

PRESERVING MODERN ARCHITECTURE – AND THE FUTURE OF PRESERVATION

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The modern movement in architecture produced a body of work of a scale and impact unprecedented in the history of humankind. Modern architecture was the physical manifestation of a broad social and philosophical movement that forever changed the course of human history. At its best, the modern movement captured a spirit of progress, openness and an uplifting of the human condition, offering to convert lofty civic ideals into physical reality. These ideas not only reflected the sweeping social and cultural aspirations of the day, but were also a manifestation of a response to the enlightenment promise of progress that continues to resonate around the world. It is therefore imperative that we continue to take into account the context and essence of this generative philosophy as we formulate preservation strategies, so that they may yield interventions that both reveal and clarify the meaning of the heritage of the modern movement.

As a force that has shaped our environment on an unprecedented scale, there are many sound economic and cultural reasons for the preservation of modern architecture. In the first place, there is simply too much of it - hundreds of millions of square feet in many thousands of buildings – for anyone to suggest that most of it should simply be destroyed and rebuilt; this solution is neither pragmatic nor ecologically sustainable. But we need to ask two key questions – *How should the work of the modern movement be evaluated and engaged, and what kind of theoretical framework should guide the preservation of this work?* In order to fully address these questions, we must look not only to the future of modern architecture, but to the future of preservation itself, as it seeks to grapple with this legacy, and to affirm its own relevance within contemporary design culture.

The History Gap – Modernism and Contemporary Design

We live in a post modern age, but we have emerged from the era of architectural postmodernism as it was defined between about 1970 and 1985. The distinction is relevant in that it acknowledges that the modern movement was finite, but that, as its echoes continue to resound in contemporary culture, it also continues to challenge ‘traditional’ historicism as an approach to design. This becomes critically important as we contemplate both a reason for -- and an approach to -- the very complex task of conserving and enhancing modern buildings.

We must acknowledge history, and that modernism is a part of history. History in this case should be seen as a post modern synthesis that combines the Hegelian engine of relentless change with the more contemporary notion that history is not fixed, but that every era subjects history to constant re-interpretation. The theoreticians of the modern movement embraced the notion of a perpetually forward looking, linear history of constant progress, whereas today progress is viewed as being relative rather than absolute, and history, rather than being seen as that which is left behind, is instead constantly revisited for the refreshment of ideas.

Contemporary design references history in its continued embrace of the aesthetics and technology of modern architecture, but without the polemic that was inherent in modernism in its relationship to the entire past history of western architecture. As DOCOMOMO founder Hubert-Jan Henket points out, this polemic is both technical and aesthetic, but at its essence it is social, driven by a collective desire to create habitats designed with the instruments of modernity to improve human life. This suggests, as we set out to infuse contemporary design into modern buildings, that it is appropriate to acknowledge the continued meaning of this polemic by considering the social or moral component inherent in any intervention strategy.

Preservation's Place: A Postmodern Perspective

Carroll Westfall, in his article "What are the Preservationists Preserving?" in Traditional Building Forum, correctly notes that preservation, as we understand it today, is a modernist enterprise. He is also correct in his assessment that preservation and traditional building – too often conflated in the minds of those that prefer the traditional to the modern – are fundamentally different things that are, in his words, only united in their enmity toward modernism. However, this attitude that preservation evolved as an antidote to modernism, and specifically to a modern movement that ruptured the timeless continuum of traditional building, is both misleading in its oversimplification, and corrosive in its tendency to deny the necessity of coming to grips with how to address, through conservation and judicious intervention, the considerable and often wonderful heritage of modern architecture.

If we accept Westfall's premise that preservation, as it has been defined in documents ranging from the Athens Charter to the United States Secretary of the Interior's Standards, is itself a part of the modernist project, then we should also recognize that preservation must now be adapted to the post modern present.

Preservation can and should be an activist force for change. It should acknowledge and plan for a future that can reflect only a selective, and therefore subjective, view of the past. Preservation strives to elucidate the past through the historical facts embodied in a place, but in fact the process of intervention will inevitably bring new perception and hence new meaning to the work through the modification of both the work and its context. To this end, a preserved building's future should be designed with the same intellectual rigor and aesthetic sensitivity that inform any successful, contemporary architectural project.

This suggests that the conventional assumption that preservation and design are diametrically opposed is rapidly dissolving. Preservation, as it applies to buildings and urban design, is increasingly recognized as being fully integrated within the practice of architecture, operating out of a theoretical framework that recognizes the inevitability of change. The goal of preservation will increasingly become to create dialogues that heighten the perception of the original, while acknowledging and acting upon this inevitability.

This revisionist approach is well-articulated by scholars like Jorge Otero-Pailos, the editor of *Future Anterior*, who views contemporary preservation as an instrument that produces rather than finds history, through the regeneration of context through intervention, rather than a detached reaction to a fixed, stable context. While Otero-Pailos advances a theory of critical historiography that clearly moves beyond modernism, Vittorio Gregotti describes in *Inside Architecture* a concept of intervention that reconciles a modernist theoretical position with the principle of *belonging*. This concept embodies “interest in the materials of memory, not nostalgically, but in terms of juxtaposition...forming new orders and groupings by shifting the context of those materials that belong to memory's heritage.”

Both authors acknowledge the highly precise but fragmentary nature of contemporary design, particularly as it relates to modifications, and relative to the aspiration toward “total design” that characterized much of the modern movement. They recognize the increasing tendency of successful interventions to be presented as a series of “mini-narratives” that -- at their best -- can sharpen one's perception of both the original and the intervention, create new, fundamental meanings for the whole, and also leave open the potential for future modifications. In the world of heritage conservation, the legitimacy of this approach was acknowledged in a May 2005 memorandum by UNESCO, “World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the

Historic Urban Landscape,” that focused on how best to manage growth and change in historic precincts through precise and sensitive, but contemporary, methods of intervention.

Formulating a Sound Approach to Preserving Modernism in the Postmodern World

Let’s return to our original problem of what to do with modern architecture. On one level, the legacy of modernism should be documented, classified and treated in the same manner as the architecture of any historic period. Significant works should be treated with many of the same disciplinary tools that are utilized in the preservation of traditional architecture, though with perhaps more focus on the *idea* of the building, where this idea was important in giving meaning to the original work. However, we need to acknowledge that the scale, diversity, and material nature of many of the works of the modern movement -- especially those sometimes labeled Ordinary Everyday Modernism (OEM) -- offer unconventional challenges to traditional preservation practice. These challenges can best be met by the kind of rethinking of preservation itself that is outlined above.

We acknowledge that there is a necessary human dimension found in traditional urban form and place-making that is lacking in a lot of OEM. This situation should be viewed as an opportunity to mine the artifacts for latent meaning through a process of critical discovery meant to transform and “re-humanize” the original. This resembles the strategy that has been adopted by the GSA in the “First Impressions” part of their Design Excellence program that is creating sensitive contemporary interventions within the large body of OEM owned by the Federal Government. In this case, the quality of the original architecture may be augmented through using the existing buildings as structural armatures upon which to build new experiences, introducing elements of scale and texture that will reinvigorate and make contemporary (one can’t really say “modernize”) works that might otherwise seem to have exhausted their useful lives. This strategy runs counter to the notion of ‘total design’ and recognizes that design is often most successful focusing on solving small problems and local issues. Compensation for these shortcomings are made with contemporary elements in line with UNESCO statement that: “...preservation...[should avoid] all forms of pseudo-historical design, as [it] constitutes a denial of both the historical and the contemporary alike...history must remain readable, while continuity of culture through quality interventions is the ultimate goal.”

Applying Contemporary Design Principles to Modernist Preservation

The application of contemporary principles to the preservation of modern buildings has interesting consequences. Engaging the modern movement often means dealing with structures designed with finite life-spans, and with materials that were not designed to age well, which means that conservation often has to yield to replacement or substitution as a solution for material degradation. Because of this, and because of the notion that much of the significant architecture of the modern movement was driven by the expression of an idea, there has been a tendency to foreground intent over materials conservation as criteria for authenticity. This is important to acknowledge in those significant cases where the interpreted work should still evidence the original architect's intent, but it should not - as any preservationist will agree - detract from the necessity of engaging the material artifact. The difference now is that more stress will be placed upon the creation of a critical dialogue with the essence of the original - both the idea and the material - rather than treating it as a fixed object awaiting the overlay of the intervention.

The argument is sometimes made that the aesthetic and technical distinctions between the works of modernism and much of the significant output of contemporary architecture is sufficiently blurred that we may ourselves still be defined as late modernists. As such, on one level, we can treat modifications to high modernism as works that can still build upon the form and spirit of the original, but we must nonetheless acknowledge that modernism's own history was finite, that we are now in a different place philosophically, and that the temporal gap between the original and the intervention - however much the latter may seem to extend the former - should be acknowledged. As preservationists, our response to the original, modernist *idea* can be through extension or through the emphasis of difference; the important thing is that the act of intervention is clearly acknowledged as a starting point for an architectural dialogue. The process then becomes one of weaving the modifications into the original in such a way that a continuum is created that both reveals the past and leaves open possibilities for the future.

The urgency of meeting the challenge to preserve the heritage of the modern movement, and the emerging activist, critical approach to preservation are inextricably linked. We suggest that this new synthesis - with its notion of a continuum evolving around a set of values about building, and accommodating the inevitability of change - actually parallels some of the rhetoric and practice of the traditional building movement, as noted by Dr. Westfall. His notion that there is a continuum of building that has been interrupted by the anomaly of modernism has now in a sense been turned inside out, as we are now dealing with a parallel continuum building upon the modern tradition that has moved into the post modern era. These efforts should all have the

ultimate goal of encouraging contemporary intervention in a humanist spirit. As we engage the works of the modern movement as preservationists, so we also advance the transcendent goal of humanizing our environment, thus preserving and sustaining not just buildings, but a significant part of our collective cultural legacy.