

Guidelines for Architectural Historians Testifying on the Historical Significance of Properties¹

Society of Architectural Historians
Heritage Conservation Committee

Architectural historians engage in research into, and the dissemination of knowledge about, the evolution of the art and craft of architecture and its place in the history of civilization. Architectural historians' judgments as to the value of historic architecture are often sought in public and private decisions regarding the preservation of our built environment.

It is essential to the integrity of the discipline that the architectural historian's testimony be based on sound scholarship, be an honest appraisal of all the pertinent circumstances, and be given with due regard for the gravity of its consequences.

Basic Principles

- Maintain objectivity and eschew dissemination of untrue, unfair, or exaggerated statements regarding the significance of any property or properties;
- Actively advocating for the demolition of historic properties is contrary to the overall mission of the Society and is strongly discouraged;
- Assess the significance of the property or properties in question according to applicable local, state, and/or federal criteria;
- Express a professional opinion only when it is founded upon adequate knowledge of the facts, upon expertise in pertinent areas of scholarship, and upon honest conviction;
- Disclose whether a fee has been paid for work related to the case in question;
- Avoid testimony if the person providing an opinion has any personal or professional interest which would be affected by the disposition of the matter at hand. At a minimum, such interests must be fully disclosed;
- Explicitly state that all testimony presented reflects solely that individual's opinion unless he or she has been duly authorized by an organization, agency, or firm to speak on its behalf.

¹ The first version of these guidelines was prepared by the Society of Architectural Historians' Committee on Preservation and were adopted by the SAH Board of Directors on 2 April 1986. The guidelines have received the official support of the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions, the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, and the Vernacular Architecture Forum. The document was further updated and revised and approved by the SAH Board on 9 November 2004. The document was significantly revised by the SAH Heritage Conservation Committee on 7 May 2017 and approved on 10 May 2019. It will be forwarded to the SAH Board for approval.

Guidance on Credentials

No one form of academic program is acknowledged to be the sole means by which an individual can become an architectural historian. Advanced degrees in art and architectural history form the primary bases for entering the discipline; nevertheless, comparable preparation in other fields such as historic preservation, American history, American studies, history, or cultural studies in other areas, geography, archaeology, and folk-life also may provide expertise in assessing aspects of the built environment in their historic context. Furthermore, architects, landscape architects, building conservators, and those practicing in professional design and planning fields may have expertise in facets of architectural history, as well as others who may have acquired expertise with little or no formal education in the field.

In all the above cases, a demonstrated record of achievement related to the historical subjects in question, rather than training or professional practice per se, should be considered the essential basis for one's qualifications to testify as an expert on matters pertaining to architectural history in a given case. Moreover, simply having an interest in old buildings or being involved with efforts to preserve them should not be considered an adequate basis for such testimony.

In presenting qualifications, architectural historians should be specific in enumerating their areas of expertise in applicable periods, building types, and geographical areas with respect to the case.

Guidance on Research

A foremost responsibility of architectural historians intending to testify on the significance of a property or properties is to familiarize themselves with that work to the fullest extent possible, including onsite study and relevant contexts, such as:

- other work of the period(s), type(s), and designer(s) involved;
- work employing similar materials, construction techniques, or systems;
- work commissioned by the same or comparable clients, occupied by the same or comparable clients, or occupied by the same or analogous groups; and
- the physical setting in both its historic and current dimensions.

In cases involving one or more properties within a designated historic district, or a precinct that has the potential to become a historic district, the full nature of the contribution of the property or properties to that district should be carefully considered. This information may be acquired by examining and assessing the validity of existing research or conducting new research or consultation with colleagues if needed. Testimony must be explicit regarding the degree to which it is based on original research or on the work of others.

Many subject areas have received little or no scholarly attention, and the absence of research should not necessarily preclude responsible efforts to save significant properties. Similarly, many cases cannot be researched in a definitive manner in the time available. Nevertheless, in all cases, architectural historians intending to testify should exercise their best professional judgment in determining whether adequate information is available and ensuring that no available information is being concealed from consideration.

Guidance for Evaluation

Architectural historians intending to testify should be thoroughly familiar with applicable local, state, and federal criteria for evaluation and gain a full understanding of the issues relating to significance that the testimony is intended to resolve. In many cases, historic properties that are threatened with demolition or major/inappropriate alterations will be judged by criteria that relate to local significance.

A given work may not rank among the finest designed by a distinguished architect, for example, but it may still be significant for the locality in question. Similarly, a building type that is common in some areas may be more significant in a region where it is rarely found.

Guidance on Fees

Taking a fee for testimony is legal under most circumstances and should not, in itself, be construed as diminishing the value of testimony. However, architectural historians should make every reasonable effort to demonstrate that their testimony is motivated solely by honest conviction, understanding of all relevant material, and scholarly expertise. In every instance, architectural historians testifying should state explicitly whether they have accepted a fee for that testimony; whether they have accepted, or at any time have accepted, a fee for work related to the case; and the source or sources of the fees. They should further explicitly state all the circumstances under which they are presenting testimony. In contractual agreements which will, or may at some later date, include testimony, that agreement should stipulate that the architectural historian will seek to arrive at an objective evaluation of the significance of the property or properties in question. The contracted fee should be structured according to the nature and extent of the work undertaken for research, analysis, and preparation of findings in a report or other appropriate form, and not according to the real or potential monetary value of the property or properties in question. Under some circumstances it may be prudent to perform such work incrementally; that is, prepare preliminary findings, and, should the contracting parties so agree, then proceed with an in-depth study. The contractual agreement should specifically preclude subsequent excerpting of portions of the study in a manner that distorts the overall findings of that study.

Adopted 10 May 2019

Society of Architectural Historians

Heritage Conservation Committee