



# Condition Assessments

Tips for Historic Building Owners



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**Historic preservation** treats historic buildings in one of four ways: preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, or reconstruction. No matter which treatment you ultimately choose, you must first assess the condition of your historic structure. Condition assessments are a holistic approach to understanding how buildings were constructed, used, and maintained, and the various mechanisms that affect their structural and material condition. Whether done for research purposes or as a precursor to restoration work, all condition assessments have two primary objectives: to identify materials and features, and evaluate their condition.

## Before you begin...

- Determine the purpose of the assessment. If you are conducting an assessment as part of an historic designation application, be aware of any special information or forms that the designating agency might require.
- Assemble any tools you might need to gain access to and inspect the parts of your building. These might include a ladder, flashlight, tape measure, level or plumb bob, camera (for documentation), plastic baggies (for samples), or awl (useful for testing wood for rot).
- An illustrated architectural style guide or dictionary can be a useful tool for identifying historic building elements.
- Do your research. Primary historical research of an old building can provide valuable site-specific information like the date of an addition or other change to the building fabric.
- Water is the greatest enemy of old buildings and can come from external sources as well as internal plumbing. Is there evidence of water penetration or damage under roofs, on ceilings, around windows or kitchen and bath fixtures? Is there insect damage or wood rot? All are indicators of water issues that need to be addressed.

## Inspection

On-site inspections can be done in many different ways. The most important thing is to look at as much of the building as possible. The list below includes some of the typical features you will want to examine. Begin with the most easily accessible areas on the outside and look at the building as a whole, then work in from there. *Be sure to take careful notes and photographs to document what you see and where you saw it.* This record will be useful to both you and future investigators.

- Foundation
- Wall Materials and Finishes
- Roof Type and Covering
- Building Construction Methods
- Decorative Finishes
- Surrounding Site Features and Landscape



### Safety First!

**Take extra care when climbing ladders, walking on roofs, and working around dodgy old electrical wiring. If you don't feel comfortable around these things, find someone else who is.**

## As a Final Note

It is important to determine the cause of any problem you discover and to resolve the issue rather than to cover it up with a cursory repair. If there is a crack in your wall find out why, don't just patch it with putty and paint. Simple fixes can quickly turn into major problems if ignored.

MORE

T.C. McDonald, *Understanding Old Buildings: the Process of Architectural Investigation* (Wash., DC: NPS, 1994):

<http://www.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief35.htm>

D.S. Watt, *Building Pathology: Principles and Practice* (UK: Blackwell Science, 1999).

*California Park Structure Assessment Form:*

[http://www.parks.ca.gov/pages/22491/files/NPS\\_Structure\\_Assessment\\_Form.pdf](http://www.parks.ca.gov/pages/22491/files/NPS_Structure_Assessment_Form.pdf)

*Historic Building Condition Assessment* (includes training video and links to other sites):

<http://www.parks.ca.gov/buildingcondition>