Buildings & Architecture Vocabulary

Topic vocabulary for the IELTS exam

* Important
  • Do not try and learn this list of vocabulary.
  • Identify the vocabulary you find useful for answering practise questions about buildings and architecture.
  • Record these in your vocabulary notebook and practise using them regularly.

Set 1: Key definitions

building – a structure that has a roof and walls
- There used to be a field behind my house but now it’s covered in buildings.
architecture – the practise of designing buildings; the style in which buildings are made
- Paulo studied architecture at university before joining the family building business.
- My favourite style of architecture is Georgian because it is bold and beautiful but not too ornate.
architect – a person who designs buildings
- Tammy’s friends laughed when she said she wanted to design houses when she left school but she grew up to be an award-winning architect.
feature – a distinctive attribute or aspect of something
- The best feature of the new church in our town is the stunning, modern spire.
façade – the front of a building, especially a large or attractive building
- The British Museum in London is famous for its grand Classical façade.
landmark – an object or building that is easily seen and recognized from a distance, especially one that enables someone to establish their location
- The Eiffel Tower is probably the best-loved landmark in Paris.
heritage – things, such as buildings and traditions, that are important to a nation’s history
- Some people complain that large historic houses cost a lot to maintain but they are part of our heritage and should be preserved.

Set 2: Building materials

building material – any material which is used for construction purposes
- The house would look fabulous when it was finished but at the moment it was little more than a pile of building materials.
brick – a small rectangular block typically made of fired or sun-dried clay, used in building
- They decided to build their house with bricks rather than concrete blocks.
concrete – building material that is made by mixing together cement, sand, small stones and water
- Concrete is a very popular building material because it is strong and can be moulded into different shapes.

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reinforced concrete – concrete with metal bars or wire embedded in to increase its strength
- Reinforced concrete is the perfect material for constructing large structures such as tower blocks and bridges.

steel – a strong hard metal that is made of a mixture of iron and carbon
- Modern architects such as Zaha Hadid use steel to create stunning futuristic designs rather than just using it to form the hidden framework of a building.

timber – wood that is prepared for use in building
- In Sweden, timber is a popular building material because they have lots of forests.

stone – a hard, solid substance found in the ground, used for building
- Stone has been used as a building material for centuries.

glass – a hard, brittle, man-made material that you can see through
- These days, they can make glass that is so strong that you can have whole walls made out of it.

marble – a type of hard stone, often with a beautiful lined pattern going through it, that can be highly polished
- The Taj Mahal is the most famous building in the world made from marble.

Set 3: Types of building
See my Home Vocabulary list for 18 different types of house/accommodation.
Other types of building:

manor house – a large country house surrounded by land that belongs to it
- It’s so nice to see the old manor house being renovated after the previous owners let it fall into disrepair.

castle – a strong building, often large, built in the past by a ruler or important person to protect the people inside from attack
- Most castles were built on a hill so that the occupants could see the enemy approaching.

sky-scaper – a very tall building
- With the development of stronger building materials, they are able to build skyscrapers higher and higher.

office block – a building made up of many different offices, often of different companies
- Many old buildings in the city are being demolished to make way for smart new office blocks.

warehouse – large building built for the storage of raw materials or manufactured goods before they are distributed for sale
- There is a real trend for converting old warehouses into fashionable apartments.

public building – a building owned by the state or local government and used by the public, e.g. townhall, library, museum, leisure centre
- Many public buildings are quite old and cost a lot of money to maintain

commercial building – buildings that are used for commercial purposes, such as, office blocks, shops and warehouses
- Most of my architect friends design houses but I much prefer working on commercial buildings.

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**prefabricated building (prefab)** – buildings that are made in sections in a factory and can be put together quickly
- Prefabs were popular after the war when many new homes had to be built quickly but are coming back into fashion with new technology and modern designs.

**historic building** – an old building that is important to history
- We are fortunate in my country to have many magnificent historic buildings.

**a ruin** – a building reduced to a state of decay and collapse
- One of the most visited historic sites in the world is the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu in Peru.

**monument** – a statue, building, or other structure erected to commemorate a notable person or event, often of historical importance
- India gate is one of the most recognisable monuments in India.

**Set 4: Features of buildings**

**column** – large, upright pillar, typically cylindrical, supporting the upper part of a building
- The huge columns of many ruined Greek temples are still standing today.

**pillar** – a tall vertical structure of stone, brick, wood, or metal, used as a support for a building
- The roof was supported by two rows of brick pillars.

**arch** – a curved symmetrical structure spanning an opening and typically supporting the weight of a bridge, roof, or wall above it
- Old churches are one of the best places to see impressive arches.

**steeple** – a tall pointed roof, usually on a church
- The church steeple could be seen for many miles away from the town.

**spire** – similar to a steeple but usually a narrower structure
- Skyscrapers such as the Shanghai World Finance Center often have a spire built on top to make them taller and thus increase their prestige.

**tower** – a tall, narrow building, either free-standing or forming part of a large building such as a church or castle
- There was an amazing view over the city from the top of the tower.

**dome** – a rounded roof
- The dome of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is one of the most recognisable domes in the world.

**balcony** – a platform enclosed by a wall or bars on the outside of a building, with access from an upper-floor window or door
- My dream home would have a balcony overlooking the sea.

**Set 5: Popular styles of architecture**

Examples can be seen on the Buildings Vocabulary page of the website.
(These words are all proper nouns, so start with a capital letter)

**Classical** – characteristic of the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome

**Gothic** – characterised by large expanses of glass, clustered columns, sharply pointed spires, intricate sculptures and pointed arches
**Georgian** – based on the simple elegance of classical architecture, with little ornamentation. Symmetry of design was important.

**Victorian** – characterised by sash windows set in bay windows, an asymmetrical shape, bright colours and decorative features

**Art Deco** – characterised by simple, clean shapes, usually with a ‘streamlined’ look and decoration that is geometric or stylised forms of plants, animals and sunrays

**Islamic** – known for its arches, domes, minarets, geometric designs, courtyards and often colourful tile decoration

**Modernist** – typically characterized by simple designs in glass, steel and reinforced concrete and no ornamentation

**Futuristic** – extremely modern and unusual in appearance, as if belonging to a future time

**Set 6: Descriptions**

**elegant** – graceful and stylish in appearance  
- Amira loved the **elegant** lines of the building’s Art Deco façade.

**stunning** – extremely impressive or attractive  
- Igor had doubts about the Futuristic design of the new library building but had to admit that it looked absolutely **stunning** when finished.

**eye-catching** – very attractive or noticeable  
- She found the carved stone pillars particularly **eye-catching**.

**ornate** – covered with a lot of decoration, especially complicated designs  
- It’s common for grand manor houses to have **ornate** ceilings.

**a radical design** – extreme  
- Pilau liked his buildings to stand out and was well-known for his **radical designs**.

**controversial** – something that people have strong opinions about; something that people either love or hate  
- The design of the new town hall was certainly **controversial** and strongly opposed by many people.

**iconic** – in architecture, a design that is ‘ground-breaking’ and sets new standards or a building that represents a particular style of architecture  
- The Sydney Opera House is Australia’s most **iconic** building.

**state of the art** – incorporating the newest ideas and features  
- The new hospital was **state of the art** and medical professionals from across the country were eager to work there.

**spacious** – having lots of space for people to move around in  
- Older properties tend to have more **spacious** rooms than modern homes.

**geometric** – patterns or shapes consisting of regular shapes or lines  
- Many styles of architecture incorporate **geometric** designs both for strength as well for decoration.

**symmetrical** – where one side is the same as the other  
- If you cut a **symmetrical** design in half, one side is the mirror image of the other.
**ugly / unsightly** – unpleasant to look at; not attractive
- I think that the houses being built on many new housing estates are really ugly.

**monstrosity** – a thing, especially a building, which is very large and unsightly
- The civic centre in our town, of typical 1960's design, is a total monstrosity and I wish they’d demolish it to build something more attractive.

**eyesore** – a building that is not attractive
fall into disrepair – to be in a damaged state, often to the extent that it is dangerous
- The cinema used to be a beautiful building but has become a bit of an eyesore since it fell into disrepair.

**past its heyday** – no longer at the peak of popularity or success
- Although Victorian architecture is past its heyday, Victorian townhouses are still very popular as they make spacious family homes.

**derelict** – in very poor condition as a result of disuse and neglect
**demolish** – completely destroy a building
They are going to demolish the derelict buildings down at the docks to make way for a development of new waterside apartments.

Set 7: Improving a property
See my [Home Vocabulary](#) list for some home improvement words and phrases.
Here is some related buildings vocabulary:

**preserve** – to keep looking the same
- The National Trust is a charity in the UK that is dedicated to restoring and preserving historical buildings.

**transform** – to change something completely, usually to improve it
- The new owners transformed the derelict manor house into a stunning country hotel.

**maintain** – keep something in a good condition by checking and repairing it regularly
- Old buildings generally cost more to maintain than ones built with modern materials.

Set 8: Buildings & the environment

**energy efficient** – using little electricity, gas, etc.
- These days, one of the most important considerations in building design and the choice of building materials is energy efficiency.

**insulation** – material used to stop heat escaping
- In cold climates, it’s important for buildings to be well insulated and glass fibre is often used as roof insulation.

**double glazing** – windows which have two layers of glass with a space between them, designed to reduce the loss of heat and exclude noise
- The first thing they did to improve the old property was to put in double glazed windows.

**eco-friendly** – not harmful to the environment
- Installing solar panels to cut down on the use of fossil fuels is one of the best ways to make your home eco-friendly.

**wheelchair friendly** – meets the needs of people who use a wheelchair in terms of access and internal services
- Historic houses that are open to the public are required to make alterations to ensure that they are as wheelchair friendly as is practically possible.
Set 9: Basic buildings vocabulary

definition – the outside of something, especially a building
- The exterior of the pretty little cottage was painted pink.
derivation – the inside of something, especially a building
- The cottage had small windows, making the interior quite dark.

celling – the top inside surface of a room
- A popular feature of Georgian properties is their high ceilings which make rooms feel really spacious.
floor – the lower surface of a room that people walk on
- Bare floorboards are very popular in the homes of today but I prefer carpet as it makes floors warmer to walk on.
stairs – a long set of steps inside a building joining the different levels
- The children were told not to leave their toys on the landing in case someone tripped over them and fell down the stairs.
storey – a level of a building
- The three-storey house with an extra bedroom in the attic was perfect for Milek, Edyta and their four children.
firplace – a space in the wall at the base of a chimney for a fire to burn
- When people renovate Victorian properties they often remove the old fireplaces but some keep them as decorative features.

For the vocabulary related to the different rooms in a house see my Home Vocabulary list.

Set 10: Other vocabulary

blueprint – a design plan or other technical drawing
- Bruno and Claudia were so excited when the architect rang to say that the blueprints of their new house were ready for them to look at.
**design** – a plan or drawing produced to show the look of something, e.g. a building, before it is created
- Rahul worked closely with his clients to create a **design** that perfectly matched their idea of their dream home.

**planning permission** – formal permission from a local authority for the erection or alteration of a building
- It’s very difficult to get **planning permission** to make alterations to a historic building.

**building site** – an area of land on which a building or a group of buildings is in the process of being built or altered
- It was fascinating watching the muddy **building site** gradually transformed into a smart new housing estate.

**to construct** – to build
- It took five years to **construct** the Buri Khalifa skyscraper in Dubai.

**to put up** – to build
- They are **putting up** an ugly office block on the site of the lovely old theatre.

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**For IELTS-style practise questions**

For IELTS-style buildings and architecture-related practise questions and sample answers visit: