

PAINTING 101: HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Painting can be one of the most dramatic improvements you make to your building. However, only paint a building that has been previously painted to maintain the historic look of the building. Measures should be taken to remove old paint from brick to restore the original brick, if applicable. In addition, if repointing must be done to prep the façade, before painting, consult with a mason experienced with using the type of mortar for the age of your building. If the building is metal or has metal components, we recommend consulting with a professional company for cleaning and preparatory work. The following steps will help smooth the way for a successful paint job on your historic building:



- 1. Evaluation.** Determine what you need to prepare for painting. Check all the wood. Is it sound or rotting? Does it have insect damage? Repair or replace any damaged areas that you find. If you need to repaint your masonry building, first check the mortar. Make sure the surface is prepped correctly before proceeding, including looking for moisture damage or possible areas where moisture could come in. If the building needs repointing, do that before painting.
- 2. Timing.** Plan a painting schedule. Some times of the year are better than others for painting. Good weather usually ensures a better paint job. Ask your local paint dealer for assistance.
- 3. Windows.** Check the condition of your windows. Glaze and repair windows as necessary. Replace any deteriorated putty with a glazing compound; be sure to put it all around the window. Wait two or three days for the compound to dry before painting.
- 4. Old Paint.** Prepare the surface adequately. Be sure to remove all peeling and loose paint. A variety of tools can be used: a wire brush, a scraper, a blow torch, or an electric heat gun. Use these last two devices carefully; employ only enough heat to soften the paint so that it can be easily removed. Do not blast masonry as this can ruin the old brick; instead, use a chemical application to help remove the old paint.
- 5. Primer.** A primer should be used for all bare wood surfaces as it helps the final coat adhere. Mix a little of the finish coat paint with the primer to achieve a richer color. If working with metal, primers need to be chemically compatible with the type of metal material before painting; be sure to choose a paint that is rust-inhibiting as well.
- 6. Building Material.** Determine the type of paint best suited for your building. Stone, brick, wood, concrete block, and metal all require different paints and primers.
- 7. Oil vs. Latex.** Which kind of paint should you use, oil or latex? That can depend on the material! We recommend reading more about this from Preservation Brief 11 from the National Park Service. There are advantages and disadvantages to each:
- 8. Shine.** Be aware that there are three degrees of shine for paint: gloss, semi-gloss, and flat/matte.
- 9. Quality.** Remember that quality paint will last longer than a cheap brand. It will not fade or peel as quickly and usually gives better coverage.

[A Note on Lead Paint](#)

If your building is more than 50 years old, it may contain lead-based paint. If you are removing the existing paint as part of the repainting process, have a sample tested. It is *imperative* that the testing be done by a reputable company or by a state testing lab. If there is a problem, contact your state environmental department for information on options for removing or encasing the lead-based paint.



An important reminder: Once you use latex, you must continue to use it. It is difficult to switch back to oil. If you have been using an oil-based paint, it is best to continue with oil.

PAINT COLOR

The color you paint your building, window trim, or door is, to some extent, a personal decision. It is an expression of yourself and your commercial establishment. However, there are other people and things to think about. The following procedures can help you decide what colors to use on your building.



- 1. Look Around!** Be a good neighbor and look at your building in the context of the entire block or downtown. The color of your building can affect the overall character of Main Street.
- 2. Investigate.** Decide whether you'd like to return your building to its original paint colors. If you are seeking historical accuracy, carefully scrape a small area to reveal different layers of paint. Please note that over time, the original color may have faded. To get a better idea of the true color, wet the original surface. The base color will appear more accurately when moist.
- 3. Research.** Color schemes for commercial buildings differ by region of the country. They also differ according to the period when the building was constructed. Scrape a small area of the building to determine its historic color. Sherwin Williams also has a line of historically-used colors to choose from. Choose a swatch that fits with the era of your building and what it was historically painted.
- 4. Sunlight.** Think about how the sun strikes your building. The amount of sunlight can change the hue of paint color. Hold a paint splotch against your building on cloudy and sunny days. To be certain about your color choice, invest in a quart of paint and apply it. There is a great difference between a small color spot and an entire wall.
- 5. White Paint.** It is important to remember that white paint was not used as widely during the Victorian period as it is today. White is a glaring color that does not blend in readily with most downtown environments. Historic downtown buildings traditionally used dark colors, especially on the window's trim and architectural features.
- 6. Trim.** Traditionally, building trim was painted as decoration, often in a contrasting shade lighter or darker than the primary building color. This paint treatment defined the trim, but it was not so overpowering that the trim colors dominated the buildings.
- 7. Aluminum Frames.** Today, aluminum frames have frequently replaced traditional wood doors and windows. The shine and metallic color of the aluminum do not complement historic buildings. Paint them a more neutral color or choose darker, anodized frames if the original window has to be replaced or the original window has previously been replaced.
- 8. Accent.** Paint color should be used to tie together all building elements, including the cornice, upper facade, windows, storefront, and doors. Use at most 4 colors to accent the features of your building that bring character.
- 9. Express Yourself!** With these procedures in mind, express the identity of your business through paint color. It adds to the richness and variety of Main Street.

