VIEWPOINTS

INTERSTATE SAFETY REST AREAS

CONSIDERING ARCHEOLOGY

THE PARADORES OF SPAIN

CONTEMPORARY DESIGN IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

A PRESERVATION RESPONSE TO GLOBAL WARMING
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CONTENTS

INTERSTATE SAFETY REST AREAS: ENHANCING THE AMERICAN TRAVEL EXPERIENCE
Joanna Dowling ................................................................. 5

CONSIDERING ARCHEOLOGY: WHAT SITE STEWARDS SHOULD KNOW
Scott M. Grammer ........................................................... 15

THE PARADORES OF SPAIN: A SOJOURN TO REFRESH THE PRESERVATION SOUL
Theodore Ligibel .............................................................. 21

CONTEMPORARY DESIGN IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS—A UK PERSPECTIVE
Murray G. Miller ............................................................... 27

A PRESERVATION RESPONSE TO GLOBAL WARMING: JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON OR LEADING OUR OWN PARADE?
Anthony Veerkamp .......................................................... 35
Tepee forms were the most common image of regional design used by safety rest areas developers in the late 1960s. States including Texas, South Dakota, Oklahoma, and Colorado have picnic shelters in the form of grand tepees. This one is on westbound I-10 in Texas. Photo by Joanna Dowling.
In the late 1950s a new entity emerged in this country; it was a uniquely American type and one that would in short time burgeon across the American landscape. Built as accents to the Interstate Highway System, safety rest areas (SRAs) provided relief, respite, and entertainment to mid-century automobile travelers. Today they serve as both functional waypoints and cultural landscapes. These landscapes reflect an interchange of persons and ideas that in many ways define social paradigms of the mid-century period. Born of an era that expounded progress and mobility, safety rest area sites represent both. In design and function they were forward looking, reflecting the technologies and visual aesthetic of their time. In their siting within the Interstate System they represent a new kind of public space, one whose sole purpose was to accommodate those traveling within the system.

Yet despite their importance, and perhaps because of their familiarity, these places have yet to be considered for their architectural or cultural significance. Older ones are routinely revamped or replaced—with the support of government policy at the highest level.

A NEW GENRE TO MEET A NEW NEED

Rest areas are to be provided on Interstate highways as a safety measure. Safety rest areas are off-road spaces with provisions for emergency stopping and resting by motorists for short periods. They have freeway type entrances and exit connections, parking areas, benches and tables and may have toilets and water supply where proper maintenance and supervision are assured. They may be designed for short-time picnic use in addition to parking of vehicles for short periods. They are not to be planned as local parks.

Two important precedents informed the development of Interstate safety rest areas: roadside parks and commercial roadside architecture. Both with roots in the pre–World War II era of expansive road building, roadside parks created a model of place while commercial architecture created a visual mode that came to define the built environment of the roadway. Commercial roadside architecture, both preceding and following the war, created a visual vocabulary that American travelers learned to read and anticipate. They had also come to expect frequent opportunities to leave the roadway, for leisure, sightseeing, and, when available, the use of comfort facilities.

SRA developers looked to the aesthetic precedent of commercial roadside architecture, designing buildings and structures in the tradition of these roadside curiosities that had come to define American highways in
the decades preceding the Interstate era; this resulted in SRA elements that were unique and colorful expressions of regional flavor and modern architectural design. Safety rest areas functioned to create a context of place within the Interstate System, achieved through the implementation of unique and whimsical design elements and the use of regionally signifying characteristics.

Roadside parks, which became popular in the 1930s, also paved the way for safety rest areas. Stopping sites, or waysides, first emerged in rural areas where commercial establishments were not available. Often they appeared in areas of scenic interest or merely in places where there was room for a car to pull off the roadway. These earliest waysides materialized out of necessity; when motorists wanted to stop, they pulled off and parked along the roadside.

This manner of roadside park development was echoed throughout the country as road building brought similar travel experiences to diverse sections of the American public. Roadside park construction became part of a greater movement of roadside development and beautification. Briefly interrupted by World War II, progressive development continued after the war and by the mid-1950s American highways were lined by a well-developed system of roadside parks constructed and maintained by state highway departments. By the time the Interstate Highway System was legislated in 1956 almost every state had a system of roadside parks. While they consisted of minimal facilities, their necessity had been proven by their prolific numbers and extensive use. The well-documented popularity of roadside parks was a leading factor in the federal decision to standardize safety rest areas as part of the Interstate System.
The limited access nature of Interstate Highways meant that a stop within a safety rest area was often the only contact travelers had with regions they passed through. Before the development of interchange businesses there were few options for stopping available to drivers on newly constructed stretches of Interstate Highways. SRAs took the place of both the roadside park and the roadside store, allowing travelers what could be their only interaction with local landscapes. The functional objectives of these sites—which included providing restrooms, travel information, and places for drivers to rest from long-distance travel—made feasible the less tangible directive of connecting people with the regions they passed through, replacing the local flavor that would have once been readily accessible from the roadway.

**EARLY STANDARDIZATION**

In 1958, two years after the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways was legislated and funded by the federal government through the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) published *A Policy on Safety Rest Areas for the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways* (quoted on page 5). These were the first federal regulations designed to guide the construction of roadside service facilities. Federal funding of highway maintenance projects, including comfort and sanitary facilities, dated to 1930; however, prior to 1958 all site specifications were determined independently by state highway departments. The federal guidelines were a part of the overall standardization of the new roadway system, of which SRAs were a part.

Controlled or limited access road design was the aspect of Interstate design that inspired the inclusion of safety rest areas in the Interstate Highway System. Planned to bypass commercial strips, through which many existing highways passed, Interstate Highways, with their controlled access road design, would confine drivers to long stretches of roadway, rendering them unable to leave the road for any basic necessity. In 1962 Frank J. Cope, assistant landscape architect for the Ohio Department of Highways, reflected on the changed nature of the American roadway system and the essential nature of SRAs to traveler comfort and safety:

> At the onset of Ohio’s Interstate Highway program it became apparent the needs of motorists on this great system of roadways would be unlike existing routes. This new highway system would cut across the country, bypassing towns and villages which formerly provided the services necessary to the welfare and safety of the traveling public. There would be no access to privately operated service centers except at interchanges. Services at or near more of our interchanges were not existent when moderately large segments of Ohio’s Interstate System were opened to the traveling public and after three years no motorist’s services have been provided by private enterprise at or near many of the interchanges. One might liken motorists services needed on a segment of Interstate Highway System to an isolated village of equivalent population; for once the motorist enters the roadway he is somewhat isolated from the rest of the countryside.²

The site features included in the 1958 national standards for SRA design were those that would provide for the basic needs
of people traveling on Interstate Highways. Convenience and comfort facilities located in SRAs included toilets, drinking water supply, table-bench units, bulletin boards, fireplaces or grills, independent benches, refuse cans, and signs or small monuments or placards that typically commemorated an event in local or national history that occurred nearby. The first SRAs constructed in the late 1950s, in states such as Wisconsin and Ohio, reflected the straightforward requirements of the earliest guidelines. Basic in design and construction methods, such sites adhered to the mandate that safety rest areas should not be excessive in their provisions but formal and functional.

**EMERGENCE OF REGIONAL VARIATIONS**

The proscribed pragmatism of SRA construction, however, was quickly met in different regions by a desire to create sites that depicted their particular uniqueness. The basic functional elements of SRA sites became architecturally designed elements of a planned whole: toilet buildings to house comfort amenities, picnic shelters to protect picnic tables, and information shelters to display travel information. Progress was the calling card of SRA developers, as site planners sought to equal in aesthetic experience what the Interstate System was creating in engineering marvel.

In 1957 George T. O’Malley of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources echoed a sentiment that came to define SRA development on a national scale: “In view of the huge sums of money spent on development of new super highways should sanitary facilities be restricted to a privy type toilet and hand pump water supply?” he questioned. “Should not the rustic design be replaced by the modern in keeping with the highways being served?”

Distinctive characteristics were used in the design of structures to create objects of attraction that, in the tradition of commercial roadside architecture, would draw travelers from the Interstate. Once inside, elements such as picnic shelters designed in the manner of grand tepees, oil rigs, windmills, and adobe huts would become objects of interest and entertainment.

By the early 1960s significant attention was lavished on the architectural design of SRA buildings and structures. Sites were typically designed around a central theme, expressed in the toilet building and then reflected in other site structures, particularly picnic and information shelters. This approach created visual cohesion and a sense of place for travelers. Thematic design located users within their specific surroundings of the safety rest area, as well as locating them thematically within the state or region of the country. The materials and design qualities used often played on regional characteristics such as significant history or traditional building aesthetics.

Architectural design became the conceptual link between the perception of place and the function of place, as SRA structures took on architectural characteristics that reflected a variety of aesthetic trends. The author has identified seven broad design trends into which SRA buildings and structures can be classified: basic traditional, modern, regional, rustic or regional modern, combined forms, free form, and 1970s revival. For more information on these designations please visit www.restareahistory.org.

Complementing the architectural design of SRA buildings was an equal emphasis on site selection and landscape planning. Landscape designs were used to further define one’s experience of place. The use
of regional plantings and the incorporation of indigenous landscape elements were common practices. The site selection process was also used to create a context of place; when possible, sites were located to showcase scenic vistas and natural landscapes. Locations were also selected for their proximity to scenes of historic events, and histories were often commemorated within SRA sites by way of informational postings.

**BALANCING FUNCTIONAL AND PRESERVATION CONCERNS**

The first generation of SRA design began in the late 1950s and extended through the 1970s. Programs were directed by state governments, and sites were built concurrently with stretches of Interstate Highway. SRAs opened as the highways opened. Initial specifications called for site designs to accommodate travel volumes projected through 1975. In 1972 the Federal Highway Administration reported 1,200 safety rest areas open on Interstate Highways. This represents a staggering number considering the first sites had opened just over a decade earlier. By the mid 1970s travel on Interstate Highways was already exceeding original expectations, and by the early 1980s state departments of transportation began updating and replacing SRAs. In Missouri, for example, sites being replaced were merely 15 years old. Subsequent standardization guidelines recommended that SRAs be constructed to serve a 20-year life span, based on projected traffic volumes and use. Because lack of funding has limited updating at this aggressive pace in many states, redevelopment has become a sporadic enterprise. At present there is a growing movement to update SRA sites that have aged well beyond their intended lives as the scale and facilities of original sites,
and even early redeveloped sites, seem to have lost their modern luster in the eyes of the traveling public.

Safety rest area sites are not only a record of the Interstate travel experience and their own historical development, they are functional sites that continue to serve the needs of the traveling public. Given this dual identity there is a need to balance history and function in a manner that will adequately provide for both.

### MOST SITES EXEMPTED FROM SECTION 106 REVIEW

As the Interstate Highway System approached its 50-year mark, which was commemorated in 2006, much discussion surrounded the feasibility of subjecting the System as a whole to Section 106 review processes. As a means of mitigating a potential nightmare of bureaucracy, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) initiated a movement to drastically reduce the number of undertakings associated with the Interstate System that would be subject to 106 review. The Exemption Regarding Historic Preservation Review Process for Effects to the Interstate Highway System was the result.

The exemption was based on the concept “that the Interstate System is historically important, but only certain particularly important elements of that system…warrant consideration. Such elements would still be
considered under Section 106. The exemption takes no position on the eligibility of the Interstate System as a whole.” As summarized, the exemption “would relieve Federal agencies from the requirement of taking into account the effects of their undertakings on the Interstate Highway System, except with regard to certain individual elements or structures that are part of that system.”

The exemption required the Federal Highway Administration to submit a list, by June 30, 2006, of individual elements of the Interstate System that will continue to be considered under Section 106. These were, basically, elements that were in or likely to soon be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The exemption agreement and the final list of elements held out from the exemption can be accessed through the FHWA website: www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/histpres/highways_list.asp.

The Exemption Regarding Historic Preservation Review Process for Effects to the Interstate Highway System is particularly relevant to a discussion of safety rest area history and preservation. In many ways the exemption was the beginning and the end of SRA preservation in a national context. Among the 138 elements included in the FHWA’s final list of elements to be excluded from the Interstate exemption, only nine are listed with a designation of rest area.

Given that the current application of the exemption negates the potential recognition of historic significance for any element of the Interstate Highway System that was not initially included in its list of exceptions, the remaining hundreds of SRA sites are not only unprotected but lawfully prohibited from receiving formal protective designation. The exemption creates a substantial hurdle to conventional preservation practice as applied to safety rest areas; however, given the importance of this program and the rate at which original SRA sites are being lost to updating and redevelopment, it is imperative that an alternative means of recognition be adapted.

**ENHANCEMENT VERSUS REDEVELOPMENT**

Many preservation battles center on buildings that are threatened because they are no longer able to serve their initial use. Historic safety rest areas, much the opposite, are threatened because their initial use is still in great demand. In the decades since the first safety rest areas were constructed, traffic volumes on Interstate Highways have increased dramatically. This volume has also increased the usage of SRA facilities. Because SRA sites were constructed to provide for a limited future projection of use, the sites were essentially built to be rebuilt.

The treatment of SRA facilities has varied from state to state. Maintenance and redevelopment schemes have depended upon the priorities of state maintenance departments. Ironically one of the best protections for original SRA material has been the perpetual lack of funding for their redevelopment.

Because safety rest areas continue to serve a vital functional purpose, some degree of updating and redevelopment is invariably necessary. However, it is possible to incorporate history-sensitive practices into redevelopment schemes. Incorporating new elements into existing sites is a practice that has been used in several states. In Oregon and California new toilet buildings have been added to several sites. These new buildings respect the architectural design of their original counterparts. It is important to note
that this approach was used for practical reasons, not as a preservation measure. Such a concept, however, provides a viable preservation model.

A less comprehensive approach, however one that serves preservation goals, is the practice of retaining original SRA elements in redeveloped sites. In Missouri the state’s original sites were redeveloped in the 1980s, with the construction of new regionally designed toilet buildings that replaced and contrasted with the original toilet buildings designed in the modern style. In these sites the original picnic shelters were kept, and in at least two sites the original buildings were reused as storage facilities. Wisconsin has taken a similar approach in at least one redeveloped site, reusing an original 1960 building as a storage facility. Ironically, Missouri’s regionally themed 1980s sites are now themselves threatened by redevelopment, in what seems to be an ongoing cycle of construction and redevelopment.

A wide discrepancy in maintenance practices is evident among states that have retained their original sites and facilities. The state of Texas has a wonderfully maintained system of late 1960s SRAs, along with newer sites constructed within the last 10 years. Other states have been less successful in maintaining their older facilities.

New Mexico’s SRA facilities are a poignant illustration of how poor maintenance affects preservation and user satisfaction. The state is home to many wonderful examples of regional design that were constructed in the late 1960s. The toilet buildings and picnic shelters communicate traditional Southwestern architectural design and use of materials. However, the condition of both the sites and structures in many locations was found to


Several picnic shelters of this design accompany the toilet building pictured opposite. These shelters dot the site, giving the sense of a clustered village or settlement. Photo by Joanna Dowling.
be sadly decayed on a recent visit. The condition of these sites undermines any potential aesthetic experience that could be generated by the architectural quality of the unique buildings and shelters. It is unlikely that travelers will remain in a site long enough to enjoy its regional characteristics if it feels unclean and unsafe.

Maintenance is an effective form of preservation. Proper maintenance of SRA sites not only sustains the physical condition of a site’s facilities and landscape, it contributes to a positive site experience in the minds of travelers. The patina of age is perhaps not so romantic in a rest room; however it may be possible that SRA users would have more patience and appreciation for properly maintained older facilities if they approached them with a more informed perspective, one that included an understanding of SRAs as historical elements of the Interstate Highway System.

RECOGNITION NEEDED

First and most importantly, the historical record of safety rest areas must be recognized by the preservation community as well as the department of transportation staff who serve as the current stewards of these sites. This history has not yet been documented within the written record of the Interstate System, and has not been acknowledged within the many volumes that recall 20th-century road building, roadside architecture, and the American travel experience. These sites must be surveyed and criteria developed to determine which ones are most worthy of protection.

Safety rest areas are a significant aspect of 20th-century road building and the expansion of leisure travel during mid-century America. As interest in our recent past grows, it is important that these sites are recognized as cultural landscapes that com-
municate the American travel experience in both public and personal terms.

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NOTES:
3 George T. O’Malley, “Critique of the Roadside Park Design Problem and Announcement of Awards,” from the proceedings of the 16th Annual Ohio Short Course on Roadside Development, 1957.
5 Ibid
6 For the purposes of this discussion safety rest areas constructed between 1956 and 1980 will be referred to as historic. The author recognizes that this identification falls outside the standard 50-year guideline for historic designation.

RESOURCES

Historical information about safety rest areas can be useful for the staffs of state departments of transportation and state historic preservation offices, transportation historians, those associated with state historical societies and preservation organizations, and others concerned with transportation structures and sites. Research sources on this subject are vast, however they are dispersed. Many state departments of transportation have documentation of the development of their respective programs, including site plans, usage surveys, letters from travelers, developmental guidelines, photographs, and various articles. A comprehensive national record can be found in the publications issued by the Ohio Short Courses on Roadside Development; these conferences were held annually between 1941 and 1972. The author is aware that these volumes are held at the Ohio Department of Transportation and the transportation library at Northwestern University. General private and government publications that document development trends and policies can be found in various transportation and university libraries nationwide.

For further information on the issues discussed in this article or for information on safety rest area programs in a particular state, please contact the author at joanna.dowling@gmail.com and visit www.restareahistory.org.
Owning or managing a historic site is a daunting and expensive task. One must maintain the historic structure and any new infrastructure, drawing on limited funds that are also needed for staff salaries, interpretative programming, collections management, and more. But there’s something else to add to the list: Property owners, stewards, and managers should consider the possibility that archaeological resources are present on site, and strive to preserve and protect those resources.

Taking archeology into account is essential for complete preservation and interpretation of a historic site. The reality is that, because of the need for modern amenities and infrastructure, ground-disturbing activities will occur. The key to striking a balance between preservation and progress on a site is to develop a plan before beginning any construction or maintenance project.

INCLUDING ARCHEOLOGY IN PROJECT PLANNING

The character of a historic site includes not only the architecture, grounds, and landscaping but also the soil strata contained beneath the surface. Soil layers and the artifacts contained within are significant components of a historic site, just as a keystone, earthwork, or planting can be crucial to defining the historic character of the site.

Frequently, however, the need for construction and maintenance requires disturbing the ground. While this may be necessary, many stewards do not realize that even minimal ground disturbances hold the potential to destroy not only artifacts and the interpretive potential for the site, but may also irreparably alter the historic character of the site. Even seemingly innocuous activities such as the burial of phone lines and simple landscaping can destroy the site’s subsurface character, resulting in the destruction of the archeological record.

Although archeological interests and construction (or mitigation) requirements may appear to be incompatible, they don’t need to be. Successful cooperative planning efforts can take into account all interests involved. This happens at James Madison’s Montpelier, National Trust Historic Site in Virginia, and Poplar Forest, Thomas Jefferson’s Virginia retreat, as two notable examples. Both sites have on-staff archeologists who are essential to a multi-disciplinary, cooperative approach to planning and preservation.

However, for sites without the resources or need for on-site archeologists, stewards must understand that archeology is an essential component for preservation and maintenance of the site’s historic character. For example, if a historic home is suffering from water infiltration through its foundation, an obvious part of the solution is to consult historic architects or structural engineers. Not so obvious, however, is to consult an archeologist. In addition to providing interpretation of the depositional history at the site, an archeologist can assist architects and engineers by providing deliberate excavation.
of the foundation, isolating problem areas for repair. Following excavation, the archeologist can also determine whether additional excavation is even necessary for future repair. In this way, archeology, architecture, and engineering are not mutually exclusive in solving the problem.

Why doesn’t this kind of collaboration happen more often? The appearance of incompatibility is largely due to an incomplete understanding of archeological goals and methodology.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Archeological method and theory involves more than the search for artifacts. Archeology is the search for the information that artifacts within their depositional context can yield.

Unfortunately, the perception is that archeology is a frivolous expense with very little return value to the practical considerations at the site. Archeology is frequently viewed as one of two extremes—either a never-ending thrill ride as depicted in the Indiana Jones films or as methodical, expensive excavation by students with trowels “playing in the dirt.” This is largely because the value of archeology is often only understood in terms of recovered artifacts discovered at a particular site.

Artifacts are significant and often stand alone in terms of their importance to the understanding and interpretation of a given site. Individual artifacts can yield a wealth of specific information, including but not limited to dating a site and providing a clue to the identity of the people who discarded the artifact. However, frequently more important than the artifact itself is the “context” in which the artifact is discovered. Context includes such information as the artifact’s spatial orientation, its relation to other artifacts, and its relation to soil layers.

For example, stains within a layer of soil (i.e., “features”) can often yield even more insight into the site’s occupants than artifacts alone. At one historic site, stains revealing 200-year-old fencing surrounding slave quarter sites suggested that slaves had been able to maintain a small private area away from the overseer’s prying eyes. These features were found in shallow soils that could have easily been destroyed by even the most minor ground-disturbing activities. Valuable insight into these slaves’ lives could have been lost.

Understanding that archeology is concerned with context, not just artifacts, is a vital first step in realizing why even small ground disturbances can have a significant effect on the historic character of a site. With better knowledge of archeological theory and methods, stewards will more readily understand why they should consider archeology and strive to protect archeological resources that may be present.

GENERAL ARCHEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

One fundamental archeological principle is to preserve undisturbed archeological resources in situ. Oftentimes the best option is simply to do nothing. This reasoning goes to the very nature of archeological excavation. Archeology is a destructive process. The very sample with which the archeologist is working is totally and irreparably destroyed by excavation. Years of deposition and accompanying human behavior cannot be replaced, only reconstructed.

If a subsurface examination is necessary, there are nondestructive options available.
The use of remote sensing methods — proton magnetometers, seismic sensors, and electrical resistivity (among other techniques) — is commonplace and frequently employed to determine if subsurface features are present, and then to pinpoint their location and evaluate them. In some cases, remote sensing can nullify the need to excavate at all.

If, however, excavation or mitigation proves necessary, site stewards must consult with the archeologist prior to excavation to determine who should do the work and how and where excavated artifacts, if any, will be preserved and curated. The archeologist will then follow a process similar to that listed below to determine the nature and significance of archeological resources that may be present. For convenience, archeologists frequently describe archeological investigation as consisting of stages or phases:

Phase I: This stage is when the “adventure” of archeology frequently begins. (Having tromped miles through swampland and poison ivy dodging snakes and alligators, in retrospect, I question as to exactly what the adventure was!) Phase I comprises basic survey and mapping with accompanying surface collection and subsurface testing used to determine the presence or absence of sites of interest. Preliminary information developed from Phase I survey as to the site’s age, size, and integrity frequently dictates whether a Phase II or III excavation is warranted. This information can even be used to develop an archeological management plan for a property. Phase I is the least expensive form of archeology, with costs dependent upon the size of the site, topography, soil conditions, and the amount of subsurface testing required.

Phase II: During this stage archeologists frequently excavate small areas and conduct controlled surface collection to determine site integrity. Phase II is conducted on sites identified during Phase I to determine either the extent to which further investigation is necessary or if the site should be avoided during construction or mitigation. If testing results from Phase II show that the area has significant archeological potential, then Phase III will likely be recommended.

Phase III: While all three phases contribute to the understanding and interpretation of a historic site, this stage is often the most significant for complete site interpretation. Phase III is the “classic” archeology with which most are familiar. Phase III is the most costly and time-consuming phase since routine maintenance of a historic site often requires disturbing the ground. When a drainage system was installed along the back foundation of Belle Grove Plantation, a National Trust Historic Site in Virginia, the staff archeologist monitored the excavation of the site. Photo courtesy of Belle Grove Plantation.
it may require complete or near total excavation of a site, particularly when ground disturbances will destroy all or a portion of the site. Individual soil deposits are excavated layer by layer until a sterile soil horizon devoid of human activity is encountered. While excavating the site, archeologists keep detailed records of observations and document the excavation in painstaking detail using photography, videography, and hand-drawn renditions of features and artifacts in situ. Sites, features, and artifacts are often mapped with surveying equipment. This information is typically then downloaded into accompanying software programs enabling archeologists to develop two-dimensional and three-dimensional maps of the excavation and its relationship to the surrounding area.

While archeological fieldwork is the most visible aspect of the discipline, it should be noted that nearly three times the field time and effort is spent on preliminary research, artifact identification, analysis and curation, and reporting findings from a given site.

**COMPLETE STEWARDSHIP**

The first and most important step for stewards is recognizing that, if at all possible, there should be little or no ground disturbing activities on site without the presence of a qualified archeologist. This is true at both rural and urban historic sites. Although one may not think of finding archeological resources in urban environments, there are cases of archeological resources preserved even in highly developed, densely populated areas. Buildings and pavement can act as a seal over which history is preserved. Two of the more remarkable examples are the slave cemetery in New York City and the Tequesta Stone or Miami Ring located in downtown Miami, both of which were discovered below the surface of lots scheduled for development.

Stewards should strive for the complete preservation of intact archeological soils and the artifacts they contain. In fact, for those with easements attached to the site, easement language could be interpreted to include archeological resources. Owners or managers could be under a legal obligation to prevent or limit ground disturbances altogether!

The reality, though, is that a complete prohibition of ground-disturbing activities is unrealistic. Site stewards should consider alternative solutions to construction or maintenance needs with the goal of preserving any intact archeological remains present on the site. If a viable, nondestructive solution cannot readily be found, remember that an archeologist may provide further options while simultaneously enhancing the understanding of the occupational history at the site.

In the event that a site needs construction or maintenance requiring ground disturbance, site stewards should be prepared to protect archeological resources. At a minimum, stewards should establish a baseline of current topographical conditions and subsurface ground disturbances that have already occurred at the site. Included in this baseline should be an evaluation of potential problem areas such as water drainage, root intrusion, heave (swelling or rising of displaced soil), or other potential immediate threats to historic structures and archeological resources. These may include but are not limited to the following. Determine:

- With current gutter and downspout configurations, where is runoff occurring? Is it being routed away from the site?
If roads are present, is it possible that the slope or amount of road substrate compaction encourages or directs additional water runoff toward the site?

Is a road or the structure itself acting as a dam, trapping water or preventing water flow away from the site?

What is the overall condition of existing utility lines and can they be located?

Are water lines or spigots contained within walls or the foundation and, if so, what are their current conditions?

Does root intrusion from vegetation or soil heave from landscaping pose a threat to the structure or archeological resource?

Ideally, stewards should strive to move beyond this basic information and develop an archeological management plan to help guide them with construction or maintenance decisions. In addition to the above baseline information, the following questions should be addressed in developing an archeological management plan:

Have previous archeological investigations been conducted on site? If so, what areas of the site have been investigated and what was the nature of the archeological record and site stratigraphy?

What other ground disturbances have already occurred on site?

Where are ground disturbances located in relation to the construction or maintenance area? If so, can new work be confined to already disturbed areas?

If archeological excavations are undertaken, what potential impacts would soil removal have on structural integrity of building walls or foundations?

At Cliveden, National Trust Historic Site in Philadelphia, when archeologists conducted a research project in 1979–80, they discovered that the site had already been damaged by the laying of telephone cables perhaps a decade before. Photo courtesy of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
If archeological excavations are undertaken, what resources and facilities are available to ensure the curation, preservation, and storage of recovered artifacts and field notes?

Development of even the most basic archeological management plan can prove invaluable to help stewards protect archeological resources present at the site. With the development of an archeological management plan or baseline assessment, owners and managers can properly consult with archeologists who frequently enhance site interpretation while simultaneously assisting other experts working on site. Without a management plan, present archeological resources may be irreparably damaged or destroyed, resulting in a lost opportunity to gain significant insights at the historic site.

There is significant added value to this approach. First, stewards can have the confidence that they have done their due diligence and can make better decisions about construction and maintenance projects.

Second, stewards will reduce the risk of the surprise discovery of an archeologically significant site during the project. Once surprise discoveries are made, the archeological resource may have already been destroyed—the information it could have yielded may already be gone. In some cases, depending on the nature of the surprise discovery, the project may be forced to stop until reactive archeology can take place. This is bound to add costs and cause delays.

The bottom line is that stewards should strive to consider archeology prior to embarking on any ground-disturbing activities at the site. The alternative could be expensive in terms of lost time, resources, and opportunities to gain additional knowledge about the site.

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NOTE:

1 Not all archeologists assign the same nomenclature to this process because the reality is that the archeological process involves a mix of techniques and levels of intensity driven by finances, topography, soil conditions, and threat to the resource.
Imagine this scenario: You are invited to a meeting with an aide to the President who presents you with this proposal:

*Identify the most important historic places in the nation in need of preservation that are in economically depressed areas and that have high heritage tourism potential, so that the government can begin their restoration as travel-based accommodations.*

A preservationist’s dream—perhaps hallucination—to be sure. Well, in Spain that is essentially what happened...spread out over an 80-year time span.

Now celebrating its 80th anniversary, Spain’s remarkable system of Paradores de Turismo began in 1928 as the government’s response to improving local economies and substandard tourist accommodations as well as addressing the derelict state of many important historic sites throughout the country. Begun under the reign of King Alfonso XIII, the original principles of the Parador system, by which they still operate, are:

To act as guardian of our national and artistic heritage while promoting quality tourism and dynamizing those regions with fewer economic resources.

It was no accident that this system of restored lodging venues was conceived at a time of relative political stability when automobiles were first beginning to appear throughout the country, with the resultant mobile traveler. The Parador system began in smaller towns, where places to stay were infrequent; the initial concept was to develop a chain of accommodations that were a day’s drive apart. As it evolved over the ensuing decades, the idea of taking important historic sites, some of which had been abandoned for many years, and rehabilitating them for use as tourist venues while maintaining a large measure of regional character was nothing short of brilliant—both from an economic and a tourism point of view. The ongoing success, indeed flourishing, of the Parador system to nearly 100 locations attests to that genius.

The premier Parador, Parador de Gredos, opened in 1928 in the tiny village of Navarrrendonda de Gredos, set amidst the granite peaks of the Gredos Mountains in central Spain. In fact this first Parador (literally inn or stopping place) was new construction, but it incorporated typical exterior stonework and interior detailing found in this area of the Province Castilla Leon. It is reported that King Alfonso himself chose the site for this Parador during royal hunting excursions to the mountains. It is known that in 1978, on the 50th anniversary of the Parador system, Parador de Gredos was the location of a meeting of influential Spanish leaders who shaped the final draft of the Spanish Constitution at the beginning of the
reign of Spain’s current monarch, King Juan Carlos I (grandson of King Alfonso). So, though new in 1928, the Parador de Gredos now holds an important place in Spanish history, basking in its status as the progenitor of this unique collection of tourist venues that would become a hallmark of Spanish and European hospitality.

At present, 93 Paradores exist throughout Spain, most occupying historic monuments of some sort, though there are a few “brand new” examples. In cities and villages, rural areas and mountainous hamlets, Paradores are found in every corner of this ethnically rich nation.

THE GUEST EXPERIENCE

Thanks to my wife’s internet savvy, and a friend who speaks fluent Spanish, we navigated our way into this web of historic accommodations. Intrigued by the initial search, we pursued the notion and found ourselves awash in a world of Spanish architecture, history, and regional culture, the likes of which we only could have dreamed existed. Former castles and citadels, monasteries and convents, once-glorious palaces—some dating from as early as the 10th century—unfolded before our eyes on the official website, www.paradores.es. Booking is through designated travel agents around the world, and we happily paid the required surcharge to embark on a Spanish sojourn built around staying in these reclaimed historic resources. In all we visited six of the Paradores, but there are many to choose from.

Our first Parador was at Avila, a UNESCO World Heritage walled city reputed to be Spain’s best preserved medieval fortress town, with no fewer than 82 round bastions protecting this ancient provincial seat. Nestled along-
side the massive city walls, this Parador began life as the 16th-century Piedras Albas (white stones) Palace. Reincarnated, after years of decline, the Avila Parador more than satisfied our initial curiosity. Overlooked by storks nesting on a nearby campanile, a short path through the Parador’s sculpture-strewn garden leads directly to the parapet walkway atop the immense walls. For a small fee you can walk virtually the entire perimeter of Avila, encountering spectacular views, historic exhibits, and local character of countless sorts. Most Paradores currently would be considered higher-end accommodations, offering central heating and air conditioning, “TVs in every room,” queen- and king-size beds, impeccable maid service, marble and glass showers, and mini-bars. A typical evening’s lodging generally will range from $150 to $220 (US) per night for two persons; the full Spanish breakfast requires a modest supplement and is well worth the cost. The rooms are modern, yet strongly reflective of local historic and architectural character. Paradores also are marketed as stylish reception and modest-sized conference venues featuring ample dining salons, meeting and break-out rooms, and modern-day amenities such as heated pools and workout stations, wireless internet connectivity, interactive television, and videoconferencing.

Spain, recall, was a charter member of the European Union and has been enjoying a tourism and economic renaissance as a result. The number of construction and rehabilitation projects, both publicly and privately sponsored, was astounding, so much so that in every location we visited scaffolding adorned at least one historic site and virtually any horizon was sprinkled with construction cranes, sometimes upwards of a dozen at a time.

ADAPTIVE USE ON A GRAND SCALE

The approach to the rebirth of these once-neglected places is analogous to the popularly perceived American definition of adaptive use, but with the understanding that architects and contractors, locally hired whenever possible, will ensure that the look and feel of the venue will remain vintage and sympathetic to its often historic surroundings. The existing exterior envelope and important interior architectural details generally are preserved and reused to the greatest extent possible, while modern amenities are carefully added, and concealed. New additions are not uncommon, but again are deftly designed to compatibly coexist with the original structure. Window locations, for example, are not changed cavalierly to accommodate an occupant’s convenience. At a Parador in Spain’s north-central Province of Aragon, the row of Renaissance-era arched widows on the facade was kept intact. Offering fabulous views of the valley below, yet too high on the interior to easily peer from, these windows were made accessible through the creation of a bank of short rises in each room, allowing guests to step up to the windows and enjoy the impressive scene below. Cleverly, the tile-lined risers conceal the new heating and cooling systems that service each room.

Neither are new Paradores uncommon, such as those at Toledo or Calahorra, though the majority utilizes some portion of a historic structure.

The ruined condition of many Paradores demanded that they either be reconstructed or reconstituted, often combining both levels of intervention. In the case of the 12th- and 13th-century former castle/convent, now Parador Alcaniz La Concordia, images of
the structure indicated that it had fallen into severe disrepair. Architecturally compatible stones, both original and new, were used to restore the edifice perched high on a rocky summit overlooking the red-roofed village of Alcaniz.

The restoration incorporated a 12th-century tower that holds some of the most intact medieval wall paintings in Europe. To view these frescoes requires waiting for an appointed time and guide. So precious are these images that only a handful of guides are allowed to safeguard the ornate metal keys that open the massive strap-hinged wooden door guarding the colorful murals.

CELEBRATING REGIONAL CHARACTER

Preserving and promoting regional personality is a high priority at each Parador and throughout the entire nationwide organization. Clearly seen in the overall architectural design and construction methods, these local characteristics also are found in the furnishings, the language spoken, the artistic enhancements, and especially the food. The breakfasts, los desayunos, are a repast worthy of royalty. All manner of morning fare is presented, with the addition of regional specialties...smoky meats and strong cheeses, exotic fruits and vegetables, traditional egg dishes, distinctive baked goods, liters of olive oil, and always the local sausage (chorizo)...even chocolate and wines of the district may be offered. At one Parador we feasted on pan de hogaza, con jamon de Teruel y aciete de oliva virgen extra, in other words “country loaf [bread] with Teruel ham and extra virgin olive oil.” At some Paradores the wait staff dress in period clothing unique to that province or town, and recipe cards describing the dish and its nutritional value are supplied.

The public spaces of Paradores are typically lined with ancient tapestries, heavy wooden medieval furniture, old master paintings and delicate architectural engravings, wrought-iron light fixtures, and often Islamic-inspired pottery. Tilework, for which Spain is so well known, is everywhere—in the floors as deep—red terra-cotta pavers, on the walls, on stairs as treads and risers, and as decorative elements throughout. Intricate multi-tile panels, vividly depicting provincial stories of famous marriages, battles, and medieval festivals, often adorn walls.

BRINGING THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

Fortunately the fledgling Parador system survived the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s and has prospered, perhaps beyond even what King Alfonso had imagined. With the turn of a new millennium, most Paradores...
are scheduled for major renovation, including some effort toward environmental sustainability. The Parador system is keenly aware that the reuse of such monumental structures is a sustainable act in and of itself, and openly promotes this fact in its literature. The upgrades to some Paradores are completed but most are scheduled or underway. During retrofitting, the Parador may remain open on a limited basis with perhaps half the rooms and public spaces being renovated at a time, so that the inn is never actually closed, as was the case with the Parador in Toledo. (At Toledo, where occupancy was limited due to construction, we elected to stay in a former Archbishop’s Palace perched on an outcrop overlooking Toledo. It was here where the famed mid-2nd millennium painter El Greco is said to have conceived his famous View and Plan of Toledo while musing in the prelate’s lush gardens high above this ancient walled city.) Funding for these renovations, and for the development of new Paradores, is not widely disseminated information. Even our Spanish-fluent fellow traveler had difficulty in ascertaining exactly who manages and funds the Parador system nowadays. If occupancy is an indication, however, much of their financial support comes from the abundance of overnight and event bookings we observed at every location. The popularity of these historic venues is a testament to the singular appeal they hold for Spanish, European Union, and foreign visitors alike.

**REFLECTIONS**

To say that the trip was “recharging” would be an understatement. We felt privileged to have been able to experience this unique chain of historic accommodations. A favorite moment of the trip came in an encounter with a distinguished Spanish couple who were delighted that Americans...
had discovered the Parador system; that we had found this particularly secluded Paradore (Alcaniz) before they had was, however, a certain vexation to them.

This was an informative trip offering many lessons, on matters from heritage hospitality to conservation methods to architectural and regional history. Not the least of these was respect for the remarkable direct and sustained involvement of the Spanish government in the restoration and reuse of so many important historic places.

Interestingly, Spain’s neighbor, Portugal, followed suit and established its own system of Paradores in the 1940s. Known as *pousadas*, they claim a similar ancestry and a philosophy of reusing existing historic structures, though now are managed by a private hotel group. But that’s another story!

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Additional Resources


The official Paradores website: www.paradores.es.
CONTEMPORARY DESIGN IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS—A UK PERSPECTIVE

By Murray G. Miller

In the Summer 2007 issue of this journal, de Teel Patterson Tiller struck a familiar chord when he introduced “Obey the Imperatives of Our Own Moment: A Call for Quality Contemporary Design in Historic Districts.” Tiller opened by stating: “It is axiomatic that the heritage preservation business preserves the best of the past for the benefit of future generations.” As a supplement to this thread, and as provided for in Criterion C of the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, we might note that the business of preservation extends beyond the “best” of the past to include those resources that may not be the best but represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction. Historic districts and conservation areas are, therefore, key examples where we experience a distinct contribution of the “collective” to the visual setting or character of an area of special interest.

Also relevant is an acknowledgement that the planning controls applied to individually listed/designated buildings are different from those that are generally applied to conservation areas/historic districts. In the latter case, the notion of the “best” of the past may be much more modest, reflecting a growing interest internationally in the concept of conserving “a sense of place.” In the UK, for example, Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning and the Historic Environment (PPG 15) provides a full statement of government policies in relation to the historic environment, and captures this theme this way:

It is the quality and interest of areas, rather than that of individual buildings, which should be the prime consideration in identifying conservation areas. There has been increasing recognition in recent years that our experience of a historic area depends on much more than the quality of individual buildings—[it also depends] on the historic layout of property boundaries and thoroughfares; on a particular ‘mix’ of uses; on characteristic materials; on appropriate scaling and detailing of contemporary buildings.

If we explore the matter of contemporary buildings in these areas of special interest, we might recall in Tiller’s article where he postulated that “The common understanding throughout these mid-20th-century, elite deliberations was that historicized additions were not only undesirable but that new architecture within a historic context ‘should obey the imperatives of its own historical moment,’ as the 1977 [National] Trust report stated.” This is promulgated in numerous internationally recognized conservation charters, standards, and guidelines. One might acknowledge that the first such record of that conservation philosophy was
expressed by William Morris in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Manifesto of 1877, which read in part:

In early times this kind of forgery was impossible, because knowledge failed the builders, or perhaps because instinct held them back. If repairs were needed, if ambition or piety pricked on to change, that change was of necessity wrought in the unmistakable fashion of the time. The result of all this was often a building in which the many changes, though harsh and visible enough, were, by their very contrast, interesting and instructive and could by no means possibility mislead.

It may be worth noting that the UK’s British Standard 7913 (BS 7913) Guide to the Principles of the Conservation of Historic Buildings (1998), the New Zealand Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Value (1993), and Australia’s Burra Charter (1999) do not make explicit reference to “contemporary” design. Conversely, the near wholesale adoption of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation (1995) (the “Standards”) in 2002 by the pan-Canadian working group, which were included as part of the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada, made an amendment to Standard 9 of the Standards by offering the option of either “contemporary” design or one that made references to historic motifs, provided that in whichever case, the new should be distinguishable from the old.
Tiller acknowledged that “Contemporary design will not always be the best or the most appropriate design choice in a historic setting. But it should have the first right of refusal and be the first option explored—not the last.”

This leads me to reflect less on the particular style that one might elect to design within, and perhaps more on the simple prescription for good architecture that draws strength from the Vitruvian precepts of “commodity, firmness and delight.” Consistency and continuity can, on the other hand, be as important within a group of buildings as within a single building and, as with alterations, it is considered that new buildings should not draw attention to themselves disproportionately.

This is perhaps where the challenge of designing in the historic context is most acute and can often give rise to interesting decisions on planning applications involving contemporary design in historic districts. More particularly, some of the threads exposed by Tiller may draw synergy from the particular UK perspective that is the focus of this article.

**THE UK STATUTE: CHALLENGES IN INTERPRETATION**

The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act of 1990 (the “Act”) is the principal legislation in the UK planning system affecting the historic environment. Section 72 of the Act, which establishes the general duty of planning authorities in relation to conservation areas, requires that “special attention shall be paid to the desir-
ability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of [conservation areas].”

Challenging issues can arise from the interpretation of the Act and National Policy Guidance in relation to conservation areas, and these are partly reflected in an increase in the number of planning appeals. It is acknowledged that there are often differences in the interpretation of government policy between local authorities which can affect outcomes; however, this type of occurrence is not limited to the UK. Perhaps the most notable challenge in this regard is related to the implementation of the statutory duty having to do with the “desirability of preserving or enhancing” the character or appearance of conservation areas. New development in conservation areas has been a particular area of discussion, in which the courts have held particular views as to what the Act intended by the duty “of preserving.”

As to the precise interpretation of “preserving or enhancing,” the Courts have held (South Lakeland DC v. Secretary of State for the Environment, [1992] 2 WLR 204) that there is no requirement in the legislation that conservation areas should be protected from all development that does not enhance or positively preserve. While the character and appearance of conservation areas should always be given full weight in planning decisions, the objective of preservation can be achieved either by development that makes a positive contribution to an area’s character or appearance, or by development that leaves character and appearance unharmed.

If we pursue the matter of “unharmed”
further, we might reflect on planning appeal decisions. For example, a recent planning appeal involved consideration as to whether a contemporary design of compatible scale, location, and materials would satisfy the desire to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Bowden Conservation Area, near Manchester, UK. The local authority refused the application (partially depicted on pages 29, 31 and 33), citing that “by reason of its location, scale, design and massing [it] would fail to preserve or enhance the character of the Bowdon Conservation Area [and that it would] detract from the appearance of the street scene and the spacious well-landscaped character of the Conservation Area.”

The appellant’s team contended that the reasons for refusal appeared to be based on the assumption that a contemporary idiom was somehow not compatible with conservation area character. Evidence provided at the appeal demonstrated that the proposal was in accordance with the area’s character and that it was compatible in the elements of scale, height, massing, form, and materials. It was acknowledged that the proposed design differed in respect to the building’s articulation and detailing, however these were not considered negative or detrimental elements, rather, they were merely an expression of contemporary architectural design.

The Inspector (appointed by The Planning Inspectorate, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to hear the case) held that “the appeal proposal [was] unashamedly modern in overall form and detailed design, particularly in terms of its
flat roofs, the massing of its rectilinear elements and the relationship between windows and walls.” However, [he did] not share the Council’s view that it replicate[d] the international style of the first half of the 20th century. He went on further to observe the following: “Overall, the proposal would be recognisably of its own time and a worthy partner for the surrounding Victorian buildings and as such it would add interest to both East Downs Road and to the wider Conservation Area.”

The Inspector thereby concluded that the proposal would preserve and enhance the character and appearance of the Bowdon Conservation Area. The Inspector was correct in his recognition that the proposed design would be “of its own time” and he was entitled to reach that observation on the strength of the information put before him.

In another case, Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council v. A & B Construction, the central subject of appeal focused upon whether a replacement cottage built on the site of a former Grade II listed cottage (destroyed by fire) would preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the conservation area. The replacement cottage was built following the granting of planning permission, though not in accordance with the approved plans. A subsequent application for planning permission that reflected the changes was refused by the Council.

The appellants argued that “the design of the new cottage was negotiated to reflect the detail and appearance of the lost building; that of a modest, thatched and tiled building in the Picturesque style incorporating Gothick detailing.”

The Inspector considering the appeal agreed with the appellants “that in certain respects the appeal building, in terms of its design, materials and employment of local thatching techniques, endeavours to present a building...
that reinforces local distinctiveness. The use of thatch and brick certainly reflect the vernacular building materials drawn to my attention during the visit. Additionally, elements of the form of the building, such as the irregularity of plan expressed on the west elevation and the half hipped modelling of parts of the roof are convincing attributes.”

This might suggest that the threshold represented by the “desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance” of conservation areas would therefore have been satisfied by the Inspector’s conclusions.

However, in this particular instance, the Inspector held firmly that “the primary issues [were] the proportion[s] of the principal east elevation; [that] the house lack[ed] conviction as a building seeking successful visual integration with its context; [that] brick was employed with little variety of colour, and [was] laid in a stretcher bond, betraying the modernity of its construction.

Furthermore, the window heads [were] set in a flat soldier-course, and [were] not gauged or set at a shallow camber as one would anticipate in such a structure.”

The Inspector further considered that “the appeal building would fail to preserve the character and appearance of the conservation area, insofar as the proposal would not contribute to the area by either preserving or enhancing its character.” He went on to state that “the appeal building fails as architecture because its detailing is not absolutely correct; the result is more an approximation than a convincing portrayal of the neo-vernacular style.”

In this case it would appear as though considerable weight had been given to the detailing and quality of the as-built structure. It would therefore appear as though the Inspector was not under any statutory obligation to apply the full force of s72 of the Act to what seems to have been a negotiated
agreement between the local authority and the applicant. That agreement had been to reinstate the “character” of the fire-ravaged cottage with an absolutely correct “reconstruction.”

In this appeal case, one might have expected that the terms “absolutely correct” would imply “reconstruction,” which would of course “preserve” the character and appearance of the conservation area. It would appear, however, that the widely recognized meaning of the words “to preserve” (to keep something in its existing state) may have been applied to the conservation area in the same manner as is frequently applied to individual buildings, structures, or parts thereof, whereas to preserve the character of the conservation area more often than not simply means that it shall be left in no worse a condition than before, or at the very least, left unharmed.

He might therefore have held a similar position to that arising from the South Lakeland decision that while the as-built cottage may not have been absolutely in accordance with the approved plans, it may have left the integrity, and thus the character and appearance of the conservation area unharmed.

NEW CONSTRUCTION AS “PRESERVATION”

If we now re-visit the term “to preserve,” we might note that the government acknowledges in PPG 15 that “The historic environment in England is all pervasive, and cannot in practice be preserved unchanged.” This may appear to some as being an inherent dichotomy. It is also acknowledged that “preserving” may be interpreted, in the conservation context as applied to individual buildings and structures, to mean the action or process of protecting, maintaining, and/or stabilizing their existing materials, form, and integrity. Applied to conservation areas, new work, regardless of its style, that maintains the scale, height, location, and materiality of the area, is said to “protect” its integrity and thus “preserves” its character and appearance.

In order to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of conservation areas, Conservation Area Appraisals ought to be undertaken to identify the areas’ “special interest,” define their capacity for change, and assess any new development in terms of its potential impact on the “special interest.” An element of that new development may very well be “contemporary” in design.

It is further acknowledged that contemporary design in historic contexts derives considerable support from many internationally recognized conservation charters, which may be considered to be on par with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. While there is virtually no mention of “contemporary” design per se in most conservation charters, standards, or guidelines, the use of the term “new work” is omnipresent, and there is certain unanimity in the underlying philosophy that new work, in addition to expressing “commodity, firmness and delight,” should also exemplify compatibility, distinguishability, and excellence.

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A PRESERVATION RESPONSE TO GLOBAL WARMING:
JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON OR LEADING OUR OWN PARADE?

By Anthony Veerkamp

For most visitors to Amsterdam, a trip to the Stopera isn’t high on their to-do list. The omission is not entirely unwarranted, as the unlovely and unloved City Hall/Opera House was built after years of protest on a site that was once the heart of Amsterdam’s historic Jewish Quarter. Those who do venture in may stumble across what at first glance appears to be a modern art installation, but in fact is the Normaal Amsterdam Peil (NAP), the Normal Amsterdam Water Level.

The NAP is a fixed point established in the 17th century indicating the average level of the River IJ in Amsterdam, and has since been the basis for elevation measurements throughout Western Europe. Located down a short flight of steps, a large bronze plate indicates the exact level of the NAP. Above it rise three water-filled glass columns. Water rises and falls in two of the three columns, indicating the current water level at the coastal towns of Vlissingen (the namesake of Flushing Queens) and IJmuiden. In the third column, water bubbles far overhead, a sobering indication of the height of the North Sea during the epic flood of 1953 which killed nearly 2,000 people in Holland alone.

A few things become apparent by visiting the NAP. First: by rights you should be standing underwater; Second: the Dutch take fluctuations in sea level very seriously. What’s not immediately evident when gazing at the NAP installation is that while the water in those first two columns rises and falls with the tides, over time it’s creeping inexorably upward, echoing a mean sea level in Holland that has risen by over 20 cm (8 inches) in the past century. And while much remains unclear about the future, one thing is as certain as death and taxes: Sea levels will continue to rise in Holland, and everywhere else.

Many factors contribute to rising sea levels, but global warming due to anthropogenic (i.e., caused by us) greenhouse gas concentrations are a fundamental cause. Global warming causes sea levels to rise through a combination of melting glaciers, expansion of warming waters, and disappearing ice sheets. Since 1900 sea levels have been rising 10 times faster than over the past two millennia (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007, www.ipcc.ch).

Thomas Carlyle branded economics “the dismal science” in the 19th century, but these days, climatologists seem a whole lot gloomier than economists, credit crisis notwithstanding. Most every climatologist is in dour agreement that a sea level rise of one meter or more is likely—the question is not “if” but “when.” Some expect the rise within many of our lifetimes, while others suggest it might take 100 years. Bottom line, even the optimists are pessimistic.
Of course, a rising sea level is just one manifestation of climate change, but it provides perhaps the most tangible evidence of a warming planet. Not that the global temperature data aren’t scary by themselves: Over the last century, the global average temperature has increased 1.3°F, with almost 90 percent of the warming occurring over the last 50 years. More alarmingly, 11 of the last 12 years rank among the hottest on record since 1850 (IPCC, 2007).

**“GLOBAL WARMING” CATCHES ON**

After years of saying “nay,” the U.S. has caught up with its own scientific community and world consensus, recognizing that climate change is a present-day reality.

That’s not to say there isn’t still the odd hold out; Senator James Inhofe (R) of Oklahoma stands by his famous branding of global warming as “the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people.” At the other end of the spectrum, the government of Australia recently established a Department of Climate Change and has committed to a 60 percent decrease in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Despite the doubters, most of those writing and talking about climate change no longer feel compelled to prove climate change as a scientific reality. By and large there is an assumption that we finally get it, we’re scared, and we need to know what we can do about it. This awareness and attendant anxiety regarding the threat of climate change is perhaps the single biggest driving force in a new global focus on sustainability.

Companies are now falling all over themselves to prove their green credentials, smelling all the money to be made in being environmentally friendly—or appearing to be. This has given us a new word—“green-washing”—and, of course, a new website to track the phenomenon: www.green-washingindex.com.

Indeed, of late it seems that we are at greater risk from an avalanche of “green issues” (a la *Vanity Fair*: “The Green Issue,” *Kiplinger’s Personal Finance*: “The Green Issue,” or even *Elle*: “The Green Issue”) than from drowning in a climate change–related flood. Suddenly, caring about the environment is in fashion (magazines) again. Alas, much of the media coverage on sustainability is a bit unclear on the concept, suggesting that the best route to getting greener is via the shopping mall. Just about every exhortation to “go green” starts with...
“replace your light bulbs with compact fluorescents.” (Fair enough, as long as you remember to bring them to a certified CFL recycling site when they burn out, as they contain mercury.) Unfortunately, it’s going to take more than changing light bulbs to tackle this crisis; despite what the ads tell you, the road to sustainability is not lined with hybrid SUVs, and may involve some old fashioned self sacrifice.

**ENTER THE PRESERVATIONISTS**

The preservation community has promoted a novel approach to reducing our carbon footprint—instead of building something new, why not take care of what we already have? At its core, that’s been the preservation movement’s fundamental contribution to the national conversation about sustainability.

Of course, the message is a bit more nuanced and developed than that. National Trust President Richard Moe has spoken forcefully and eloquently on “Historic Preservation’s Essential Role in Fighting Climate Change” (see his speech featured in the March/April 2008 issue of Forum News). The National Trust has launched a Sustainability Initiative, and Preservation magazine has had its requisite “Green Issue” (and a very good one, at that).

The National Trust is effectively promoting historic preservation as an intrinsically “green” endeavor, and an essential component of any strategy to combat climate change. This puts our movement in an enviable position; it turns out preservation isn’t just good for the soul (reason enough) and the pocketbook (ka-ching!), but for the planet! Sure, we preservationists already knew this, but we’ve been coyly hiding our lights under a bushel. Fortunately, the climate change challenge is bringing out our best roll-up-the-shirtsleeves traits. Preservationists have put our shoulders to the wheel, gamely demonstrating that we are a part of the solution to climate change.

That’s good…maybe too good. Here’s the problem: For years, global warming activists were treated like the Henny Pennys of the public policy world. For years, the U.S. government’s position on the looming climate change crisis amounted to “What? That little acorn?” Activists have for the most part taken their new-found respectability in stride, demonstrating remarkably little rancor after long suffering the ignominy of irrelevance. Still, some of these folks must be a teensy bit cynical about the eagerness of all their new best friends to help carry the sustainability banner after the battle for the public’s trust has already been won. That would be an unfair assessment of preservationists’ motives, but not out of line with human or organizational behaviour.

**CRAFTING THE PRESERVATION MESSAGE**

It might help deflect any suggestions of opportunism if the preservation community more clearly articulated how climate change is a direct threat to all that we value. Biologists, for example, learned to effectively communicate the looming climate change crisis by first documenting how some “charismatic megafauna” were at risk (it turns out the public is more moved by polar bears than lichens). Likewise other constituencies have studied and articulated additional threats: economic impacts, geopolitical impacts, public health and safety impacts…everything, it seems, but heritage impacts. It’s not a total loss: Many
of these analyses address cultural resources, albeit unwittingly. From forestry analysis of global warming impacts on sugar maples to satellite maps showing impact of a 1-meter sea level rise on South Beach or Boston, many impacts are already documented. But, by and large, threats to our cultural heritage are minimized or ignored.

That’s a shame, for a number of reasons. First off, while most preservationists have long been dyed-in-the-sustainably-harvested-wool environmentalists, there are some holdouts among us. Reminding the whole preservation choir why we must care about climate change would help close the ranks around this issue (of course, some folks will be irredeemable, such as the gentleman who exhorted “What’s all the fuss about a melting icepack! Polar bears like to swim!”)

We have a lot of catching up to do, but we can benefit from the good work already done around the world. During the years of official climate change denial, preservationists in the United States were like East German filmmakers, largely isolated from an international community actively engaged in climate change’s impacts on cultural heritage. We are now actively engaged with preservation NGOs around the world, and the timing couldn’t be better—finally, the rest of the world thinks that the United States might have something to contribute beyond more gas, whether of the greenhouse or political variety.

English Heritage, The National Trust of the UK, and an innovative collaboration involving the public, private, and NGO sectors in 10 European countries called “Noah’s Ark” are just a few of the international efforts to address climate change’s effects on cultural heritage. Last spring (May 6–8) UNESCO organized the 1st World Conference on Global Climate Change and its Impacts on Structures of Cultural Heritage, and continues to document the impact of climate change on World Heritage Sites.

Clearly, partnerships and cooperation are key to any effort to get out of the mess in which we find ourselves, but that doesn’t mean we need to march in absolute lockstep with the broader sustainability movement. Right now, the sustainability message is resonating with a public looking for real solutions to a serious problem. However, preservationists should avoid the temptation to wrap the movement in green bunting like a bad Cristo project. We are on solid footing with our message that historic preservation can help fight climate change. We should skirt the slippery rhetorical slope that leads from “preservation is good because it is green” to “historic preservation is always the greenest alternative.”

The first statement is actually true, but we preserve for far more reasons than ecological virtue, and defining ourselves narrowly leaves us at risk of getting thrown out with the bathwater in the event that the sustainability ethic turns out to be a passing fad (a depressing prospect, but we’ve been to this rodeo before).
The second statement is, of course, false, and that is something we should all be able to live with and own up to. Measuring carbon footprints is complicated (just ask the folks hammering out new LEED standards). Inevitably, we’ll encounter situations where the rounding error is not in our favor. Being up front with our partners about where we differ allows us to work to resolve those differences and develop compromises that optimize public benefit. Papering over differences, on the other hand, can lead to dispiriting battles of attrition.

Consider the recent Bay Area legal fight pitting one couple’s carbon-absorbing, summer cooling bill–reducing redwood trees (or, more specifically, the shadows these trees cast) against their neighbor’s array of photovoltaic panels. Tough call, on the face of it, though the fact that the trees were there first might seem to be a factor. Not at all, at least in the eyes of the California courts. Under a 1978 state law protecting homeowners’ investment in solar panels, trees that impeded solar panels’ access to the sun could be deemed a nuisance and their owners fined up to $1,000 a day. Under the solar shade law, solar access trumped all other considerations, redwoods be damned. Fortunately, calmer heads have prevailed. A new law sponsored by State Senator Joe Simitian eliminates criminal prosecution for blocking sunlight.

Alas, while trees may now be safe, current California law still exempts solar panel installation from historic design review. We are likely to see more of this kind of well-intentioned but ill-conceived legislation that
throws historic resource protection under the sustainability bus. The preservation community needs to be positioned to advocate for preservation-friendly public policy, even when it means coming up against out green compadres. Our movement provides an enormous amount of social, economic, and environmental benefit; we shouldn’t lose too much sleep just because now and then preservation turns out not to have the smallest carbon footprint. Unless, of course, we’ve oversold ourselves.

STOCKING OUR RESPONSE TOOLKIT

Fundamentally, we can lessen the impact of climate change, but we can’t avoid it all together. This suggests that the response of the preservation community needs to be multifaceted. We are already well on the road of demonstrating how preservation can help fight climate change. But we also need to identify and protect resources already threatened by climate change, and to be better prepared to anticipate how our cultural heritage is likely to be affected as climate change continues. Doing so will help assure that we have the right tools in our toolkit.

And in our emergency preparedness kit. For while climate change is slow, its impacts can be sudden and come without warning, taking the form of floods, wildfires, and a host of other calamities. For better or worse, preservationists have become adept at responding to a crisis; for example, we deserve to be very proud of our Hurricane Katrina response. (Whether or not Katrina can be directly blamed on climate change is irrelevant; the fact is that the type of damage sustained in Katrina is consistent with climate change, and we can anticipate more such calamities in the future.) But pride in a job well done can’t compensate for all that was lost. And it’s only likely to get worse.

To repeat: Even the optimists are pessimists.

Is the preservation community adequately prepared for future calamities? The answer is almost certainly “no.” The grim reality is that this is a battle that preservationists, indeed humanity, may not be able to “win.” A negotiated peace might be doable. To get there, the preservation community needs to redouble our efforts on disaster preparedness and prevention (or mitigation, in disaster parlance). Proper planning offers the promise of stemming our losses, though will likely entail some painful tradeoffs.

How do we ease the pain? By continuing to practice what we’ve always preached: taking good care of what we already have. And yes, change your light bulbs.

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