Preservationists Debate the Recent Past

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Left: Number 2 Columbus Circle, 1964, New York City. Photo by Chester H. Liebs.
Center: Residence designed by I. M. Pei for William Slayton, executive vice president of the American Institute of Architects. Photo by Nancy Witherell.
Right: Brookhollow One (1969-1979), Dallas, Tex. Photo by Sue Roebuck.
By and large, preservationists are fervent and committed people with strong opinions. We pass a favorite downtown building and lament the loss of original windows, willingly go to community meetings when the fate of an old bridge is on the agenda, ponder periods of significance, and argue whether the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards are too strict or not strict enough—and all this before breakfast. And in a field rife with spirited debates, one of the most provocative topics is the preservation of the recent past.

Ironically, preservationists have always been preserving the recent past, from the little-valued Victorian of the 19th century to the Art Deco and Moderne masterpieces of 20th century. New York’s Pennsylvania Station, the sacrificial lamb of the American preservation movement, was just over 50 years old when it was demolished in the mid-1960s. The American preservation movement was really borne out of the widespread destruction of our historic towns and cities that came in the decades following World War II. The challenge with this recent past is that it was built on the rubble of the not-so-recent or officially “historic” past. Furthermore, these resources are challenged by their context and also by their legacy—an auto-centric sprawling landscape of highways, big box stores, shopping centers, monster homes, and subdivisions.

Is the built heritage of the recent past really to blame and if so, does that mean it shouldn’t be saved? Can the built environment of the recent past be preserved without seeming to endorse its cultural legacy, which is seen by some to be at odds with traditional preservation values?

This was one of the central questions posed at the “Recent Past Forum.” The meeting, hosted by the National Trust, was held in Phoenix, Ariz., in March 2005. National Trust Trustees, Advisors, staff, and invited experts gathered to debate the pros and cons of preserving the recent past and to discuss the many challenges associated with its preservation. The central goal of the meeting was to determine what guidelines and strategies we need to shape our work in the preservation of the recent past. How can we balance concerns for promoting livable communities in a way that makes this period of history a logical and consistent extension of our past and enhance the integrity and value of what we do?

As would be expected, the participants had many distinct opinions on the subject, from more philosophical discussions on what resources from the recent past should be preserved to more practical concerns on how to go about doing it.

All but one of the essays in this journal were prepared by participants at that meeting. Yet, all the essays reflect the range of discussion that took place in Phoenix and represent the range of viewpoints and strategies discussed there. Often the discussion was heated. This too is reflected in the essays.

Donovan Rypkema, in his essay “Saving the Recent Past,” states: “Let there be no misunderstanding—many of the buildings advocated for preservation by the recent past proponents require not just revising standards but lowering standards;” to put it more succinctly, “the vast majority of what has been built in America in the last 50 years is crap.”

Along these lines, some of the participants argued that because there is so much of the recent past, it needs to be held to a higher standard—to possess a greater degree of integrity in order to meet National Register eligibility than other, older, resource types. Julie H. Ernst, Anthea M. Hartig, and Luis G. Hoyos, in their article “Setting the Bar: The Pros and Cons of Holding the Recent Past to a Higher Stan-
began a multi-phase survey project to research and document the forces that shaped the Modern Movement in the city of Washington, an effort presented by Judith H. Robinson and David Maloney.

In “Growth, Efficiency and Modernism: The U.S. General Services Administration Takes a Proactive Look at Its Modern Inventory,” staff from the GSA’s Center for Historic Buildings discusses the comprehensive survey conducted by GSA, the largest property holder in the U.S., to better understand the quality of its modern-era buildings and determine appropriate treatment. Survey results have revealed that a number of GSA’s larger federal office buildings and courthouses from the period may exhibit greater architectural or historical merit than was initially believed.

But Chester Liebs, long in the vanguard of preserving the recent past, reminds us there is nothing new under the sun when he reflects on the 30 years that have passed since he wrote an article that appeared in *Historic Preservation* magazine advocating for the preservation of our not-so-distant past. To some, the preservation of the recent past can be seen as just part of the continuum of the movement. But there is a difference this time, because “a new cohort of preservationists is pushing the envelope—some of whom inevitably grew up in houses lining sidewalks where public transit meant a ride to school in a yellow bus.” Many members of this “new cohort of preservationists” don’t come to the field through preservation, they come via architecture or design. Or they pick up a copy of Atomic Ranch or Modernism magazine and realize, in a fit of hyper-nostalgia, that their beloved recent past is rapidly disappearing.

Previous issues of *Forum Journal* (Fall 1995 and Fall 2000) have focused on this topic. The intent of this issue is to encourage the debate, ideas, and energy associated with preserving the resources of the recent past and to stimulate additional discussion. Letters to the editor are welcome.

Jennifer Emerson and Martin L. J. Newman are trustees of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Remembering Our Not-So-Distant Past: Some Thoughts Three Decades Later

“The 20th century—the very name once symbolized all that was modern—is now creaking through its 78th year. It has been a period of drastic environmental transformation and many of its planning and design failures are becoming obvious. Nevertheless, an immense architectural heritage is being bequeathed to succeeding generations to record, analyze, evaluate, conserve or discard.”

With these opening words, written almost 30 years ago in a 1978 article in *Historic Preservation* titled “Remember Our Not-So-Distant Past,” I challenged the preservation field to prepare for dealing with the next huge phylum of historic resources coming up for review.

A Wake-up Call for the Recent Past

For the generation of John Ruskin and other 19th-century romantics, the challenge was conserving vestiges of the medieval world being subsumed by the Industrial Revolution. From Mount Vernon’s rescue in 1860 up to the early 1960s, in the United States conserving what was considered “colonial” was de rigueur. My generation of preservationists—I was born just at the close of the Second World War—were part of what has been called “a children’s crusade.”

Entering the field shortly after passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, it fell to us to expand upon the pioneering work of the Historic American Buildings Survey and various individual architectural historians, by attempting to undertake, for the first time, comprehensive state-by-state surveys of the nation’s historic places. We also had to determine whether many of our findings—long-scowned Victoriana, dying downtowns, “rust belt” leavings from the nation’s former industrial might—met the new National Register criteria, especially that rather revolutionary catchall, Criteria C.

Several developments
motivated me to write the wake-up call. By the late 1970s "the new preservation," what James Marston Fitch has called "the curatorial management of the built world," was rapidly becoming an industry with its surge of adaptive use projects. Along with the churnning out of greater numbers of historic-structure adaptive uses came the realization that historic preservation, a movement dedicated to protecting the diversity of the past, was ironically spawning its own, predictable "renovation look"—a rehabilitation aesthetic that today has spread around the globe. Just visit a Starbucks in Taipei or Tokyo!" 

Writer and critic Calvin Trillin was one of the first to point out this phenomenon in a 1977 New Yorker article titled "Thoughts Brought on by Prolonged Exposure to Exposed Brick," in which he cautioned, "when old warehouses and abandoned factories all over the country started to be scrubbed into boutiques several years ago, we traveling people had accepted them more or less the way we had accepted the advent of the Holidays Inns—at first marveling at their presence and then grumbling that they all looked alike." 

Cookie-cutter rehab was modulated somewhat by the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, which guided preservation work receiving tax breaks after passage of the Tax Reform Act of 1976, but at the same time, informative evidence of the built past, especially from the 1930s and '40s, then a little too recent to be seen of value, was still being lost in the name of preservation. Workers piled off Streamlined-Moderne Carrara-glass storefronts in over-eager "townscaping" projects, while the widespread adoption of one-size-fits-all sign-control ordinances forced the destruction of thousands of often imaginative and magnificently-crafted neon signs that once bedazzled America's cities.

Meanwhile, the nearly completed interstate highway system had bypassed many former through roads, leaving older roadside businesses to wither. Rapidly dwindling in number, early examples of roadside buildings evoked a special fascination at the time for a growing number of architects, artists, photographers, and historians. A few select specimens of this genre were also beginning to receive official recognition including a 1930s Shell Station, in the shape of a shell, that had successfully been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in a pioneering effort by the State of North Carolina. (Preservation North Carolina restored this Winston-Salem landmark and uses it for its northwest regional office.) To help coalesce these interests into a movement to record and conserve such disappearing yet significant aspects of the cultural patrimony, the Society for Commercial Archeology was founded in 1977. (I also began research for the book Main Street to Miracle Mile, and launched a summer course on the subject at Boston University in 1979.)

At the time many properties of the then recent past were also shy of 50 years old, making them ineligible for the National Register except in extraordinary circumstances. At the suggestion of Richard Longstreth and Michael Tomlin of the Society of Architectural Historians' Preservation Committee, in 1980 I attempted to come up with an optional approach to the 50-year yardstick for significance, what I called the "Out of Production Theory." It postulated that such structures should begin to be assessed for their significance when the materials of which they are composed are no longer produced and have to be obtained from salvage yards or by reproduction—something hard to do with modern industrially-produced building components.

The mere suggestion that Moderne storefronts or roadside icons should be considered for preservation at the time, while generating much media attention including a front page article in the Wall Street Journal, was considered by many preservationists to be more than slightly strange, to say the least. Today the preservation of 1930s and '40s shop fronts, historic signs, and especially highly iconic examples of roadside architecture...
A More Recent, Recent Past

Now a new cohort of preservationists is further expanding the scope of what should be considered for selective conservation—some of whom inevitably grew up in houses lining sidewalk-less streets where public transit meant a ride in a yellow school bus. For them, the not-too-distant past is another step more recent. They eschew Victorian and Arts and Crafts furniture in favor of spare Modernist pieces that were until recently thrift-shop giveaways. They have also joined with an earlier generation of preservationists to mount an effective crusade using strategies ranging from promulgating international charters to hosting websites such as the “Recent Past Net-charters to hosting websites work.”

For many in the preservation field, today’s move to conserve the recent past is viewed as a natural consequence of the continuing cycle of generation, marginalization, rediscovery, and revival. At the same time there is worry that any challenge to the current status quo runs the risk of losing support among politicians and the general public.

Critics do have a point. The past 30 years have arguably produced a built environment of super sprawl, alienation, profligate energy consumption, devastating effects on national health and the natural environment, and a loss of understanding of “place.” With much of preservationdom speaking out to curb sprawl, embracing the idea of sustainability, and supporting to a large extent the principles of “the New Urbanism,” there is an understandable fear that if 1960s suburban tract-house developments are listed in the National Register, big-box stores like Walmart might be next. Recent past proponents would probably counter that “recent is not present” and that whether or not to conserve significant aspects of today’s super sprawl is fortunately something for a future generation to sort out.

As for the utility of this present’s not-so-distant past, at the National Trust’s March 2005 “Recent Past Forum” in Phoenix, an intergenerational group of conservation professionals largely concurred that the more tightly packed, closer-to-downtown ring of suburbs of the 1950s to ’70s were capable of redensification—by introducing rapid transit and injecting infill development—without diminishing their historic value. Since many of the houses in these areas are of a relatively small scale, their growing popularity among “suburban preservation pioneers” also hints that a change in values might be taking place away from the current craze for “McMansions.”

Although pioneering urban theorist Jane Jacobs had in mind then-underutilized, inner-city commercial buildings when she wrote her 1961 book The Death and Life of Great American Cities, it is today’s older suburbs, with their often lower property values and rents, that have become the “incubator” places that Jacobs maintained are essential for community vitality. These are the neighborhoods where young families and new immigrants can get a start, and savvy visitors can find inexpensive and excellent ethnic restaurants, a welcome alternative to the often high-priced, pretentious, and predictable fare one finds in many former incubator spaces turned trendy inner-city historic districts.

At the New York World’s Fair in 1939, Americans had the opportunity to view a film about the future of communities—The City, filmed by Ralph Steiner, narrated by Louis Munford, and with a musical score by Arron Cop-
Number 2 Columbus Circle, 1964, Edward Durell Stone, New York City is threatened with re-skinning with a new facade. While on the World Monument Fund’s “watch list” and the National Trust’s America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places list, the building has so far been denied New York City landmark status. This is an apt illustration of how agreement within the preservation field about the importance and level of significance of such Modernist structures is still in a state of flux. Photo by Chester H. Liebs.

Historic Places list, the building America’s 11 Most Endangered...
Saving the Recent Past – A Philosophical and Practical Dissent

Donovan D. Rypkema

Let’s start with what we agree on:
• There are many important, significant buildings that have been erected in the recent past that certainly merit saving and celebrating.
• There are buildings and sites of little architectural merit but whose importance through association with prominent events and people in the last 50 years needs to be recognized.
• The heroic efforts of individuals and organizations to save such important landmarks as the Farnsworth House should be applauded by all preservationists, and those actions represent the most recent step in a continuum of preservation efforts since those of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association 150 years ago.
• The 50-year threshold is sometimes inadequate and arbitrary and should contain flexibility for special circumstances (as it does now, by the way).
• The preservation movement needs to continue to broaden its definition of what is important, to include those sites that are significant to previously under-recognized and disenfranchised elements of the American tapestry—Native Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, gays and lesbians, newer immigrant groups, and others.

But even among the most vociferous advocates for preserving the recent past, the areas of agreement beyond the above fall off rather quickly.

There are those who see the recent past as an area that demands special attention and increased emphasis. There are others who view the recent past as simply an ongoing chronological evolution of the historic preservation movement for which the same rigorous standards that have served the preservation movement well ought to be applied. I am happily in the latter group.

My dissent with these “recent past separatists,” and particularly to much of what I heard at the “Recent Past Forum” in Phoenix, is both philosophical and practical. This dissent is difficult because many of the strongest recent past advocates are individuals for whom I have the highest personal and professional regard, in many cases for decades. But if the preservation movement in America allows itself to abandon the measures of quality, significance, and value that have been the threshold to our saying “this is important to save,” in order to redefine “historic” to accommodate designating much of what is advocated by some of the recent past proponents, we will quickly lose both our credibility and the impact on the quality of cities that preservation has begun to have. Let there be no misunderstanding—many of the buildings advocated for preservation by the recent past proponents require not just revising standards but lowering standards.

Quality has always been an implicit component of preservation—quality of design, quality of materials, quality of craftsmanship, quality of urbanism. It is time to be unequivocal: While there are wonderful exceptions, for most of what has been built in the last 50 years quality was not remotely a consideration. In 1970 Richard Nixon nominated G. Harold Carswell to the Supreme Court, causing critics to point out that he had mediocre qualifications at best. Senator Roman Hruska responded, “Even if he is mediocre there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers. They are entitled to a little representation, aren’t they?” But Hruska was wrong; mediocre judges don’t belong on the Supreme Court and mediocre buildings don’t deserve historic designation.

Is that still too polite? Well, let me write what most of us intuitively know: The vast majority of what has been built in America in the last 50 years is crap.

Preservation and Urban Quality

We preservationists celebrate the great buildings we have saved. But the impact of historic preservation, particularly in the last two decades, has been much more—and arguably more important—than saving old buildings. Historic preservation has played the major role in rediscovering and reestablishing urban principles that have a 3,000-year history. People are moving back into cities—not in general, but first to the historic neighborhoods of cities. The rise of New Urbanism, neo-traditional development,
New Community Design, or whatever the proponents want to call it is based (whether they acknowledge it or not) on urban principles manifested in historic neighborhoods. Perhaps the biggest impact of historic preservation has been the positive influence it has had on the quality of new buildings being constructed.

The last 50 years don’t represent another step in an evolutionary process of cities; the last 50 years represent an aberration from 3,000 years of urban history, from which we are finally beginning to return. Historic buildings and neighborhoods have served as the models of what cities ought to be about. We ought not now designate as “historic” buildings and neighborhoods whose defining characteristics are the polar opposite of what good cities, good neighborhoods, and good buildings are all about.

What are those urban principles? Pedestrian orientation, quality design, quality materials, density at a human scale, mixed use, centrality of commercial activities, public spaces, walkability, compactness, economic integration, distinctiveness, fostered human interaction, neighborhood connectedness.

Which of those principles are demonstrated in our historic commercial and residential neighborhoods? Usually all of them. Which of those principles are demonstrated in most of the commercial and residential neighborhoods built in the last 50 years? Usually none of them.

Preservation and Priorities

Preservation by definition recognizes that historic resources are scarce resources—that scarcity is the heart of our argument for conservation. But the preservation movement itself is also affected by scarcity—we have limited human, financial, and political capital. We then should be devoting that capital to that which is most important. But as preservationists we have been very reluctant to set priorities.

A very practical approach I heard from one of the recent past advocates was this: “Since we have an abundance of examples of buildings of the recent past, we can raise the standard as to what we save—preserving the best, or the first, or the most representative, or the most significant.” Even those of us skeptical about the recent past movement could probably live with that. But, “no” said others. Saving an example or two would be “Noah’s Ark preservation” or “petting zoo” preservation. Clever phrases, indeed, but phrases that are oblivious to the scarcity of our own resources.

During the discussion, seeking common ground on establishing priorities, I said, “At least we can all agree that Mount Vernon is more important than McDonald’s.” And the responses were these:

“Not to teenagers it isn’t. McDonald’s is far more important.”

“McDonald’s has had a much greater impact on urban form in America than Mount Vernon.”

“That’s just your opinion.”

Well, I’ll acknowledge that the first may be true and the second certainly is. And, yes, it is my opinion. But it literally never occurred to me that the premise “Mount Vernon is far more important than McDonald’s” would not be universally shared by preservationists. And I’m more than a bit troubled that it apparently is not.

We should not allow historic preservation to move from celebrating the common denominators of the American experience to championing the lowest common denominators.

Preservation, Pop Culture, and Values

What about pop culture? Does the fact that a lot of 20-somethings think that the split-level ranch house on The Brady Bunch was really cool mean the preservation movement should be rushing to have that 1960s neighborhood designated historic? Well, I’m all for pop culture. I’ve watched every episode of The Simpsons and my favorite of the Smithsonian museums is the American History Museum, mostly because Fonzie’s leather jacket and Archie Bunker’s rocker are on display. But our cities are not museums. When as preservationists we say, “This neighborhood is historic,” whether or not there is a protective ordinance in place, we are implicitly saying, “The urban character of this neighborhood ought not to be significantly changed.” We aren’t consuming 22 square feet in a display case or 22 minutes of television time; we are consuming 220 acres of the urban environment.

It’s perfectly fine to have some academic conference with papers presented on the symbiotic relationship between post-deconstructionist literature and shag carpeting. Not much harm is done. But imposing “historic” designations and
restrictions on the corporeal and land consuming versions of pop culture on our cities can do harm. By definition pop culture is about the faddish and temporary. By definition historic preservation ought to be about the enduring.

Our very important movement away from "elitism" in historic preservation shouldn't be taken so far that we are unable or unwilling to make a relative distinction between a fast food outlet and the home of the first president. The fact that nine-year-olds prefer Sponge Bob Square Pants stories to Shakespeare doesn't mean they are equally important; they are not. And Mount Vernon and McDonald's are not equally important. Period.

Preservation, Elitism, and Leadership

In Phoenix I heard both "I was trying to save this important 1960s site and couldn't rally any public support" and "All those 20-somethings believe those '60s ranch houses are really cool so everyone is for it, we need to get on board." The preservation movement has made great strides in the last two decades away from elitism. But we need to make the distinction between elitism and leadership. Preservationists need to be leaders. If saving the important 1960s site is worth doing, the absence of a wave of public support shouldn't deter us. If "everybody's for it" but it doesn't merit designation, we shouldn't be climbing on board. I don't hear of many scientists deserting the theory of evolution just because a whole bunch of people don't believe it.

I would like to think that my professional participation in historic preservation over the last 25 years has been decidedly on the "non-elitist" side of the movement; I can count on less than one hand the assignments I've undertaken that dealt with the mansions of the rich dead white guys. But broadening our perspective of historic preservation should not equate to the abandonment of what historic preservation is about.

When faced with the observation that "What you're trying to save is just ugly, simply bad architecture and bad urban design," the recent past advocates' response is, "We won't know what is good for generations. After all in the 1920s people thought the Victorian houses we now cherish were ugly and bad architecture." Well, perhaps. The primary reason for the 50-year threshold is so we can be at least two generations removed and, therefore, one hopes, exercise a more balanced judgment.

But recognizing that we cannot be absolutely certain today, what are our choices? We could save everything; we could save nothing; or we can take the only responsible course and exercise our best professional judgment. It is intellectual abrogation to be unwilling to be discriminatory in our selections. That is what leadership is about.

We also need to recognize that in many instances neighborhood activists are petitioning for historic district designation not for reasons of historic preservation; rather they are using the local ordinance as a powerful tool of the "nimby" crowd, we have lost our right to leadership of either the preservation or the Smart Growth movements.

Preservation, Meaning, and Memory

If you had dinner a month ago with a friend you hadn't seen in a long time, you can easily recall the occasion. And if the dessert was particularly spectacular, you remember that as well. But you do not remember how many times the waiter filled the water glasses. Our brains usually do a good job of sorting out important memories from unimportant memories. Historic buildings are the physical manifestation of memory. We certainly want to preserve the best memories (and, of course, the worst, so slave cabins and concentration camps clearly merit keeping). But why are we trying to save meaningless memories?
When we as preservationists decide that the characteristics of sprawl are in and of themselves the justification for historic designation, we have lost our hard-earned seat at the table of the Smart Growth movement and we will have contributed to the continuing degradation of the American landscape.

If our subconscious can tell the difference, surely our conscious preservationist selves ought to be able to.

Referring to the recent past, E. V. Walters in his book Placeways wrote, “For the first time in human history we are systematically building meaningless places.” And now, as preservationists, we’re going to designate as “historic” those meaningless places! In doing so we are in essence giving those places a meaning they never had and an importance they do not merit.

Preservation, Smart Growth, and Historic Wal-Mart

Much of the energy of preservationists in the last decade has been spent trying to mitigate the adverse impact that peripheral big box retail has had on towns and cities of every size.

Wal-Mart obviously represents a direct connection with millions of people, it has had a major impact on retailing throughout the world, it has changed the urban form, and it has clearly had a cause-and-effect impact on downtowns and small businesses. Shouldn’t it, therefore, be identified as worthy of saving? When that possibility was raised in Phoenix it was dismissed as ridiculous. I would certainly hope so. But if we accept the arguments of the recent past advocates, on what grounds would we not designate it?

I suppose in time it will be appropriate to designate a Wal-Mart or two as historically significant. But if one goes through the litany of recent past justifications—significant urban impact, reflection of popular culture at a fixed point in time, direct connection to millions of people, et al.—on what grounds would we not designate them all? When we eliminate quality and value from the threshold test for what’s important, we are left with designating Wal-Mart; we are left with designating all of them.

If we turn the question around and ask, “What, then, do we not designate?” the list becomes either very short, very arbitrary, or reflective only of the personal interests of the preservationist being asked.

Another of the responses to the suggestion that we save the first or the best or the most significant was, “The houses themselves are not what is significant in these neighborhoods. It is their sheer ubiquity that makes them significant. So it’s important that we save them all.” When we as preservationists decide that the characteristics of sprawl are in and of themselves the justification for historic designation, we have lost our hard-earned seat at the table of the Smart Growth movement and we will have contributed to the continuing degradation of the American landscape.

The Affordable Housing Issue

Now does the fact that many of these residential areas should not, in my judgment, be identified as historic, be listed in the National Register, or be protected by local designation mean that they should be torn down tomorrow? Certainly not. I’ve argued in the pages of Forum Journal that the issue of affordable housing is, today, the major economic development challenge and that keeping an inventory of older and historic housing is an essential strategic component in meeting that challenge. And I heard in Phoenix, “But we don’t have any other tool to save that housing stock.” It reminds me of that old line that “for a man with a hammer every problem looks like a nail.” But a hammer is the wrong tool to paint the walls, and a local historic district is the wrong tool to protect properties of doubtful historic value.

If historic districts aren’t the right tool then preservationists ought to join with affordable housing proponents and economic development advocates and invent a new one. Maybe there should be such a thing as a Housing Protection District. “Historic district” has a meaning, has an importance, implies significance. To use historic districts as the default tool for a purpose for which it was not intended diminishes in appearance and reality the importance of historic districts established appropriately.

Several Phoenix participants, by the way, were supportive of broader use of conservation districts for those neighborhoods that for a number of grounds merit some level of protection but do not rise to the established criteria for historic districts. Others condescendingly dismissed conservation districts as “preservation lite.” For many of the properties advocated for designation by the recent past advocates, “preservation lite” is all they deserve…and perhaps that’s being too generous.
Preservation, Responsibility, and the Practical Challenges

Probably 20 times a year I have an experience that I’m sure is shared by many readers of Forum Journal. I’m giving a speech somewhere, and the visual part of the presentation will be photos of historic residential and commercial neighborhoods and buildings, and these will be contrasted with the residential and commercial development of the last 50 years. Almost always after the speech a nonprofit preservationist—maybe a banker or a mayor or an economic development official—will come up and say, “Ah, now I get it. Now I understand what preservationists are trying to save and why.” But the very places shown in contrast to historic neighborhoods are the essence of what the “recent past” is.

There are great buildings of the recent past that deserve to be identified as historic structures. There are other buildings, such as Edward Durell Stone’s 2 Columbus Circle, over which preservationists can and should have legitimate debates. In fairness many of the recent past advocates are saying, “Let’s make sure we also recognize the exceptional architecture of the last 50 years.” And that is a continuation of what the historic preservation movement has always been. But when we add to the list of the exceptional the faddish, the ubiquitous, the mediocre, and the merely kitschy, we are denigrating both yesterday’s historic properties and tomorrow’s landmarks.

America is filled with the cacophony of rights movements: animal rights, abortion rights, right to life, right to die, right to farm, gun rights, gay rights, women’s rights, property rights, and on and on. And I’m for all of those things; rights are good. But historic preservation is a responsibility movement. The responsibility for the stewardship of the best of our built environment, certainly, but the stewardship of the meanings and memories contained in those buildings and sites as well.

When we decide that values, meanings, quality, and significance are no longer part of the preservation equation, we have lost our sense of responsibility. And with it preservation will have lost the valuable credibility it has assiduously built up over the past 60 years.

Setting the Bar: The Pros and Cons of Holding the Recent Past to a Higher Standard

Donovan D. Byphema is a principal of Place Economics, a real estate consulting firm in Washington, D.C.

The past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there because I am here. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or more accurately pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past.

Introduction

Preservation, like all other constructions of history, is a matter of selection and privileging of certain resource types, items, and eras above other surviving components of the above- and below-ground built environment. What generations of preservationists have chosen to save, restore, and rehabilitate says as much about those involved in these processes as it does about the resources themselves. Moreover, it speaks to—and in large part determines—the relative qualities of what is deemed historic (as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us in the opening excerpt). The built environment of the past 35-50 years, the recent past, reflects so much of the present that understanding its full significance poses key intellectual, archival, planning, and structural challenges to the framework of preservation advocacy and practice as it has evolved in the United States.

And, we would argue, the issue is not solely of interest and importance to the protection and interpretation of U.S. history and the range of stories and experiences it can (and should) convey. That is to say, the protection, management, interpretation, and valuation (vs. denigration and dismissal) of select recent past resources, is not solely of interest and importance at the national level. To be sure, this topic is being grappled with in various geographic settings and is, in point of fact, a global issue being addressed on an international stage.
Too much of the recent past lies captured in recent memory—many preservationists remember what urban renewal, and the modern buildings that most often followed it, wrought on historic downtowns and neighborhoods and what sprawl has done to the countryside. And even those who do not remember the mid-20th century first-hand surely appreciate its impact. This closeness makes decisions to preserve modern post-war places complicated if not downright perplexing.

In his work on history texts, monuments, and memory, sociologist James Loewen convincingly makes the case that historians in general fail to do justice to the recent past. To illustrate this point, he offers the African Kiswahili culture’s multi-faceted ways of looking at the past. The first way, the past of the living, consists of history that we make decisions to preserve modern post-war places complex.

Building on Loewen’s notion of the sasha as a multi-disciplinary field of engagement, what individuals active in preservation, cultural resource management, or any aspect of the U.S. heritage industry commonly refer to as the recent past is aptly framed by our British colleagues as *The Familiar Past* (Tarlow and West, 1999). Perhaps the predicament our transatlantic peers face is even tougher than our own, for throughout much of the U.K., research addressing the period 1500-1750 (and later) is too often simply glossed as post-medieval. For North American scholars, the once-paradoxical recent past is even more immediate as it runs up through the second half of the last century. Of course, titles such as *The Recent Past from a Southern Standpoint* (Wilmer, 1887) only reinforce the fact that the definition of what constitutes “recent” history is a necessarily fluid one.

Regardless of the particular label applied to such resources, it is highly significant that they are being addressed on an increasingly international stage by such groups as the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). That said, the implications of this discussion are potentially far more wide-reaching than such U.S.-specific issues as National Register eligibility and compliance officer workloads.

During our two-day informal meetings in Phoenix earlier this year, it became apparent that while there is a consensus that elements of the recent past are historically, socially, and intellectually significant, there is a wide range of opinion regarding the standards of integrity to which recent past resources should be held—as distinct from historic sites of greater age.

The intent of this essay is to consider the rationale offered for setting the integrity bar higher for recent past resources and, second, to strongly advocate for a consistent application of integrity standards to all historic resources.

Our intent in this essay is two-fold: first, to consider the rationale offered for setting the integrity bar higher for recent past resources and, second, to strongly advocate for a consistent application of integrity standards to all historic resources. Bar Height, Integrity Standards, and National Register Eligibility

To be sure, establishing National Register eligibility is by no means the only—or perhaps even the greatest—challenge faced by advocates of recent past resources. But given the fact that National Register eligibility is the engine that drives the preservation, cultural resource, and heritage management trains in this country, one cannot overlook this particular area of concern. Likewise, the very fact that as early as 1979 the National Park Service (NPS) prepared guidelines (Criteria Consideration G) specifically targeted at properties having achieved significance within the past 50 years only serves to underscore the importance of NR eligibility on the preservation landscape—as does the point that these guidelines have undergone multiple revisions since being enacted.

Specifically, NR Bulletin 22 requires that such resources be of exceptional importance to be deemed worthy of inclusion in the National Register and identifies post–World War II development projects; suburban subdivisions; shopping malls and commercial strip development; expanded educational, recreational, and transportation facilities; the Civil Rights movement; the U.S. space program; the Vietnam War; and even the impact of the preservation
movement on cities, towns, and rural areas as resource types that regularly succeed in meeting Criteria Consideration G.

All nominations to the National Register, from any era, must also meet the test of integrity. The seven aspects of integrity are location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Each is considered a pivotal component of a given resource’s ability to convey its significance. In general, NR Bulletin 15 instructs preparers in how to determine specifically which aspects of a site’s integrity are pivotal and contribute to the resource’s character-defining attributes. That said, a certain degree of latitude is offered the nomination writer on which of the seven aspects of integrity to use that best support the argument of significance.

Our intent is not to debate the merits of the aspects of integrity, as they are a given and the relative weight of each varies from resource to resource and nomination to nomination. Instead, however, we want to consider the underlying rationale and relative merits of the suggestion made by some of our colleagues that recent past resources be required to possess a greater degree of integrity in order to meet NR eligibility than other, older, resource types.

Discussion

The points offered by our colleagues at the Phoenix workgroup meeting—although that is by no means the first or only setting in which such sentiments have been expressed—in support of this suggestion take several forms. We have made every effort to record and characterize them accurately. Basically, we paraphrase the argument in favor of using a higher standard of integrity for recent past resources as consisting of four essential elements:

1. that when it comes to the recent past we can anticipate an overwhelming quantity of resources requiring our attention, particularly when one speaks of suburban developments, as just one class of recent past resources;
2. that we must support effective management and allocation of staff resources at both the state (SHPO) and federal (e.g., NPS, federal preservation management, and tribal historic preservation office) levels;
3. the credibility factor—that we do not want to lose whatever public support we enjoy in the face of allocating public funds and other resources for the preservation and maintenance of sites or properties that might not in all instances pass the “laugh test”; and finally
4. a distinct urge to favor original features of design and setting over subsequent alterations to those aspects of the site or property’s integrity.

Let’s look at each of these points individually before returning to the geographically (if not intellectually) broader implications of this discussion.

First, there is the matter of numbers—concern about the sheer quantity of resources that could be put forth as worthy of documentation, study, and preservation. The temptation runs high to somehow reduce the numbers and types of properties now coming of age for eligibility for a variety of practical, personal, and philosophical reasons. Surely the likely number of resources is staggering for the post-WWII period. The population explosion, the housing and infrastructure boom, the rate of segregation and suburbanization, to name but a few of the contextual nodes, make for a comparatively large pool of resources. Thus, many conclude that this sheer quantity requires us to identify and select only those of the greatest quality for study, documentation, and preservation.

And with federal and state resources already precariously low, not to mention the struggles on the local level to establish or maintain preservation programs, what would an effective management strategy look like with regard to the recent past’s resources? If the so-called “50-year” policy for eligibility for NR listing were eased, or even if it were not, our colleagues suggest that state historic preservation offices and the NPS could easily be overwhelmed, so numbers of listings should be kept manageable. Here we have crossed into the overlapping territory of the second concern.

Whether we like it or not, we work in an environment in which efficiencies and economies of scale are a regular concern. In the face of recent threats to the National Historic Preservation Act in the form of amendments that would have adversely redefined Section 106 review in the name of streamlining the process, any form of added efficiency would likely be deemed a positive by those occupying points all across the political spectrum. And given the current political landscape, we do not anticipate an increase in financial support for recent past initiatives from the public sector.

While we cannot argue against the reality of this scenario, we can strenuously insist that uncritical culling of the recent-past herd in the name of cost-cutting would—in all likelihood—represent a false economy in the long-run. That is, tacit dismissal of such resources as redundant might conserve resources in the short-term in the form of staff review time and consultants’ fees, for example, yet in the long-run we would likely lose significant opportunities to forge new alliances promoting reinvestment, reuse, and maintenance of existing resources.

If we truly want to adopt an economical approach, it might well take the form of resistance to the siren song of writing off neighborhoods and other places as a time- or resource-saving measure and develop strong and varied enough context studies that permit “consent calendar items” as has been done in some jurisdictions for once equally numerous resources as Victorian houses and Craftsman cottages. In addition, such tactics afford the opportunity to more thoughtfully ally ourselves with the growing
commitment to sustainable development, green design, and similar interests mounting a new offensive in response to rising energy costs and concerns about environmental degradation.

And finally, there is the suggestion from some quarters that original design and setting be seen as paramount—that a large measure of integrity be determined on the basis of whether or not the resource retains the intent of its builder/designer in regard to design and setting. In our own work and the scholarship of others, we have noted the importance of the notion of layering. Landscapes, sites, districts, and a host of other resource types assume complex layers produced by years of accretion. Such depositional buildup by no means represents a de facto loss of integrity. Instead, it merits investigation to determine whether these layers might not be episodes of change within a broader pattern of continuity between past and present.

To this last point, we add Richard Longstreth’s observation regarding districts containing both acknowledged historic resources as well as yet-to-be-formally-acknowledged recent past resources, that: “Denying the recent past its place in older historic districts can not only rob them of their physical integrity, it can rob the preservation process of its' integrity.”

its place in older historic districts can not only rob them of their physical integrity, it can rob the preservation process of ‘its’ integrity’ (“Integrity and the Recent Past,” in Preserving Recent Past 2, Slaton and Foulks, 2000). Thus the integrity issue in question is not simply that of the resource but potentially that of our profession as well.

Beyond these brief rebuttals, we want to unpack this higher-standard line of reasoning as representing a false economy. Moreover, this approach utterly misses the point of context insofar as it dismisses continuities and fosters a tacit disconnect between past and present. And, more egregious still, such an approach denies the meaningfulness and import of users’ or occupants’ intents and desires. Taken even further, the higher-standard argument is inconsistent and elitist, and reduces preservation to the role of arbiter of taste—a role that we categorically eschew. Instead, we counter with the suggestion that as preservationists, cultural resource managers, planners, heritage interpreters, educators, etc., we acknowledge the role and appropriateness of change as an adaptive cultural strategy. Such change should be recognized—when adequately examined in context, in relation to precedent and tradition—as a viable component of the range of architectural, landscape architectural, and archeological resources from the recent as well as the not-so-recent pasts that we regularly encounter.

We very well appreciate our colleagues’ concern with fiscal responsibility, with a desire for increased mainstream credibility and support for the preservation movement, for a more representative and diverse range of stories and experiences contributing to the broader preservation narrative. In a nutshell, context is everything and, when properly contextualized, recent past resources need not be held to a higher standard so much as they need to be held to the same high standard as other resources when considered for eligibility as National Register or World Heritage sites or for any other measure of relevance, merit, and worthiness of protection. Stated slightly differently, maybe we need to expand our reading of the aspects of integrity so as to apply them in a fashion that does not change because of the age of the resource being considered.

Conclusion

Younger generations of professionals—as well as members of the lay public—are attracted to the study, documentation, and preservation of a host of material byproducts of the recent past. These byproducts assume the form of everything from ranch houses to bowling alleys to Tiki restaurants. Perhaps to this generation—as opposed to the slightly older folks who train, mentor, and will ultimately employ them—the recent past is of such keen interest precisely because it represents sashi in the form of an exciting alternative to zamani. There is a tremendous opportunity “sell” preservation as a passion and/or a profession to this whole new audience. Regardless of why they are hooked, let us not lose sight of the fact that there is a strong and growing constituency for the protection and thoughtful management of recent past resources.

There is a clear consensus that the recent past is worth saving insofar as it merits the same attention, study, review, and consideration as other sorts of cultural resources. The precise means for accomplishing this, however, is where there is considerable room for discussion. We hope that the move to hold recent past resources to some sort of higher standard than other vintages or types of resources be strongly resisted, as it fails to support the viable preservation agenda that was so energetically debated at our Phoenix meeting and in town meetings, planning boards, and classrooms across our country and in increasingly global and comparative contexts. We do not want the integrity issue to be used to further fragment a community facing so many challenges on so many fronts, nor do we wish to foreclose on what is rapidly becoming an increasingly global matter of interest and concern.

Julie H. Einstein, Ph.D., is a visiting assistant professor of anthropology at the College of William and Mary and an officer and board member of the Recent Past Preservation Network (www.recentpast.org). Anthea M. Hartig, Ph.D., is director of the Western Office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Luis G. Hoyos, AIA, is an assistant professor of architecture at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. James Lindberg of the Mountain/Plains Office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation also assisted with this article.
We Are Rediscovering Dallas and Building a Preservation Ethic!

In the year 2002 Preservation Dallas initiated the first citywide architectural survey in more than 15 years. Two years later the survey was expanded to include post–World War II properties. We’ve used a methodology that differs significantly from that employed by most surveys, in that we train volunteers to identify and provide an initial evaluation of historic properties in each neighborhood. This approach is very labor intensive, but the results are worth the effort. Beyond just producing a report—a binder of buildings that might only remain on a shelf—we are helping Dallas residents to better appreciate historic buildings and become advocates for historic preservation efforts.

The Discover Dallas! survey teaches residents to identify characteristics that make their neighborhoods and city significant. They refer to a uniquely user-friendly survey form that uses architectural icons as an identification tool, rather than a checklist or written text. Together residents and volunteers walk the neighborhood recording the architectural details and taking pictures—discovering together the features that define their neighborhood. Other volunteers meet at the library to research the history of the neighborhood and a selected set of original houses.

Preservation Dallas now has a roster of nearly 600 trained volunteers who have participated in surveying more than 28 neighborhoods. The survey in the East Kessler Park neighborhood alone brought out 50 volunteers for one Saturday morning. In interviews given to the Dallas Morning News and Oak Cliff Tribune, local resident Laurie Hesser remarked on why the survey appealed to the neighborhood: “The project gives us the means to discover, record and preserve the pearls of history, culture and architecture that make East Kessler Park so extraordinary. It’s both a treasure hunt and a great adventure…it’s been a rewarding experience for everyone involved.”

Students and residential real estate agents also are making a tremendous contribution to the survey. The Leadership class at Sunset High School in Oak Cliff surveyed the commercial buildings on West Davis Street. Their work was reported on in Heritage Matters, a national journal published by the National Park Service. Dallas colleges are also getting in on the act, and summer internships are being offered to students from El Centro College and the University of Texas at Dallas.

Preservation Dallas now includes a training session on conducting surveys during its class for real estate agents. The two-day seminar includes an intensive examination of architectural styles and forms, and also incorporates an introduction to the survey form and some brief fieldwork.

A Searchable Database

The information collected by volunteers is placed in a searchable internet-based database. Future users will be able to search by neighborhood, address, date built, architect or builder, and style. Using a Geographic Information System (GIS), the data will be displayed with detailed, colored maps.

Discover Dallas! committees and volunteers are currently planning the survey’s website and how it will interface with a GIS. The Dallas Central Appraisal District recently added a GIS system to its website; so starting in 2006, Discover Dallas’s database with a GIS will be connected to that system which is widely used by residents, real estate agents, and government officials. Preservation Dallas also will be able to link the GIS maps with the Discover Dallas! database and ultimately display the survey using location maps on our website. This would be a professional advancement for most cities. The City of Chicago’s online survey already demonstrates how the internet is a more
effective way of displaying information, updating data, and introducing the public to resources previously unknown, much less understood.

Documenting the Post-War Era

In 2004 Preservation Dallas initiated a second phase of the survey to include post-war properties constructed between 1942 and 1969 and a list of local, national, even international designers practicing in Dallas during these years.

Dallas’s significant growth after World War II produced one of the largest concentrations of modern architecture in the Southwest. Despite the wealth of architect-designed modern buildings, these resources are increasingly threatened with insensitive alterations and demolitions. Demolition reports from the City of Dallas state that we are losing as many as 1,000 single-family houses from this era each year. While some are not architecturally distinctive, the heavy loss of building fabric in these post-war neighborhoods is changing the city’s landscape rapidly.

The initial phase of the post-war survey generated a list of Dallas architects and their significant works during these years. Preservation Dallas mailed queries to 26 architects requesting additional names and projects, which led to a series of interviews and correspondence and an eventual list of more than 200 architects and builders practicing in post-war Dallas.

The principal investigator, with a team of volunteers, documented approximately 600 of the most important buildings on Discover Dallas’ survey forms. Volunteers took photographs with high-resolution digital cameras, and for the more significant buildings also with traditional cameras using black-and-white film. Historic information recorded for each of the buildings consists of a bibliography or of data gathered from primary sources such as interviews, city directories, National Register of Historic Places nominations, and newspaper and journal articles.

Results So Far

The survey is providing valuable information for preservationists and planners, who use it to study development patterns, growth trends, and areas with opportunities for revitalization or redevelopment. And the Discover Dallas! project is being recognized in various reports and national publications, which have cited the Dallas survey method as a model for other cities to follow.

Preservation Dallas believes that we are building a stronger preservation base in the city. When these forgotten buildings are examined again through the survey exercise, neighborhood pride surges. In an effort to make this even more useful, we recently sponsored a workshop in one of the neighborhoods where the survey had been completed, showing how the survey can be employed as a planning tool. The results suggest that we can develop this approach further to make the survey even more useful locally.

All over the city, residents and workers are documenting their neighborhood’s significant properties. The resultant database is growing. Discover Dallas! is recording everything within the city limits up to the mid-1960s. Dallas is a forward-looking city and many of its citizens do not know its past. Architectural surveys are important for the same reason history is taught in schools. With teardowns on the rise, it is becoming increasingly important to document our architectural heritage. People get involved when they care. This is our way to do something that makes Dallas a more livable and economically stronger community.
Documenting DC Modernism

Judith H. Robinson and David Maloney

Capitol Park Apartments, completed in 1959, was the first building finished under the city of Washington’s Southwest Urban Renewal Plan. It inaugurated Capitol Park, a multi-building complex of apartments, townhouses, and open spaces that was fashioned as a pilot renewal project within sight of the U.S. Capitol dome. Its construction was claimed to herald the birth of a brave new world that would replace the outdated past—one condemned for its image of squalor in the very shadow of the dome. The momentous Southwest urban renewal development—begun almost 50 years ago— is by now commonly accepted as the nation’s first transformative application of the powers of urban renewal.

With the design of Capitol Park, architect Chloethiel Woodard Smith of Satterlee and Smith not only pioneered Modern architecture in Washington but also began to reshape a whole sector of the city under new principles of urbanism. Integral to the plan for Capitol Park Apartments was its rear court or park, designed by noted landscape architect Dan Kiley.

The optimism embodied by Capitol Park Apartments was shattered in 2003 when, as part of new construction on the site, demolition of primary landscape features—an open-air pavilion, mural, and pool—began without a raze permit. After the DC Preservation League and Committee of 100 on the Federal City filed a successful landmark application, and an ensuing lawsuit, preservationists reached a settlement with the owner. A key part of that settlement was establishment of a $450,000 preservation fund for historic preservation efforts in the city, particularly involving Southwest and other significant mid-century Modern buildings.

With part of the fund, the DC Historic Preservation Office, in partnership with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has begun a multi-phase project to research and document the forces that shaped the post–World War II Modern Movement in Washington.

The study is being completed by Robinson & Associates, Inc., a local firm with broad expertise in architectural history and preservation. The first component of this effort is the preparation of a Historic Context Report that will analyze diverse forces that brought Modernism to the nation’s capital, and create a record of the buildings and sites that exemplify it. To date, archival and bibliographic research has begun, tenets of Modernism have been explored, and the study focus is achieving shape. Preliminary results will be available for a Modernism Conference that the DC Preservation League and DC Historic Preservation Office will cosponsor in January 2006, with final results to follow in 2007.

Study Focus

The focus of the study is on buildings, landscapes, and developments designed and built between 1945 and about 1975. The initial date marks the end of the WWII federal defense emergency in Washington and passage of the Redevelopment Act authorizing the National Capital Planning Commission to designate urban renewal areas and adopt master plans. The tentative end date marks the start of the city’s celebration of the U.S. Bicentennial and the period when the tenets of Modernism began to lose ground. The goal of the project is to expand the awareness of the historic qualities that define the Modern era and, as the next step, to provide the framework for analyzing individual products of the Modern era for future landmark designation.

Findings about the Modern movement will differ by locality. The reasons for its emergence, timeframe, and types of resources will vary. Washington is distinctive in many regards—distinctive as a city that seldom thought of itself as “modern” but sponsored formidable Modern...
Modern residences built for an avant garde clientele included a stunning residence designed by I. M. Pei for William Slayton, executive vice president of the American Institute of Architects. Photo by Nancy Witherell.

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Modern residences built for William Slayton, executive architects. Photo by Nancy designed by I. M. Pei for an avant garde clientele. Two of the first were Walter Gropius’ Hechinger and England houses for family members of a local home improvement business. Small clusters of Modern residences grew in outlying areas such as on Chain Bridge Road, in a verdant setting free from the constraints of the traditional city context.

On the commercial scene, pent-up post-war demand for office space pushed uninspired development west of the White House along K Street. Washington is a horizontal city, with maximum building heights established by Congress in 1910 to prevent the principal federal monuments from being overshadowed by commercial construction. The resulting prototype, where buildings ballooned to fill the available building envelope, was labeled the “K Street Box.”

Soon a set of self-labeled “young turks” in the Washington AIA chapter began shaking things up. The firms of Berla & Abel and Keyes Lethbridge and Condon were in the forefront of this interest in progressive Modernism. The term “Washington School” appears to apply to their work, and these seminal architects spawned many successor firms working in the Modern idiom. Corporate and business sponsors of Modernism included the Washington Post, the Brewood printing company, and the Forest Industries Association.

Outsiders also played a role. Notable works by nationally and internationally acclaimed firms included Philip Johnson’s Pre-Colom-

thought to be a new era. But the Washington Board of Trade’s architectural awards program in 1951 described design that “lacked imagination” or produced “uninteresting copies of what had been done before.”

The introduction to the AIA’s 1965 Guide to the City of Washington, DC by three prominent local architects looks back on the era and states that two seminal works probably marked as distinct a point of origin as any that might be named: Eliel and Eero Saarinen’s 1939 competition-winning design for the Smithsonian Gallery of Art (which was never constructed), and William Lescaze’s 1940 Longfellow Building (now refaced). The introduction goes on to cite other pivotal works such as the Dulles Airport Terminal (1962); in its second edition it adds the city’s Metro system (opened 1976).

Washington’s conservative leanings were interrupted by the sporadic appearance of Modern residences built for an avant garde clientele. Two of the first were Walter Gropius’ Hechinger and England houses for family members of a local home improvement business. Small clusters of Modern residences grew in outlying areas such as on Chain Bridge

The Evolution of DC’s Modern Movement

The DC Modern study begins after the sea change that occurred in Washington during the huge WWII buildup. Massive numbers of government workers, including architects, came to the city for jobs. Historic images of the period show the Pentagon under construction and sprawling “temporaries” filling the Mall. When the burgeoning city pulled itself out of the war effort and moved on, it was

works, distinctive in the constraints of its height limit and tight geographic confines, and distinctive in the unique relationship between the local community and the giant federal presence. Washington is also unusual in that the city itself has not been greatly affected by the suburban development that is a large component of most Modern-era studies.

The methodology for the study of DC Modernism resembles any historic context study, except for a special interest in finding examples of exceptional significance—usually required for properties less than 50 years old to qualify for listing in the National Register of Historic Places—and the tangible immediacy of the sources available. Many of the architects, landscape architects, and developers involved can be interviewed. Entire runs of articles by the long-time architectural critic of the Washington Post, Wolf von Eckart, are readily available. And clients who commissioned early works by I.M. Pei and other now-famous practitioners can offer their perspective.

The study will try to answer some key questions: What influenced the architects, and how were they trained? Who were the proponents and clients? What was unique to Washington? Was Modernism concentrated geographically within the city? What was the political framework, and what were the sociological patterns? What did people notice and talk about?

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brian Wing at Dumbarton Oaks, I.M. Pei’s East Wing of the National Gallery, Edward Durell Stone’s Kennedy Center, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Martin Luther King Memorial Library.

Counter to the earlier tendency to occupy Beaux Arts mansions for their embassies and chancelleries, foreign governments began to create their own Modern landmarks. The German chancery (1964) is a masterpiece in this regard. That same year, when a city zoning ordinance made it harder to locate embassies in residential neighborhoods, many made plans to build in the State Department’s newly created International Center on upper Connecticut Avenue.

Not surprisingly, initial research indicates that Washington may have been the only city strongly influenced by President John Kennedy’s sweeping directive to improve the quality of federal building design. Stemming from a Cabinet meeting in 1961, Kennedy’s initiative culminated in a report entitled “Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture” penned by Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Records show agencies such as the National Capital Planning Commission and Commission of Fine Arts reviewing in quick succession projects such as Marcel Breuer’s HUD building and Victor Lundy’s U.S. Tax Court.

Pivotal Developments

When Jacqueline Kennedy’s attention was brought to a 1961 proposal for a vast executive branch office complex that would have obliterated the historic houses and cultural institutions on Lafayette Square, she stepped in with architect John Carl Warnecke. His New Executive Office Building and U.S. Court of Claims, set behind and deferring to the buildings on the square, were constructed instead. This highly visible project coincided with the 1966 passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, which had as profound an impact on the capital as it did the nation.

Washington’s Modern-era history also includes the painful legacy of massive displacement and social upheaval from urban renewal, devastating riots in the late ’60s (from which parts of the city are still recovering) and highway protests in 1967 opposing new freeways and pushing for mass transit. In the 1970s, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority undertook construction of the city’s Metro system, one of the most ambitious projects in the country — and one instance in which Washington was truly in the vanguard. The basis for the system’s design is an elegant engineering solution — coffered concrete barrel vaults, floating platforms, and indirect lighting. In transfer stations like Metro Center, the barrel vaults intersect to create unobstructed rooms that have been acclaimed as on par with Washington’s grand monumental spaces.

After some grandiose plans and false starts, the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) was formed in 1972 in a bold move to remake deteriorated Pennsylvania Avenue, the route of the Inaugural Parade. The series of master plans for the Avenue were a testing ground for principles of Modern urbanism. The Brutalist and much-derided FBI Building was one of the earliest implemented designs, but the Old Post Office (slated for demolition under initial plans) was saved by grass-roots action that gave birth to the DC Preservation League. In the end PADC’s architectural success was mixed, but it sowed the seeds of a lasting downtown renaissance.

Finally, Washington’s Southwest Redevelopment overshadowed many other undertakings of the Modern era for its sheer scale and ambition. Capitol Park, encompassing 30 acres, was just the first component of a project that eventually remade 552 acres of the city in about 20 years, wiping out whole historic environments in the process. The new Southwest’s mixture of high-rise apartments and low-rise townhouses, federal office complexes, a town center mall, churches and institutions, all interspersed with landscaped plazas and public spaces, was for a brief time model for urban redevelopment nationwide. But Southwest is a bittersweet legacy, beginning to be appreciated for its Modern architecture, yet still remembered for the wholesale destruction and bitterness it caused.

Washington is again a booming city experiencing another wave of reconstruction and renewal. Buildings from the Modernist era are no longer fresh and new, and many are disappearing without much debate. Ironically, the demolition at Capitol Park has been the genesis for looking at Modernism as part of the irreplaceable past and not the expendable present. If successful, the projects undertaken through the Capitol Park preservation fund may foster a greater appreciation of the city’s Modern legacy, and might even help avoiding having to re-learn an old lesson about the value of preserving the past.

Judith H. Robinson is principal of Robinson & Associates (contact: jrobinson@robinson-inc.com). David Maloney is Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer for the District of Columbia (contact: david.maloney@dc.gov).
Growth, Efficiency and Modernism: The U.S. General Services Administration Takes a Proactive Look at Its Modern Inventory

Increasingly, the buildings constructed by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) between 1950 and 1979 are requiring major reinvestment to keep them functioning as quality workspace for federal employees. The decision to reinvest—and deciding the extent of reinvestment—is not always easy. For those that lack architectural distinction and have failing curtain walls facades, a solution that radically changes the appearance of a building is often welcomed by the tenants and by a community eager to see an eyesore transformed. When architectural or historical merit is ambiguous, GSA must look beyond popular perception before determining an appropriate level of intervention. To help guide these decisions, GSA’s Office of the Chief Architect began investigating its Modern-era buildings in 2000 to better understand the quality of this building stock and determine appropriate treatment solutions. These efforts have led to some surprising conclusions and a new body of information on 38 percent of GSA’s owned inventory, which just five years ago was little understood or appreciated. Far more buildings than expected deserved a second look.

Federal Modernism in the Great Society

President Truman created GSA in 1949 to oversee the federal government’s immense building management and general procurement functions. At a time when the federal government was experiencing tremendous growth, between 1950 and 1979, GSA constructed over 80 million square feet of space; today, more than 600 of the 1,600 buildings that make up GSA’s owned inventory were built during this period.

Architects of this era embraced Modern design as a distinct and recognizable building type. Although only a few GSA Modern-era buildings were designed by recognized masters, some will become more efficient, state of the art, and technologically honest. However, concerned that the caliber of federal construction was declining, in 1962, President Kennedy convened an Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space whose Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture would articulate a new philosophy that continues to guide the design of public buildings today. This initiative called for design that reflected "the dignity, enterprise, vigor and stability of the American National government," placing emphasis on the choice of designs that embody the finest contemporary American architectural thought.

When GSA built Modern at its best, it produced strikingly contemporary designs by Modern masters—Marcel Breuer’s sweeping Washington, D.C., headquarters building for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s sleek Federal Center in Chicago, Ill.; and Victor Lundy’s boldly sculptural U.S. Tax Court also in Washington. Most federal office buildings of the time, however, are more derivative than iconic. As GSA sought to house legions of federal workers and to achieve the goals of standardization, direct purchase, mass production, and fiscal savings, economy and efficiency were often stronger driving forces than architectural distinction.

The idea of public buildings as a distinct and recognizable building type gave way to greater emphasis on utility and cost containment. As a result, most buildings GSA constructed prior to and during the period reflect typical office design of their time, constructed not as enduring iconic buildings but to serve a 25- to 30-year lifecycle.

Evaluating Buildings Under 50 Years Old

Although only a few GSA Modern-era buildings were designed by recognized masters, some will become...
National Register eligible when they reach the 50-year threshold on account of their association with historic events or individuals; as representative of a significant or unique architectural type; or for their potential, in time, to meet other National Register eligibility criteria. As the buildings of the Great Society become cultural vestiges of a past generation, new preservation advocates have emerged, in at least one case taking GSA by complete surprise.

In 2000, in Denver, Colo., local citizens railed against GSA for a planned courthouse entrance expansion that would require removal of a colonnade constructed in 1965. Local Modernists identified the Byron G. Rogers Federal Courthouse, designed by local architectural firms James Sudler Associates and Fisher and Davis, as Denver’s best example of “New Formalism.” The need to accommodate new security requirements and changing circulation patterns—coupled with a new awareness of the building’s potential National Register eligibility—called attention to a paradox that GSA can expect to face again.

Eventually, all of these buildings will require substantial reinvestment to remain useful, if they’re not replaced or removed from use. Many contain materials and systems that have not aged well and cannot be repaired or even replaced in kind. Some require entirely new facades. All will need to meet increased security standards, accommodating queuing space that may exceed the capacity of existing entrance lobbies, as it did in the Byron G. Rogers Courthouse. Tenants will continue to request changes to update lobbies or humanize stark plazas, and to improve wayfinding where architectural hierarchy that would distinguish public circulation and ceremonial space is absent. Several recent projects demonstrate the inherent tension between preserving misunderstood or under-appreciated architecture and accommodating customer preferences for the latest architectural style.

GSA’s challenge with this segment of the inventory is not only to maintain functionality and customer satisfaction within a framework that takes into account potential National Register eligibility, but also to weigh the merit of investing in these buildings against that of reinvesting in other properties, including GSA’s 19th- and early 20th-century monumental buildings, arguably of superior construction quality and cultural value.

From 2000 through 2002, GSA’s Office of the Chief Architect enlisted leading American architects, preservationists, and architectural historians to participate in a series of forums held at Yale University (2000), the GSA Headquarters in Washington (2001), and the National Preservation Conferences in Providence, R.I., (2001) and Cleveland, Ohio (2002). As a follow-up to these discussions, GSA’s Center for Historic Buildings commissioned a study to explore the broader historical and architectural context within which these buildings were designed and constructed, and to gain a better sense of their overall merit.

**Documenting the Modern Era**

In 2003, GSA’s Center for Historic Buildings released a bound, strikingly illustrated report entitled *Growth, Efficiency and Modernism: GSA Buildings of the 1950s, 60s and 70s* (www.gsa.gov/federalmodernism). The first study to substantively explore the character of these federal buildings and the changing philosophy of the government’s Public Buildings Program, the report documents the range and the highlights of GSA’s Modern-era inventory, and faces head-on the challenging design issues being raised today. The extensive publication, a context study of GSA buildings from this period, contains an Eligibility Assessment Tool—designed as part of the overall documentation effort—to assist GSA regional preservation staff in determining the likelihood that a building of this era might qualify for the National Register before age 50 due to exceptional significance or
hold the potential for eligibility in the future.

**Understanding the Inventory**

After publishing *Growth, Efficiency and Modernism*, GSA conducted an initial survey of its Modern-era buildings. The survey predominantly relies on information from GSA sources and, when available, includes basic facts such as architect, year designed and year constructed, a recent photograph, style, whether there are any significant events or people associated with the building, and whether alterations have substantially changed its appearance or compromised its original design integrity. This information is now contained in an electronic database so that GSA employees making decisions on investment or modernization can be more informed as to the potential historical value of the resources in question.

Although research is ongoing, GSA has already gained a better understanding of its Modern-era buildings—and with some surprising results. Contrary to longstanding assumptions, it appears that a number of GSA’s larger federal office buildings and courthouses from this period may exhibit greater architectural or historical merit than initially believed. These findings are supported by initial applications of the Eligibility Assessment Tool backed by archival research. This information is particularly useful when a Modern-era building is being considered for major capital improvements, and can help identify those buildings that warrant a greater effort for preserving significant features and carefully integrating design changes to maintain architectural character and quality. Although the number of buildings that qualify for National Register listing based on for exceptional significance remains very small, many more will likely be eligible for listing when reaching the 50-year threshold.

**Recognizing Significance and Directing Intervention**

The next step for GSA is to nominate Modern-era buildings already eligible for inclusion in the National Register and to create informative materials that offer guidance on how to manage and care for this select group of significant resources. A Building Preservation Plan (BPP), comparable to a Historic Structures Report (HSR), is already in draft form for the Everett M. Dirksen U.S. Courthouse in Chicago, one of three buildings comprising Mies van der Rohe’s Federal Center. The BPP will provide lasting, building-specific guidance and will also help identify changes that may need to be made to GSA’s database of BPPs to capture qualities or characteristics unique to buildings of the Modern era.

Additional tasks include developing preservation design guidelines and creating a body of case studies addressing the particular challenges these Modern buildings present. Interior lobbies and ceremonial spaces such as courtrooms are of particular interest and concern. Finally, as more of these buildings near the 50-year mark, GSA will continue to evaluate their merit and nominate the buildings that meet the established criteria for listing in the National Register.

GSA’s intent is to be proactive and, through the tools and methods identified above, move toward a refined stewardship strategy for those buildings that fall outside the traditional historic building inventory.

Following are three case studies highlighting a range of approaches GSA has applied to its Modern-era buildings—from minimal change in Texas, to sympathetic modifications in Illinois, to a complete transformation in Iowa.

**Case Study 1: Chicago Federal Center**

In 1992, the federal judiciary needed additional space in the 30-story Everett McKinley Dirksen U.S. Courthouse in Chicago. The 30-year-old
design included the construction of eight, two-story courtrooms and secure corridors for judges and juries. Lohan’s firm designed the first four of these new courtrooms and another Mies student, Munin Choudrey, designed the second set of four new courtrooms in 1999.


Case Study 2: Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Office Suite

Although a building may lack architectural merit (Criterion C), associations with events (Criterion A) and significant persons (Criterion B) can make the property eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. An example of this is the architecturally undistinguished J.J. Pickle Federal Building in Austin, Tex., which GSA, in conjunction with the Texas Historical Commission (the SHPO), has determined eligible for the National Register.

When the J.J. Pickle Federal Building was completed in 1965, President Johnson, a native Texan, established an official office in it. Located on the ninth floor, his private suite, which included an office, dining room, kitchen, sitting area, and bathroom, has been maintained by GSA for 40 years. Large windows with two-inch-thick, bulletproof glass afforded impressive vistas of the Texas State Capitol, the University of Texas, and the surrounding Texas hill country (new construction currently obscures these views). The suite retains a high degree of integrity and remains almost unchanged since President Johnson occupied it.

The suite is considered to be exceptionally significant because of its strong associa-
tion with President Johnson and as the site of meetings of national consequence. One of the most important events to occur in the suite was a December 1966 meeting, attended by President Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At this meeting, the group discussed the antiballistic missile system and decided to support the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This was a pivotal moment in determining U.S. nuclear policy during the Cold War.

Case Study 3: Des Moines Federal Building

Built in 1967-68, the Des Moines Federal Building in Iowa experienced water infiltration since its completion. After assessing the best approach to solve the problem, GSA decided that the low architectural merit of the building made it suitable for complete replacement of exterior surfaces—the most economical way to remedy the leaks while also addressing aesthetic deficiencies in the building. Beginning in 2003, GSA replaced the roof and entire facade, including the windows, dramatically altering the appearance of the building.

Before embarking on the proposed project, GSA notified the local architectural review board of its intentions to alter the building. Community support for the renovation project was overwhelming, with board members enthusiastically supporting a new exterior design. No concerns relating to its potential historic significance were raised or appeared to exist. The project architects designed a solution that provided the necessary weather barrier and simultaneously a sleek new exterior form. The success of the Des Moines Federal Building’s facade replacement demonstrates the positive impact GSA buildings can have on communities and the benefit of soliciting local input in discussions about changes to these buildings.

This material was excerpted from Growth, Efficiency and Modernism: GSA Buildings of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, produced in 2003 by the Center for Historic Buildings, Office of the Chief Architect, under the direction of Rolando Rivas-Camp, FAIA, director, GSA Center for Historic Buildings, through Robinson & Associates, Inc., authors Judith H. Robinson and Stephanie S. Fuell. The complete document is available at www.gsa.gov/federalmodernism.