Maintaining Your Historic Commercial Building

Best Practices for Owners and Businesses

Historic buildings are an important part of our downtowns in Kawartha Lakes. They give our downtowns character and provide vibrant spaces for small businesses to operate. In order to ensure that our downtown buildings survive for a long time and keep our commercial spaces looking and feeling good, it is important that property owners and occupants regularly monitor the condition of their buildings to watch for issues and make repairs as they appear. Undertaking small repairs now can prevent bigger problems down the road and ultimately save significant amounts of money and time.

In this package, you will find information on some of the major issues you should be looking out for on your historic building. If you are looking for more information on how to address a particular maintenance issue, please contact the Heritage Planning Officer in Economic Development who can assist you with additional resources and information.

Foundations

The foundation of your building is important in that it quite literally holds your building up. Most historic foundations are constructed from stone and brick and, while they are generally very stable, problems with them can become very serious for your building. Regular monitoring and routine repair is vital to keeping your foundation strong and supporting your building.

When you examine the foundation of your building, here are some things to note:

- Is the mortar crumbling or falling out from between the stones or bricks?
  Over time, the mortar joints between the stones or bricks that form your basement and crumbling and fall out. This is normal and does not necessarily indicate a serious issue, but it does need to be repaired to prevent problems from developing. Replacing mortar is known as

repointing. Any crumbling mortar should be removed and new mortar applied by hand. It is important to use an appropriate mortar mix which is softer than the stone or brick to ensure that they do not crack. If there are large sections of foundation where the mortar is falling out, or if stone or brick have become dislodged or missing, you should consult a masonry professional who will be able to assess if there is a more major problem and advise on repairs.

The foundation around this window requires re-pointing and repair to replace the dislodged stones

- Are there areas that are damp or wet in your basement?
  Dampness and water is a common problem in many basements and can cause structural issues by deteriorating masonry and timbers. You should periodically inspect your basement and foundation walls for any areas of wet or damp, especially after a heavy rain. Depending on the scope of the moisture, the problem may be mitigated by running a dehumidifier in the basement of your building, ensuring appropriate drainage around the outside of your building, or for serious problems, the installation of sump pumps. The solution to dampness in a basement depends on the scope of the problem and you should consult a professional if this is a consistent problem in your building.

- Are any wooden joists, posts and solid and dry?
  You should check any wooden joists, posts and beams to makes sure that they are solid and dry. Wet wood can rot rapidly and cause structural problems. You should also check for dry rot. Make sure that any wood in your basement is hard and solid; soft wood indicates a problem. Rotted wooden elements should be assessed and replaced or repaired, depending on the scope of the damage. Before making repairs, however, you should also make sure that the causes of the damage, such as moisture infiltration are addressed to prevent further damage in the future.

- Are the walls of the foundation cracking, bowing or sagging?
  Cracking, bowing and sagging in your foundation walls can indicate serious structural problems and should be repaired as soon as possible. They can be caused for a variety of reasons, including settling and moisture damage. It is important to consult an experienced masonry professional who will be able to assess the situation and make recommendations for a best course of action.

Masonry

Most downtown commercial buildings are built of brick and require periodic repairs to ensure their structural integrity and the longevity of their masonry. The repair of historic masonry requires specific types of mortar and specific skills to ensure that repairs do not negatively affect the building's structure and façade. Ensure that you are working with a knowledgeable heritage mason when undertaking repairs to your historic brickwork.

When you examine the masonry on your building, here are some things to note:

This masonry is badly deteriorated and requires replacement bricks and repointing

- Are there areas where the mortar is crumbling or missing?
  Over the lifespan of a building, the mortar between bricks often crumbles and needs to be replaced. This process is known as repointing. Missing mortar joints does not necessary mean there are problems with your building, but any sections of wall with missing mortar should be repointed by a qualified mason with experience working with historic brick. It is important to note that contemporary masonry because of the physical properties of the brick.

- Are there areas where the bricks are crumbling or missing?
  Brick can crumbling and crack for a variety of reason and bricks may fall out of the building if they or the mortar around them has deteriorated significantly. A number of common reasons for brick problems are: replacement mortars which are too hard for historic brick; salt damage from winter road maintenance; settling of the building over time; or moisture damage, particularly from freeze and thaw cycles. If you notice there are problems with bricks deteriorating in your building, you should contact a masonry expert who will be able to assess the situation and make recommendations for repair or remediation.

- Is there staining or efflorescence on the brick?
  Staining and efflorescence on brick usually indicates a moisture problem. Examine the building for where water is getting onto the brick and make repairs to ensure that water is being moved away from the building and draining properly. To remove the efflorescence, gently wash by hand with a mild detergent and stiff brush.

- Is there painted masonry that needs attention?

  You should not paint unpainted masonry because it can have detrimental effects on the long term health of your brick. However, there are many brick buildings which were painted in the past and it is important to maintain them to ensure their longevity. Monitor your painted masonry for chipping, cracking and bubbling which may indicate a moisture problem.

  It is often best not to remove paint from previously painted masonry as this can cause serious deterioration of the underlying brick. However, if you are interested in removing paint from masonry, you should contact a professional with experience in this area who will be able to advise what cleaning method is appropriate for your building and the appropriate method to ensure that your brick is not damaged during the process.

Metal

Architectural and decorative metal elements were popular in nineteenth century commercial construction. Cast iron, in particular, was widely used on storefronts and cornices for decorative features. Although metal elements are generally very durable, they are still subject to deterioration and should be monitored and repaired and necessary to ensure a long life. The best way to ensure the longevity of metal elements is to ensure that water is being moved away from them so that they are not wet and regular monitoring and repainting of painted elements.

Metal elements such as cornices should be kept rust free and repainted as necessary to avoid deterioration.

When you examine the metal elements on your building, here are some things to note:

- Are there areas of rust on metal elements?

  Metal elements on a building oxidize, causing rust, which should be removed to prevent further deterioration. Metal elements near the ground, such as fencing or pilasters, often oxidize near the base because they are exposed to both moisture and salt. Minor rusting can be removed by gentle brushing with a wire brush, and should be done before painting and priming an area. Low pressure sandblasting can also help remove rust if it cannot be removed by a brush, but this should be completed by a professional who has experience with architectural metalwork. Routine maintenance will prevent significant rust from eating away at the metal.

- Are there areas where paint is chipping or flaking?
  Painted metal work needs be repainted from time to time. Ferrous metals (cast and wrought iron, steel and tin) should be painted to prevent oxidization and deterioration. Paint that is chipped or flaking can either be a symptom of normal wear and tear or of moisture infiltration. Before you repaint an area, check to see if it is wet or if it has excessive determination, in which case more repairs than a new coat of paint will be needed. Make sure to choose an appropriate and durable metal paint and that any rust, dirt and grime in cleaned from the metal before painting. Non-ferrous metals (aluminium, copper, brass and stainless steel) were historically not painted and should be left uncovered.

- Are there areas of metal work that are significantly deteriorated?
  Metal work which has disintegrated, has significant rusting or is broken should be examined and repaired by a conservation professional. Cornices, in particular, require repair by a professional because of their size and height. Regular maintenance should prevent large scale deterioration.

Woodwork

Many historic commercial buildings have wooden elements, both decorative and practical. This can include everything from wooden storefronts to decorative wooden brackets along the cornice line of your building. Wooden elements require regular maintenance and should be checked regularly for deterioration and rot. Wooden storefronts are particularly susceptible to deterioration because they face heavy wear and tear from sidewalk clearing and salting in the winter, moisture from the street, and exposure to traffic.

When you examine the woodwork on your building, here are some things to note:

- Are there any bare areas that require repainting?
  Wooden elements on a building should be repainted every five to seven years, or when there are bare areas where the paint has chipped away. A coat of paint can go a long way to preserving your historic wooden elements so that you do not have to make more costly repairs down the road. Storefronts, in particular, often need to be repainted more frequently because they face

This decorative woodwork requires repair and re-painting to ensure that it does not deteriorate.

a lot of wear and tear. Choose a good quality exterior paint and make any additional repairs before you paint. Make sure the area is clean of dirt and grime and dry before you repaint it.

- Are there any areas with broken pieces that require repair or replacement?
  Wooden elements on a building an be broken for a variety of reasons and should be repaired as soon as possible to prevent further deterioration. Depending on the scale and type of damage there are different solutions you might employ. Smaller breaks and damage can be repaired by wood splicing, also known as piecing in, where the broken or deteriorated section is carefully removed and replaced without removing the entire wooden unit. Sometimes entire units, such as broken wooden brackets, need to be completely removed and replaced. Make sure that any new elements match the old, in style, shape, wood grain and appearance.

- Are there areas that are rotten or wet?
  Wet wooden elements can deteriorate rapidly and it is important to monitor wooden features on your building for rot or wetness. If you find areas on your building are wet or rotting, first check to see if you can find the source of the water and fix it before you repair your wooden elements. Bubbling, chipped or cracking paint can indicate rotten wood.

Appropriate maintenance on your historic windows and doors, including painting, helps ensure their durability and energy efficiency.

Windows and Doors

Windows and doors contribute directly to a building's architectural style and are an important part of its historic character. They are also very important elements of energy efficient building. Properly maintaining historic windows and doors contributes to their longevity and can go a long way to increasing the energy efficiency of a building by keeping out drafts and providing ventilation. Wooden windows and doors, in particular, require regular maintenance and should be checked regularly for deterioration, rot, or shifting.

When you examine your historic windows, here are some things to note:

- Is the window operable?
  A non-operable window can point to a range of problems, some easier to address than others. For example, it could indicate that the windows hardware needs replacing or fixed. However, it could also

indicate bigger issues. Windows that will not open or closed can be swollen from moisture infiltration that is coming down the walls or through the eaves. You should look for possible sources of water as these can be damaging to your building as a whole. Inoperable windows can also indicate shifting in the building so that the window can no longer properly move in its frame. If you think this is the case, you should consult a structural engineer or a heritage professional.

- Are there any bare areas that require repainting?
  A good coat of paint goes a long way to ensuring your historic windows and doors are protected from the elements. Wooden windows and doors should be painted about every five to seven years, or if there are bare areas where the paint has chipped away. Remember that many old windows were original painted with lead paint. If you are removing old paint, take proper precautions for mitigating exposure to lead paint particles. If you are having a consistent problem with paint peeling, chipping or bubbling on your wooden windows and doors, this may indicate you have a moisture problem. Check the windows for dampness and remedy the water issue before repainting. You may have moisture seepage coming down the walls of your building, from the eaves or from the roof.

- Are there any areas where there is rot or where the wood is broken?
  Check your windows, frames and surrounds for areas of rot or for any broken pieces. Rot or broken pieces should be remedied as soon as possible; a small problem can quickly turn into a large problem if not addressed immediately. Often a rotten piece on a window or door can be repaired or replaced without replacing the whole window which is usually a much cheaper solution that having a whole new window installed. If you do find rot on your historic windows and doors, check for areas where moisture may be getting at the window and work to fix the source so you don't have to fix your windows and doors over and over again.

- Is there a good seal between the window or door and the frame?
  Windows and doors that do not have a good seal or are not property fitted can rattle, cause drafts and decrease the energy efficiency of your building. You should periodically inspect weather-stripping around and replace as necessary. Apply caulking to voids between different building materials to ensure a good seal. Make sure you choose a caulking that will adhere to the appropriate materials.

Kawartha Lakes

If you would like more information about maintaining your heritage building, contact:

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