

HISTORIC PRESERVATION AS AN ETHICAL CONCEPT AND A SOCIAL ASSET

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In the United States today — and I assume in other nations as well — there is a great deal of concern about the environment. The President has appointed a special group of advisors on the environment, to be supported by a committee of citizens who are deeply concerned about the state of the environment. In the Congress a Senator has introduced a bill which would establish a similar task force and citizens' committee, to advise the executive and legislative branches of government. Magazines and newspapers constantly publish articles on the environment; books are published on the environment; conferences and symposia are held at which experts talk about the environment. The environment is obviously a growing concern of modern man as he enters the last third of the twentieth century.

That man is damaging his natural environment we can all agree. His whole history has involved systematic interference with processes of nature. Now, perhaps, he is going too far in disturbing natural ecology, upon which all life depends. But the threat to the environment seems to mean different things to different people. To some it seems to refer almost entirely to the pollution of the air and the water, and the disposal of wastes. To others it means the destruction of forests, the loss of wild life, the disturbance of the natural surface of the earth, as well as the pollution of the waters. And yet to still other people it refers to the threat to our visual and spatial surroundings, to an orderly balance between the natural and the man-made, as well as between the old and the new, and to those visible things which nourish the mind and the spirit.

Of course the environment is composed of many elements. But to stress our particular concern, I would like to introduce into this context the word "ecology", which by simple definition means "the mutual relations between organisms and their environment". Since man is certainly an organism, he is organically related to his environment. Much of man's environment today is his own creation. Man has made his cultural environment. Thus we arrive at the term "cultural ecology", by which I mean the relations between man and his cultural environment. This cultural ecology must be kept in balance, just as the ecology of nature must be kept in balance.

The preservation and restoration of historic monuments, structures and districts is vital to the maintenance of our cultural ecology. Among many reasons why a historic monument or district should be preserved and restored, two come readily to mind: one is ethical, the other is aesthetic.

Historic preservation is important and valuable because it assures the future some of the flavour and essence of the past, because it hallows places where great events occurred or where great men once trod, because it maintains living evidence of the growth and development of a community, because it is history in stone, brick, and timber. Thus historic buildings and sites should be preserved as integral parts of the life of a nation or a community, if man is to experience a whole sense of organic continuity in his environment.

Historic preservation is also of importance and value because it is the means by which the visual fabric of a community is enriched, it offers scale and the perspective of time to today's buildings and provides a necessary contrast to them, and finally because it is only fitting and proper that a thing of beauty should not be destroyed. By preserving historic monuments we enrich our culture, improve our environment, and help maintain the balance of our cultural ecology.

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It is most unfortunate that in these days it is sometimes necessary to come to the defense of the preservation of historic monuments. Do not the buildings from our past which are generally acknowledged to be beautiful, as well as to possess historic significance, stand on the same footing as the literature, the painting, or the music from our past? Who would think of destroying the works of Voltaire or of Mark Twain, in order to make room on the library bookshelves and in the reading time of today's people, for the works of contemporary writers alone? It would be unthinkable. Would we destroy the frescoes of Giotto in Santa Croce or the murals by Puvis de Chavannes in the Boston Public Library so they could be replaced by the work of modern painters? Would we ban the music of Brahms and Stravinski, in order to devote today's programme entirely to the compositions of newcomers?

The inevitable justification given for the destruction of a historic monument is very often economic. If it is in the way of a proposed highway, the engineers claim it is uneconomic to route the highway around the monument. If it stands on a prominent piece of inner-city property, the owner asserts that it is uneconomic to maintain it, for a new building will produce more revenue for him and more taxes for the city. The cultural worth of the simple existence of the structure is the last thing thought of. Yet the cultural worth of the existence of the works of painters, authors and composers is never questioned and is in itself sufficient justification for their perpetuation and continued enjoyment.

The practical answer would be, I suppose, that books of the past can be left unread, paintings can be ignored, and musical compositions not performed. And that has been the fate of many. (Yet fashions change — even the paintings of Bouguereau are returning to a certain popularity today.) But buildings cannot be ignored. There they stand, solid and sometimes unused, standing in the way of progress.

Does the word progress in its modern usage mean only economic gain or governmental efficiency? Sometimes it looks that way. A simple definition of the word progress is "improvement, advance toward perfection or to a higher state". Let us apply that meaning of progress to the use of the word today.

If progress is improvement, the building or the use of the property should be better than the monument it replaces — not only should its function be of a higher order, but its design should be finer. That is rarely the case. The Pennsylvania Railroad Station in New York, one of the grand monuments of the early 20th century, designed in the prevailing classic manner, was a magnificent enclosure for two splendid interior spaces. It was demolished to make room for an indoor sports arena, a hotel, and an office building. The station had served as a fitting monumental gateway to the nation's greatest city. Now new arrivals are crowded through garish, low-ceilinged passageways, little better than a subway station. Neither the function nor the design are an "improvement". Is this sort of thing an "advance toward perfection or to a higher state"?

Historic monuments are generally considered to have two justifications for existence: either they are buildings closely associated with great events or great men in a nation's or a community's history; or they possess unusual architectural excellence or significance. There can be no question about what I mean by "excellence". By "significance", I mean that they may be significant as examples of the culture of a period in the past, of the development of the cultural life of the nation or of the community. But there is another justification: they should be preserved if they are a part of an ensemble, of which the individual parts may not necessarily be noteworthy, but which as a whole possesses the quality of excellence or significance. This applies to the many squares, circles, and avenues in the old cities of Europe, and to many in the cities of the United States.

Of course, whether or not a proposal actually constitutes an improvement is often debatable. It is a subjective matter of taste and judgment. An interesting case in point is the recently-published pictures of the proposed new buildings for the Rond-Point on the Champs Elysées. A contemporary architectural critic might say they would be an improvement because they form a more positive enclosure for the circular open space. Dull as their design may be, they improve the ensemble. The existing 19th-century buildings are of irregular masses, so they do not firmly enclose the circle, but they are pleasing and in harmony with their environment. Sentiment and love of tradition won out. The people of Paris objected and the government withdrew its plans for the new buildings.

A historic monument, a fine piece of architecture from the past, must be preserved just because it exists; it is in itself its own justification. Prime Minister Nehru is said to have justified efforts to preserve the great Indian rhinoceros by saying that it was simply something that had to be done. Thus, a fine monument must be preserved simply because it exists; a thing of such quality, such significance to man, must not be destroyed.

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The identity of a city or of a nation is established visually primarily by its buildings, and by the streets and open spaces which they enclose. Thus the destruction of structures which have given character to a city over the years is a step toward the destruction of the city's identity, and thus toward the loss of its integrity. The unfortunate trend toward sameness and uniformity of texture, scale and material of much contemporary architecture readily leads to a city which is not only monotonous and lacking in character, but a city which lacks identity — it could be any city in almost any country. Rebuilt downtown Coventry, handsome as it is, could be the business centre of any New Town, if it were not for the tower of St-Michael's Cathedral and nearby Trinity Church, which miraculously escaped destruction during the bombing. The same can be said of Rotterdam. Its new shopping district could be any suburban shopping centre, if it were not for the rugged old Town Hall which still faces it. These ancient monuments give their cities stability, dignity, contrast, and a sense of continuity with the past. It is noteworthy that cities which have lost most of their architecture of the past cling even more tenaciously to the few monuments that are left, although building anew in the contemporary manner — Warsaw being a unique exception.

These are not merely fanciful or sentimental considerations, they have their economic value as well. Merchants are coming to realize that tourism brings business, and tourists come to see what is unique and historic about a city, not to see a city that looks just like all other cities.

There is a growing realization today that historic structures need not be preserved purely as monuments, museum-pieces of the past. They can be put to work; they can be restored to a viable part in the life of the community — even though it may be a quite different part from that which they played in their youth. A city can absorb only a limited number of museums; a city preserved and restored simply to be looked at would be as lively as Pompeii, as useful as a Potemkin village. It is not demeaning to the dignity of a fine old building for it to be carefully restored on the exterior, and equally carefully reconstructed on the interior, to adapt it to modern uses. This has been a practice in the great cities of Europe for many years, for there is nearly everywhere a preponderance of magnificent old buildings which are structurally sound but functionally out-of-date. This type of adaptive restoration is beginning to be understood in the United States. Preservationists find it difficult to convince the hard-headed owner of a handsome but outdated business or commercial

building, in an area where land values are high, that by carefully restoring the exterior of his building and completely modernizing the interior, retaining any outstanding interior features it may possess, he can convert it into a "prestige building", which can command higher rentals or attract more customers than would a new structure which was just another typical modern building.

"Ghirardelli Square" in San Francisco is a conspicuous American example of successful adaptive restoration. The old Ghirardelli chocolate factory near the waterfront is by no means a building of great architectural value. It is a rugged old brick and stone Victorian structure, more picturesque than handsome. It has been remodelled into a fascinating assemblage of shops and restaurants, surrounding a multi-level terrace with fountains and flowers — and, most important, it is a great success. Many of the old seaport towns of the East Coast of the United States have learned to make profitable use of their quaintness by careful exterior restoration of the old buildings and adapting their interiors to use as shops and restaurants.

Georgetown was a port city at the head of navigation on the Potomac River two generations before the City of Washington was conceived and laid out, absorbing the older community. Its 18th and 19th-century residences are now a choice residential section of the capital city, but its waterfront, always commercial, has deteriorated into a few blocks of decayed warehouses, lumber yards, railroad tracks, and unsightly industrial buildings, lying between the old Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the river. It was further depreciated some 20 years ago by an elevated expressway — the *bête noire* of so many urban riverfronts.

There have been numerous plans for the restoration of the Georgetown waterfront to the life of the community, ranging from complete demolition of all structures, tunnelling the expressway, and erecting new high-rise apartments, to timid restorations of existing buildings, but doing little to recover the edge of the river from its industrial uses. A project is now nearing completion which may well influence the direction that other needed development will take — and it is adaptive restoration which is showing the way. Its nucleus is a typical 19th-century brick and timber warehouse fronting on the canal, which is being remodelled to provide for shops and a restaurant on the ground floor — with a café terrace on the canal, and de luxe offices above. Adjoining it, and filling out the city block, are two modern office and residential buildings, sympathetic in scale and materials with the older buildings of the area, surrounding an open courtyard, or small piazza, which will be readily accessible from the street and planned for strolling, shopping, and café-table-sitting. It is this sort of re-use of old buildings, so common in Europe, which is the hope of historic preservation in urban America.

In the words of the architecture critic of the *Washington Post*, "This is not just a matter of sentiment or a mere archeological exercise. It is a

matter of using the past to enhance the quality of our life today. Although the sensitive remodelling of old buildings is expensive, it enhances the pocketbook of the developer as well." This kind of progress, I believe, does indeed satisfy the dictionary definition of the word — improvement and advance toward a higher state.

The rate of architectural vandalism in the United States is high, but there are occasional outstanding cases of thoughtful preservation by an appreciative owner. The Rookery is one of the architectural landmarks of downtown Chicago, that birthplace of modern architecture. An 11-storey office building designed by Burnham and Root, it was begun in 1886 — thus it is old for midwest America. Through careful maintenance, and owing to the fortunate fact that its neighbourhood has not deteriorated, it is still one of Chicago's most prestigious office buildings. However, Louis Henri Sullivan's Wainwright Building, 1891, in St-Louis, has not been so fortunate. Sullivan's first skeleton-frame structure, it was the first building design which was free of heavy classicism, the first to soar. It has been allowed to deteriorate and can no longer attract first-class tenants nor command first-class rents, so its owner has for some years contemplated tearing it down, to replace it with a modern structure — much to the despair of the preservationists and architectural historians of the country. Yet it is one of the most important monuments in the development of American, and of modern, architecture.

The concept of a building as a monument, unless it is deeply rooted in the nation's history, has been slow to take hold of the public mind in the United States. That buildings — even undistinguished ones — are revealing records of the progressive culture of a nation is a thought that is only now beginning to occur to most people. Literature is cherished, as are old furniture and early automobiles, because they are old and because they reveal so much of the life and culture of their times. But the cultural significance of buildings or urban districts is a concept which has only in recent years begun to be understood.

The most secure basis for arguing for the preservation of major historic monuments is the one which might seem to many people the weakest — the philosophical or ethical basis: "This shall be done simply because it is something that *must* be done".

An important monument represents not only the best of the culture of its time, but it is a symbol to the people of the present of their roots in the past and, through the sense of continuity which that imparts, a promise of a future. It is this powerful symbolism, perhaps, which accounts for the fact that so many of the developing nations — those which can ill afford it economically — are taking the initiative in seeking aid for the preservation of their cultural monuments. Symbols speak more powerfully

to relatively primitive than they do to those more sophisticated in the ways of this technological world.

This ethical basis for historic preservation can be backed up strongly, for those hard-headed men and nations to whom symbols speak less forcefully, by the economic basis. As I have pointed out before, people are increasingly coming to realize that the mere presence of old buildings, and the ambience of old districts, often has greater appeal than something new and original.

Beyond these two arguments for the preservation of monuments, one "soft" and the other "hard", many benefits can be pointed out, but which are less tangible and consequently more difficult to use as points for argument to an unconvinced building-owner or a reluctant government bureau, but which will materialize very tangibly as time goes on. I refer to the educational benefits to be gained from actually seeing and experiencing buildings from the past, both great and minor. I refer also to the enrichment of the visual fabric of the city by the judicious retention of old structures, to contrast with and give historical perspective to the new. And, when the structure in question is truly beautiful — (and we must not hesitate to acknowledge that not all significant monuments are truly beautiful) — I refer to the enrichment of the life of the people of the city or of the nation by the preservation of a thing of beauty.

"There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come." I don't know who originally said that, but it is a profound observation. The preservation of historic monuments is an idea whose time has come. Not that it is a new idea, for some nations have practised it for generations, but it is becoming a popular idea, and it will be on the healthy basis of popular demand and public support that its future growth will develop.

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