

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: DEFINING THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS
 OF INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY FOR HISTORIC
 COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

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The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 has had a significant effect on the build environment in the United States. Historic buildings and sites with commercial uses as defined in the law do not escape its far-reaching affect. The subject of increasing accessibility to historic buildings is often misunderstood due to confusion surrounding the law and the architectural challenges of increasing accessibility in an historic building. This lack of understanding results in a prevalence of social and economic myths surrounding the subject that deter property and business owners from improving the accessibility of their properties.

This thesis examines the relationship between the ADA and historic commercial properties. It includes a discussion of the ADA itself and considers the architectural challenges associated with increasing accessibility in historic commercial properties. Methods and procedures used to develop the thesis included library research, Internet research of primary sources, and interviews with persons directly involved with the subject. An additional methodology for researching the economic benefits of increasing accessibility is included as Appendix II.

Through this research and examination of social and economic myths, the thesis subsequently determines that compliance with the ADA through sensitive modification of historic commercial property yields many social and economic benefits. These benefits result from a clear understanding of facts surrounding the subject, rejection of myths, and creative collaborations among property owners, preservation professionals, architects, developers, and the disabled population. These positive outcomes also strengthen the historic preservation movement and the economic viability of historic commercial buildings as profitable business locations. This thesis reveals that historic preservation and the ADA can coexist. The result is substantial social and economic benefits for both.