

Preserving Heritage Buildings

Manitobans are very aware of the need to keep our heritage alive. We have inherited incredible riches from the past. The physical reminders range from fossils of prehistoric creatures and stone tools used by Manitoba's earliest inhabitants to the documents and records of the founders of our villages, towns, and cities.

One very popular type of preservation is the conservation of heritage buildings. This is not surprising, as buildings are often the most tangible record left by a society. The types of buildings constructed at any given time tell us of the aspirations, priorities and activities of a society. The construction techniques used, materials chosen and craftsmanship of execution tell us much about the lifeways of the people who built them. Probably most important, the buildings were constructed and used by our predecessors; they lived, dreamed, worked and played in these buildings. No wonder their preservation is important.

At the same time, the conservation of heritage buildings can be the most expensive, difficult and time consuming form of preservation. It is an important task that can't be taken lightly and must be well considered, well planned and well executed.

Each building, and its current circumstances, is unique. Therefore, there is no simple blueprint for preserving a building, although it is clear that those with the brightest future are ones that are in good condition, well maintained by a sympathetic owner and with a function that makes the building's long-term future feasible. It is those cases where some element of this equation is missing, or in need of attention, that will benefit from the material in this Infobulletin.

For example, a building may have a sympathetic owner and a feasible use but may be in need of major restoration work, and thus also be in need of a comprehensive restoration plan. Or a building may be in excellent condition, with a sympathetic owner and yet be

in a situation that requires careful consideration about its future function. And at the extreme end of the spectrum are those buildings that are abandoned and deteriorating, and with only a few people in the community interested in their preservation. In need of attention at every level, they require major building restoration, viable re-use options and committed ownership.

Given the range of possible circumstances, the important first step is to analyse the situation surrounding the building you are concerned about. This Infobulletin will help you identify whether there are potential problems and then help you develop a list of possible solutions.

Generally the situation surrounding a heritage building can be analysed under the categories of **heritage merit, ownership, re-use, condition/integrity, and municipal and public support.**

Ask yourself the following questions to see whether there are any concerns about the viability of your heritage building project. It is always necessary to be aware of these issues before a project begins. Please note that not all of the following questions apply to every project, but that reviewing them all will provide a good measure of comfort as you move through your own process. There may be some issues identified below that require you to do some extra work. The Historic Resources Branch may be able to supply you with additional information in those cases.

Heritage Merit

Usually an important heritage building will generate a "Yes" answer to at least five of the following questions.

- How old is the building? A heritage building is generally considered to have been built before 1930. Buildings constructed after 1930 also can be historically and architecturally important, but their relative youth generally requires preservation proponents to make a stronger case for their heritage



value.

- Is the building an excellent or early example of an architectural style or building tradition?
- Is the building constructed with rare or unusual materials, or with a rare or unusual technique?
- Was the building designed by a well known Manitoba architect?
- Does the building exhibit exceptional or unusual craftsmanship in its details?
- Was there a person or group of some importance associated with the building (typically someone who was the first to do something or who contributed to the development of the province or community)?
- Was the building symbolic of a major historical theme? This will require careful thought. All buildings are connected to history, but there are a select few that more thoroughly capture an aspect of the past (like settlement, the history of agriculture, arts, commerce, communication, community development, education, exploration, industry, manufacturing, the military, politics, recreation, religion, science and invention, social developments and transportation). The Historic Resources Branch can provide additional information for anyone requiring further clarification on this subject.

Ownership

- If you are not the owner of the building, is the current owner sympathetic to your proposal?
- If the owner is not sympathetic, how can you work to change that situation?

Re-use

- Can you maintain the original function of the building (the preferred option)?
- If you can't maintain the original function, can you introduce a new function that would have the minimum impact on the building's original character (room layouts, finishes, etc.)?
- Is the proposed re-use a reasonable, economically viable option?
- Is the use one which will ensure that the building is well used and well maintained over the long term?
- If the new use requires visitation for its success, either from tourists or customers, is the building in an advantageous location? Is it in or near an urban centre? If not, can you make the public aware of the building's existence and location?
- If your project requires renovations and repairs, how much will that work cost? Can you get estimates for that work?

- Can you afford those costs, or will they be recouped in the new business venture?
- If you cannot afford these costs, have you investigated other funding sources?

Condition/ Integrity

A heritage building that generates a "Yes" answer to the first two questions below and a "No" answer to the last two is a better candidate for conservation work.

- Does the building sit on its original site?
- Is the building in good condition?
- Have there been major alterations to the building (additions or removals) that adversely affect its original character?
- Have there been major interior alterations to the building (additions or removals) that adversely affect its original character?

Municipal and Public Support

- Will your project require the support of the community and elected officials? (This is common when the building is a local landmark, but where there is an unsympathetic owner and where the building is in questionable condition.)
- In the above case, is the municipal government aware of your project? Do they support your project?
- If the municipal government does not support your project, what can you do to address any concerns that have been raised?
- Do the building's neighbours support your project?
- Does the general public support your project?
- If the neighbours or the general public do not support your project, what can you do to address the objections?

For more information about issues involved in preserving a heritage building please contact:

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