

Scotland's  
**Urban Past**  
YOUR TOWN YOUR STREET YOUR STORY



# INVESTIGATING BUILDINGS AND URBAN SPACES

## Reading buildings

This guide has been created by Scotland's Urban Past (SUP), a five-year community-engagement project from Historic Environment Scotland.

We support communities to record, research and celebrate the history on their doorsteps.

Through our free training and resources, people of all ages can discover and share the fascinating stories of Scotland's towns and cities.

[www.scotlandsurbanpast.org.uk](http://www.scotlandsurbanpast.org.uk)

# Reading buildings

**Visiting a site or building is an essential part of researching and recording towns and cities. Even if you already know the site or building well, it is always worth taking a fresh look.**

## Introduction

The urban landscape is made up of a wide variety of buildings and the open spaces between, such as gardens, streets, squares and parks. To understand each individual building you need to be aware of the context or the relationships between your chosen site or building and its neighbours.

Looking carefully at – or ‘reading’ – and understanding your urban landscape or building will inform what you choose to record in photographs, sketches and measured-survey drawings. View your chosen site from as many angles as possible. You may also wish to visit your site on several occasions, at different times of the day and year.

This exercise is simply about looking and understanding. Research using archival and other sources will then help you to develop a greater understanding of your site and its development over time.



## Keeping safe on site visits

**Before you visit your site or building,** ensure that:

- you have gained written permission, if required, from appropriate authorities or owner(s) to access a site or enter a building
- you have carried out a risk assessment of your site
- you are properly equipped with suitable clothing and safety equipment
- you have considered the timing of the visit (of the day and year) and weather conditions for safety reasons – consider the optimum sketching and photography opportunities
- you have selected safe and accessible points to observe, photograph and sketch



## Reading the urban landscape

We recommend you start with a broad view and then move on to the details. If there is more than one building, gain an overall impression of the wider group before moving on to individual buildings or structures (see below). From your chosen observation points, consider the following questions.

### Features of the land (topography) around your site or building

- are there any constructed features, such as a canal, railway, bridge, viaduct, tunnel?
- are there roads or an open space, such as a park, cemetery or vacant building plot, around your site or building?
- how wide are roads and pavements, and what materials are they made from?
- is there street furniture, such as any lamp posts, traffic lights, post boxes, telephone boxes, railings, seating or art works? What materials are used?
- are there trees or other planting?
- is the area or street well-looked after? Are building work or street improvements being carried out or have they been recently?

### Buildings in an urban context

- are the buildings uniform? Are the buildings terraced, detached? How many storeys does each building have?
- are there spaces between the buildings? What do they consist of?
- are the buildings entered directly from the pavement or are they set in their own ground?
- what types of buildings are there, such as houses or flats, shops, schools, industrial buildings, civic buildings?
- do any of the buildings look similar? Do any buildings seem unusual or out of place in comparison with others?

## Reading buildings, outside and inside

### **Buildings: exterior structure and forms**

- is each building inhabited, a ruin, a combination?
- how many storeys does the building have? Is there a basement and/or an attic?
- how many windows wide is it? Are all the storeys the same size? Are all the storeys in proportion?
- can you see if the building has been extended or changed?
- what type of roof(s) does the building have?
- what style is the building, for instance, Neoclassical, Baronial, vernacular? Can you see more than one style?
- does the style of the building look like other local buildings?

### **Buildings: exterior materials and details**

- what materials are used for the walls of each building?
- what materials are used for the roof(s) of each building?
- are the same materials used at the front, sides and rear of the building? If different materials have been used, can you tell if this is connected to changes or extensions to the building?
- are the building materials typical of the town, city or local area, for instance many buildings in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire are built of grey or pink granite?
- what shape are the doors and windows?
- what architectural features and decorative details can you identify on the walls, roof(s) and around the building?
- can you see a date or initials on the building? Can you see signs or advertising for earlier occupiers on the building? Can you find a makers name on metalwork or other material?
- is the style so distinctive or unusual that it suggests the work of an architect or designer?

### **Buildings: interior**

If you have permission and it is [safe to enter a building](#), start your examination of the building with the lowest floor and work upwards.

- what spaces or rooms are there on each floor?
- can you identify the style(s) of the interior spaces or rooms? Is there one style throughout the building or more? Does style inside the building correspond with style outside?
- can you see any structural materials?
- what materials are used for decoration and fittings?
- do any differences in the materials or the style seem to be connected to extensions to the building?
- are there any other features of interest or curiosity?

### **You and the site or building**

- does this building remind you of any others locally or further afield?
- do you have any memories connected with the area, street or building(s)?
- find out more about how to [collect memories](#) about a site or building



*A variety of architectural forms and features on the Canongate, Edinburgh.*

## Get started!

### Get to know your site or building by...

- [taking photographs](#)
- sketching
- making a [measured drawing](#)
- investigating the street layout and area in the past using historic maps
- discovering more about your site using our [research resources](#), libraries and archives



*Developing photo composition skills on the streets of Inverness.*



*Young Archaeologists in Dunfermline learn to make a measured drawing using a plane table and an alidade.*

## Notes

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