listed 2000
6. Monette, Clarence J. (1978). *The History of Eagle River Michigan*, Greenly Printing Co.
7. Kline, John Steven and Long, Mary (2023). *Historic Walking Tour, Eagle River, Michigan*, JSKline, Eagle River, Michigan.