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Preservation and Design

Richard W. Longstreth

That preservation has become a major growth industry in architecture is no secret. Firms of all types and sizes across the country are pursuing work which would have attracted scant interest a decade ago. If this shift continues, it may be among the most radical and far reaching in its consequences to occur in design during the 20th century. Prompted by changes in public attitude, growth patterns, and the economy, preservation has emerged as a formidable rejuvenating force. The movement's meteoric rise, combined with the pronounced difference in values that it represents, has caught the profession somewhat off-guard and not well equipped to address the challenge.

Traditionally, the practice of architecture has been oriented toward new construction and little else. The organized, ongoing effort to save old buildings—what we now call preservation—did not begin in earnest until the late 18th century. From that time until the recent past, the effort focused on documenting, restoring and maintaining properties considered to be major contributors to a nation's cultural legacy. Restoring these monuments soon gained acceptance as an important extension of architectural practice, one that closely tied to the mainstream of professional concerns. Nineteenth-century restoration architects were very much involved in designing new work and sometimes in developing design theory. With eclecticism a principal underpinning of practice, architects embraced

restoration; it saved buildings that were a source of inspiration and the process itself offered myriad new insights on the past which could directly affect the tone of contemporary design.

By the early 20th century, the complexity of and demand for restoration had reached the point where it was emerging as a discrete field. Even in the United States, where methods were less advanced than in Europe, a few architects began to channel most of their energies into restoration during the 1920's and 1930's. The gap between old and new also increased due to the growing acceptance of modernist tenets. At a time when young architects sought to create a totally new urban order, the restorationist worked ever more in a world of his own.

On the other hand, architects of all sorts have long been occupied in renovating buildings. This process has usually emphasized change over retention. Its effects have intensified over the past hundred years with the abundance of new, inexpensive veneers and other easily assembled components. The desire to transform a building's appearance completely has been the most pronounced in the United States, stimulated by economic prosperity and a taste for newness. Renovation became synonymous with modernization, giving the edifice a new "look," whether or not modifications occurred in use. As such, the process was an expedient substitute for building anew.

The concept of preservation as an effort to save a large segment of the manmade landscape is new, gaining currency in the United States over the past twenty years. The idea combines traditional aspects of restoration (retain) and renovation (change), while modifying them both. Total restoration is now seen as being unnecessary, even undesirable, in most instances. Renovation is seen as a means to preserve significant existing features and, in some cases, may be considered more prestigious than new construction. Combining these facets was first devised to rescue more landmarks than the relatively few which could serve as historical museums. The process has become much broader in its application, encompassing every type of idiomatic structure and settlement patterns. To achieve this objective, preservation has embraced adaptive use, a practice dating back at least to Roman antiquity, but one that was seldom sympathetic to the existing building. With change now an integral part of the program, the split between preservation and new design is closing.

Nevertheless, architects have had difficulty adjusting to the situation because it constitutes a reversal in attitude toward the built environment. Few members of the profession have been trained since this attitude became widespread; fewer still have had academic preparation in the subject. The profession as a whole was educated under a value system than had little respect for the

nation's existing urban fabric and required no more than a survey knowledge of history. Architects have had to teach themselves — an arduous task and one not always gratified by financial reward. Some practitioners have risen to the occasion, creating exemplary work and playing an important role in preservation campaigns. But most of their colleagues have been less diligent, courting projects to bolster income and taking little time to learn new techniques. Over the past few years, thousands of buildings have been butchered in the name of preservation, retrofit, and other trendy labels. The tax benefits now available to owners who renovate commercial properties may cause much greater damage in the future.¹ The problem does not lend itself to quick remedy. Yet it can be reduced by changes in several areas, among them education, professional image, design priorities and investigation of formal issues.

Ideally, academic training in preservation should be available to all architecture students. Numerous professional schools provide some exposure to the subject and about ten of them have inaugurated programs permitting intensive study.² The need has just begun to be satisfied. Academia is slow to respond to new circumstances unless large amounts of external funding are available. Preservation coursework involves many specialized areas; the cost is substantial and qualified faculty are hard to find. Administrators must face the risk

that once any new field of instruction is created, the demand may subside. Existing programs are small and are primarily structured for the graduate student. Few undergraduates, most of whom will soon enter practice, benefit from these curricula. At the very least, core courses in design, materials, and structure should include pertinent aspects of work in preservation. But even if professional training was to change overnight, the effects would take time to bear fruit. Education is a long-term investment.

Short courses and other academic exercises addressed to a post graduate audience can have a more immediate impact. Preservation is so multi-faceted a subject that rapid-fire overviews may cause harm by generating false knowledge. But the extension method could be very productive in disseminating detailed information on narrow topics such as masonry repair. Such offerings are scarce, though the demand for them is no doubt substantial. Sessions that introduce architects to preservation by emphasizing its intricacies and the need to proceed with caution would also be of value, if hardly popular.

Architects have long prided themselves on the ability to solve a wide range of problems, a belief implanted in their training. This attitude is admirable when new realms are approached with openness and a degree of humility; it is not when it fosters arrogance. Many architects engaged in preservation projects resist modifying old habits or seeking the specialist's advice. The situation may be aggravated by the fact that often preservationists are amateurs or are trained in fields such as American studies and administration which traditionally have had little contact with the world of design.³ Involvement from these quarters may be regarded as an assault on professionalism; who are these people to tell the architect how to do his job? Actually preservationists have amassed an impressive track record in dealing with the built environ-

ment, demonstrating that mutual benefit can be derived from exchange. Designers should not fear that preservation will emasculate their role in giving form to communities or, that if they revere more than the occasional landmark, their capacity to innovate will diminish. Present needs are much greater than the historic fabric of cities and towns can sustain. Barring economic disaster, the demand for new buildings should thus remain substantial, though not always in high gear. Even in times of limited growth, the desire to conserve a heritage lies quite apart from the will to be its servant.

Attitudes concerning professional image are apt to affect the approach taken in relating new design elements to old ones. Many architects are inclined to think more about their scheme, what they can do to a building, than the building as an historic artifact. They may thus seek conspicuous evidence of their work in the finished product. The modernist interest in making a "statement," achieved through contrast to the physical context, may accentuate this tendency. In some cases, pronounced contrast is a logical answer to the program and it can produce elegant results. The old building's qualities may be enhanced; indeed, the design may be of greater merit than it was prior to alteration. But in many other cases, minimal intervention and discreet relationships are preferable. Even with changes in use, exteriors often require no modification and interior spaces can be kept more or less intact. Unfortunately, this approach remains the exception. The architect must overcome longstanding biases if he is to develop a project so that it appears as if nothing has been done when the job is complete.

Work performed in this manner may well disappoint the client. For generations, property owners have wanted a renovation project to indicate that a lot of money has been spent, irrespective of the actual cost. Governmental agencies that ad-

minister and stimulate redevelopment are just as prone to this objective. Thus, hundreds of buildings are still over-renovated. The old process of concealing or removing has been replaced by one that is scarcely better. The building is updated and made to look new again through such popular devices as rendering masonry squeaky clean and inserting tinted plate glass with anodized aluminum frames — black holes that insult a building's dignity. A more sympathetic approach can be less expensive; seldom is it more so unless elaborate components require major repair or replication. Taste and the habitual yearn for a quick fix remain the underlying causes of ostentatious renovation.

Preservationists have also had a hard time in grappling with the issue. Most people in the field are not very sophisticated in matters of new design. It was never a pressing concern when they normally opposed any consequential change other than restoration. By the late 1960's, this attitude began to shift, born out of efforts to retain a much broader legacy. Now the argument has become quite strong in some preservation circles that one should not be too strict about the character of new design elements; if preservation is to be effective in the development process, flexibility must exist in the stipulations imposed on the owner. The willingness to compromise is essential in such work; however, ultimately, the product is far more important than the process. During the last few years, preservationists have lauded schemes where the building's historic features are extensively altered. Irrespective of design quality, it may be questionable whether such work constitutes preservation at all (Figure 1).

An instructive case study of compromise can be found in the redevelopment of Quincy Market in Boston (Figure 2). While no single change is major, the cumulative effect is so strong as to negate much of the complex's historic value. In certain instances, this scale of interven-

tion might be acceptable for a building of marginal significance. The results are tragic for one of the great landmarks of early American commercial architecture. Circumstances surrounding the project's conception in the 1960's probably precluded much less change; however, this factor is seldom mentioned. Its success as an alliance of preservation and development interests has also fostered the heavy-handed approach used in its design.⁴ From New York to Keokuk, quincification has become an architectural cliché, much as did the use of exposed brick à la Ghiradelli Square some years before.

The primary vehicle used by preservationists to control changes is regulation administered through design review. Since 1976, the Department of the Interior has been empowered to approve alterations to commercial properties that are listed on, or are eligible for, the National Register when the owner seeks to obtain available tax benefits. The federal criteria are quite loose, permitting flexibility in design solutions. Some architects view the guidelines' official interpretation as being conservative, since strong contrasts between old and new elements are not always condoned. At the same time, the process has helped to raise significantly the standard of renovation work performed on scores of properties.

As early as the 1930's municipalities began to establish their own design restrictions for historic districts and, later, for individual landmarks. These local ordinances vary greatly in content, but most of them were conceived to protect existing fabric rather than to guide substantial modifications. In some communities the provisions are very strict, prescribing form, detail and the vocabulary in which they are to be rendered. Whether the measures are rigid or not, design review boards may assess proposals on the basis of personal taste and be closed-minded about departures from conventional practice. Review at the local level can

be among the most frustrating to architects, many of whom see the rules as inhibiting their normal method of practice. Regulation is devised to prevent poor design; it need not preclude innovative solutions if the parameters can be viewed as a creative challenge rather than as a deterrent. Comparative study of local ordinances has just begun.⁵ Such research could be of great benefit to understanding the scope of their value and for suggesting new directions that might be taken. And with a new generation of architects exploring historical vocabularies once again, even the most stringent ordinances may allow some remarkable designs to be realized.

Part of the difficulty architects and preservationists alike have had with change in an historic context results from the lack of detailed investigation and analysis of pertinent design issues. Aside from the limitations imposed by law, most work has been guided primarily by intuition. The freedom implicit in this method has advantages. Viollet-le-Duc's maxim on restoration is equally applicable to this broader realm of design: there are no formulas; the conditions of each project must be the principal guide. Yet Viollet was no less adamant about developing a sound theoretical foundation for his efforts and employing a consistent methodology in executing projects. In contrast, the intellectual basis for much preservation work today, including the study of old and new design relationships, is minimal. The dearth of inquiry fosters confusion: it also stifles opportunities to find new avenues of design expression.

Restoration theories developed in the 19th century are germane to present forms of preservation work. At one extreme is the attempt to create an idealized scheme, imbued with a totality and perfection which the original never possessed. At the other end of the spectrum, the work, with all its accretions and patina, is left untouched. Some middle ground is normally sought, but vary-



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ing degrees of emphasis can generate entirely different results. While contemporary practice is derived from these theories, many architects, even many preservationists, are not familiar with them. Nor, is there much awareness that the scope of theoretical stances provides numerous options for the development of new design elements under any given set of circumstances. Additions to buildings afford another dimension since they can recast the character of the ensemble. Categorical analysis derived from factors such as the relative size of an addition to the extant building, the significance of that building and the nature of its salient physical qualities, and its site and surroundings can also lead to valuable insights. Both recent work and centuries of precedent provide a rich field for probing. Discovery of the past through preservation could invigorate design theory and practice as it did a hundred years ago.

At that time many of Europe's best architects and critics had a keen interest in the subject. Their concerns generated strenuous, often antagonistic, debate. In retrospect, we can find fallacies with much that they espoused and practiced. Yet their ideas were informed and adventurous, their work filled with energy. Preservationists in the United States today should become more aware of design issues and realize that their projects are no less susceptible to cliché than any others. Architects should become more knowledgeable and sensitive when dealing with a legacy which is not theirs alone. Sometimes their role is best a curatorial one. Yet the field also offers as yet barely tapped opportunities to explore new directions. Preservation has been far more successful in many respects than could have been imagined twenty years ago. If the movement's vitality can encompass the realm of design, and the preservation process from the past as well as save it, the prospects could be enormously appealing.

NOTES

1. Opinion is divided on the matter. The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 provides increased incentives for work on commercial and industrial properties that are listed on, or are eligible for, the National Register, and meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. However, the act also contains some tax benefits for rehabilitation of such properties, 30 years and older, that are not listed on the Register, and thus require no design review. The monetary difference between incentives in these two categories may not be sufficient to curtail insensitive work in many instances where the building could qualify for Register status.
2. A number of other preservation programs have been established in liberal arts departments. The National Trust annually publishes a guide to all these programs.
3. "Preservationist" generally refers to people who are either employed in some branch of the field or who otherwise devote a substantial part of their time to preservation efforts. The term is used here as a matter of convenience, with full realization that numerous architects are included within its parameters.
4. Quincy Market has generated considerable controversy in the Boston area and has thus contributed indirectly to more sensitive design work there in recent years.
5. Ellen Beasley, "New Construction in Residential Historic Districts," in National Trust for Historic Preservation, *Old and New Architecture; Design Relationship* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1980), pp. 229-256. Several other essays in this book shed additional light on the subject. See also: Alice M. Bowsher, *Design Review in Historic Districts: A Handbook for Virginia Review Boards* (Washington, D.C.: author, 1978).
6. The Trust's *Old and New Architecture* is the principal book on the subject; however, its essays seldom venture beyond elementary description. Brent Brolin's *Architecture in Contest: Fitting New Buildings with Old* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1980) is intellectually banal and reveals no imagination in design matters. Several more provocative writings exist, among them: Rodolpho Machado, "Old Buildings as Palimpsest," *Progressive Architecture*, November 1976; and André Corboz, "Old Buildings and Modern Functions," *Lotus*, 13, 1976.

The following pages present a portfolio of recent work, diverse in program, ideological approach and solution. These schemes represent some exceptional thinking. They have been assembled by the editors as evidence of the potential that design in preservation affords.