



## **IHBC GUIDANCE NOTES**

### **Façade maintenance and safety risks**

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*This is one of a series of occasional Guidance Notes published by The Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC). IHBC Guidance Notes offer current and recent guidance into topics that we consider crucial to the promotion of good built and historic environment conservation policy and practice. The Notes necessarily reflect knowledge and practice at the time they were developed, while the IHBC always welcomes new case examples, feedback and comment to [research@ihbc.org.uk](mailto:research@ihbc.org.uk) for future revisions and updates.*

### **Executive Summary**

1. This short Note draws attention to a recommended change in procedure relating to the periodic inspection of historic (commercial) facades – although the principles would also benefit wider application.
2. Because of the increasing frequency of extreme weather events as a consequence of global warming; inspection of historic facades is becoming more necessary to reduce the risk of the localized failure to facades and the consequent danger to the general public.

### **Background**

3. The concept of a statutory requirement for the periodic inspection of certain building facades as an adjunct to public safety is well-established in North America and parts of Western Europe. It operates particularly where climatic extremes are more frequently experienced. In the U.S.A. for example at least nine major cities have ordinances that require periodic inspections undertaken under the direction of a suitably qualified architect, surveyor or engineer.<sup>[1]</sup> Similar ordinances operate in Canada. <sup>[2]</sup> Although such inspections are usually mandatory on tall buildings; the ornate complexity of many less tall, Victorian and Edwardian city centre buildings of up to seven or eight

storeys in the UK pose similar inspection and maintenance questions.

4. Existing UK legislation deals principally with *post-facto* situations - problems when facades have already become unstable and are visibly dangerous. Repairing these is expensive and often disruptive, for example if roads need to be closed to traffic for extended periods.

5. Although it will never be possible to predict and address all potentially catastrophic building failures (particularly anticipating the complete safety of the public); owners who fail to implement a good practice inspection regime may be failing in a duty of care to prevent a risk to life to those using the public realm. In London, in February 2014 high-level masonry fell from a historic building killing a passing pedestrian. In November 2014 a balcony collapsed from an 1880's Grade 2 Listed Queen Anne Revival terraced house in a central London conservation area killing two removal men. Other regrettable incidents of serious injury have also been recorded in recent years attributed to extreme weather conditions exacerbated by the consequences of poor general maintenance. [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#)

## **New Guidance**

6. The Health and Safety Executive [HSE] has recently changed its guidance regarding inspections but this has not been widely publicised [\[5\]](#) despite a number of threats to life and fatalities as a consequence of falling masonry, not necessarily triggered during high winds and rain, but occurring later.

7. While such incidents remain, however rare, they demonstrate the need for vigilance on the part of owners, property portfolio managers and agents, and robust procedures regarding heritage management, particularly of large commercial listed buildings where full external access and regular maintenance inspections may have been a relatively low priority in the past.

8. The Health and Safety Executive has issued revised 'Workplace Regulations Approved Code of Practice and Guidance' in relation to Regulation 4A. [\[6\]](#) This promotes the principle that workplace buildings must have stability and solidity appropriate to their use but as this is issued as 'guidance' rather than as part of the Code of Practice itself it carries less weight - but might be a material consideration in any litigation arising from building failures.

9. A duty to have a solid and stable workplace building was defined by the European Union as long ago as 1989 and the UK Government was advised about failure to implement the directive in 2002. As a consequence, although a duty was imposed it was not considered necessary to have an

inspection regime to identify problems before these become dangerous. This absurd situation lasting for more than a decade has now been rectified by the HSE's recent update.

Paragraph 38 states:

*'An inspection and maintenance regime, appropriate to the building's type and use, should be determined to ensure that any defect which may cause an unacceptable safety risk is detected in good time, so appropriate remedial action can be taken. All inspection and maintenance should be carried out by suitably competent people. An inspection and maintenance regime does not necessarily need to be documented.'*

Paragraph 39 states:

*'Inspection and maintenance may require only the following:*

- *a general understanding of building construction and maintenance requirements;*
- *an awareness of the limitations of your experience and knowledge;*
- *the willingness and ability to supplement existing experience and knowledge, when necessary by obtaining external help and advice.'*

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## **Endnotes**

[1] See <http://www.facadeordinance.com/>

[2] Vancouver, Canada example, see [http://www.cityofvancouver.us/MunicipalCode.asp?menuid=10462&submenuID=10478&title=title\\_17&chapter=14&VMC=index.html](http://www.cityofvancouver.us/MunicipalCode.asp?menuid=10462&submenuID=10478&title=title_17&chapter=14&VMC=index.html)

[3] Following severe weather on Friday 14 November 2014, ornamental masonry fell into the street from George Attenborough & Son's jewellers premises a handsome carved frontage dates from 1843. on the corner of Fleet Street and Chancery Lane, London on 14 November 2014 causing a risk to drivers and pedestrians. City of London Police closed off the roads and London Fire Brigade used a cherry-picked to reach the unstable area on the second floor. The handsome carved frontage dates from 1843.

[4] It has been estimated that there have been at least 6 fatalities, 3 serious and 13 minor injuries from falling masonry in the UK since 1999.

[5] The additional advice appeared at the same time that the government were promoting further deregulation under the Red Tap Initiative.

[6] Guidance at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/l24.pdf>.