



Property Management

Historic buildings: owners and managers must preserve, protect

Owners and managers of historic buildings have an important job. Preserving our past and ensuring the continued beauty and longevity of historic structures is not an easy task. Yet what would our city be like without the rich character of older buildings and the beautiful brick, carved stone, wood trim, solid wood doors and unique windows that characterize these structures?

The key to longevity for any building, and particularly in preserving historic structures, is maintenance. The old saying “a stitch in time saves nine” certainly is true when it comes to caring for older buildings. An easy way to evaluate where your building might be vulnerable is by looking at the outside when it’s raining or when the snow is melting. Wet, saturated areas indicate potential deterioration. It is essential to repair these areas and determine the source of water accumulation. Colorado experiences more than 150 freeze-thaw cycles each year. When water freezes it expands approximately 9 percent, which causes a lot of movement and pressure on the saturated brick, concrete, wood and metal. Mortar joints begins to fail, concrete begins to scale, wood begins to rot and metal begins to rust. As a result, moisture-freeze thawing is the biggest cause of damage to structures in the state.

Removing the snow without using chemicals is the best procedure because de-icing chemicals are extremely corrosive to metals and concrete. If it is necessary



Rhonda Maas
Founder and
president, Building
Restoration
Specialties Inc.,
Denver

to employ ice-melting chemicals, they should be used sparingly and washed off as soon as possible to remove the residue and halt the subsequent corrosion. Replacing and repairing windows, both for beauty and functionality, is another important issue for historic buildings. In nearly all cases, windows – even 100-year-old windows – can be reworked to operate properly and eliminate leaks. Wood trim surrounding the windows can be repaired and painted, rather than replaced. When treated properly, these windows can last another 100 years. This is not always the case with modern replacement windows, which often have a life span of only 10 to 20 years due to short-lived seals and gaskets.

Peeling, flaking paint is another issue with historic structures. Not only does this apply to paint on windows and trim, but also to less obvious places such as on handrails where they meet the concrete. Brickwork on older buildings often has been painted, and it is a delicate process to update this work, requiring a skilled craftsman to remove and repair the paint while maintaining the integrity of the original brick. In some cases, paint is

not only a decoration but also a protective coating for the surface below. In other cases, paint traps moisture and accelerates deterioration. Removing the paint to allow the masonry to breathe will actually prolong the life of the façade. A qualified restoration contractor can recommend the best option for removing paint and protecting the surface.

In fact, historic buildings require uniquely skilled craftsmen to perform most repairs and structural maintenance. When seeking help with such work, property managers should look for contractors who specialize in assessing the condition of older properties and can make informed recommendations regarding repair. Not everyone understands the best way to approach work on historic structures, so it is important to ask for references and to see before and after photographs of similar work. Taking time to call references and hire a qualified tradesman to perform the repairs will ensure you retain the original beauty of your building.

Over the long term, it can be far less costly to properly care for a historic building than to neglect it to the point that major repairs are needed. Cheap or inappropriate repair work also is a false economy. And not only is proper maintenance and restoration a more economical approach, it also is both environmentally friendly and socially responsible to take good care of the beautiful and unique structures that grace our state.▲