

Preservation of the Dilworth House: An Insider's View

REBECCA VIEYRA
Venturi Scott Brown & Associates Inc.

A case study of the Washington Square Condominium Project, Society Hill Historic District, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates

Traditionally, a positive and mutually supportive symbiotic relationship has existed between preservation and design in the United States. Significant, often precious and isolated buildings were typically restored in a pure sense as they were returned to their original condition and appearance.

Simultaneously, design of contemporary structures often invoked the spirit of historic structures as an awareness of both the detail and the broader spirit of these preserved icons spawned new buildings. The contemporary and the historic seldom existed cheek by jowl, often exhibiting a distant relationship in both spirit and physical proximity. Colonial revival styles, for example, blossomed in eras in which preservation thrived and Americans celebrated their own architectural traditions. Similarly, the nation's Bicentennial made way for the emergence of Post-Modernism.

As Preservation has evolved in the post urban renewal mid-twentieth century, becoming not only more inclusive but also oriented toward working within urban contexts, the symbiotic relationship between it and design has similarly evolved into one that is more concrete. Contemporary buildings intending to be compatible with their historic neighbors, for instance, takes the relationship to a new, often more physical level. As a result, the

real historic fabric and the new, often "retro" or revival creation join to make a new context which accommodates both the old and the new.

In some situations, the combination of old and new is further challenged by the desire not only to preserve significant icons but also to create new ones. A need to enable older monuments to coexist and complement new significant structures provides both a design and preservation imperative.

"Let us design from the inside out as well as the outside in! ... Let us work within an evolving community - not a historical district."¹ The design of Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates evidences preservation's new mode of symbiotic relationship with design. A study of the morphology of preservation driven design in the proposed Washington Square Condominiums is presented, with a view from the inside. This personal perspective of an architect intern working on the project, a view from within the office, enables an understanding of forces driving both preservation and design in a new light. This vibrant relationship to design does not allow for the phenomenon of what Venturi has termed "the prevention of history in the name of preserving it."²

The site for the Washington Square Condominium project is currently the home of the "infamous" Dilworth House. "The house is currently listed as a significant historic resource in the city's Society Hill Historic District..."³. Mayor Richardson Dilworth built this house in the colonial revival style in the

mid 1950s to make a personal statement about the neighborhood. He lived in the house from 1957-1962 with his family in order to promote urban renewal and revitalization to the previously unsafe neighborhood. Forty years later, the structure illustrates a preservation paradox: the success of the home in providing an anchor for and supporting the revitalization of this Philadelphia neighborhood has culminated in the plan to further revitalize the neighborhood by removing the house itself. However, the social significance of the house, not necessarily its architectural style, has caused the uproar from the preservation community of Philadelphia. Accordingly, an attempt at preserving the social significance of the site is inherent throughout the several iterations that lead to the final conceptual design of the Washington Square Condominiums.



Fig. 1. Demolition

Iteration 1: Demolition

None of the house remains. The proposed condominium building borrows pieces of architectural history. Traditional architectural features of a “house,” such as a pedimental roof at the top of the building are included in the design of the condominium building. Also in keeping with tradition of the square, and the urban fabric, are the materials in the proposal. A brick building and brownstone base contextually fit in the framework. These somewhat conservative traditional American architectural features of a “house” and its urban setting have a new twist, as Robert Venturi is so famous for creating, when applied to this condominium building.

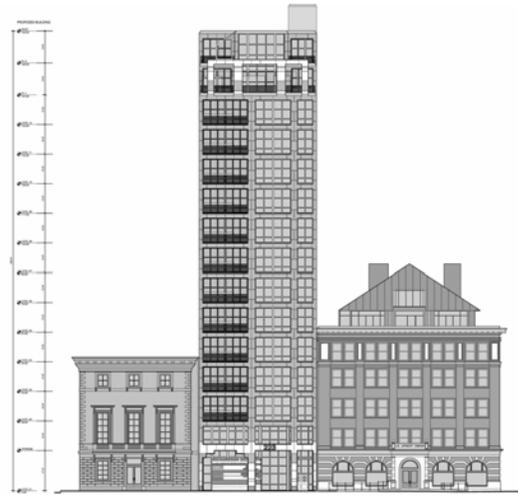


Fig. 2. Cartoon Commemoration

Iteration 2: Cartoon Commemoration

Again, none of the house remains. The condominium is made more “condominium-like” this time with subtler features of a traditional American home. The social significance of Dilworth, however, is most celebrated in this scheme. A billboard, or sign, another architectural element for which Venturi is famous, is placed along the street at the lobby to the condominiums. The billboard, much like a cartoon, celebrates through exaggeration the social significance of the house. It is through this exaggeration, not the physical presence of the house, that the Mayor and his commitment to the city can be truly recognized.



Fig. 3. Façade Reconstruction

Iteration 3: Façade Reconstruction

In this scheme, the front façade of the former Dilworth House is reconstructed within the lobby of the condominium building. This, perhaps in response to the disapproving preservation alliance, is a more “authentic” version of the billboard from the previous scheme. The reconstitution of the façade of the house, however, does not allow for redesign to the façade. This static quality, unfortunately, eliminates the potential for exaggeration in the celebratory gesture toward Mayor Dilworth and his role in the rejuvenation of the Society Hill district.



Fig. 4. No Demolition

Iteration 4: No Demolition

This iteration does not conceptually follow the lineage of the morphology of the Washington Square Condominium design. This iteration is purely political in its intent. In response to more disapproval from the preservation community, Robert Venturi proves the quote, “be careful what you wish for.” A large, all glass condominium tower is placed behind the entirely preserved Dilworth House. The tower has no relationship to the house, and disregards the context of Washington Square. This iteration clearly illustrates the importance of the coexistence of preservation and design in today's society. Preservation alone does not work!

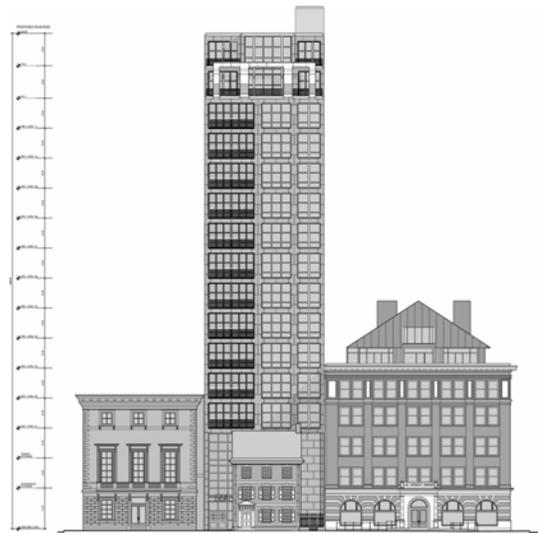


Fig. 5. Final Scheme

Iteration 5: Partial Demolition; Old engages new

In this final iteration, the traditional architectural elements that make up a house are re-introduced into the condominium building. A clear base, shaft, and capitol all of contextually responsible materials make up the façade of the building. In front of the building sits the main portion of the “Dilworth House.” The mock colonial revival style structure is in keeping with the majority of the actual house. At the same time, the contemporary nature of the condominiums engages the house in a slight cantilever of the condominium building over the house. The main floor of the house is also programmatically included in the design of the condominiums by acting as a common “living room” for the residents. It is within this “living room” that one can experience the authenticity of the house as a 1950s colonial revival design; the room’s “modern” picture window facing the suburban inspired garden is most reflective of the era in which the Dilworth House was built. Highlighting the incongruities of preservation, the entire project also speaks to Historic Preservation’s evolution and ultimately, its success.

Originally built to encourage people to move into an abandoned, unsafe, section of the Philadelphia, the icon of this success threatens its unaltered future. Ultimately, however, it ensures the creation of a new context in which both the old and the new will co-exist.

Endnotes

¹ Venturi, Robert. "The Preservation Game at Penn: an Emotional Response" in *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA. 1996. p 148.

² Venturi, Robert. "The Preservation Game at Penn: an Emotional Response" in *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA. 1996. p 148.

³ Preservation Alliance News, www.preservationalliance.com/news_dilworth_06.php. October 10, 2006.