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ARCHITECTURE SUSTAINABILITY PRESERVATION

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SOME THOUGHTS ON MAINTENANCE OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Buildings deteriorate for a number of reasons. Chief among them are weather, which attacks the exterior envelope, and dampness, particularly damaging to the interior.

Weathering. Weathering includes the actions of sun, wind, frost, and rain on exposed surfaces. Each surface reacts differently depending on its material and exposure. For example, limestone is dissolved by acid rain, wood rots where wet, vinyl becomes brittle in sunlight. Limestone is most vulnerable on the windward side, wood where it contacts the ground, vinyl on the east, south, and west. In every case, if not treated, the rate of deterioration, and increase of cost of repair, accelerates over time.

Dampness. All materials inside buildings are susceptible to deterioration from elevated levels of humidity. Again, each element reacts differently depending on material and location. And again, if allowed to remain damp, the rate of deterioration of the interior increases over time as does the rate of increase in cost of repair.

Legal Requirements. The Property Maintenance Code applies to all buildings, including those owned by local governments, not-for-profits, religious institutions, etc. Included in its provisions are requirements for properly maintaining interiors and exteriors. These examples are from the 2007 edition of the Code:

All exterior surface...shall be maintained in good condition. Exterior wood surfaces..shall be protected from the elements and decay by painting or other protective covering or treatment. (From Section 304.2.)

and

Roof drainage shall be adequate to prevent dampness or deterioration in the walls or interior portion of the structure. (From Section 304.7.)

Quality of materials. An additional reason to take care of old buildings is many of their materials are better quality than those available today; and the life of many valuable existing materials can be extended indefinitely by good maintenance. For example, old window sash are often made of old-growth wood which has lasted a hundred years or so and can be repaired and maintained to provide another hundred years of service. Replacement windows cannot be expected to last more than a few decades.

Prudence. Because the rate of deterioration (and expense of repair) accelerates over time, it is prudent for owners of buildings (including local governments, not-for-profits, religious institutions, etc.) to maintain them in excellent condition. The least expensive maintenance is

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small, frequent repairs. The most expensive maintenance is a large project necessary to remedy years of neglect.

Oversight. Local Code Enforcement Officers are empowered to enforce Codes relating to buildings. They, and the Codes, treat maintenance of historic buildings the same as maintenance of any other. Although they have authority to strictly enforce the Property Code regarding any building, it is seldom that CEO's cite an owner for improper maintenance unless there is an obvious public hazard. As far as I know, the state has no mechanism to inspect buildings and enforce the Property Code, even for those buildings where the State has provided grants to aid owners with their care.