

Adaptive Reuse: Preservation's Next Argument

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Current preservation methods in the United States attempt to define historical and cultural identities for the nation, but have no means for identifying and preserving their fluctuations as time progresses. The insistence on embalming a building at one period eliminates any possibility to understand the changes in technological innovations, individual preferences or cultural ideas. However, not all buildings can take on the role of recording the evolution of society, but one genre is ideally suited to the task. Adaptive reuse holds the potential to fill the gaps left open by current methods of preservation. However, to do so, two major questions must be answered. Why, exactly, is it necessary to express changes of a culture, and how to accomplish this?

PRESERVATION'S PAST

A general understanding of how current preservation attained the importance it has today must precede the answer to these questions. Interest in historic buildings as artifacts truly began to take hold in the United States, around the second half of the 19th Century. The preservation of these structures began as a leisure pursuit, or in examples, such as Jamestown, Virginia¹ or Santa Fe, New Mexico,² as a way of creating a tourist economy. Slowly, others joined the struggle, but until the 1960's, preservationist fought an uphill battle against the theoretical ideas rooted in the Zeitgeist. They believed history that was expendable, and something to overcome. In its wake, politicians and developers backed by Modernist theories, destroyed countless historically and culturally significant structures all in the name of profit and progress towards the spirit of the age.

However, in the 1960's the Postmodernist movement emerged through new theories, like those found in books by Jane Jacob's the "Life and Death of Great American Cities" and Robert Venturi's

"Complexity and Contradiction." They brought to light the many failures of Modernist theory and proposed alternatives towards urban development and history. However, the event that jump-started the intense preservationist ideals in the United States was the destruction of Penn Station in New York³. The love for this building was so strong and its cultural and historical importance so evident, that even Modernist architects turned out to prevent its demise. Unfortunately, not even the protest of "more than 250 architects, writers and artists"⁴ was enough to stop the urban development trends or the ever-pressing drive for more profit. After its destruction, against the fervent protest of so many, America recognized that it needed more than the understanding of owners to protect its heritage in buildings. The event spurred a new fear that the buildings most loved by society, and those representing the important portions of the United States history, were not safe unless change occurred. Through the next few decades, the battle between Modernist progression and historic preservation would rage on. Today, preservation, still gaining popularity, has no end in sight. However, the forms and methods implemented will be the next debate for the movement.

It is important to note the difference between society and a culture. It may appear subtle, but is very important for this argument. A society is a large group of people that affiliate with one another through a common idea, such as an American identity. Within that society, multiple cultures exist, defined by different pasts, regional characteristics, or group affiliations. The distinct lines between cultures may be difficult to identify, but when looking at the broad scope of a society, definite variations are evident. These variations of cultural preferences, histories and values must be preserved.

Critiquing Current Methods

Adaptive reuse, the most dynamic form of preservation, requires numerous changes to be successful. However, any mention of alteration to historical buildings automatically becomes a source for debate. Questions arise about how well the altered building will function, what to preserve and how to express these historically and culturally significant elements.

The Standards for Rehabilitation, from the National Park Service (NPS), best represent the current accepted preservationist views. These guidelines and regulations, successful for other forms of preservation, raise several problems when addressing adaptive reuse. In fact, adaptive reuse is not even a category of preservation. Instead, the NPS uses the term rehabilitation when regarding the drastic changes to an existing structure. It is defined as "the process of returning a property to a state of utility, through repair or alteration, which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions and features of the property which are significant to its historic, architectural and cultural values⁵." From this definition branches guidelines that convey a strict preservationist attitude.

Problems with current preservation begin with the criteria for nomination of a building for the register. It is no secret that the preservation movement was created to protect the historically significant buildings of the United States. However, when one considers why there is the need to protect such buildings the answer boils down to preserving and creating a social identity for the nation. This significance is attainable through history, as the NPS criteria attempt, or a long list of other possibilities. These addendums allow a building to attain historical protection before it reaches the 50-year mark, set as a cut off in the standards.⁶ If the ultimate goal for preservation is to protect and create an identity for the nation, then why not set up criteria based on cultural significances as the focus. The age of a building should be one criterion, but not the basis for the system. For example, no one would argue that when completed the World Trade Center Memorial is a historical landmark, even if it is only one day old. Cultural identities in the United States are being overshadowed by an "age value"⁷ that most people associate with an important structure. It is in the best interest for all preservationist to realize that importance does not come from the age of a structure, but is a direct

reflection of the significance cultures place on them, whether they are 300 years old or 3 weeks.

In addition, current methods assign too much emphasis to preserving elements of one period in the life of adaptively reused buildings. Current views inhibit newer functions from expressing their contributions to a building's function and aesthetic. Ultimately, they distort any reading or understanding of the building's form as it reflects the varying functions and cultures over time.

Furthermore, many preservationists preach historic integrity while allowing and encouraging the replacement of damaged elements with replicas. For example, introduced almost immediately, and repeated in nearly every section of the guidelines, is the motto "Identify, Retain, Preserve." This phrase relates to the "historic integrity" of a building, or an aesthetic representative of a specific time place and use. It also states that any "new feature, shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities, and where possible, materials."⁸ The NPS guidelines continuously restate this point. Because of this, current practice implements items meant to fool an observer into believing they belong to the original structure.⁹ These false, historic items contain no integrity of their own, other than their resemblance to the originals, and so begin to erode the notion that rehabilitation preserves the past. Paul Byard writes on this when he defines facadism. A "dirty word preservationists use for projects that save the illusory fronts of old buildings to mask entirely the new construction. The passerby doesn't know whether to be insulted by the crude lie or delighted by the kitsch."¹⁰

Another contemporary opinion on replicas is Giorgio Cavaglieri's article "Design in Adaptive Reuse." The article explains the benefits of juxtaposing elements to iterate changes a building has experienced. In addition, he attacks the practice of replacing damaged elements with replicas to present a desired historical aesthetic.¹¹ Directly he states,

"It is, therefore, an error to try and present it [a replica element] to the public and to new generations of old forms and details. Because of the changes in technology these features are inaccurate even when copied from the original and they are frequently unsuited for the new use."¹²

Beyond failing to directly aide the new use, replicas do not represent the new culture. He and other

architects, historians, and even some preservationists, understand the value of incorporating contemporary elements into an adapted structure.

The acceptance of any alterations to the original structure deemed historically significant further confuses the issues. These elements are treated in the same manner as the original structure. At the same time current views revere some of these alterations, they attempt to prevent other changes with the potential to hold the very historic significance deemed preservable in other changes.¹³ The acceptance of these alterations and denial of new ones reinforces the problems of placing the importance on only one period in a building's existence. Why is one addition to the original structure preservable, while another addition deemed detrimental to the integrity of the same building? This contradiction reinforces the distinction between expressing a complete history versus a select history. At the period alterations stop, select history forces the building to become static. It is trapped, and ceases to express its responsiveness to the contemporary forces that created the alterations. A building with a complete history displays all changes involved in adapting for a contemporary function and regards them just as important as the original structure, expressing their contributions to the continued use and history of that building. A building's existence with alterations allows one to read the building. Failure to alter a building does not preserve history. Instead, it prevents new uses from adding their characteristics to the structure, enriching the appearance of the building and expressing a building's adaptation to contemporary contexts.

The display of elements from only one period and function of a building limit a building to expressing only one portion of its past, or a select history. In other words, this form of preservation presents a static representation. If the goal of preservation is to keep around those buildings that represent the heritage of a culture, then current methods are far from successful. The question raised is how representative of a culture are these preserved buildings. When one considers that society is constantly in flux, then it only makes sense that a building also in flux is the best method for recording these changes. If preservation wishes to preserve history and define an American identity that is complete, then these changes must also be a part of the story.

Finally, most orthodox preservationist thought fails to address the benefits of juxtaposing old and new elements with the goal of accentuating the original parts. Juxtaposition allows each part to act as a foil to its neighbor, further expressing the changes and displaying the original elements on a canvas of contemporary alterations or vice versa. Adaptive reuse has the potential to convey a much deeper and interesting message than a simple aesthetic nostalgia. It holds the ability to represent the ever evolving of society.

It is important to reiterate that not all buildings, fall under the scrutiny of this argument. A type of buildings that should preserve and restore elements to represent one period are those functioning as museums. These buildings exist to inform about one period in history, but do not take on a contemporary function other than display. Nevertheless, attempts to replicate lost elements should never occur.

At the same time, complete removal of a building may allow for the representation of the current conditions, but it erases a sites ability to describe its past. While this argument focuses on adopting an attitude of considering, first function, expression and then history, it also respects the need to retain and preserve important elements of the past. Doing so reminds observers of the building's history, and celebrates the melding of new and old as proof progress. The key is to strike a balance between respecting past and present, displaying characteristics of both and focusing on allowing a structure to again function.

PHYSIOGNOMY

Before determining how adaptive reuse benefits the reading of a building and represents the changes of cultures. It is important to understand how these changes manifest themselves over time. The scientific term for this visual evidence of everything that has happened across time is physiognomy.¹⁴ It is critically important in an adaptively reused building, and expresses a building's history. The casual observer may not be able to identify all the different uses just from a glance, but they understand different elements built up over time. This buildup creates juxtapositions unique to the building based on its history, site, uses, owners and the occupied periods. All should imprint themselves onto a building to create a "combined entity" and

allow it to proud of its past and accepting of contemporary conditions. Paul Byard explains this term as when “new architecture is added to old architecture to meet some need for change.”¹⁵ Through this, new meanings are evident and the architecture now visually expresses its change.

This build up of identity can be termed as the profile of a building. It does not refer to the outline of a building’s shape, but a “short, vivid biography.”¹⁶ Like a FBI profile of a person, a building’s profile records the major events of its life and becomes enriched and more distinct as changes and alterations take place. Nevertheless, through all the changes it is imperative to try to preserve some attribute of the original building as a way of identifying the starting point for its story. The elements that do this can be termed the fingerprint of the building. A prime example of a built up profile and a beginning fingerprint appear on the cover page of Stewart Brand’s book “How Buildings Learn” and the story behind the two buildings.¹⁷

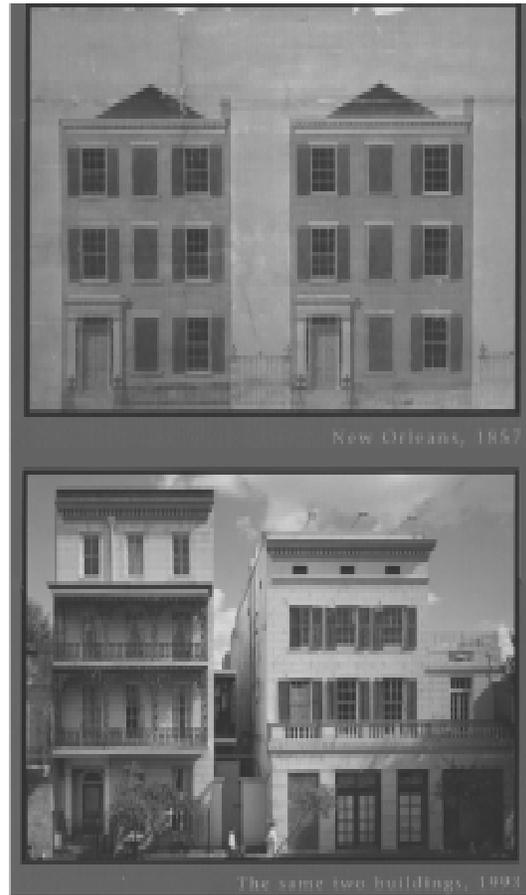
Two identical buildings were built next to each other in the “American sector” of New Orleans. Through the years, the subsequent owners altered the buildings to fit their individual needs.

What emerged from this process are two buildings that are distinct from one another. Their identities are a testament to the flexibility of structures given the chance to express their own unique qualities and histories. Had the buildings remained the same there would be no way of knowing that at one point the owner decided to place a stable for rent to the side of one of the buildings, or that a barber shop moved into that space. If during the time shortly after their construction, today’s form of preservation deemed them worthy of protection because of their historical or cultural significance, the identifying changes might have never occurred. Today these buildings still hold a key to their identical beginning. Their identical front window openings and the dental moldings in their cornices are their fingerprints.¹⁸ What is more interesting, however, is the multitude of layers evident from these pictures.

BENEFITING FROM JUXTAPOSITION

While the current views hold many promising points for dealing with specific historic elements, the major problem revolves around the non-acceptance of contemporary elements and their celebration along

Fig. 1



side the historic. Many fail to see all the benefits of contemporary elements that, allow a designer the flexibility to alter a building as necessary to house the new function, accept the contemporary context and represent cultural changes. At the same time, juxtaposition of multiple aesthetics displays the truth of what elements are historic versus contemporary. Juxtaposing old and new, results in the emphasis and understanding about the original elements developing a combined identity.

Buildings remaining visually static do not represent a culture. Instead, they become a limited memory. Would not buildings better portray a culture if many changed along with it? This contradiction of forcing a building to represent a dynamic society while remaining static must be addressed. Moreover, when heritage of a culture passes on it should not be the same as it was received. Instead, the next generation should inherit a heritage altered and enriched by experiences.¹⁹

Static architecture is unable to respond to new contexts, technologies, occupants, or uses. It sacrifices the benefits of alteration to try to claim a specific importance in history or culture. The opposite notion is dynamic architecture. Through adaptations, a building constantly changes with its users and environment to best serve its purpose. These changes also allow a building to represent many histories and multiple cultures. The resulting collage, presents a building as a dynamic structure, and celebrates the struggles, endured to adapt to a contemporary function and context. Through its multiple layers, complete history symbolizes the struggle between past and present. This expression should be the goal for designers handling adaptive reuse projects.

A NEW PRESERVATIONIST ATTITUDE

Paul Byard and Giorgio Cavaglieri are only two of a growing number of architects and preservationists involved in this argument. Coop-Himmelblau, for example, currently utilizes many of the aforementioned ideas of Byard and Cavaglieri in their work. The influence is visible in Coop-Himmelblau's designs, expressing a building's contemporary functions. Their use of materials and designs, strikingly different from the original structure, serve to express the new functions and act as juxtaposition to the original elements.²⁰

One example of theirs is the Gasometer B project in Vienna, Austria. They, along with three other design teams, each adapted one of four old fuel tanks into apartments and commercial space. Coop-Himmelblau's design was by far the boldest. Rather than cramming all of the functions into the restrictive shell of the original structure, they tenuously attached the aptly named "shield" onto one side of the tank. The minimal connection not only preserves the majority of the original façade of the tank, but also enhances the distinction between the tank and shield. They went so far as to conceal the tank from one of the major viewing angles.²¹ Unlike what typical American doctrine recommends, Coop-Himmelblau's design does not shrink beside the original tank timidly hiding. Instead, its presence becomes as powerful as the tank.

Gasometer Tank-B is one solution to the problem of expressing the new while preserving the old. The over all concept may raise issues among orthodox preservationists, but it succeeds in distin-

Fig. 2



guishing between original and contemporary. Rather than blurring old with new and causing confusion between historic and contemporary, these elements accentuate each other.

Paul Byard FAIA more specifically writes on the importance of these disparate elements meeting to form a "combined identity."²² Byard's written works, such as *The Architecture of Additions*, also involve numerous investigations into case studies from past and present, and prove the importance of character defining alterations. The examples of past cultures, and knowledge of these cultures, prove their acceptance of changes, even to sacred buildings. These changes were not detrimental to the society, or their ability to remember the past, but as a method for getting the most out of what already existed.

NOTES

¹ Max Page & Randall Mason, *Giving Historic Preservation a History*, (New York, New York: Routledge, 2004): 107-129.

² Max Page & Randall Mason: 185-206.

³ Paul Byard, *The Architecture of Additions*, (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1998): 78 & 158.

⁴ "AGBANY Proposes Plan to Save Penn Station," *Progressive Architecture*, (Jan 1963: Vol. 44 #1): 48.

⁵ National Park Service Standards for Rehabilitating. Through Preservation links located in national parks service, and specifically Rehabilitation.

http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/standguide/rehab/rehab_approach.htm (accessed Feb 23, 2004) and/or <http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/tax/rhb/stand.htm> (accessed Feb 27, 2004).

⁶ National Park Service Criteria for Listing. Through Preservation links located in national parks service, and specifically About Registering. <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/listing.htm> (accessed Sept 21, 2004)

⁷ Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They Are Built*, (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1994): 10 and Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," *Oppositions*, (Fall 1982: Vol. 25): 24 .

⁸ National Park Service Standards for Rehabilitating.

Through Preservation links located in national parks service, and specifically Rehabilitation. http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/standguide/rehab/rehab_approach.htm (accessed Feb 23, 2004) and/or <http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/tax/rhb/stand.htm> (accessed Feb 27, 2004).

⁹ James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation, (Multiple publication sites: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982): 83-135.*

¹⁰ Byard, *The Architecture of Additions*, (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1998): 99.

¹¹ Giorgio Cavaglieri, FAIA, "Design in Adaptive Reuse," *Historic Preservation*, (Jan-Mar 1974 v.26, n.1): 13- 17.

¹² Giorgio Cavaglieri, FAIA, "Design in Adaptive Reuse," *Historic Preservation*, (Jan-Mar 1974 v.26, n.1): 17.

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¹⁴ James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation, (Multiple publication sites: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982): 83.*

¹⁵ Paul Byard, *The Architecture of Additions*, (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1998): 14.

¹⁶ Webster's New World Compact School and Office Dictionary, Macmillan General Reference, 1995: 342.

¹⁷ Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They Are Built*, (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1994) (viii-1)

¹⁸ Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They Are Built*, (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1994) (viii-1)

¹⁹ Max Page & Randall Mason , *Giving Historic Preservation a History*, (New York, New York: Routledge, 2004): 40.

²⁰ James S. Russell, "Coop Himmalbau challenges preservation orthodoxy in the GASOMETER B project by making stolid former fuel tanks dance," *Architectural Record*, (Nov 2001): 109-115.

²¹ James S. Russell: 109-115.

²² Paul Byard, *The Architecture of Additions*, (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1998): 9.

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