What is historic architecture?

Historic architecture encompasses a wide variety of building types and styles, reflecting American values, ambitions, ideologies, and folkways. It ranges from high-style, architect-designed structures to the vernacular forms that are manifestations of local building traditions and indigenous materials. America is a vast nation and our architectural heritage is also represented by a rich array of regionally and culturally distinctive styles. These include above-ground Native American pueblo and Spanish missions in the Southwest, wood-frame Cape Cod houses and brick mill structures in New England, Mission style from the Southwest, wood-frame Cape Cod houses and brick mill structures in New England, Mission style from the Southwest, and the French Creole buildings in the American South.

Our architectural heritage is a legacy left to us by previous generations and we in turn have an obligation to safeguard it. It can be manifested by structures innovative in their construction technology, beautiful to behold, and evocative of our shared history. Some of our greatest achievements as a society are the product of local building traditions and indigenous materials. America is a vast nation and our architectural heritage is also represented by a rich array of regionally and culturally distinctive styles. These include above-ground Native American pueblo and Spanish missions in the Southwest, wood-frame Cape Cod houses and brick mill structures in New England, Mission style from the Southwest, and the French Creole buildings in the American South.

There are many important reasons for recording historic architecture. Some of these reasons are articulated by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) in American National Standards for Architectural and Engineering Documentation:

- To create a public archive of measured drawings, historical photographs, and related documentation—drawings, histories, and photographs of the building—available to the public copyright-free and on-line through the National Park Service's website.
- To provide a permanent record of the structural, architectural, and historical context in which the structure was developed and later evolved in order to convey its significance.
- To provide a mechanism to help shape society's ideals, whether monumental and high style or the vernacular and utilitarian.
- To provide a complete resume of the builder's art, from the architectural and historical context in which the structure was developed and later evolved in order to convey its significance.
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The HABS surveys implemented for the first time the use of digital technology in historic architecture on a national scale and set uniform standards.

The significance of the HABS program resides in the broad scope of the collection and its public accessibility, as well as in the establishment of national standards for recording historic architecture. As was stated in the 1933 proposal for the creation of HABS, the collection represents “a complete resume of the builder’s art,” from the monumental and high style to the vernacular and utilitarian. Priority is also given to endangered structures for which no record would otherwise exist. The HABS records are available to the public copyright-free and on-line through the Library and Photographic Division of the Library of Congress. The Congress is a resource for architectural historians, restoration architects, preservationists, scholars, and the general public interested in American history and architecture. HABS is also responsible for the development of guidelines for the production of the drawings, histories, and photographs, and the criteria for preparing them for inclusion in the collection, recognized as the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for Architectural and Engineering Documentation.

According to HABS methodology, the three components of the documentation—drawings, histories, and photographs—are to create a comprehensive understanding of the structure. Drawings include plans, sections, elevations, and details. Histories record texture, details, and spatial relationships vividly conveyed by drawings or the written word. The building is represented in a variety of forms: as an image, in two or three-dimensional laser scanning. Measurements are recorded with pencil on graph paper and augmented by digital photography, and the drawings are then produced using Computer Aided Drafting. Field analysis is supported by primary source research to create a written report that outlines the architectural and historical context in which the structure was developed and later evolved in order to convey its significance. Large-format, black-and-white photographs record texture, details, and spatial relationships vividly conveyed by drawings or the written word. The building is represented in a variety of forms: as an image, in two or three-dimensional laser scanning. Measurements are recorded with pencil on graph paper and augmented by digital photography, and the drawings are then produced using Computer Aided Drafting. Field analysis is supported by primary source research to create a written report that outlines the architectural and historical context in which the structure was developed and later evolved in order to convey its significance.
HABS Partners and Programs

Under the terms of the tripartite agreement, the AIA provides advice and support through the lens of private-sector architectural practice and education, the LoC maintains the collection under state-of-the-art conditions and provides public accessibility, and the NPS (HABS) develops guidelines, field tests new technologies and techniques, and produces standard-setting documentation. While providing no historic designation and carrying no regulatory power beyond mitigation, HABS documentation is used by government agencies, State Historic Preservation Offices, local preservation organizations, and private institutions to facilitate, interpret, manage, and promote historic properties. Documentation regularly appears in exhibitions and publications, magazines, scholarly journals, and in full-length books such as the Norton/Library of Congress Press, Visual Sourcebooks in Architecture, Design & Engineering series.

To meet the tremendous need for on-site documentation, the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, through HABS, works to cooperate with groups in both the public and private sectors to help undertake preservation efforts including rehabilitation, community development, advocacy, and historical interpretation. Today, the documentation is produced by a combination of HABS staff working with sponsors, by students, and by professionals either in compliance with Section 106 mitigation or through donations to the collection. HABS works to cooperate with groups in both the public and private sectors to help undertake preservation efforts including rehabilitation, community development, advocacy, and historical interpretation.

In the 1950s, HABS began the summer program that still operates today. Students and professional volunteers gain practical field experience as part of a summer recording team. Duties involve on-site field work and preparation of measured drawings and written historical reports for the HABS collection. Student participation is also encouraged through the annual competition for the best set of drawings to HABS ‘standards known as the Charles E. Peterson Prize. The prize honors one of the founders of the HABS program and is intended to increase awareness, knowledge, and appreciation of historic buildings throughout the United States.

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HABS also encourages participation among architecture professionals through the Leicester B. Holland Prize, an annual competition that recognizes the best single-sheet measured drawing of a historic site, structure, or landscape prepared to program standards. The prize honors Leicester B. Holland (1882-1952), FAIA, and co-founder of the HABS program in the 1930s. While also promoting awareness for historic architecture, the prize is designed to reinvigorate the art of architectural delineation and composition in the traditions established by the École des Beaux-Arts.

For more information about the HABS program, or to access the HABS Guidelines for Drawings, History, or Photography, visit our website at http://www.nps.gov/hdpp.

Visit HABS/HAER/HALES on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/HeritageDocumentationPrograms.


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