

Why Historic Buildings?

By Trevor Vilac



This article is for information purposes and is not intended to replace the advice of a heritage professional or other conservation specialists.

Figure 1 - The Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site, located in Steveston, Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. Constructed in 1894 in historic Steveston, the Gulf of Georgia Cannery was at one point the largest salmon cannery in British Columbia. Photograph by Paul Grdina.

Have you ever been captivated by a sense of intrigue in an old building? Or been fascinated by the lasting impact of past events associated with a particular space? There are many factors that make these buildings unique. Historic buildings have a special place in our society. With the notion of heritage conservation and historic preservation becoming more prominent in public life, it is important to deploy the appropriate tactics in safeguarding our historic buildings. The merits of safeguarding these buildings are numerous. As such, it is crucial to appreciate what makes a particular building significant in order to protect the fabric that makes the building special. For example, The Gulf of Georgia Cannery, located in Steveston, Richmond, British Columbia, Canada, was constructed in 1894. At one point it was the largest salmon cannery in British Columbia, and is associated with the West Coast fishing industry (Figure 1).

THE LANGUAGE OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS

As part of the process of understanding a historic building, it is important to be familiar with the terminology of heritage conservation. Familiarity with the terminology helps one to grasp the different intricacies of the conservation planning process. Whether you reside in Canada or the United States, there is largely similar terminology, albeit with some minor differences. The following are some of the key terms identified in the standards and guidelines:

- **Canada – Historic Place:** A structure, building or group of buildings, district, landscape, archaeological site, or other place that has been formally recognized for its heritage value.¹
- **United States – Historic Property:** Any prehistoric or historic district, site, building, structure, or object included on, or eligible for inclusion on, the National Register, including artifacts, records, and material

remains relating to the district, site, building, structure, or object.²

- **Heritage Value:** The aesthetic, historic, scientific, cultural, social or spiritual importance or significance for past, present, and future generations. The heritage value of a historic place is embodied in its character-defining materials, forms, location, spatial configuration, uses, and cultural associations or meanings.³
- **Character-defining Element:** The materials, forms, location, spatial configurations, uses, and cultural associations or meanings that contribute to the heritage value of a historic place, which must be retained to preserve its heritage value.⁴
- **Conservation:** All actions or processes that are aimed at safeguarding the character-defining elements of a historic place so as to retain its heritage value and extend its physical life. This may involve





Figure 2 – The Marine Building, located in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. When the Marine Building opened in 1930, it was the tallest building in the British Empire. The Marine Building is an exemplar of the Art Deco style. Photograph by Trevor Vilac.

preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, or a combination of these actions or processes.⁵

- **Preservation:** The action or process of protecting, maintaining, and/or stabilizing the existing materials, form, and integrity of a historic place or of an individual component, while protecting its heritage value.⁶
- **Rehabilitation:** The action or process of making possible a continuing or compatible contemporary use of a historic place or an individual component, while protecting its heritage value.⁷
- **Restoration:** The action or process of accurately revealing, recovering, or representing the state of a historic place or of an individual component, as it appeared at a particular period in history, while protecting its heritage value.⁸
- **Intervention:** Any action, other than demolition or destruction, that results in a physical change to an element of a historic place.⁹

It is important to note that in Canada, there is no age requirement for a building to be recognized as a historic place on the Canadian Register of Historic Places (CRHP). In the United States, for a building to be recognized as a historic property on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), the building generally must be at least 50 years old.

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORIC BUILDING

To understand the significance of a given historic building, it is necessary to begin with research. Is the building simply old (“historical”), or is the building in fact a recognized historic place or historic property? During an initial research phase of the building, we can discover information that helps focus the scope of the proposed conservation activities:



Figure 3 – Reconstruction of a terra cotta cornice, including upgrades to the structural support as part of a conservation activity. The cornice is a character-defining element of the historic building.

- Check with the appropriate authorities having jurisdiction and consult the appropriate heritage registers.
- Research the availability of a heritage conservation plan.
- Check for the availability of a statement of significance that provides a description of the historic place, heritage values, and character-defining elements.

The CRHP and NRHP are key resources to see if a particular building has some level of recognition. In Canada, heritage registers can exist at different levels, whether it be at federal, provincial, territorial, or municipal. For example, the Marine Building (Figure 2) in Vancouver, British Columbia, is recognized on the City of Vancouver Heritage Register. In the United States, some states and cities maintain their own historic registers in addition to the NRHP.

Another key step in understanding the historic place is creating detailed documentation of existing conditions. Prior to implementing any intervention work, the historic building should be methodically documented. Documentation with photographs, to-scale drawings, and descriptive text is vital, especially if an intervention involves replacing materials in kind. The records produced during this initial phase need to be detailed, as they may be referred to later in the project, or even by future project teams involved with conservation work on the historic building. Research and investigation of the building should also include a consultation of the appropriate standards and guidelines.

CONSULTING THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

When getting started with the planning and maintenance of a particular historic place or property, engineers, architects, consultants, and other specialists don't have to work alone. In both Canada and the United States, we need to consult appropriate standards and guidelines, and there are invaluable publications available to aid with conservation planning for such buildings. In Canada, this would be the Parks Canada "Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada." In the United States, it would be the Secretary of the Interior's "Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties." Both resources are available free online.

The standards and guidelines provide

input for different types of conservation actions, such as preservation, rehabilitation, or restoration. Additionally, they provide guidance that is specific to historic materials.

Standards and guidelines are vital resources in the early stages of conservation to help with the planning for maintenance or repair of a historic place. It is crucial that the appropriate standards and guidelines are consulted early in the project to ensure proposals are suitable and don't undermine

the heritage value of a particular historic place. Additionally, the standards and guidelines aid in the conservation planning process, but do not replace the need for conservation specialists.

The standards and guidelines should be consulted throughout the conservation process, from planning, to construction document preparation, through to execution. Conservation activity that is insensitive to the character-defining elements of the historic place must be avoided.

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SUMMARY

Understanding the heritage values and character-defining elements of a historic building are key prior to carrying out conservation planning or any intervention work. In the end, the goal of heritage conservation is to “safeguard the character-defining elements of a historic place so as to retain its heritage value and extend its physical life.”¹⁰ Figure 3 illustrates an example where careful steps, such as attentive documentation of existing conditions and structural stabilization, have been executed to do just that. Awareness of the resources that are available, paired with careful investigation of the historic building, provides a good starting point for a historic building project. 

REFERENCES

Parks Canada. “Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada.” Available online

at <https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/pages/standards-normes.aspx>. Accessed October 10, 2018.

The Secretary of the Interior. “Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.” Available online at <https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards.htm>. Accessed October 10, 2018.

FOOTNOTES

1. “Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada.” Second Ed. Ottawa. Parks Canada. 2003. p. 254.
2. *National Historic Preservation Act*. Amended 2016. Washington. Congress. 1966. p. 4.
3. “Standards.” p. 254.
4. *Ibid.* p. 253.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.* p. 255.
7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.* p. 254.
10. *Ibid.* p. 253.



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Ural Philharmonic Concert Hall to Mimic Sound Waves

Zaha Hadid Architects has won a competition to design the Sverdlovsk Philharmonic Concert Hall in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The venue will contain a 1600-seat concert hall and a smaller 400-seat chamber music hall.



Courtesy Zaha Hadid Architects.

“Echoing the physical aspects of sound waves, the design of the new philharmonic concert hall is based on the properties of musical sound resonance creating wave vibrations in a continuous smooth surface,” said a spokesperson for Zaha Hadid Architects, explaining that the two halls will be suspended within the steel structure of the building’s roof, taking its form from the shape of sound waves.

“The design reinterprets these physical acoustic properties to define spaces for the auditoria that are suspended within the canopy, appearing to float above the new civic plaza that is both the lobby of the Philharmonic Concert Hall and an enclosed urban square.”

The new venue will be built alongside the existing Sverdlovsk Philharmonic building, which it will replace, and the Weinger Gardens. It has been designed to tie the buildings and green spaces on the block together.

Watch a video on the planned building here: <https://youtu.be/FFFFqNudm-0>.

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