

CHANGE OVER TIME

An international journal of conservation and the built environment

ON REPAIR AND REPARATION

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With the nearing close of the first decade of the 21st century, the state of the world is far from healthy. Environmental degradation, economic malaise, cultural disjuncture, political isolation, and social strife all threaten the stability and future of life as we know it. Responses to these problems have taken different approaches and will undoubtedly yield different outcomes over time; however, all share in the recognition for the need to repair. Repair and reparation are an old response to that which is damaged, broken and dysfunctional yet the global nature of today's challenges is unprecedented. Each discipline and profession has an ethical if not moral obligation to confront these challenges through thoughtful reflection and action.

Conservation of natural and cultural resources, in today's parlance, "heritage" has always been about repair whether it is ecological restoration, building rehabilitation, or urban revitalization. While conservation of the natural environment has had a longer track record and greater visibility in terms of its scientific study and advocacy, the preservation of the historic built environment has had a less effective influence, at least in the U.S., on how we should think about current concerns such as sustainability, human equality, and social and cultural stability.

A historical reading of the problem and its solutions reveals a number of past examples where damage to built heritage served as a conduit for reparation: after the French Revolution, after the American Civil War, and after World War II in Europe. All these examples demonstrate a response to conflict and its consequences of physical, social and cultural destruction. We would do well to study historical responses to the need to repair, but also recognize that the scale and complexity of the problems today of environmental degradation and the destruction of cultural heritage are unprecedented.

If there ever was a moment when conservation of the built environment had something to contribute to the current state of social and political strife, economic recession and environmental destruction, it is now. On the surface, conservation is concerned with the protection of cultural heritage from loss and damage so that existing built works and places deemed significant and valuable can continue to inspire, to admonish (as in monument, from the Latin *monere*-to warn) or simply to provide continuity from the past to the present. We advocate for conservation because objects and places hold important information, associations, and meaning; because they embody social and cultural memory which, if lost, would make the world a less rich place to live.

Consider recent world events--the destruction of the Bamayan buddhas, the Mostar bridge, even the World Trade Towers--all potent cultural symbols whose targeted loss says more about the power and significance of these places now than their existence ever did. Consider the current battles over the retention of Charity Hospital in New Orleans as a viable medical complex and the waste of \$79 million to buy land, demolish architecturally valuable houses, and relocate residents from a site that would not be needed by a smarter hospital plan using

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the existing Art Deco hospital; or the dilemma of if and how to rebuild the vernacular urban neighborhoods of the 9th Ward also in New Orleans in order to preserve the rich and viable traditions of that largely African-American creole neighborhood; or the huge debate over the destruction of 2 Columbus Circle for the Museum of Design in New York City; a debate which has caused a serious reconsideration of how we view and define post war modernism in this country and how we will pass on that legacy. All these examples engage in the phenomenon of loss or retention of cultural heritage and the implications of that outcome.

For the general public heritage conservation is about the survival of the past. Such concerns, as noble as they may be, are considered luxuries, especially in hard times. They are luxuries because the assumption is that only true progress, be it physical, economic, or cultural must be based on that which is new. The only real creativity is that which produces something novel. That which is existing or old is far from the new. It is considered depreciated, degenerated or broken, as well as irrelevant; therefore those activities and concerns that attend to these troublesome survivors from the past are not part of real progress or progressive solutions.

Of course the above is untrue; conservation is both creative and progressive. In today's climate it is in fact subversive in its interest in mending the flawed rather than in discarding and starting anew. As Elizabeth Spelman has aptly observed, the capacity of professionals to repair things can scarcely be valued in any society whose economy is based on the production of and the desire for the new. Repair is at odds with the imperative of a capitalist society.

Creativity has always been valued as a human accomplishment. To be creative has meant to see or do something not done or thought before. The form or color never seen, the sound never heard, or the theory never dreamt. The result is new in its vision and impact. Most museums, concert halls, libraries and cities are full of such applauded accomplishments. No act of cultural conservation ever claimed a Nobel Prize or a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant." To bring together the past and present by thinking and acting in ways different from the original processes that create new works, and to forge a new approach that is sensitive to all contexts are the goals of conservation. As an act of intervention it seeks to mediate and in that mediation, it is creative. Conservation/preservation is about change because it understands and seeks to reconcile that change responsive to the existing or historic environment.

Not everything that is broken can or even should be repaired. But the concept of conservation begins first with considering the benefits of retaining or recovering all or part of the existing. It considers the functional, aesthetic, and associative values embodied in the existing work and it possesses a remarkable set of knowledge and skills unique to it alone to discover, revive, and reuse. Its concerns and methods of analysis, intervention and especially prevention are part of the definition of Sustainability and it has much to offer all professionals and the public in the ascendancy of that concept. But like the definition of creativity itself, Sustainability has been cast as a new concept with new ideas and so conservation has had limited recognition or influence in its contributions to the current debate. Clearly this invisibility must change.