

"A CERTAIN KIND OF SPIRIT"

THE PRESERVATION OF THE CHARACTER AND THE CONSERVATION OF FABRIC IN HISTORIC STRUCTURES

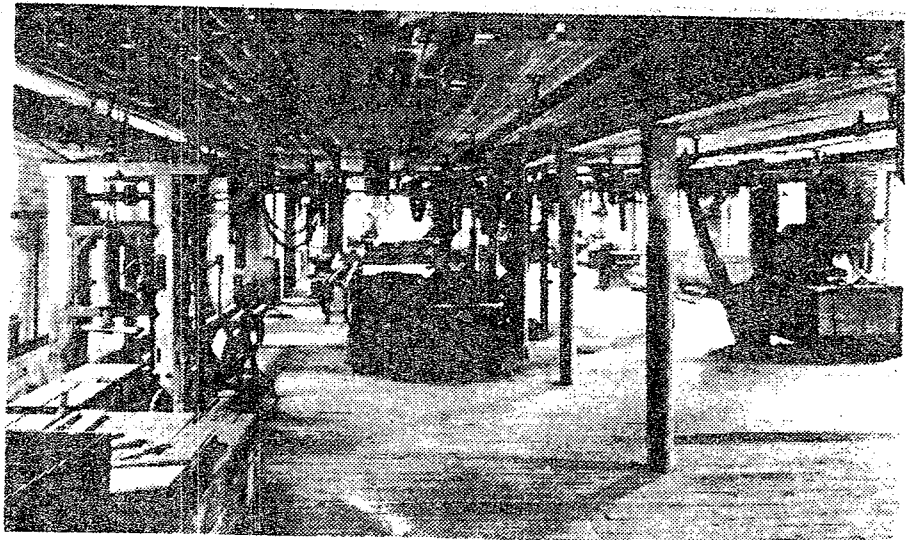
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The action of time makes man's works into natural objects...In making them natural objects also, time gives to man's lifeless productions the brief quality of everything belonging to nature - life.

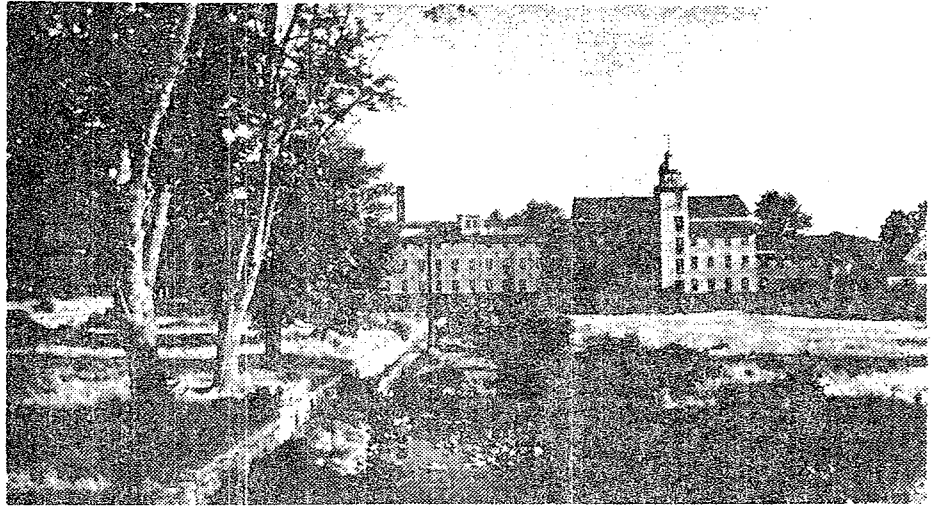
Vernon Lee, "In Praise of Old Houses", 1902

In The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, Mishima wrote: "The continuity of our lives is preserved by being surrounded by the solidified substance of time...With the passage of time, the actual form of [an object] is surpassed by time itself, and, after the decades and centuries have elapsed, it is as though time had become solidified and has assumed that form. A given small space, which was at first occupied by the object, is now occupied by solidified time. It has, in fact, become the incarnation of a certain kind of spirit." [2]

The significance of this observation was driven home to me when I had the opportunity to see the abandoned machine shop of the Crown and Eagle [textile] Mills in North Uxbridge, Massachusetts in 1968. By a fluke of history this machine shop, in a factory which had been closed for over half a century, had remained intact. Nothing had been changed since the workmen had departed 50 years before. To see this was an awesome experience, enhanced particularly by the fact that the building had not been 'preserved' as a conscious act, either by making it into a museum, or by adapting it to some other use. That room, without question, had assumed the kind of spirit which Mishima identified. The profound meaning of the Industrial Revolution, the early history of the rise of American capitalism, and the origins of modern technology and labor seemed to converge and focus upon that one place at that moment. The scene was so charged with feeling, information, and emotion from the past that to touch each item in the room was to touch an icon. One could almost sense the workmen rise from the faded photographs to be present in that space.



Interior of machine shop
in 1968



Crown and Eagle Mills
in 1968

Sadly, this image, which I had the opportunity to witness, proved to be ephemeral. In 1973, the machine shop was purchased by Old Sturbridge Village Museum, not to preserve it, as you might expect, but to strip it of its machinery. This machinery ironically was taken in order to build a museum exhibit of a machine shop to commemorate the one they destroyed. Following this, in 1975, vandals set fire to the mill. By the next morning, the building had been reduced to a broken shell. To have seen such a building and interior space, caught as this was between the historic past and an uncertain future, heightened my sense of communication with the past in a way that no formal museum or 'restored' building has ever done. Maybe, like a beautiful wave, the power of this image by necessity resides in something intangible and therefore naturally ephemeral. Samuel Johnson is reported to have said: "Depend upon it, Sir. When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." [3] The effort to understand the ingredients which make up the experience of a place such as the Crown and Eagle Mills machine shop may help reveal what does make buildings communicate something which people find important. No matter what Sturbridge Village finds to do with the machines in their exhibit, the evocative power of that original machine shop can never be recovered. It is an opportunity which they lost because the "spirit" could not be transported to a reproduction of the space.

It is difficult to isolate what the ingredients are which give certain old buildings their value. Is it their history, their adherence to certain aesthetic principles, their particular place in certain people's lives, or changing styles and taste? It may be clear what the historic and architectural value of a building is, but what is its emotional content? What gives it the power to move people - to make them think about the mysteries its history; to engender their love for it? Preservation can sometimes miss the point. A building or district may be 'preserved', but made over into something so new that all the visual time depth has been excised.

An important example of this is the Faneuil Hall Markets in Boston. Until the wholesale produce market for which it was designed by Alexander Parris in the 1830's, was moved out, this complex was a colorful, if seedy, part of the historic Boston core. Since being renovated as a shopping center by the Rouse Company, it has been fabulously successful, reportedly attracting more people than Disneyworld. Like Disneyworld, however, the renovated buildings are history

reduced to a storybook. Only the stone facades and timber floors of the old buildings were preserved; all effects of age were removed, and all of the residue of its former uses was sanitized or torn out. All of the windows, architectural details, and interior fittings are new. The complex no longer seems like an historic part of the city. It is a carnival precinct, separate from the real city around it.

Has preservation been achieved? Superficially it has. However, as one walks through the complex, one has a feeling that the buildings have been 'lobotomized'. Their genuine history has been excised, and their age erased. The question which naturally follows this discussion is how can the obvious popularity of the Faneuil Hall Markets be reconciled with this criticism? Is the effects of age on structures indeed important to people, or, if it is not, should it be?

It is clear that newness, elegance, and cleanliness will find favor with the public, even in historic areas. In the ancient city of York, England, "tourists prefer old buildings well kept up to those that seem 'seedy'." Historian David Lowenthal identifies an "instinctive desire to renovate and rid [artifacts] of patina." [4] In final analysis, professional preservation and conservation work must recognize these two forces at work, and achieve a balance that allows for necessary new uses and renewal of fabric, but which does not erase the visual manifestations of time from a structure.

This is not a new argument. In Britain, during the 19th Century, it was the protestations against the stripping of the historic plaster surfaces to reveal long hidden stonework that earned the name "antiscrape." The arguments over "Scrape" and "Anti-scrape" have been brought forward contemporary reality recently by the growing controversy over the results of the ongoing cleaning of Michealangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel. The cleaned work has been called "sentimental and unsculptural" unlike Michealangelo's other work and therefore believed to be the unfinished under painting, while the Vatican defends the restoration as revealing "Michealangelo to be a revolutionary colorist." [5] Even the urge to do such a radical and complete cleaning all at one time is significant, while the growing negative reaction also shows a deep concern that the loss may be greater than the gain. One expert observed that "some artists ...feel the disappearance of treasured certainties as a painful personal loss." "The Michealangelo we knew is being scrubbed off forever", says one critic, Alexander Eliot. [6] The on-going argument has focused on whether the 'a secco' layers were painted by Michealangelo or by later artists and restorers. In fact, in terms of whether these layers be peeled away, and thus destroyed, such an argument should be beside the point. Restoration such as this is irreversable. To dramatically alter every part of a great work or art from the way it has appeared for centuries, by cleaning it down to layers which are thought to be original is risky at best. In terms of building restoration, the conflict between the desire to conserve existing fabric, with the desire to restore what may have been the original design conception, can lead to a real dilemma.

In 1964, the Congress of Venice, an international convention of preservationists, issued the influential. Article 9 identified that: "The process of restoration is...to preserve and reveal [both] the aesthetic and historical value of the monument." The Charter also concluded that: "the valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since the unity of style is not the aim of a restoration.

The Venice Charter laid the philosophical base for the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Both documents recognize the need to balance artistic and historical values in the conservation of a building, but there is also a subtle distinction in the interpretation of both the aesthetic and the historical meaning of a building which such government level promulgations are unable to make clear.

James Marston Fitch goes beyond this duality to identify a distinction between an historic building's value based on a knowledge of its history, and of its value as the visual embodiment of that history in its present form. It is the difference, as he says, between a sensual awareness, and a cognitive assessment, of its historical significance. [7] To simply define the problem of restoration and rehabilitation only in terms of an emphasis on either artistic or historical value is to miss the equally essential, but more subtle distinction between the "sensual" and the "cognitive" role that a building or other artifact may have as the embodiment of that history. For example in the case of the Sistine Chapel, the current conflict is between those who would like to uncover the lower layers of the painting in the belief that the masterpiece can be restored to look exactly as it did when it was painted in the 16th Century, and those who feel that the present work, with the accumulated effects of time and later work, still embodies the masterwork of Michealangelo. Part of the opposition to the cleaning goes beyond the concern over the possible loss of part of Michealangelo's overpainting to include a concern that the later overpainting as well as the laquer, varnish and even some of the dirt, are an essential part of the aesthetic of the work, as it has influenced succeeding generations of painters and critics. As the restorer himself recognizes, "We are destroying the image...of Michealangelo that was derived from the study and observation of the dirty frescoes. We know that." What he fails to recognize, and what must be recognized for historic buildings as it should be for great works of art, is that the historic "image" and "concept" are themselves important. That even the work of such a master is now "occupied by solidified time...a certain kind of spirit" that is lost if it is made over to look new.

In a recent project to develop a set of design guidelines for the historic city center of Bangor, Maine, I was confronted with exactly this issue. Bangor is blessed with a reasonably intact central city district, which has somehow avoided the worst effects of Urban Renewal. It is in need of commercial revitalization, so the effort to develop rehabilitation guidelines had to address the need to improve the image while preserving the historic buildings. I had the opportunity to work on this project in 1985. [8] In the effort to avoid the shortcomings of the usual set of guidelines, we took a different approach. The buildings in the Central Business District had evolved from a uniform Federal Style row into an eclectic group of facades of differing styles and heights. Many of the original structures were still extant, but all had been radically changed. However, it was apparent from the examination of the historic photographs, that there was still much visual evidence which still survived from the earliest period. This evidence, for example, consisted of the original brick walls, the occasional remaining early small paned window sash, a few storefronts and other details. It was this eclectic image (sensual value), laced with the visual evidence of the earliest period (cognitive value) which combined to give the present downtown a strong and varied, yet coherent visual quality (aesthetic value). Our design effort focused on the effort to maintain and enhance this balance of the three values. Most of all, we wanted to avoid the pitfalls which frequently result

strict adherence to design guidelines. The stripping of the variations in texture and details which resulted from changes made over time in the interest of a cleaned up and more uniform aesthetic.

In order to do this, we drafted a series of specific design and rehabilitation recommendations for each individual building. Each entry included copies of available historic photographs. As part of these recommendations, we included a category called "Items to Preserve". In this category all exterior elements which we identified as essential to the building's present character both in terms of aesthetics and historical significance would be noted and described. For example, this often included remarks on the survival of several of the original window sash, together with the hand blown glass, regardless of whether the other windows in the building had been changed or not. In several cases, the "Items to Preserve" included the present color and weathering of the masonry, which exhibited the subtle marks of the end of the original structure against a later addition, or other evidence of historical finishes or changes. Later storefronts which were of historical or stylistic importance, and even faded painted wall signs of an earlier time, were included in this list on each building if they were judged by us to be either historically or visually significant. The judgment on what to include did rely on a balance of historical and aesthetic criticism, but what is important is that it was informed by an assessment of what the building itself could say to people if the details which have survived from the past were not stripped away in an overly ambitious future rehabilitation effort.



ABOVE: Elevation of a portion of Bangor Main Street Facade ca. 1870, reconstructed from photographs.

BELOW: Elevation of same block today with photographic overlays showing those portions which date from before 1870.



In every case, the "Items to Preserve" column was intended to educate the owners, and thus encourage people in Bangor to preserve the actual surviving details. Too often, design guidelines encourage owners to reproduce original details to create stylistic uniformity. In the process, original work is often torn out and replaced with the new copies. This was very different from what was carried out in the Faneuil Hall Markets where, for example, all of the surviving original window sash and frames, which had been uniquely designed by Alexander Parris, were destroyed and replaced with modern units so that the whole building could assume a uniform appearance. The alternative of reproducing the original windows where they were missing was rejected as not being "honest", despite the fact that it resulted in the destruction of all of the few remaining window sash which had made it through the vicissitudes of almost a century and a half of heavy use.

The problem of balancing the various goals of preservation is indeed not an easy one. Most of the Venice Charter is aimed at the preservation of "monuments". Most of these buildings are made of stone, and thus, even when in ruins, are durable and capable of picturesque decay. As Tschudi-Madsen observes: "in wood building countries the time [of decay] would be reduced to a few years. Furthermore, it would not be nice to look at." The problem is particularly acute in the West, where decayed wooden buildings provide captivating images in the mining districts. However their their character is easily lost when they are "restored" into what most often resembles a movie set or becomes a tourist attraction.

It is clear that reproduction of certain details and elements, as well as even whole buildings is frequently justified, despite the disapproval voiced by Ruskin about such practice. When the Campanile in Venice collapsed in 1902, or a part of the famous complex of warehouses on the Wharf in Bergen, Norway was destroyed by fire, it was just as acceptable to replicate their exterior on a new structural frame as it was for the war torn countries to elect to carefully reconstruct the lost historic buildings in parts of the devastated cities. Authenticity is not the only value. The point that I wish to make is that when the genuine exists, it should be retained. Not only that, it is incumbent on the professional to work towards educating the public to understand the importance of preserving as much of the original fabric as possible, and that the marks of age and use should not be erased. Guidelines are perhaps more important as an educational tool than they are as a legal mandate. Ultimately cities such as Bangor will be best enhanced when people see, recognize and come to love what is already around them.

1. John Ruskin, "Lamp of Memory" X, The Seven Lamps of Architecture, (reprint) The Noonday Press, New York, 1961, p177.
2. Yokyo Mishima, (Translated by I. Morris), The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, New York, 1959.
3. Boswell, Life of Johnson, 1776.
4. David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country, Cambridge University Press, London, 1985.
5. New York Times, 10/9/85, p6; 3/6/87, p6.
6. Alexander Eliot, "The Sistine Cleanup: Agony or Ecstasy", in Harvard Magazine, Vol 89, no.4, March-April, 1987, p28.
7. James Marston Fitch, Historic Preservation, McGraw Hill, New York City, 1982, p83.
8. Lane, Frenchman and Associates with Randolph Langenbach, Reclaiming the Past for the Future, City of Bangor, Maine, 1985.

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SUMMARY

The Venice Charter of 1964 emphasized the need to "preserve and reveal the aesthetic and the historical value" of historic buildings. This paper examines a second duality in the evaluation of buildings - a duality between the value of a building in terms of its place in history, and its value as the visual embodiment of that history. As James Marston Fitch observed, it is the difference between a cognitive and a sensual awareness of the physical evidence of the time and use of the structure.

By reflecting on the emotive impact of seeing an intact, but long abandoned machine shop before it was stripped by a museum, this paper draws a distinction between the importance of an object as the physical reminder of the past (cognitive value) and the visual embodiment of that past (sensual value). While the cognitive value was served by installing the machines in a museum, the emotive power of that interior view of what was the last textile mill machine shop was lost. The paper goes on to discuss the ongoing restoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling in light of this observation of the cultural value of the impact of "time" on this work of art as a way of introducing the same concept in approaches to building restoration.

The paper then describes a project in Bangor, Maine, carried out by the author, where Design Guidelines for the preservation and rehabilitation of buildings in the city center had to be developed and implemented. In order to preserve the specific value of historic details which show the impact of time on these buildings a different approach was developed. Instead of limiting the project to a general set of "design guidelines", the design team developed a series of "Recommendations" for each separate building. An important category in these was the section called "Items to Preserve" where individual details, whose value would not normally be noticed in the standard renovation project, would be identified and thus brought to the attention of the owner and the city. These elements included surviving original window sash (as opposed to reproductions), early paint colors, evidence of early changes to the building, significant period storefronts; and even visually and historically important signs.

The paper concludes with comments about the importance which public education has in the preservation of this historical evidence, and the role which the professional must assume in both identifying and emphasizing the need to preserve the evidence of time and change in structures. In the effort to renovate and economically rejuvenate historic buildings and districts, many projects, such as the well known and successful Faneuil Hall Markets in Boston, have resulted in the overly complete stripping of the evidence of age and use in the interests of giving the renovated buildings a contemporary look. As John Ruskin said: "The greatest glory of a building...is in its Age....In that deep sense of voicefulness...which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity." [1]

"CIERTO TIPO DE ESPIRITU"

LA PRESERVACION DEL CARACTER Y LA CONSERVACION DE LOS MATERIALES EN ESTRUCTURAS HISTORICAS

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La Carta de Venecia de 1964 enfatizó la necesidad de "preservar y revelar el valor estético e histórico" de edificios. Este ensayo examina una segunda dualidad en la evaluación de edificios—una dualidad entre el valor del edificio en términos de su lugar en la historia, y su valor como representación visual de esa historia. Como James Marston Fitch indicó, es la diferencia entre un conocimiento cognitivo y uno sensorial de la evidencia física de la edad y uso de la estructura.

Considerando el impacto emotivo de ver un taller, intacto, con sus máquinas, pero por largo tiempo abandonado, antes de que estas sean arrancadas y llevadas a un museo, este ensayo diferencia entre la importancia de un objeto como evidencia física del pasado (valor cognitivo) y la representación visual de ese pasado (valor sensorial). Mientras el valor cognitivo fue obtenido al instalar las máquinas en un museo, el poder emotivo de la vista interior de lo que fue el último taller de máquinas de un fábrica de textiles se ha perdido. El ensayo continúa con la discusión sobre la restauración, que se está llevando a cabo, del techo de la Capilla Sixtina. En función de la observación sobre el valor cultural del impacto "tiempo" en esta obra de arte, se considera como una manera de introducir el mismo concepto en la restauración de edificios.

Después el ensayo describe un proyecto en Bangor, Maine, llevado a cabo por el autor, donde se desarrollaron e implementaron Guías de Diseño para la preservación y rehabilitación de edificios en el centro de la ciudad. Con el objeto de preservar el valor específico de los detalles históricos, que mostraban el impacto del tiempo en estos edificios, se ha desarrollado un procedimiento diferente. En vez de limitar el proyecto a un grupo general de "guías de diseño", el grupo de investigadores desarrolló una serie de "recomendaciones" para cada edificio en forma independiente. Una parte importante en este análisis es la sección llamada "Detalles a Preservar" en donde detalles individuales, cuyo valor no sería normalmente tomado en cuenta en proyectos típicos de renovación, serían identificados y luego presentados al dueño y a la ciudad. Estos elementos incluían la mantenimiento, del marco de ventana original (en oposición a una reproducción de este), de las áreas de pintura originales, de fachadas interesantes, e incluso signos visuales e históricos importantes.

El ensayo concluye con comentarios acerca de la importancia de la educación pública sobre la preservación de la evidencia histórica, y el papel que el profesional debe asumir en identificar y enfatizar la necesidad de preservar la evidencia del tiempo y los cambios en las estructuras. En el esfuerzo de renovar y en forma económica rejuvenecer edificios históricos y distritos, muchos proyectos, como el bien conocido y exitoso de los Mercados de Faneuil Hall en Boston, han resultado en la desaparición completa de la evidencia del tiempo y uso, en el interés de dar un visión contemporánea a los edificios renovados. Como dijo John Ruskin "La gloria mayor de un edificio... está en su edad... en su profunda elocuencia.. que nosotros sentimos en las paredes que han sido tocadas por el paso de la humanidad"[1]