

# INVESTIGATING OLD BUILDINGS

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The purpose of researching an old building is to substantiate the historic significance of the property, such documentation will help qualify it for Heritage listing or for some other form of official designation that can assist in promoting its protection and / or development.

The answers to the following four questions should be sought:

- ◆ When was the building constructed?
- ◆ What relationship is there between the present condition of the building and its original appearance (what changes have been made over the year)?
- ◆ What persons, events or circumstance are parts of its history?
- ◆ How does the building relate to the local, provincial or national history?

To discover the answers to these questions, the following research sources can be consulted:

## **Source 1: The building itself**

The building may have a date or other type of inscription set into an exterior wall. This can be important due to the date of construction, or the original owner, or to the original function of the building. (A date stone, however, is not always reliable evidence and should be cross-checked with other information). In addition, careful inspection of the physical fabric of a building can reveal evidence of physical changes that have been made to the structure.

## **Source 2: Legal records**

The legal description, the chain of title deeds, court awards, building permits, revenue and taxation records, and other sorts of pertinent materials will be an important source of information about the building's history.

## **Source 3: Materials available in libraries, historical societies, and personal collections**

Published histories as well as old photographs, newspapers, maps, atlases, city directories, and genealogies will frequently contain material that will help to flesh out the skeleton history that has been derived from the information contained in the legal records and will serve to place the building within a historical perspective.

## **Source 4: Legal People**

Frequently there are persons in the community who will remember things about the building and its past owners that will provide useful clues about its history. Also, experts on local history will know of research materials that may contain relevant information about the building and its

relationship to community history. When do you have enough information? The answer to this question depends on the purpose of your study for a survey to meet the federal or provincial department of Archaeology's stands and exhaustive investigation into the history of each structure inventoried is not necessary – legal records and easily accessible research material such as county and local histories, old photographs and old maps will often provide sufficient information to support evaluation of the survey data.

For the preparation of national heritage nominations, it is important to pin the facts down as firmly as possible. If the nomination is for an individual structure, the research should be exhaustive. If the nomination is for a district, building dates should be fairly well fixed and library materials should be carefully investigated to make certain that the fullest possible history of the district has been obtained. A detailed account of the condition of each structure in the district, to determine to what extent each retains its original aspect, is not necessary – a general overview of the integrity of the district can instead be given. (Generally, an inventory form will be completed for each property within a proposed area so that if questions concerning an individual property arise later, more specific information will be available.) For all nominations, an evaluation of how the building or district relates to national, province, and local history will be necessary – i.e., does the building or district occupy an unusual, typical or outstanding position within this context?

Finally, if you are considering a restoration project, you will need very specific information on the original features of the building. This will require careful, detailed and physical examination of the building along with an intensive effort to obtain old photographs and prints that show the building as it was earlier in its history.

### **The information provided by the building**

Careful inspection of the physical fabric of the building may uncover important information about its history. Difference in the type of materials and detailing used in different portions of the structure, along with changes in construction techniques, can be indications that additions have been made.

Frequently, blocked up windows and doors can also be detected. Abrupt changes in floor level or proportion can also indicate that alterations have been made. Some familiarity with architectural style can assist in altering the research to probable changes, such as the removal or addition of portions, changes in windows and doors, removal of roof ornaments, etc. Finally, inspection of the structural system can be instructive as to the possible period of construction and / or alterations that have taken place. The attic, isolated store rooms and basement usually are good places to investigate since features often remain exposed in those areas.

### **The information provided by legal records**

Investigation of the legal records relating to the building will provide a broad outline of its history, including probable date of construction, original and subsequent owners, and events or conditions that affected it. The amount of information that can be gleaned from these records will vary, but

whatever is discovered, will be well worth the time spent in sifting through them. The first thing to do is to obtain the name of the present owner and the **legal description** of the property, which is available from the Registrar of Deeds in the district *katchehri*. The legal description is not the same as the street address because it is a description of the legal boundaries of the property. For rural property this usually reference *Hadbast* number, range, and breakdown within the section. In towns and cities, the legal description references block, plot number and subdivision. With these two pieces of information in hand the researcher can perform a **title search**.

The *chain of title* is the list of buyers and sellers of the property. To obtain this list, you begin with the present owner. His or her name will appear in the **deed index** (located in the Registrar of Deed office) as the purchaser (grantee) of the property. Make certain that the legal description cited is the same as that for the property you are researching to insure that you are on the right track (some persons own more than one property). There will be a reference number to the deed. The deed will contain information on the date of the property transfer, the previous owner (grantor), sale price, and possibly improvements associated with the property. The name of the grantor will now appear as the grantee in the deed index as you proceed to the next transaction associated with the property. Look this name up and proceed to record the information on the deed, and then move on to the next grantee, and so on, until you arrive at the original owner.

Be aware that the deed refer to the land and not the building. Thus, the original owner of the land may not have been responsible for the construction of the building, or the building may not have been constructed directly after purchase of the property. Changes in valuation of the property from transaction to transaction may indicate approximately when the building was built, although all such valuation must be considered in light of economic condition in the given period. Still, when definite information about building construction date is not available, it may be possible to arrive at a reasonable bracket date through the information obtained from the chain of title.

If there is an **abstract** for the property, the tedious process of working out the chain of title, can be avoided. The abstract is the summary of all transactions involving the property. Abstracts are prepared by professional abstractors to document the property title, usually for a title insurance company. The abstract is a wealth of information because it gives reference to all legal records associated with the property. The abstract for a property, if one exists, would probably be in the possession of the owner or the holder of the mortgage.

**Tax, revenue and building permits records** may also contain information that will shed light on the history of the property. Increase in tax assessment can indicate improvements or new construction; revenue records can indicate when improvements were made or periods of financial difficulty, probate records can sometimes suggest something about the activities of the deceased or give information about personal property that may have been associated with the building (like furnishings).

Some communities may have begun requiring building permits during the period the building constructed. If so, these records will be useful in determining construction dates and the identity of the builder or architect. Even if the building was already constructed by the time building permits were required, information regarding later additions or other improvements may be contained in the permit files.

### **The information provided by the materials available in libraries, historical societies, and personal collections**

Libraries and other research facilities including the contents of neglected store rooms and basements, may contain much valuable information about the historical framework of the community and, sometimes, about features of a particular building's history. **Local histories** and other such publications should be consulted. **Old prints, drawings and photographs** are useful in determining the original aspect of specific buildings, neighborhoods, and districts. Such sources, if dated, can also help to pin down the date of construction more closely. **Map**, especially government survey maps and plate maps can indicate the growth patterns of a settlement and show when building first appeared in certain areas. District revenue *Naqsha wa Aks e Shajra* and maps for civic improvement can also be quite useful. Registers such as *Misl e Haqiqat* and *Daftar Nazool e Sarkar* in particular often contain description of prominent buildings located within the village; **newspapers and clipping files** can also provide information about the property and its past owners. Consulting old **city directories** (arranged by street) can be away to determine when a building was occupied and by whom — this means that the identity of persons who rented the property can sometimes be ferreted out. (Some early city directories are arranged only alphabetically by occupants' names. Also, when using directories, you need to be alert to possible changes in numbering and even in names of streets). **Genealogical files** and other **special collections** may also be of assistance

### **The information provided by people**

Old times can frequently provide interesting recollections about a property that may be assistance in your research efforts. But memory is a fragile faculty and should not by itself be relied upon to substantiate the property's history.

Experts on local history, journalists, correspondents, teachers at colleges and schools should be sought out whenever possible since they may be in possession of material or knowledge that will be relevant to your research project.

Finally, experts in architectural history should be consulted since these persons have knowledge about past architectural trends and developments that may help you to understand the building better. Most important, an architectural historian can provide a fair estimate of the building's architectural significance, an evaluation that is very difficult for the field surveyor to make. (Given the state of understanding about our traditional architecture, it is even difficult for a novice architectural historian to make this evaluation).

The final step in the research process to correlate all the material gathered and prepare an outline of the building's history, including discussion of how the building is related to a broader historical context. Once the building's history is documented, its historic significance can be evaluated and restoration efforts can proceed, and valuable information can be provided to historians of art and architecture.

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