HISTORIC PRESERVATION

& Urban Change

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This issue of *Urban Infill* is devoted to the theory and practice of historic preservation as viewed through the lens of population loss, shifting land use patterns, and urban regeneration. Beyond preservation, articles explore fragmentation, cultural identity, and the at-times inevitable reconfiguration and erasure of the historic built environment. The book is organized into four sections:

1. **FOUNDATIONS** The first section invokes core principles and fundamental values that give meaning to historic preservation efforts. The ghost of John Ruskin is invoked in an effort to achieve a more authentic understanding of cities as they decline and change. This section also explores the interplay between neighborhood-scale development, unfolding over time, and the deep history of the underlying natural systems that form and reform urban environments.

2. **REPAIR & MAINTENANCE** The second section advocates for the ongoing upkeep, caretaking, and reuse of historic urban places. The idea of repair is also explored as a creative process, through a series of proposals for stabilizing and mothballing historic properties.

3. **REDISCOVERY & CONNECTION** Section three looks for the emotional and cultural connections that are created when people interact with historic artifacts. This section explores ephemeral aspects of historic preservation and considers the ways in which historic preservation encompasses living memories and the residue of past eras.

4. **APPROACHES IN PRACTICE** The last section focuses on historic preservation practice, including experimental approaches to building conservation and preservation planning. A pair of case studies compare two very different strategies for the reuse of historic, industrial properties. This section also includes an ambitious, yet pragmatic approach for surveying historic buildings in advance of large-scale demolition efforts, and a portfolio of projects that repurpose abandoned houses to spare them from demolition.
INTRODUCTION

History is more than a collection of relics and objective facts. We might well conceive of it as a process that is seen from a limited perspective within the process. The late philosopher of history Eric Voegelin saw the interplay of conscious experience and symbolization as being critical to understanding history, where human existence is a struggle for meaning that is ever oriented to a mystery that transcends complete understanding. History and the symbols within it are not merely a matter of objective study, but instead invite a comparative analysis of the experiences that have engendered them.

Growing up on the site of an extinct Mississippi town that had been founded by my great-great-grandfather in 1846, I learned as a child that the place was more than the physical landscape. The buildings—home, store, barn, and a few other houses—were all fairly new, yet there were clues of something more. Artifacts uncovered in the garden and an abandoned street in our pasture suggested that something had happened there long before my time. My conscious reconstruction of the past involving relics, places, images, and stories was more than simply a matter of objective description. For the story of the dead town continued up to the present involving thereby my family and myself. As I was the “teller of the tale” and also a character within it, the tale was a symbolic construction that framed my existence by linking it to a greater community of being. Place, as geographer Philip Wagner described, is suffused with an “enormous weight of representation, or symbolism,” “a momentary coexistence among varied presences” through which “a person may experience vicarious exposure to people, things, and places that are distant or remote in time.”

This was brilliantly exemplified by the observations of physicist Niels Bohr. While visiting Kronborg Castle in Denmark, he remarked:

Isn’t it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? As scientists, we believe that a castle consists only of stones and admire the way the architect puts them together. The stone, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church, constitute the whole castle. None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. Suddenly the walls and the ramparts speak a different language. The courtyard becomes an entire world, a dark corner reminds us of the darkness in the human soul, we hear Hamlet’s “to be or not to be”…everyone knows the questions Shakespeare had him ask, the human depths he was made to reveal…And once we know that, Kronberg becomes quite a different castle for us.2

Such insights are sometimes given lip-service within the preservation community. Richard Moe writes that historic places help us understand “who we are, where we came from, and what is the legacy that shapes us.”3 We might also recall the book, With Heritage So Rich, a key factor in the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act. Its authors warned against placing too much emphasis on merely “saving bricks and mortar” and becoming “a cult of antiquarians.” Instead they said preservation must “give a sense of orientation to our society, using structures and objects of the past to establish values of time and place.”4 The practice of historic preservation should be a deeply and richly philosophical experience. Yet as we spend more and more money on preservation, are we encouraging reflection or are we simply saving bricks and mortar?
CONTRADICTIONS

If there is an over-emphasis on bricks and mortar with relatively little emphasis on the foundational role of meaning, this certainly derives from a bias toward objective and material aspects of history and the modern tendency to regard scientific methods as the only canon of truth. Historic preservation asserts the value of history while the modern trend has been to reject the past in favor of an all-important future. Beginning with the Enlightenment, modernity has often demonized the past as a dark age—something to be repudiated—rather than recognized as the source of human experience and insight. The call for “building better nests,” echoes through modern history from the French Revolution to Urban Renewal to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, all marching toward fanciful utopias dominated by stark, nightmarish forms. Preservation recognizes the importance of the past and provides an important counterbalance.

However, while historic preservation implicitly asserts the significance of history, it is promoted based on a poor understanding of this concern, which in practice tends to subvert it. The focus shifts to that which can be comprehended empirically, namely surveying, recording, maintaining, promoting, and funding. Foundational philosophical concerns, if anyone has the audacity to raise them, are regarded as a potential embarrassment and even a threat, as I have discovered. I once attempted to recall basic principles in an introduction to our state’s preservation plan. I assumed that minimally it might generate constructive dialogue. The reception was less than favorable. I was told that we were required only to follow the regulations, not to think about them. With this prohibition against thinking, the task of recovering the symbolic depths of experience on which preservation is based was deemed irrelevant. I suspect that such a view is far too common. If so, the public outreach of preservation does little toward raising levels of understanding. As Jacques Barzun has observed, although there is “more and more cultural stuff to house, classify, docket, consult, and teach… culture…is declining. It is doing so virtually in proportion to the various cultural endeavors. All this collecting, exhibiting, performing, and encouraging grow and spread with well-meant public and private support.”

FIRST PRINCIPLES

For the Greeks, memory was the path to recollecting first principles, the basics of life we take for granted. Such reflection is driven by a questioning wonder that leads beyond the everydayness of life. They called this love of memory, philosophical friendship, the place of the past in our thought and feelings. As John Burnet pointed out in his study of Greek thought: “Wisdom is not a knowledge of many things, but the perception of the underlying unity [of seemingly unrelated facts].” This underlying unity includes far more than material objects. It also includes the conscious processes that reveal the order of the world. The Greeks philosophically mediated and ranges from empirical facts to symbols, values, and qualities.

2. History has a mythic dimension. The symbols of the past aren’t simply facts. They can have a mythic quality. St. Augustine saw memories of the past and anticipation of the future as integral parts of present experience; the past serves as an inner teacher that provides imperfect images of more transcendent goals. This interplay of past and future, object and value, experience and symbol, was captured by Robert Dupree when he wrote: “The shards of the past are both remembrances and foreshadowings of the community that resides in human hope and the spirit, [they are] the sacrament of community.”

3. History is personally formative. The past plays a formative role in our personal existence whether we recognize it or not. This realization is behind the traditional concerns with personal formation and the cultivation of virtues such as wisdom and piety through exposure to insights and symbols from the past. Piety, or piety, is a respect for nature, other people, and the past, and the knowledge that they represent a larger community of being to which we owe our existence and our responsibility. Wisdom is concerned with transcendent values—truth, goodness, and beauty. According to Freeman Tilden, beauty is the key to understanding the need to preserve, because beauty is the call of wonder, the call toward something beyond, the guide toward the true and the good. He wrote that it is “the path along which our quest for understanding must go. Surely we deal with an essence that is beyond our powers of expression. But we can, and we do, feel its reality.” These are the key concerns of preservation.

NOTES