

Open-ended Questions and Questions to Start

- What do you notice about this building?
- What strikes you about this building?
- Let's take a moment to look at this building. When you notice something, just shout it out.

Open-ended questions like these can be very useful in helping you gauge your audience and understand where their interest is, or what they are immediately drawn to. This information can be helpful in determining the next, more focused, question to ask or what information can serve as an entry to other types of information. For example, a visitor who repeatedly comments on the materials used in a building may be much more interested in hearing about construction techniques and innovations, city planning, supplies of available materials, etc., and may stay engaged longer. A visitor who asks "How many people lived here?" or "What did the person who lived here do for a living?" may be more interested in the stories of the people involved—the architect, original owner, or subsequent owner. This visitor may stay engaged longer if information is presented in terms of how a person was involved ("*The architect chose locally-quarried sandstone because it was readily available,*" v. "*Sandstone was readily available.*").

If your group is slow to respond at first, sometimes changing the question to something more specific can help, such as:

- Compare this building to the one we were just looking at. What do you notice that is similar or different? When you think of something, just shout it out.
- Does anybody see anything they particularly like or don't like about this one?

Sometimes a more directed and specific question is needed to get the ball rolling:

- Does anyone notice anything unusual about the foot-print of this building, compared to the last one we saw?

For open-ended questions, I find the following tips helpful:

- Validate every response by repeating it to make sure the group heard it, and saying something like "*That's great. She noticed that all of the first floor windows have elaborate hoods, but the second floor windows have plain hoods. Does everyone else see that?*"

- Don't be afraid of silence or quiet for a minute, while people are looking and thinking.
- View all responses as valid, even if they may seem incorrect at first. Try to figure out what the visitor is getting at. For example, in a comparison between The Mansion Hill Inn and N.B. Van Slyke's first house, a visitor may say *"They're made out of the same materials."* Because these two buildings are not made out of the same materials, try to get the visitor to look more closely by asking follow-up questions, such as *"OK, let's take a closer look. How are the materials being used?"* or *"How do the materials affect the appearance of the decorative details?"* These questions can help focus the visitor, and let him discover the correct answer himself.

Open-ended questions can be followed by more targeted questions, based on the initial observations of the group, or based on what information you want to include for reference later on. For example, to your question *"What do you notice about this building?"* a visitor may respond with:

"This building looks like it was made out of stone."

If you are interested in pursuing this line, you could follow up with:

"Yes, he noticed that this building is made of stone. Does anyone have any observations about the stone, such as how the surface of the stone has been treated or how the artist is using the stone decoratively?"

If you feel you need to move along, you can respond and redirect by saying:

"Yes, this architect used sandstone that was quarried locally. This architect also designed many buildings in the German Romanesque Revival style. If you remember the 'Romanesque' elements from the last building we saw, what elements do you see here that are similar?"