

Heritage Building Conservation

Heritage buildings have become a popular way to focus resources on the interpretation of our cultural and architectural history. The increasing interest in historic buildings has led to a growing concern for ensuring not only that these structures are conserved, but that their conservation should attain high levels of quality.

Heritage building conservation is the process of protecting historically significant structures from damage or inappropriate alteration. Conservation may also include sensitive repair or alterations that enhance our understanding, or add life to, a historic building.

The materials that are included in this section of the website will assist community groups and building owners in develop a strategy for conserving their architectural heritage.

Readers of this material will see that the information does not prescribe a set of rules – building conservation is not a science where “do’s” and “dont’s” can be rigidly determined and applied. Rather, it is an art, dependent on the unique qualities and circumstances of each historic building. At the same time, these materials, if used with attention and sensitivity, will result in a conservation project of the highest quality.

A key concept that is starting to inform many built-heritage projects is called heritage value, with its practical application called values-based management. Heritage value may be defined as the collection of aesthetic, historic, scientific, cultural, social or spiritual attributes that a community has determined comprises a particular building’s significance. These values are embodied in what are called character-defining elements (or CDEs): a building’s forms, spatial configuration, uses and cultural associations or meanings. Identifying the character-defining elements for your building is a very useful exercise, and extremely helpful in making good, historically-sensitive maintenance and repair decisions.

Character-defining elements are the features you should particularly preserve if you want to protect your property’s and your neighbourhood’s heritage value. The processes aimed at preserving heritage value can be grouped together under the heading of **conservation**: all actions or processes aimed at safeguarding the character-defining elements of a cultural resource so as to retain its heritage value and extend its physical life. This process starts with maintenance, which all owners of buildings of any age should be practising as a matter of course. Maintenance includes periodic inspection, routine cleaning, minor repair and

refinishing, and replacement of damaged or deteriorated materials that are not practical to save. Always keep your building's CDEs in mind while carrying out routine maintenance – often just a little more time or effort can save a historic detail once you realize it's worth saving.

If you carry out good regular maintenance, you will reduce the likelihood that more drastic measures will be required. However, many older buildings have undergone long periods of deferred maintenance and will eventually need more substantial work. Beyond routine maintenance, there are three major categories of treatment: preservation, rehabilitation, and restoration.

Restoration—generally reserved for museum-quality buildings—entails returning the appearance of a site to match its original appearance or another important moment in its history (often referred to as its period of significance). Few building owners would be interested in taking this approach; indeed, it could involve stripping away layers of history that potentially form part of the building's heritage value.

More useful for most people are the notions of **preservation**—protecting, maintaining and/or stabilizing the existing materials, form and integrity of a historic place while retaining its heritage value—and **rehabilitation**—making possible a continuing or compatible contemporary use of a historic place through repair, alterations, and/or additions, while protecting its heritage value. In each case, all work is done with an eye on the character-defining elements.

Depending on the state of the building, preservation could be not much different than good, historically-sensitive maintenance and repair, while rehabilitation might involve bigger changes such as adding a carefully-designed, historically-sensitive addition. Rehabilitation is often the approach to take with a building that is in very poor repair or is no longer functional for some other reason (e.g. its original purpose is now obsolete, or not needed in that location). One form of rehabilitation, called adaptive re-use, specifically refers to modifying the purpose of a building, while retaining as much as possible of the heritage character. An example would be turning a church or school into a house.

In general, heritage professionals the world over agree that work on historic buildings should be undertaken according to the following basic principles:

1. Repair rather than replace character-defining elements. It is better to retain original materials and forms whenever possible. They are not only authentic, but there is an excellent chance that they are of a quality or workmanship that is no longer available (e.g. old growth wood, which is lose-grained and much longer-lasting than the plantation-grown wood than we can buy today).

2. If you must replace character-defining elements, do so “in kind.” That is, if an original is truly beyond saving, but sufficient physical evidence exists, copy it using the same materials, forms and details.
3. If replacement in kind is impossible owing to insufficient physical evidence for a copy, make your replacement compatible with the character of the building, basing the form, details and materials on similar buildings in the neighbourhood or area.

Generally, you should always document major work with photographs taken before, during and after the process, and consider carefully whether any changes you are making are reversible. Otherwise, you may be destroying some aspect of your building that you or later owners may come to regret; remember: the history of your community and maybe even your family is written in the walls.

Extensive information about historic building conservation and maintenance is available in books, magazines and on the internet. A document such as the *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada* (linked on this website) can help you understand the issues surrounding the conservation of heritage buildings and will have many useful hints for any building work. Much of the information in this section is paraphrased from the *Standards and Guidelines*.