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Historic Structure Reports: Variations on a Theme

DEBORAH SLATON and ALAN W. O'BRIGHT, Guest Editors

The concept of the historic structure report (HSR) originated in early nineteenth-century France and has developed, apparently independently, in this century in Canada, Australia, and the United States. HSRs have been prepared in the United States since the 1930s, beginning with Charles Peterson's National Park Service (NPS) report on the Moore House. The history of HSRs in the United States was explored previously in the *Bulletin* (Vol. XIV:4) by Randall Biallas, NPS chief historical architect, who revisits the topic in this issue.

The past decade has witnessed a resurgence of interest in HSRs with the publication of articles, discussions at APT conferences and AIA symposiums, and the development of HSR-oriented coursework at schools of architecture. David G. Woodcock writes of teaching HSR concepts to future preservationists in this *Bulletin*. Two issues of the NPS *CRM Bulletin* (Vol. XIII:4 and Vol. XIII:6) have examined various aspects of the subject from the NPS perspective.

In related developments *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* clarified the definition of a range of preservation treatments;¹ these processes were also explored in "Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties: A Philosophical and Ethical Framework for Making Treatment Decisions."²

In 1988 the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) formed a task group as part of ASTM Subcommittee E6.24 on Building Rehabilitation and Preservation Technology to prepare a historic structure report guide. Drafts of this guide were circulated to numerous individuals and organizations in the field, including many members of APT, and were presented at several APT conferences. The task force determined early that the document needed to allow for variety and flexibility in the structures for which HSRs might be prepared, as well as in the format of report that might be required; therefore an ASTM guide rather than a standard was developed.³

The ASTM guide defines an HSR as "a document prepared for a building, structure, or group of buildings and structures

of recognized significance to record and analyze the property's initial construction and subsequent alterations through historical, physical and pictorial evidence; document the performance and condition of the building's architectural materials and overall structural stability; identify an appropriate course of treatment; and document alterations made through that treatment." It provides a list of reference documents related to HSRs, a discussion of their significance and use, approaches and procedures for preparing and using HSRs, and suggestions for the disciplines from which HSR team members may be drawn. Historical research, site inspection, methods of documentation, field testing and sample review, laboratory testing and materials analysis, evaluation of research and inspection results, and development of treatment recommendations are addressed, in addition to content, organization, application, and distribution of HSRs. The guide is currently in the process of formal ASTM review (balloting), after which it will be published as an ASTM reference document.⁴

Our goal for this special issue of the *APT Bulletin* was to examine HSRs on a range of structure types, prepared by persons of varying disciplines, for different kinds of clients and users. We sought to illustrate different approaches and processes and to cite work outside the U.S.

Buildings of major significance, such as the West Block of Parliament in Ottawa and Mount Vernon in Virginia, are explored in company with a historic walled garden in France. Approaches to HSRs are considered in papers from France, Canada, and Australia. The relationship between buildings and their landscape is of major concern in studies of a farmstead in Maine and a light station on South Manitou Island in Michigan.

Most HSRs are committed to ink-on-paper documents, issued in very limited quantities, and placed on a shelf. The last ten years have witnessed the rapid development of digital technology, providing preservation professionals with a ready tool to access important research documents cloistered within public and private collections from the comfort of their personal computers. Barrett Kennedy's

article investigates the process for developing graphic, Internet-accessible files that could make HSRs and related research materials more widely available.

One peer reviewer pointed out that this issue does not cover the limited-scope HSR prepared for the underfunded historic structure. What happens with the remote, timber-framed barn or indigenous stone building that receives few visitors and has limited or no use but is a significant representative of an unusual construction technique or dying culture? We trust that the examples given here will be useful even in those difficult cases and are hopeful that the *Bulletin* will address this subject in the future.

DEBORAH SLATON is an architectural conservator with Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates Inc., in Northbrook, Illinois. ALAN W. O'BRIGHT is an architect with the U. S. National Park Service in St. Louis, Missouri. Both have authored several HSRs and are co-authors, with Philip Hamp, of Vinci/Hamp Architects, Chicago, of the ASTM *Guide to the Preparation and Use of Historic Structure Reports*.

Notes

1. Kay D. Weeks and Anne E. Grimmer, *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring and Reconstructing Historic Buildings* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Dept. of the Interior, NPS, Cultural Resource Stewardship and Partnerships, Heritage Preservation Services, 1995).

2. Kay D. Weeks and H. Ward Jandl, in Stephen J. Kelley, ed., *Preservation and Rehabilitation*, ASTM Special Tech. Publ. 1258 (West Conshohocken, Pa.: ASTM, 1996).

3. *Form and Style for ASTM Standards*, 8th ed. (1989) states that a guide proposes "a series of options or instructions that offer direction without recommending a definite course of action." It is not a standard for all cases but "guidance based on a consensus of viewpoints ... to increase awareness of the user concerning available techniques in a given subject area...."

4. Final review is scheduled to be completed by spring 1997. The *APT Communiqué* will provide a publication update.