

THE LEAST YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CARING FOR YOUR OLD BUILDING



Looking after your old building correctly ensures that its historical value and interest is retained and that it remains an asset to the area. It also plays a significant part in ensuring its financial worth is maintained and increased. Often small interventions like painting with an attractive colour scheme, replacing inappropriate windows and doors with historically appropriate ones, or recladding a roof with an appropriate roofing material will significantly enhance the financial and aesthetic value of your old building. With commercial buildings, it is important to ensure the building is neat and clear of excessive and inappropriate advertising signs, visible external air-conditioner units and other intrusions.



Rather carry out simple regular maintenance than allow your building to fall into disrepair – which is costly to repair: The old Stadtsfontein, Oranjezicht

Old Buildings are different to new buildings

Old buildings are very different to modern buildings in that they are built from different and often more pliable and softer materials, and as such they must be treated in a different way. They are usually organic in nature, needing to breathe, both through the walls and under wooden floors, and needing to move according to outside forces acting on it - including forces relating to moisture and temperature change. Interventions that do not respect the organic nature of historical buildings tend to lead to serious and often costly problems down the line – such as cracking. It is best to understand the requirements of your building before you work on it.



Consult with your local heritage bodies

Historical buildings form part of our national heritage, and alterations or demolitions will require heritage conservation permission. In South Africa, all structures over 60 years old – including their fixtures and fittings, are protected in terms of the National Heritage Resources Act, 25 of 1999. All properties in a conservation area or heritage area are also protected. This means no alterations or new work may take place without the required permissions. Please contact your local district office of the City's Heritage Resources Section in order to ascertain whether and which heritage permissions are required and how to make your application.

Making a building safe and healthy and protecting it from fire damage is important. However, it is worth discussing building regulations with the City's Heritage Resources Section as it may be possible to vary some of the regulations to minimize any destructive requirements.

Choose a professional with experience in working with historical buildings similar to yours. Architects and contractors experienced in working on historical buildings understand the requirements of these buildings, and will often avert costly mistakes.

Taking on an old building

Before taking on an historical property, make sure that it is generally suitable for your requirements in terms of size and plan. Sometimes people buy buildings because of their historical charm, only to completely alter them or to remove all patina or sense of age.

In fact if you need an addition larger than the original building, or prefer open plan living, you may have to alter an old building so much that most of its historical integrity will be lost. Consult the City of Cape Town's Heritage Resources Section or a professional experienced in conservation first.

Understand your old building

Avoid quick decisions about old buildings. Take a good look at the building and try to discover the original uses of the rooms, how the structure was actually built, its early finishes, and determine the nature of subsequent changes. This information could well change your initial ideas about how to maintain the building and what changes you wish to make.

Sometimes, on reflection, past changes are sufficiently interesting to preserve and repair - such as a later addition of a verandah. It is not always advisable to return an old building to its original appearance, although intrusive and unsympathetic alterations are often best corrected.

Do some historical research

Old records might provide inspiration on how to restore. For example, old photographs often show decorative roof and verandah features that may long since have been removed. The Western Cape Archives in Roeland Street has an excellent collection of historical photographs.



[A little research and finding an old photograph will assist you with restoring your old house](#)

Keep a Maintenance Checklist



Lack of simple maintenance to a building such as this will end up causing significant damage to original features and materials and incur much larger expenditure (Simon's Town)

By adhering to a short maintenance checklist, and carrying out a little maintenance every year, the need for expensive restoration work is averted. Maintain your old building carefully, it is part of our heritage, and adds value to your neighbourhood.

Routine maintenance is mostly common sense; make sure for instance that:

1. Your gutters and down-pipes are clear, and not leaking.
2. Your joinery and masonry is well painted and not flaking off.
3. The putty around your windows is in good condition.
4. Areas of rust are treated with a rust inhibitor.
5. Water is draining away from your house rather than towards it.
6. Air vents are unblocked and that there is a free flow of air under your floors.
7. Invasive roots are not damaging your house.
8. Try to ensure that your ground level around the house is lower than floor level inside.



Do keep your ventilations grills clear to allow air to circulate below your wooden floor



Clean, prime and paint historical metal work



Do remove plants and roots that are growing into a wall. You might have to poison the plant in order to ensure it does not regrow

Roofs and gutters

The major cause of deterioration in old buildings is water damage from leaking roofs, gutters, faulty down-pipes and drainage. The old soft brickwork and plaster are easily saturated, paint quickly lifts and timber begins to rot. Keep water out and away from buildings by regularly checking gutters, down-pipes and drains. Saturated ground promotes rising damp and even structural subsidence. Temporary unsightly repairs are often preferable to allowing water penetration for even short periods.

When replacing roof sheeting, make sure you are using an appropriate material and profile. The opportunity of replacing an inappropriate roof sheeting with a more sympathetic one should not be missed. For instance if you need to replace a later IBR or Canadian Profile roof because it is damaged or leaking, you should consider if a Victorian profile corrugated iron or chromadek roof would not be more appropriate and restore some of the value to the building. Similarly it might be possible to put back the correct roof slopes and restore verandah roofs.



Clear gutters, downpipes and hoppers

Allow floors and walls to breathe

Most old walls and floors allow the passage of small amounts of moisture rising from the ground to escape because they are soft and porous. In wet periods walls absorb moisture which dries out again on sunny days. Attempting to seal walls against damp penetration or rising damp usually exacerbates the problem by trapping and damming the moisture in the walls. Applying oil sealers, membranes or cement plaster to walls with damp problems will merely drive the water higher. The water source needs to be cut off by a damp proof course or better drainage.

The use of soft lime plaster will allow old walls to retain their natural porosity and respond to moisture in an appropriate way. Lime wash outside is always preferable, but needs to be applied every year. Acrylic paint is otherwise acceptable as it allows the walls to breathe. Where possible the replacement of old timber floors with concrete floors should be avoided as it is likely to drive ground moisture into the walls and lead to serious rising damp problems. It is far preferable to service or repair your wooden floor.

The deterioration of timber flooring is usually due to inadequate ventilation in the sub-floor areas. Unblocking vents or adding new ones will help dry out the sub-floor.



Use of paint that does not breathe caused blistering as it traps the moisture in the walls



Rising Damp caused by the removal of a suspended wooden floor and replacement with a concrete slab

Beware of cement and concrete

Most old construction employs relatively soft materials such as stone, brick, lime plaster and earth (dagha). Concrete and strong mixes of cement mortar are usually incompatible with 19th and early 20th century buildings. Use of them often leads to cracking, uneven settlement and also permeability problems. Make sure you use the correct plaster mix for old walls.



Hard concrete plaster often cracks when covering softer more pliable masonry

Avoid cure-all products

Modern artificial substances often cause more problems than not. Damp can be exacerbated, and deterioration of surfaces can be accelerated by the use of such products.

Repair

It is far better to retain original joinery and windows even if they are not in perfect condition, than to replace with new. Try to see whether original joinery cannot be repaired by a good joiner. Should the joinery be in such bad condition it must be replaced, try to replace it with exact replicas of the original. Keep away from top-hung mock sash windows – they never look as good as real sash windows and are not as efficient.



Retain original materials where possible, rather than replacing

Use matching and traditional materials and profiles

Many new materials and the profiles and sizes in which they are supplied are both unsightly and of the wrong proportions, and may destroy the character of your old house. Try to keep to the original type and proportions of windows and doors. Look out for details, such as plaster mouldings, joinery and ironmongery details and gutter profile. (Victorian period houses usually have an 'ogee' profile gutter rather than the modern square or semicircular profile.)



The use of a traditional profile gutter and downpipes on historical buildings is encouraged. These are often available in modern rust free materials

The use of traditional materials and profiles is not only technically preferable, but generally looks the best anyway. Do not use IBR, tile-sheeting or Canadian Profile sheeting on historical buildings. More often than not, traditional profile corrugated iron, painted charcoal, black, or red is correct for Victorian domestic architecture. Chromadek is a good alternative to old fashioned corrugated iron. On the coast, you may prefer to use Victorian profile fibre cement.

Use carefully considered colours and finishes

Older buildings are often more appealing if their colour schemes relate to their period and style of construction. Generally, joinery should not be stripped to bare wood, but should remain painted unless teak or other hard wood. Stripping of wood often damages the wood, and leads to faster deterioration as well as generally being historically incorrect. Joinery should be painted with an oil-based paint. Masonry should either be lime-washed or painted with an acrylic paint. Avoid plastic or textured paints as these are likely to lead to damp problems as they do not allow the walls to breathe. Do not paint natural surfaces that were not originally painted – such as sandstone and other special finishes.



Although not historically authentic, the use of colour in the Bo-Kaap has given this historical precinct a new energy. What do you think?

Avoid over-restoration

Doing too much restoration work often removes the attractive quality of old buildings. Usually there has been a succession of alterations and surfaces that have developed a patination due to use and weathering. These all provide a sense of age and previous occupation and some can be considered 'honourable scars'. Where possible, retain original plaster and finishes. Complete stripping of plaster removes all patina.

Avoid mock-heritage reproductions

Designing buildings in historical style has always been popular, but to build a reproduction building or extension to an old building can produce historical fraud and devalue the quality of the original. Additions should be sympathetic in location, bulk, proportion, scale and materials without copying historical styles.



Mock reproductions often devalue the real thing, and should generally be avoided in historical contexts

Don't make historical buildings redundant

Old buildings are best maintained and appreciated by using them. The active use of an old building with sensitive alterations is preferable to having a perfectly intact old building without a use. Alterations should be reversible where possible, and should read as a new sympathetic layer to the history of the building.

Security (See City Brochure)

Security is always a problem in South Africa. Where possible make use of electronic alarm systems and floodlights - they are generally the least intrusive. Should you need to put bars on your windows, it is usually preferable to line up the burglar bars with the glazing bars, or divide the spacing equally. Always respect the traditional vertical proportions of the windows. On public facades, it is generally preferable to place the bars internally. Bars should be painted in such a way as they disappear as far as possible.

Discreetly placed electric fence cables are often a better alternative to razor wire or high walls.



Garden walls (See City Brochure)

It has often been demonstrated that high walls are not necessarily a safe deterrent to burglars. Once over the wall, the burglar is out of sight and may proceed without fear. It is also aesthetically preferable to allow visual accessibility from the street to the house. This may be done by the use of wooden picket or metal paling fences. Where possible keep front walls to the traditional low height. Rather than altering original garden walls with cast-iron work, consider constructing a second visually permeable inner fence, and plant sympathetically between the two. A prickly hedge or thorny creeper often makes an aesthetic alternative to a wall or razor wire fence, or can be used to improve its appearance.



Retention of the original boundary wall and gate, with an inner hedge and fence for security.

Where original wire gates or old-fashioned wire fences remain, try to retain these as they are part of our heritage that is disappearing rapidly.

Remember to consult with the Heritage Resources Section of the City of Cape Town before you plan any changes or alterations to your historical building.

Other Sources of Information

There are a number of useful guidelines and brochures on the City's website: www.capetown.gov.za/heritageinfo where you may find useful information, including the **contact details** for our District and Metro Offices:

HAP 1 **Heritage Resources**

HAP 2 **Heritage Areas**

HAP 3 **Cultural Landscapes & Historic Vegetation**

HAP 4 **Design Guidelines in a Heritage Context**

HAP 5 **Boundary Enclosures in Heritage Areas and to Historic Buildings**

HAP 6 **Garages & Carports in Heritage Areas and for Historic Buildings**

HAP 7 **Roofscapes in Heritage Areas and of Historic Buildings**

HAP 8 **Security in Heritage Areas and for Historic Buildings**

HAP 9 **Langa Heritage and Sites**

HAP 10 **Company's Garden Self-guided Walk**

HAP 11 **Alterations and Additions in Historic Residential Areas**

HAP 12 **Guidelines for Work in St. James & Kalk Bay Heritage Area**

HAP 13 **Guidelines for Work in Bo-Kaap Heritage Areas**

HAP 14 **DRAFT Guidelines for Work in Bungalows Heritage Areas**

HAP 15 **Guidelines for Work in Mamre Heritage Area**

HAP 16 **Philippi Heritage Information Brochure**

HAP 17 **Slave Heritage Walks of Cape Town**

Heritage Guidelines for Signs in Urban Conservation Areas of Cape Town - A guideline document for designing appropriate and attractive signs in urban conservation areas, such as Long Street and Greenmarket Square.

Cultural Heritage Strategy - A framework for the management and protection of the cultural heritage resources of the City of Cape Town.