

## Writing an Accurate Architectural Description (Item 9)

The following items should be included if you choose to write an architectural description of the nominated site rather than use the Description Worksheet. You should be able to describe a building in a page or less. Be clear and concise in your language, and be sure that you are describing the building's existing condition rather than its original or earlier appearance. Generally, you should move from the macro to the micro – from its size, style, and use to its doors, windows, and ornamentation. Use style guides and architectural dictionaries to help identify the building's architectural style and find the correct terminology for its component parts. Here's a sample outline to help organize your description:

### Basic Outline

1. Begin with a comprehensive overview sentence that captures some of the building's major features (including number of stories, style, and use).
2. Continue with further description of macro aspects: building shape, cladding material, roofing material, and foundation material. Indicate and describe any differentiation between primary (street) facades and secondary (rear and/or side) facades.
3. Begin to focus on specific features: window type, doors and door surrounds, porches, chimneys, storefronts, etc., and the location of these elements on the facades.
4. Focus in on any particularly distinctive ornamental features or design details
5. Discuss the overall condition of the building materials and features
6. Note any obvious alterations from the building's original condition, for example window replacement, additions, or changes in the cladding material.
7. Describe the building's interior spaces – for a residential structure, note the number of bedrooms and bathrooms and the general configuration of the layout. For commercial, industrial, or institutional buildings, note the primary “public” spaces and their uses, along with the general configuration of the layout. Include a description of all notable historic interior features, including built-in furniture, fireplace mantles, decorative moldings, plumbing fixtures, tilework, flooring materials, etc. If you don't include this information in your nomination, important interior features may not receive the protection they deserve.
8. Describe the building's relationship to its site, to the street, or to adjacent buildings. Include specific landscaping features, if appropriate.

Here are a few useful resources:

*A Field Guide to American Houses*, Virginia and Lee McAlester, 1984

*What Style Is It?*, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1983

*Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Architecture*, Cyril Harris, 1983



## Tips for Effective Descriptions

1. Organize your description from the basic to the specific. The style, size, and use of the building should appear in the first sentences.
2. Avoid subjective judgments. You are trying to preserve the building. Negative comments could have the opposite effect.
3. Don't "list" the building's features - try to make the description flow. It may take several rewrites before you have a complete description.

## Sample Architectural Descriptions

### A. **Commercial:** San Fernando Building

The San Fernando Building is located at the southeast corner of Fourth and Main Streets. The reinforced concrete structure consists of eight stories above a basement. The building has an E-shaped plan above the first story to allow for light wells. Typical of the Beaux-Arts style in which it is rendered, the building is horizontally organized with a base represented by the first two stories, a shaft represented by the third through sixth stories, and a capital represented by the seventh and eighth stories. The north and west facades face Fourth and Main Streets respectively and are nearly identical. The north façade has eight vertical bays, while there are six bays on the west façade.

The base of the building is clad in cast concrete, designed to resemble rusticated stone. There are two main entrances to the building, one in the third bay from the south on Main Street and the other in the fourth bay from the east on Fourth Street. There are three original storefronts in the easternmost bays on Fourth Street. The second story windows are set above spandrel panes with an incised diamond motif. IN each bay on the second story are three pivoting windows with a single transom above. In each bay on the third through eighth stories are three one-over-one double-hung sash windows. The bays are separated by simple rusticated piers, and are set above diamond incised spandrel panels in the fourth, fifth, and sixth stories. A denticulated cornice, punctuated by corbels over the piers, runs above the sixth story. The upper two stories were added to the building in 1911. They are distinguished by ornamental friezes set above the seventh and eighth stories. A denticulated cornice caps the building.

While the interior of the building has been extensively altered, the T-shaped, ground floor lobby remains largely intact.



**B. Residential: Cliff May Experimental House**

The Cliff May Experimental House is a one-story Modern California Ranch style structure with an open rectangular floor plan. The Experimental House is clad with board and batten wood siding with wood trim and the central gable of the low-pitched shingle roof is punctuated by a 288 square foot rectangular glass skylight, supported by two metal cross-beams. May constructed both bathroom ceilings of glass. A thin band of clerestory windows are located just under the eaves. In addition, a 15-foot sliding glass wall opens from the living room to an exterior patio.

Inside, the house is devoid of most interior walls. Spaces are defined by twenty-five 2'x 4'x 6' movable mahogany partitions placed on concealed rubber wheels. The only interior walls used define the two bathrooms and the U-shaped kitchen. All floors within the house are hardwood. An interior fireplace has been added.

The attached garage continues the overall horizontal axis with a slightly-lowered, minimally-pitched roofline with extended. The garage has been converted into an additional bedroom. Other contributing elements to the Experimental House include a board and batten backyard fence, a firepit, a semi-circular auto court, and custom landscaping by Thomas Church with Specimen Sycamores and California Live Oaks.

