

An Indispensable Reference For Heritage Conservation Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada

by Christiane Lefebvre and Ève Wertheimer

Each year, across the country, an assortment of cherished historic places is demolished. Rare wooden grain elevators on the Prairies, distinctive round barns in Quebec's Eastern Townships, the historic Avro Arrow hangars in Mississauga—the litany of lost heritage sites is all too familiar to conservation professionals in Canada. Although the main threats to these and other historic places are neglect, abandonment and demolition, inappropriate conservation practices can also severely undermine the physical integrity and heritage value of Canada's historic sites.

To provide the Canadian public with a comprehensive tool to guide conservation practice, the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada was created. The result of a major collaborative effort among federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments, heritage conservation professionals, and scores of individual Canadians, this detailed publication is the first of its kind in Canada. Developed for a broad range of users—including architects, building owners, property managers and landscape experts—the Standards and Guidelines serves as a reliable benchmark for heritage conservation practice in Canada and is an indispensable reference work for professionals in that field.

Developing A Common Language For Heritage Conservation In Canada

Prior to development of the Standards and Guidelines, no single, comprehensive reference governed heritage conservation in Canada. Among the primary sources for conservation specialists were documents such as the Venice Charter—an international accord that established the fundamental principles of conservation practice. Closer to home, a variety of conservation tools were developed by provinces, municipalities and community organizations to guide local heritage conservation authorities.

Effective application of these international and local approaches to heritage conservation, however, is hindered by fundamental limitations. Although useful in setting out the general parameters of conservation practice, the principles of the Venice Charter are not concrete enough to provide technical, hands-on guidance. Local sources, on the other hand, too often focus on the details of specific locations and are not easily applicable elsewhere.



To bridge this gap in methodology, the Standards and Guidelines was developed. A product of the Historic Places Initiative—a pan-Canadian program—the publication is a comprehensive document that provides those working in Canada's heritage conservation field with a common approach and a shared vernacular.

Using The Standards and Guidelines

The document is a model of clarity and practicality. Divided into five sections, it offers a wealth of helpful information and advice to users. Of particular interest to heritage conservation professionals are the principles that underpin the Standards and Guidelines. Drawn from international heritage conservation charters, the four principles are:

- employ research and investigation to understand historical places; conduct integrated, long-term planning before conservation work begins; find viable and compatible uses for historic places; and
- use a conservation approach that respects the value of historic places.

In addition to presenting fundamental principles, section one outlines the purpose of the document and defines key terms. Most importantly, this section clearly lays out the main steps to successful conservation projects.

The first step is to identify the heritage value and character-defining elements of a historical place. Customarily, these qualities are summarized in a “statement of significance”—a formal record that expresses a consensus about the historical meaning of the site. This contextual information, complemented by relevant historical research and physical investigation, will guide all future conservation activities.

The next step is to select one of three conservation treatments—preservation, rehabilitation or restoration—that best respects project objectives and the site’s heritage value. In most cases, preservation is the ideal option. Preservation entails protecting, maintaining and stabilizing the existing form, material and integrity of a historic place while protecting its heritage value. Rehabilitation is a more intrusive alternative, as this treatment necessitates alterations, additions and repairs to make historic places suitable for contemporary uses. Restoration is the most intrusive activity, as it involves returning a historic place to its appearance at a particular time in history.

The third step in the conservation process is to review the standards of heritage conservation. The first nine standards apply to all treatments—preservation, rehabilitation and restoration; standards 10 through 12 refer specifically to rehabilitation, while 13 and 14 apply particularly to restoration.

Application of the guidelines contained in the publication is the fourth step of the heritage conservation process. The guidelines help users interpret and apply the standards. While the standards apply to all types of historic places, the guidelines supply practical advice with respect to specific sites (archaeological sites, landscapes, heritage buildings and engineering works) and their various components—in the case of heritage buildings, features such as roofs, windows, exterior masonry and wood.

Organized by treatment, advice supplied through the guidelines section of the book begins with preferred conservation options and ends with the most intrusive interventions. Each recommended choice is accompanied by “not recommended” counterparts. This creative format is particularly useful for the evaluation of specific interventions.

Lastly, a section at the end of the document deals with “other considerations,” such as accessibility or energy conservation. The guidelines offer directions such as how to strike a balance between the regulations which relate to these concerns and the heritage value and character-defining elements of the historic place.

Putting The Standards and Guidelines To Work Across Canada

Parks Canada was the first organization in Canada to adopt the Standards and Guidelines as its official source for heritage conservation. The federal agency relies on this valuable reference to assess conservation interventions for all federal heritage buildings and for the national historic sites under its stewardship. It also uses it to evaluate proposals submitted to the Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund—a federally sponsored program that encourages businesses to preserve old buildings and re-establish them in community life.

As the product of a broad Canadian consensus, it is understandable that a number of governments across the country have also embraced the Standards and Guidelines. Provincial governments in Alberta and Saskatchewan follow the principles and processes established by the publication, Alberta using it as its principal heritage management tool, and Saskatchewan for regulating provincially designated historic places. In addition, a large number of municipalities utilize the document as their main reference.

Private organizations, such as the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Heritage Canada Foundation, are also guided by the Standards and Guidelines. Of note, the HCF recently adopted

the resource to help manage the organization's properties; moreover, the Foundation will energetically promote widespread use of the document by targeting groups in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Indeed, conservation specialists in all governments, public agencies and community groups are encouraged to take advantage of the Standards and Guidelines.

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Editor's Note: The Standards and Guidelines can be downloaded from the Parks Canada Web site: www.pc.gc.ca. Printed copies can be obtained by e-mailing historicplaces@pc.gc.ca.