Photographing Historic Buildings
A Guide for Community Heritage Projects

A Project of the Gimli Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee

Gimli Municipal **HERITAGE ADVISORY** Committee

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CERTAIN COMMUNITY HERITAGE PROJECTS REQUIRE PHOTOGRAPHS of historic buildings, and so an appreciation for some of the key issues associated with this important task is essential. The creation of good quality photographic images will ensure that a whole range of projects—for archival purposes, communications, and especially for certain traditional heritage initiatives like walking tours, articles, posters, slide shows, PowerPoint presentations—have the necessary visual content to attract, inform and inspire viewers.

The following short guide highlights some of the key issues to keep in mind when you are taking photographs of historic buildings.

First – it is important to recognize that every building is unique, and so deserves its own special attention. It is always a good idea to pause for a moment before embarking on a photo-shoot project: walk around the building, taking it in, seeing what "story" it has to tell – maybe via materials, textures, forms, details, colours, contrasts, novel angles that strikingly reveal certain features. This does not mean that any particular building requires an exhaustive devotion of time – a photographic record of simpler buildings will likely take a shorter time to complete compared to large and more complex structures.

Second – a word about cameras. It is beyond the scope of this guide to address the myriad issues associated with digital photography, which include file formats and sizes, image resolution, and of course the many technical terms associated with the subject. It is recommended that community heritage personnel become acquainted with the subject in some detail, either via a digital camera course or through the manuals that come with a camera. And of course it also will be necessary for personnel to be proficient with the digital camera software that will be required for processing images in a computer (sometimes this software comes with a camera, but reasonably priced photo software is also available).

Now you can start. Take as many photographs as you can. Digital cameras and computers have revolutionized photography. The digital storage cards employed in digital camera technology allow for nearly endless photo production, and computers allow for storage of these images in easy-to-access folders and files.

As a general guide to picture-taking, use a 35mm lens and get as far away from the building as possible. This will allow you to get a good unobstructed view of the building. If it is impossible to get far enough back, or if there are obstructions between you and the building, it may be necessary to use a 28mm lens. Distortion of the image is a greater problem with this lens, however, so be sure not to tilt the camera too much. You may want to photograph the site by orienting a camera armed with a 35mm lens sideways – this vertical orientation also limits distortion (but in digital format, and transferred to a computer, will also require that the image be re-oriented).

A site should be photographed in as much detail as possible. A minimum of 10 images is suggested, and 20 photographs would not be excessive for most buildings. Upwards of 50 images may be required for larger and more complex buildings. Besides the building's main elevations, other photographic subjects should include, as noted above, interesting or representative details and views that clearly show construction methods and materials. Photographs also should be taken of any additions or alterations to the structure. It is a good idea to take photographs of the building or site from a distance, so as to put it into its context.

The following two sections, Digital Camera Photographic Arrays and Reworked Photographic Arrays, suggest a typical photographic collection and then how that camera-generated array would be reordered and organized.

Digital Camera Photographic Arrays

The following images (including on the next page) suggest how a digital camera will establish and name each image. Note in the following collection that no particular order has been established. The photographer has simply taken pictures as she walked around the building – it will be possible to reorganize the collection to create a more coherent presentation once the images have been downloaded into a computer. Also note that some of the vertically oriented images originally appear in a horizontal format (a camera convention) – these can be re-oriented once in the computer.

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MG.248.JPG

MG.245.JPG

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MG.247.JPG

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**Digital Camera Photograph Arrays
(Continued)**

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MG.253.JPG

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MG.256.JPG

MG.257.JPG

MG.258.JPG

MG.259.JPG

Reworked Photographic Arrays

The following images (including on the next page) suggest how the collection of images presented above should be re-ordered and named so as to convey a better sense of movement around the building.

View from southwest

View from west

View from northwest

View from north

MG.259.JPG

View from northeast

View from east

View from east

Details from east

Details from southeast

Verandah details

Window details

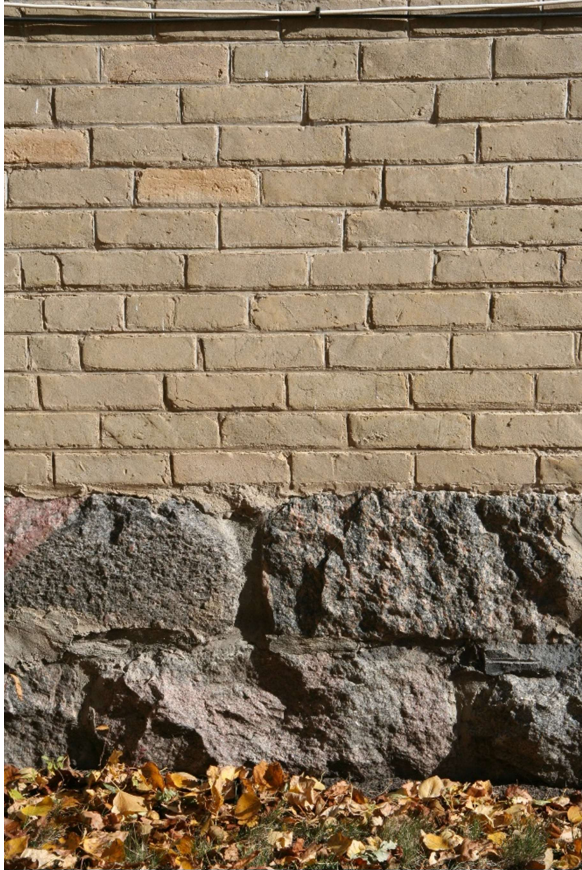

Side Door

Verandah details

Main door

Verandah details

Window details

Hints

The following commentary highlights via some useful images key photographic opportunities to be exploited when exploring a building.

Fallen leaves on the ground enhance the textuality of the bricks and stone shown in this detail view. The colours and forms are also subtly attractive.

A useful frontal view (top) of a detailed gable-end is given more drama (below) via a more extreme camera angle. Both images will be useful depending on the nature of a follow-up project.

It is occasionally necessary to take photographs of certain buildings during the autumn or winter months, when obscuring foliage is absent. Such images also help suggest alternate local climatic situations and can set up nice colour contrasts with more common summer-time images.

A view taken of a façade in shadow (top) is not as descriptive as an image in more sunlight (below) – allowing for a greater sense of details and the fall of light and shade on the bricks and other features.