

Fig. 1. Elevations showing different degrees of significance
 (Extract from Significance Assessment Study for SM Barns by Heritage Architecture Ltd.)

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE IN PRACTICE: MANAGING CHANGE IN DOMESTIC HISTORICAL BUILDINGS IN ENGLAND

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Changes on lifestyle, fashion, modern standards of living and health and safety requirements can put a lot of pressure on historic buildings. In many cases, the original uses of such buildings are long gone and new uses need to be found; many also need to be re-adjusted to respond to higher demand for places to live. In both cases, change is required if these buildings are to survive at all.

This paper focuses on the process of carrying out significance assessments on historic buildings: a basic step to produce a Statement of Significance. The case of a barn conversion in England will be used to explain how change has been assessed and managed in an everyday practice. A methodology drawn from previous experience and good practice guidance is detailed. Opportunities and constraints in this process will also be highlighted.

Keywords:

significance – assessment – domestic – conservation – impact

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic buildings of historical significance are very often owned by private individuals, which in turn, are often used residentially. As detailed in Table 1 the majority of listed buildings in England belong to this group. However, these buildings outlive their inhabitants for generations and because of the intimate relationship (that of living in them) of this particular type of buildings and its inhabitants, constant change is ever more required, e.g. one cannot avoid using or upgrading a shower, the kitchen or opening the windows because these are of historic significance. All and every part of these properties usually continues to be used and to be functional.

Since for a domestic building to survive it is not enough to hold an historic or aesthetic value, buildings need to continue to be useful and appealing to modern people. Patterns of living also change; we no longer live in a society where, for instance, the kitchen is a space used solely by servants. Today the kitchen is a very different space than what it used to be when these buildings were conceived, accommodating all kind of activities such as studying, TV watching, socialising, etc. Therefore the question of change beyond of that essentially necessary, such as that for the upgrading

of services in a like-for-like approach, is often added to the equation.

Donald Insall summarises this elegantly:

“To attempt to preserve any place, literally and totally, would demand preserving its way of life, and that of the people who inhabit it. Logically speaking, it would demand that we deny every opportunity of improved education, or the benefits of public health and relief from the terror of disease, or of today’s increasing blessing of a longer life.” (INSALL, 2008: 93)

Therefore, it is crucial to make informed decisions for achieving a sensitive response to this constant change and to make sure that during this process the significant parts of the building are passed on to the following generations.

This paper will focus firstly in the actual process of assessing significance to domestic buildings and will use as an example chosen extracts from an Assessment of Significance (AoS) related to a timber frame barn building to illustrate the process. Secondly, it will touch the subject of the Statement of Significance and Impact Appraisal to complete the usual procedure¹.

¹ The drawings and tables used throughout this paper are examples extracted from a larger study produced by Heritage Architecture Ltd. This information is provided solely for illustration purposes and it is publicly available with the relevant authorities however, the building name and address is not disclosed for the privacy of the relevant parties.

Grade I	These buildings are of exceptional interest, sometimes considered to be internationally important	2.5% of listed buildings
Grade II*	These buildings are particularly important buildings of more than special interest	5.5% of listed buildings
Grade II	These buildings are nationally important and of special interest	92% of all listed buildings are in this class and it is the most likely grade of listing for a home owner
	In England there are approximately 374,081 listed building entries. (An entry can sometimes include more than one building – such as a terrace.)	

Graph detailing the age range of listed buildings in the UK

Source: English Heritage website

Table 1. Categories and age range of Listed Buildings in UK.

2. CASE STUDY: CONVERSION OF BARNs TO RESIDENTIAL USE

The following building was statutory protected as Grade II. In brief, the proposal of this barn entailed its conversion into residential use since its original function was redundant and the building was in desperate need of repairs.

3. THE ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

What is an Assessment of Significance

In brief, an AoS is the exercise of gathering the necessary information, documentation and analysis

that will eventually allow elaborating a Statement of Significance: a short declaration of the importance of the site and its attributes. In the Illustrated Burra Charter, Marquis-Kyle and Walker define Statements of Significance as follows:

“A statement of significance is the accepted formal method used by heritage organisations and professionals to describe the values that make a place important to the community. It is a summary of the outcome of investigations into the place, addressing all its values—cultural and natural—in a clear, easy to understand way” (2004, 79).

Furthermore, according to the current specific legislation in England *“...The level of detail should*



Fig. 2. Barn, UK.

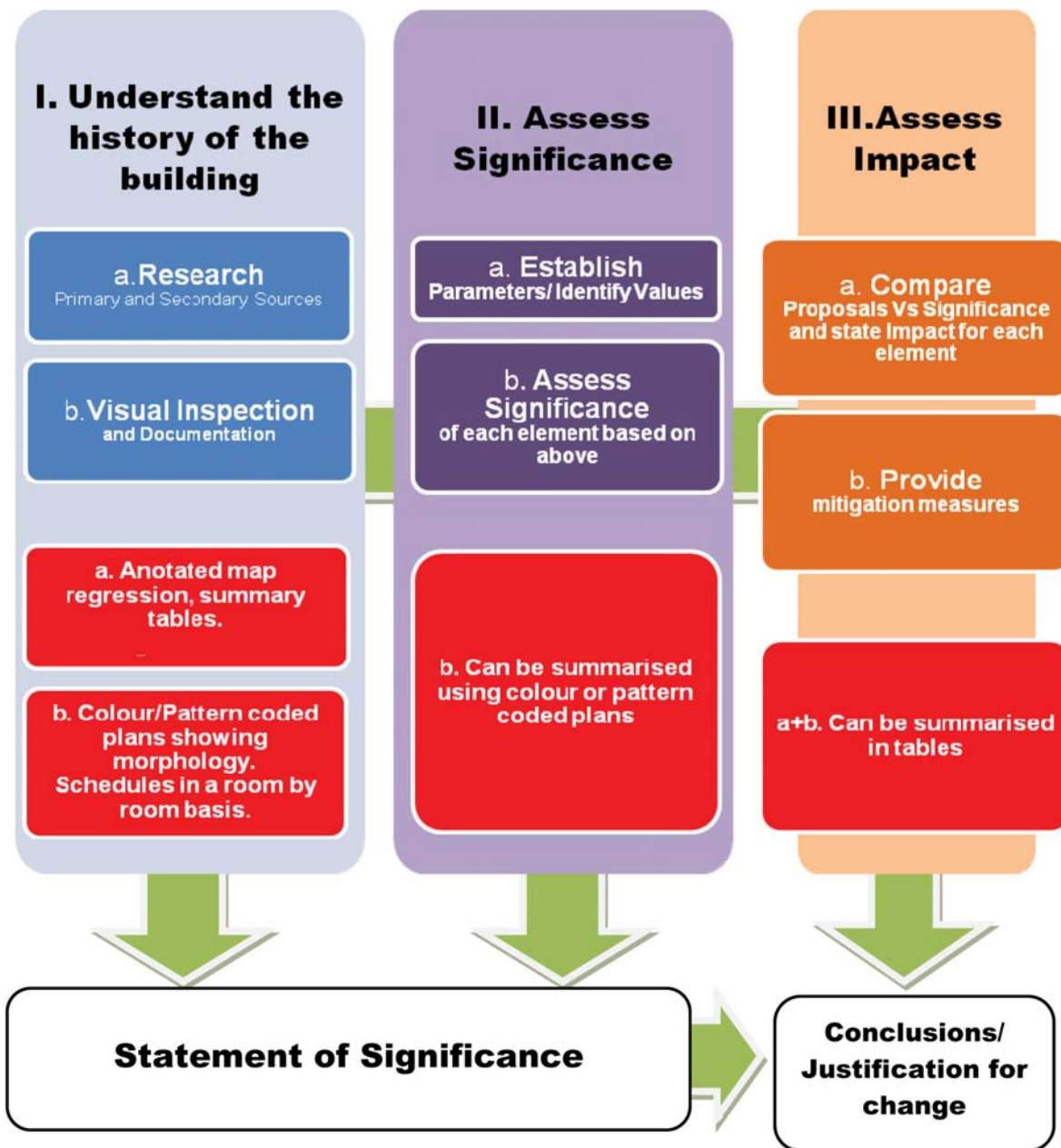


Fig. 3. Methodology for Assessing Significance + Good Practice.

be proportionate to the importance of the heritage asset and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on the significance of the heritage asset” (PPS 5, HE 6.1).

Therefore, allowed change on a listed Grade I building may vary significantly (much more restrictive) to a Grade II since the former is statutory recognised as of considerable higher value than the latter.

Why it is important to carry out an AoS

In the same way that a strategic plan guides a

government or a company in its priorities and course of action, a clear understanding of what is most significant in a building is essential before any proposal for changes is carried out. Having an AoS before starting to plan any modifications is of great help and a great time and money-saving measure because this means that all resources are focused in the right direction, right from the start.

How is an AoS produced

As summarised in Figure 1 and explained below it consists of a series of steps.

Element	S	Description
Roof Structure	1	Generally early timber posts, rafters, queen struts and purlins. Some possibly re-used from an earlier structure, however, of considerable age. Generally in fair condition, evidence of insect infestation in early and late timbers and possibly dry rot at rear elevation.
	3	Timber battens replacements.
Walls	1	Generally early timber studs with the exemption to south and north entrances where late timber was inserted to reduce the size of the openings [see schedule of exteriors].
Doors/Windows	4	(2x) Late timber ledged and braced doors.
Fittings/Fixtures	4	Modern lighting.
Flooring	4	Generally earth and cement flooring at eastern side of barn. Remains of earlier flooring at southern threshold.
Other	4	Late timber mezzanine, shelves and lockers.

Table 2. B1-Interior. Extract of the Schedules of Significance and Condition. A general description was given for each barn. (Heritage Architecture Ltd.)



4. THE METHODOLOGY

I. Understand the History of the Building

The more information that can be obtained before physically surveying the building, the easier it would be to understand and establish the significance of the building and each of its parts.

Documentary Research

Primary and Secondary sources should be used. Common sources include:

- Historical maps: Getting a sequence of historic maps is of great help to understand how the building and its context changed through time. It is ideal to get at

least one map of the area where the property is not yet shown as built and as many maps as possible were major changes are discernible.

- Planning records: These records may provide us with more detailed information on the physical changes that a property endured in the last decades.

- Occupant's records/Census: a record of all the people who lived in the house. These records often state the occupation and ages of the inhabitants at some given time. There is a direct relationship between the number of changes of ownership and the changes undergone within a single property. Furthermore, sometimes the identification of a notable tenant becomes part of the significance of the house.

- Private records: personal letters of previous owners describing works to the house, oral accounts and family photographs are an invaluable resource.

- Previous experience: The knowledge acquired by working with buildings of the same period, architect and/or area is also of immense value, especially when records such as those mentioned above are not available.

Survey of the physical fabric

This entails a detailed visual inspection of the property in a determined area-by-area basis (e.g. room-by-room, floor-by-floor). Ideally, before carrying out the survey the research using the resources mentioned above has been finished. However, it is not uncommon some overlap between the two, resulting in further visits of the site.

During the survey all elements of the building should be recorded in an orderly manner. Also, the fabric, material, condition, integrity, etc., of each element may be described. Table 2 is an example of how this information may be organised. The information gathered works as a detailed documentation of the site for the future.

II. Significance Assessment of each element in respect to the whole

Identification of Values (establish parameters)

Once the history of the site has been understood and its fabric has been closely surveyed the values of the

site should be identified. The specific elements that convey each of these values should be highlighted.

English Heritage’s Conservation Principles describes a range of heritage values, arranged in four groups, which may be attached to places. These are:

- Evidential value: the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity.

- Historical value: the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present – it tends to be illustrative or associative.

- Aesthetic value: the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.

- Communal value: the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory.

In other words, the first step is to establish and explain what has been considered to state the significance throughout the analysis of the fabric of the building. This requires, inter alia, an analysis of the following: the intrinsic architectural merit (architectural design, plan form, decoration, craftsmanship, building type and technological innovation or virtuosity); Its completeness in terms of external characteristics, internal features and plan form; the contribution it makes to the character of the area due to its value as a landmark, or as particularly good example of local traditions, etc.; and the extent to which the building illustrates important aspects of the nation’s social,

Grade 1 Highly Significant	Elements belonging to the original concept and design fundamental part of the building typology and contributing to its townscape presence. <i>These parts ought to be retained.</i>
Grade 2 Significant	Elements that belong to the original structure, concept and design and still possess some original features, i.e. possible remains of fireplaces. This category also comprises those ensembles that represent very good surviving examples of spatial organization of the original structure. <i>For these parts alterations, changes or removals have to be treated with particular attention.</i>
Grade 3 Moderate or neutral Significance	Elements that remain from the original plan-form but do not have any value per-se and, due to later alterations, have lost their contextual meaning. <i>These parts can be removed according to new design decisions.</i>
Grade 4 No significance / Detrimental	Parts or elements that are visually intrusive, or those elements that detract from the intactness of the building, or are of poor craftsmanship quality. Internal and external elements that have been added with time, i.e. later partitions, suspended ceilings, later doors and windows. <i>These elements have to be removed. These are opportunities for enhancement.</i>

Table 3. Example of a grading system. (Edited from Heritage Architecture Ltd.)



Fig. 3. Example of a Morphological Study. The Morphological study as shown above was the result of research and a methodical physical observation of the site. The age of each of the barns was determined thanks to information found in old maps and advice of an expert on timber structure buildings. (Source: Heritage Architecture Ltd.)

economic, cultural or military history and/or close historical associations with important people or events, etc.

Using a grading system

The values identified as explained above form the foundation of the grading system. Using a grading system allows illustrating in a concise and straightforward manner the degree in which each of the elements of the building may contribute to the values identified and provides information of how elements pertaining to this category should be treated. These are also intended to give sufficient guidance on the preparation of proposals for repair and alteration to the buildings. An example of a grading system is found in Table 3.

An easy way to represent the outcome of the information is by producing drawings showing the morphology of the property and significance of each part. These drawings should be cross-referenced with the tables of descriptions produced during the physical survey of the building. It is very important to mark up the areas where assumptions were made, and areas that could not be surveyed See Figures 3 & 4.

Common complications:

Besides the usual problems to access certain parts of a building (e.g. flooring covered by modern carpet, doors locked, etc.) determining the authenticity of some elements would require a trained eye, especially because replicas are all too common. If in doubt, a good description is of great help together with good quality pictures so that a second opinion of colleagues or specialists can determine its real significance if required.

4. BEYOND THE AOS: IMPACT APPRAISAL AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Even though this is an additional step to the assessment of significance of a building, it is considered to be best practice to assess the impact of each proposal of a change or an intervention to a building and suggest mitigation measures for each element. It could either be included as a general statement (e.g. all doors should be treated as...) or it may be very detailed (e.g. door 12 should be...). An example of a detailed impact appraisal is found at Table 4.

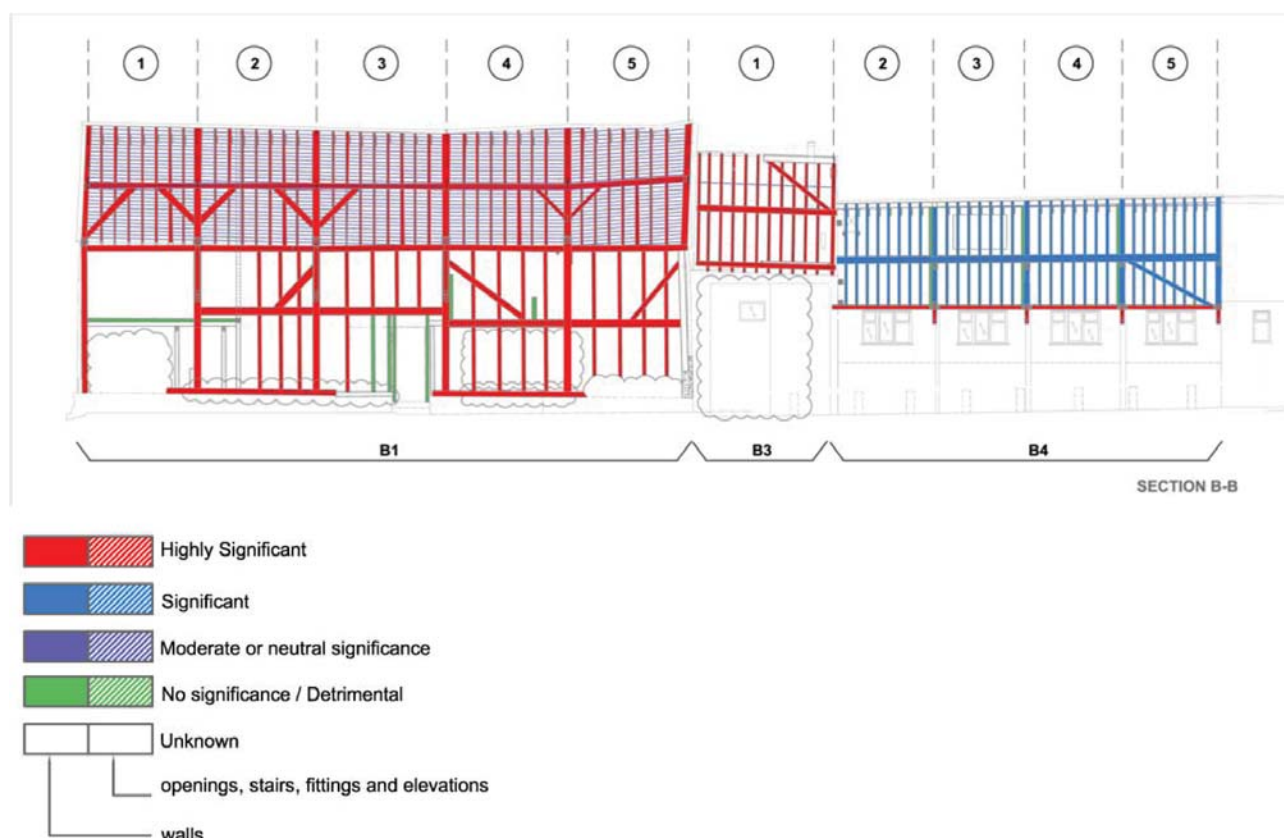


Fig. 4. Extract of a significance assessment drawings. These drawings were cross-referenced with the schedules (Table 2). The significance and sensitivity of particular elements of the structure were given using colour coded drawings. (Source: Heritage Architecture Ltd.).

5. FINAL REMARKS

Carrying out an AoS provides us with a great tool for managing change in a responsible way by making informed decisions when change is inevitable and desirable. However, should there be uncontrolled change to valued buildings without clearly stating the aspects that make the buildings significant in the first place, runs the risk of removing what has the most value. Similarly, failing to take the opportunity on documenting the process of changing the buildings runs the risk of losing a valuable window to this moment in history for the future. There is much knowledge and ingenuity in old structures and history has thought us very well that what we value today, may not be exactly what we, or future generations, will value in the future.

“Change to a significant place is inevitable, if only as a result of the passage of time, but can be neutral or beneficial in its effect on heritage values. It is only harmful if (and to the extent that) significance is eroded” (Drury, P., McPherson, A., 2008, pp 43).

This paper has argued that the understanding of the values that a building represents and the physical identification of the elements that convey these form the foundations of the Statement of Significance, which is an invaluable tool to adapt buildings. In the process of gathering and analysing the information to produce such statement, what is referred to as the AoS, one would assure that a detailed documentation of the fabric of a building and patterns of living is also produced.

Summarising the AoS using tables and colour or pattern coded drawings provides a concise and straightforward tool for guidance in changes to the fabric of a building as well as inform future generations of the changing pattern in the building’s continuing history.

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Table 4. Extract of the Impact Appraisal. (Source: Heritage Architecture Ltd.)

Barns		Area: B1	
Impact Appraisal on proposed alterations			
Potential impact upon the fabric: beneficial or enhancing; neutral; negative or detracting			
Magnitude and sensitivity: negligible; very low; medium low; medium; medium-high; high; very high.			
Element	Work	Impact	Mitigation/notes
Roof	Existing timber structure to be repaired and strengthened as described in Section 12.2.4 of this report.	Beneficial/ Medium-high	Please refer to CBP dwg No. 1124/AP 05 The insulation zone is to the outside of the original timber frame structure in order to expose the timber frame internally whilst maintaining the original external appearance.
Walls	Existing non original gallery to be strengthened and provided with stairs as described in proposal dwg. No. 1124/AP02 Installation of insulated studwork with wbp ply inner lining between existing timbers at walls and eaves.	Beneficial / Medium	Existing gutter and eaves level to be maintained at existing heights. Existing shiplap boards and tiles to be re-used whenever possible and new to match existing will be used when needed.
		Neutral/ Medium-high	
Doors/ Windows	Reinstatement of earlier double door openings and creation of window openings at NW, SW and W elevation between existing studs. Removal of later internal partitions and doors, detrimental to the building. New doors and windows	Neutral/ Medium	At this Barn there are no original surviving doors or windows. However, there is evidence of these wide earlier openings (See section 5.1.2.2) The new windows are proposed to be with dark stained timber frames.
		Beneficial/Medium	
		Neutral/ Medium-low	
Fittings/ Fixtures	Installation of new kitchen	Low/negative	Required for change of use. Freestanding and reversible.
Flooring	N/A		

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