

Encouraging Excellence While Maintaining Standards: An Ongoing Discussion

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The Galveston symposium captured a moment in time in the dialogue between design as a pure creative exercise and the role of standards in guiding preservation practice. This article draws some conclusions from that discussion.

During the Galveston design symposium the author moderated the closing panel discussion on the connection between design as a creative act and the need to provide guidance for the treatment of older buildings and their contexts. Panelists in the discussion included American preservation architects Jean Carroon, T. Gunny Harboe, and Fred Bland and Australian architect Paul Stark. This article draws on questions raised by the audience during the session and the panelists' responses, subsequent discussions among the participants and authors, and reflections on previous and later publications on the topics covered in the symposium.

Design Issues

The Design Excellence and Preservation Standards symposium was held in Galveston, Texas, as the United States National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1966, was approaching its 40-year anniversary. The act created the National Register of Historic Places and called on the Secretary of the Interior to establish standards for work that might be done to buildings listed on, or eligible for listing on, the register, in cases where the work was supported by federal funds or where the building itself was federally owned.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Restoration and Rehabilitation, developed as part of the implementation of the NHPA, were first published in 1977 and have been modified over the years, the last version being published in 1995 (see page 50). The guidance in the standards was heavily influenced by the Venice Charter of 1964 (see page 51), which addressed the relationship between existing buildings and building fabric and proposed alterations or additions to them.

While not so direct as Emperor Theodosius's edict of 309 CE in which he forbade disfigurement to "external decorations on private buildings through modern additions" and spoiling of "historic buildings in an important town out of avarice and the desire to make money," the Secretary of the Interior's Standards strongly encourage respectful attention to the character of the existing building. Moreover, preservation architects have even been heard to suggest that one should "put your ego on hold" when working on historic buildings.¹

Any discussion of the design principles that should influence work done on existing buildings must begin with an understanding of the opposing forces represented by Eugene Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879) in France and by John Ruskin (1819–1900), the British social activist and art and architecture critic. Ruskin's writings influenced William Morris, a key figure in social, liturgical, and art movements associated with the Arts and Crafts revivals of the period, which are generally seen to be reactions to the industrialization of the Victorian era.

Viollet-le-Duc took the position that an architect has the responsibility to seek out the underlying character of a structure, to remove those elements that do not reflect this central theme, and, where necessary, to add elements that had been destroyed or never built, which would "complete" the work to its best advantage. His work in France is best seen at Carcassonne, the medieval walled city that he "restored" by adding turrets and steeply pitched roofs, completing an assembly that, while charming as a stage-set, does not reflect the town at any point in its real history.

Viollet-le-Duc's philosophy was followed in Britain by architects George Gilbert Scott, William Butterfield, and



Fig. 1. At the Castelvecchio in Verona, Italy, architect Carlo Scarpa negated the defensive nature of the castle by removing a vertical section of stone from the protective wall and cutting it loose from its corner tower to emphasize its height and construction. Photograph by Platt Byard Dovell White, Architects.



Fig. 2. I. M. Pei's famous central glass entrance pyramid at the Louvre in Paris has a transparency that allows the original palace buildings to be read, while creating a marker that attracts the visitor to the lower-level orientation space. Photograph by Mark Paciga.

others, who lavished attention on many large parish churches and cathedrals. These "restoration architects" removed box pews and galleries, whitewashed over ancient paintings on plaster walls, and added Gothic lecterns and screens inside and Gothic porches and gables outside.

As early as 1843 in *Modern Painters* and more directly in volume two of *Stones of Venice* (1853), John Ruskin was adamant in his opposition to such "restoration" practices, decrying the obliteration of a building's history and stating that such attempts to create the building anew were "as impossible as to raise the dead...the thing is a lie from beginning to end."²

By the 1870s William Morris joined the battle, writing that "my eye just now caught the word 'restoration' in the morning paper, and, on looking closer, I saw that this time it is nothing less than the Minster of Tewkesbury that is to be destroyed by Sir Gilbert Scott."³ By 1878 Morris and others had founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, which quickly became known as the "Anti-Scrape Society."

How do these opposing views of the treatment of historic buildings seem to us today? If Viollet-le-Duc, Ruskin, and Morris are the basis for the nineteenth-century dialogue, then it is equally true that the work of Carlo Scarpa on the 1356 della Scala family's castle, the Castelvecchio at Verona, in 1964 (coincidentally the year that the International Congress met in Venice) shaped architectural thinking in the twentieth century. Paul Spencer Byard has called Scarpa's work a "transformation": it "brings home the extraordinary power of the possibilities opened for twentieth-century architects by the modernist embrace of abstraction and the opportunity they acquired to develop new meanings for buildings where old meanings had been cut away" (Fig. 1).⁴

The European acceptance of the work of such architects as Jean Nouvel, Norman Foster, Herzog and de Meuron, and Frank Gehry, who make bold design statements in adapting and modernizing historic buildings, was supported by the late Italian architect Mario Botta, for example, who is quoted by architectural historian Wim Denslagen as saying that "the old needs the new in order to be recognizable and the new needs the old

in order to enter into a dialogue with it" (Fig. 2).⁵ However, Denslagen himself is by no means convinced of the wisdom of that position, writing that "Botta does not wish to design architecture that conforms in a subservient manner to the existing architectural environment. His designs have both to bear witness to the modern age and to respond to existing historical values. The latter is, in my view, an essential precondition when designing new buildings in a historical environment." To clarify his position on the priority of the existing historical values, Denslagen calls this chapter of his book "Artistic Arrogance."⁶

There is clearly no formula that can be used to establish a "correct" design solution to any particular circumstance, and for every dramatic, perhaps even "arrogant" intervention, there are dozens of respectful, effective, and still contemporary examples of additions to iconic buildings and to other significant buildings in historically important settings.

The English Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) describes itself as "the champion for architecture in England, promoting high standards in the design of buildings and the spaces between them." Francis Golding's 2001 CABE publication entitled *Building in Context: New Development in Historic Areas* contains well-illustrated examples of design projects in various scales, ranging from cottages in a Dorset village (a careful exercise in local vernacular), to a large multi-family housing scheme for Chester (a reinterpretation of local vernacular for a volume house builder on a complex inner-city site), to a significant addition to a Victorian concert hall in the Midlands (an example of picking up cues without resorting to imitation) (Fig. 3).

In all of these cases, each of which has parallels in communities around the world, Golding draws conclusions on appropriate design for sensitive sites. While local government has significantly more control of design quality in the United Kingdom than in the United States, the following conclusions provide a useful perspective that can guide design in historic contexts for an international audience:



Fig. 3. The Bars at Chester, a large multi-family house in northwest England, uses materials and facade patterns that are linked to the historic buildings that surround the property. This large project must be economically viable, and its architectural treatment respects the older forms. Photograph courtesy of English Heritage, NMR.

“The best buildings result from creative dialogue between architect, client, local planning authority, and others.”

“Difficult sites should generate good architecture and are not an excuse for not achieving it.”

“With skill and care, it is possible to accommodate large modern uses within the grain of historic settings.”

“High environmental standards can help generate good architecture.”

“Sensitivity to context and the use of traditional materials are not incompatible with contemporary architecture.”

“Good design does not stop at the front door, but extends into public areas beyond the building.”

“Successful architecture can be produced either by following historic precedents, by adapting them, or by contrasting with them.”

“In a diverse context a contemporary building may be less visually intrusive than one making a failed attempt to follow historic precedents.”

The publication suggests a number of questions to ask in evaluating new designs proposed for historic settings. The most helpful, and entirely compatible

with the U.S. Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, are these two: “Is the architecture of the building suitable for the uses it contains?” and “Is it trying to be too grand or pretending to be too modest than it really is?”⁷

While the ability to control design with regulation varies widely from country to country, the key message is that good design cannot be separated from the past; neither should it be subservient to it. Rather, there is a need for dialogue that must draw out the best in both.

Public architecture, where control and influence are more easily enforced, has a responsibility to pave the way for a greater public understanding of the power of good design. In some sense the very word preservation may be a hindrance to this understanding, since it is perceived by many to imply a backward-looking approach. James Marston Fitch’s seminal work, *Historic Preservation*, carried with it the subtitle *Curatorial Management of the Built World*.⁸ The task outlined by Fitch is not to fix buildings and places in time but to manage their change in such a way as to retain the best of the past and combine it with new work to create a better whole.

Understanding Good Design

Good design has long been a concern of the U.S. government, so it was appropriate that the National Park Service and the General Services Administration were sponsors of the Galveston design symposium. Designs developed within the U.S. national parks between 1916 and 1942 generally followed the local vernacular, in terms of both form and materials, though building scale was often monumental to meet the programmatic needs. Many buildings were designed and constructed during the Great Depression and utilized traditional crafts associated with regional locations, as seen at the Ahwahnee Hotel (1925) in Yosemite National Park (Fig. 4).

In the Mission 66 era, from 1956 to 1966, the National Park Service invited leading architects to design structures that would meet the growing demands of a mobile public anxious to explore and experience national heritage, both natural and historic. Like the Ahwanhee



Fig. 4. Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park in California was designed by Gilbert Stanley Underwood for the Yosemite Park and Curry Company in 1925. With 150,000 square feet of rooms, its massive scale fits in with the grandeur of its setting, using rock and wood to root the building in familiar materials appropriate to the site. Photograph courtesy of Yosemite National Park.

Hotel many of these buildings were, by definition, iconic, reflecting the architectural predilection of the designer and the functions to be housed rather than the historical context. Indeed, some of these modern structures, such as the Cyclo-rama building at Gettysburg, are now regarded as intrusions on their settings and are the subject of intense discussion as to their futures (Fig. 5).

These two Park Service examples epitomize the dilemma facing the introduction of new facilities into existing contexts. Is the new work to be deemed a reinterpretation of the old, an evocation of the past, or should it be a new entity in its own right, evoking the spirit of a new age and new sensibilities?

In the Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture developed in 1962, then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan presented his own interpretation of the Vitruvian principles of “commodity, firmness and delight” by noting that federal office buildings must “first provide efficient and economical facilities” and “second, provide visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor and stability of the American government.”⁹

These principles had stemmed from concerns about overcrowded offices

with poor lighting and ventilation that led to inefficient and accident-prone working conditions. At the Galveston symposium over 40 years later it was noted that while there is still a demand for efficient and economical space, the expectations have expanded to encompass issues of accessibility and egress, building security at several levels, energy efficiency, life-cycle costing, complex communications technologies, and future flexibility for space planning, as well as green-building concerns for air quality, embodied energy, and sustainable materials. These requirements are hard to meet in new structures, but they present significant additional challenges in the adaptation and rehabilitation of existing buildings. The task is even harder when the existing building is deemed to have historic qualities that must be retained.¹⁰

The 1962 report on federal architecture was adamant that an “official style should be avoided” and that “major emphasis should be placed on designs that embody the finest of contemporary American architectural thought.” The approach to seek the best in contemporary design was formalized in the General Services Administration’s establishment of the Design Excellence

Program in 1994. The program set out to commission leading, and in some cases controversial, architects for major federal projects. The design process included an allowance of time for the federal clients to develop close working relationships with their assigned architects, recognition that budgets would have to be adequate to allow for quality buildings and high standards of performance, and peer review of the designs as they were developed. The program has produced some of the nation’s finest public architecture. Projects within the purview of GSA’s Center for Historic Buildings have included the restoration of the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House in New York City, work on the Byron Rogers Federal Building and Courthouse in Denver, Colorado, and an addition to the U.S. Courthouse at Wheeling, West Virginia.¹¹

In the dialogue among the panelists in Galveston, voices varied between a Ruskin-like approach (“do as little as you need, and not more than you have to”) to a more aggressive posture that argued for understanding the significance of the site and accepting the adage that “change is the only certainty.”¹²

Significance and Integrity

The regulation of changes made to historic buildings presumes that there are essential elements of the existing structure that are of lasting value and meaning, and that should not be expunged by later work. This topic is covered in Sharon Park’s article in this issue of *APT Bulletin*.

The discussions at the conclusion of the symposium focused on physical forms and details of the kind described in the U.S. National Park Service *Preservation Brief* Number 17.¹³ It is, however, important to note that, in addition to the physical elements that must be considered, the broad issue of significance is itself subject to changing mores and may well depend on local and ethnic considerations. W. Brown Morton, one of the original authors of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, has noted that “the management of cultural resources must consider the challenge of communicating historical significance, differing views on significance, who defines significance, and the relationship

between significance and taste.” He concludes that “historic significance can never be permanently canonized because concepts of historical significance are always subjective and must be periodically, thoughtfully revisited and redefined...so that [our resources] are preserved from all unnecessary manipulation so that they may retain the wholeness of their truth for generations to come.” He calls for “a policy of strict preservation [that] will permit our fragile and irreplaceable historic and cultural resources to remain places where truth, viewed through different lenses at different times, can remain unmolested from inappropriate responses to ever-changing concepts of significance.”¹⁴

During the symposium panelist Paul Stark noted that the Australian adoption and continuing review of the Burra Charter was specifically titled “For the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance” and stressed that the added breadth provided by that title was also reflected in a new awareness of cultural as well as architectural significance that is now evident in preservation thinking in United States.

However broadly the issues of significance are defined and the key architectural features identified, in most cases it is the ability of a building to be adapted to contemporary performance standards that assures its continuing value in a market-based economy.

Performance Issues

The American Institute of Architects created the Center for Building Performance out of the earlier AIA Codes and Standards Committee as the profession acknowledged that building-performance mandates extended beyond the generally accepted categories of safety, health, and welfare.¹⁵ The center has identified ten building-performance mandates:

- human-response performance (including physical, intellectual, and emotional responses)
- environmental performance
- building-site performance
- building-identity performance
- building-integrity performance (including responses to natural and



Fig. 5. In a building campaign that far predates the U.S. General Services Administration’s Design Excellence Program, the National Park Service saw the Mission 66 buildings as an opportunity to celebrate the best architecture of the day rather than to derive forms from local traditions and materials. Internationally known Modernist architect Richard Neutra designed the Cyclorama building in 1962. It is now threatened with demolition by the Park Service because it is seen as being too intrusive to the hallowed ground of the Gettysburg National Historic Site. It is interesting to compare this situation with that of I. M. Pei’s dramatic pyramid in the great courtyard at the Louvre in Paris, equally controversial at the time, but now generally appreciated as an appropriate intervention. Photograph by Jack Boucher, HABS.

- human-made disasters)
- spatial performance
- visual performance
- acoustical performance
- thermal performance
- indoor-air quality

Meeting this wide range of performance mandates in buildings designed in different eras is a challenge. Interestingly, institutional buildings from the nineteenth century — designed with heavy masonry, generous floor-to-ceiling heights, wide hallways, and floor plates that enabled cross ventilation and the entry of natural light — are often the easiest to adapt to contemporary building-performance standards. There may be issues of accessibility and egress, but the scale of the buildings generally facilitates adaptation and reuse.

Conversely, the U.S. General Services Administration has noted that many of the buildings from the period of the Great Society (1960s) were designed with low budgets and in an era where energy for air conditioning and lighting was plentiful and cheap, accessibility was not subject to the Americans with Disabilities Act, and security was limited to controlling access to personal documents and files. Many of these buildings are now unpopular with their occupants and are expensive to operate. Addition-

ally, these buildings often have proprietary aluminum or steel-and-glass skins and mechanical systems, which are outdated and obsolete, making rehabilitation and repair difficult. Where these structures have, nevertheless, developed local historic value, their rehabilitation raises fundamental issues of significance and aesthetic economic questions.

Conclusions and Future Dialogue

In convening the symposium on Design Excellence and Preservation Standards, APT and its partner organizations did not presume to conclude a dialogue on this fascinating and complex topic but rather to advance a series of positions that would establish the arguments at that point in time and would illuminate and encourage future inquiry and debate.

The contributions of the international group of presenters brought invaluable perspectives to the event, perspectives that have been addressed over time by US/ICOMOS, among others.¹⁶ The growing awareness of cultural and intangible heritage is impacting decision making in every field, and the wise management of architectural resources is certainly one of them.

From the design perspective, the participants in Galveston agreed that good preservation analysis improves contemporary design decisions and that the

perception that preservation is backward looking is inaccurate.

As the concern for resource conservation intensifies and as performance standards become increasingly demanding, the multiple issues of building performance are being subjected to better research and analysis with a positive impact on the entire field of building conservation.

Appreciation for environments that promote physical and emotional wellness and the awareness that much of our current built world lacks these qualities is not only the subject of research but also the stuff of debate among those who build and manage property.

Market forces are driving a revitalization of urban areas, and the economy is recognizing the finite quality of resources and encouraging reuse and rehabilitation.

We are all involved in the management of these changes, and we share a common goal of creating quality environments that show an understanding and respect for the past. The opportunity to be good curators of our heritage, while being thoughtful creators of future buildings and places, has never been more exciting nor held greater promise for great architecture.

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Notes

1. Kay Weeks, Editor, *Working on the Past* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1995), video.
2. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice, 1853* in *Ruskin: The Complete Works* (London: George Allen and Unwin) Vol. 8, p. 242.
3. William Morris to the *Athenaeum*, April 1877, in "William Morris and the Anti-Scrape Society: Reflections on the Origin of an Ethos," by William Chapman in *Heritage* (Summer 1990): 6–13.
4. Paul Spencer Byard, *The Architecture of Additions: Design and Regulation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 25 et seq.
5. Wim Denslagen, *Architectural Restoration in Western Europe: Controversy and Continuity* (Amsterdam: Architectura and Natura Press, 1994), 254 (includes excerpts from an interview with Mario Botta published in *Archithese*, no. 14 (1988): 77–83).
6. Ibid.
7. Francis Golding, *Building in Context: New Development in Historic Areas* (London: English Heritage and CABE, 2001), 36–37.
8. James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), title page.
9. Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture, A Report to the President by the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space, Washington, D.C., June 1, 1962.
10. For more information on approaches to preservation design and case studies from the General Services Administration, see Judith Robinson and Stephanie S. Foell, *Growth Efficiency and Modernism: GSA Buildings of the 1950s, 60s and 70s* (Washington, D.C.: GSA Center for Historic Buildings, 2001), passim.
11. GSA's Center for Historic Buildings has supported a variety of preservation treatments for federal buildings across the country. The Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House in New York (1900–07) by Cass Gilbert received a complete restoration of its exterior and in many of its major historic rooms. The 1965 Byron G. Rogers Federal Building and Courthouse in Denver, Colorado, was one of a number of 1960s complexes derived from the "low-base-tower-and-landscaped-plaza" model used at the United Nations' Building in New York. Remodeling in 2000 proposed the removal of a long colonnade along the plaza, but re-evaluation from a preservationist perspective recognized it as a character-defining feature, and it was retained. At the U.S. Courthouse at Wheeling, West Virginia, a sensitively scaled and detailed addition doubled the size of the historic building, making the connection with a glass-walled link that used the exterior wall of the original building as an internal backdrop to the grand staircase that links the new building with the old.
12. T. Gunny Harboe, "Design Excellence and Preservation Standards" (comments at symposium, APT 2004, Galveston, Tex., Nov. 4, 2004). Paul Stark, "Design Excellence and Preservation Standards" (comments at same symposium).
13. Lee Nelson, "Architectural Character: Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving Their Character," *Preservation Brief* No. 17 (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1982).
14. W. Brown Morton III, "Managing the Impact on Cultural Resources of Changing Concepts of Significance," *Preservation of What, and for Whom?* (Ithaca: The National Council for Preservation Education, 1999), 143 et seq.
15. David Bullen, "Building Performance: Past, Present and Future," *AIA Journal of Architecture* (Oct. 2005): 1, 4–5.
16. Other papers on preservation policies in France, Germany, Cuba, and Australia were published in the workbook for "U.S. Preservation in the Global Context," a symposium organized by US/ICOMOS International Symposium and held in Indianapolis, Ind., in April 2000.