Is the debate over preserving structures that aren't typically considered historically valuable date-related or more of a cultural issue?

PAUL WESTLAKE: If a building is important to the character of a community and if it's beloved and recognized as a symbol, then it's a landmark. The 50-year date that is often used to establish landmark status isn't critical. What's important is that it defines a community's traditions and culture. This idea is especially relevant in the Western United States, where 80 percent of the buildings have been built since World War II. That whole landscape falls outside the norms of what we think of in the East as historic fabric.

GEORGE SKARMEAS: The 50-year mark has been debated very seriously lately, and the National Park Service is in the process of revising its standards. This is primarily because of Dulles Airport (in Washington, D.C.). The issue there was the restoration, expansion, and modification of a building that was landmarked even though it was only about 30 years old. In the past, we lost a lot of important buildings because they were not on some list.

PAUL BYARD: As for the underlying objective, age is probably unimportant. It's a question of what you can learn from a building. To a degree, the date question is a way of getting around the popularity issue.

DIANE KAASE: Popularity is something that I'd like to take out of the picture because a landmark isn't necessarily popular architecturally. The Edward Durell Stone building on Columbus Circle in New York City is a classic case. My first reaction to it, which is still my reaction today, was "Who let that get built here?" But I now realize that there is a lot to that building.

BYARD: We only progress when we get away from likes and dislikes. We have to get to some substantive point about the quality of the building and what you learn from it. We also have to be reminded of the cyclical nature of preference. We are now realizing how fine things are that we hated for the past 15 years.

PAMELA HAWKES: People think there's a scientific approach to preservation that will always yield the right answer. But the more I do it, the more difficult the answers seem to be. The easy buildings have been dealt with. Now we're dealing with the ones that are more marginal.

BYARD: They're not necessarily more marginal; they're just newer. We haven't thought about them in the same way. We've been through a period of not feeling good about the buildings of the 1960s and 1970s because they were out of tune with the conservative, disappointed world in which we've been living lately. But it's conceivable that this, too, shall pass.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties stipulate that additions must be different, yet compatible with historic structures. How do you combine old architecture with new construction?

HUGH HARDY: The purpose of these guidelines is to challenge people to think about what's at stake in ways they never had before.

KAASE: I disagree. "Tell me what I have to do!"—that's what architects want. When you hand an architect the Secretary of the Interior's standards, they baffle them because there's so much interpretation necessary.

HARDY: That's really horrifying.

WESTLAKE: Maybe architects are too timid. My experience is that those involved in
state historic preservation offices and with the Department of the Interior are actually open to strong change and contemporary solutions.

SKARMEDA: The question is: Can you legislate sensibility, sensitivity, and design talent? You can't. I think the standards are an attempt to protect buildings. When we're dealing with new construction and additions to historic buildings, we need to figure out ways of managing egos. Generally, the underlying assumption is that we can improve on the past. But that's not necessarily the case, and the standards attempt to control change and put it on a manageable course. I'm not sure that's the right approach. But it certainly makes us think about these issues. First, we need to understand what the building means, its significance and character. Then we must figure out our relationship to that.

HARDY: It's difficult to generalize a way in which it ought to be done. But context has a lot to do with it and the materials make an enormous difference.

WESTLAK: The key is to find something to transform the original principles into new vocabularies. Often, we think it's better to stand as far away from the original as possible, to understand the original not through its details and materials, but through the spirit of the composition. Too much confusion is created by weak attempts to conform to historic work.

JOHN MILNER: I got a lesson from Bob Venturi 20 years ago when we were working on the Franklin Court Project in Philadelphia, which involved the restoration of five rowhouses, one of which was totally gone and had to be reconstructed. These houses were to commemorate Benjamin Franklin and to screen his house, which was built on the courtyard behind it. The question was: What do we do with this missing tooth? And I said, "Well, for sure it should be a very different, contemporary building." And Bob Venturi said, "No, it shouldn't. It should be another rowhouse." Looking back, if we had done a contemporary building, it wouldn't have been right.

BYARD: Venturi was on the cutting edge at that time.

JAMES RHODES: Rule-making, whether it's the Secretary's standards or preservation law, seems to serve two functions. One is to express some element of consensus, that this is the best we could come up with together. The other is that if you do it this way, you won't get into trouble. But you can always come in if you've got something different. Defining design excellence is impossible. That's why the people who interpret the standards must be well-chosen and responsible. As society changes, the rules may be interpreted differently.

BYARD: The key words within the standards are very generous. I mean, "appropriately" gives you all the room in the world.

RHODES: It's a wonderful word, isn't it?

BYARD: So is "compatibility." It depends on what you bring to it, and that is what the word is supposed to do. It's supposed to leave room for your work.
A preservation area. Last summer, The Boston Globe quoted citizens saying, "If you change it, you're going to lose the charm." Now Boston's cultural landscape is being bulldozed, and the public is torn between nostalgia and progress.

It's a paradox: we want to preserve the past, but we also want to move forward. This is especially true in a city like Boston, where history and development often clash. The question is, how can we strike a balance?

The answer, I think, lies in thoughtful design and community input. We need to preserve what's valuable, but also adapt to the needs of the present. It's a delicate process, but one worth pursuing.
BYARD: The very notion that you could even think you could is wonderfully naive.

At Frank Lloyd Wright's Wingspread in Racine, Wisconsin, engineer Robert Silman Associates used high-tech composite materials to strengthen the roof. Was this a suitable preservation strategy?

HAWKES: It’s not that radical. The best preservation approach is always to use tried-and-true materials in a way that’s reversible so that if it doesn’t quite work out, the next set of repairs will be just as easy. There were some catastrophic failures of materials used in the 1970s and 1980s from which there was almost no way out.

BYARD: Wingspread got right to the issue. When you put it back together, are you trying to make a perfect artifact, or are you looking at it as a work of art that has a certain effect? I don’t care if you repair it with carbon fiber or with 2-by-4s; the point is to be able to learn from it what you can.

HARDY: All restoration has to be an interpretation because it’s basically impossible to restore anything. You cannot turn the clock back; you can’t re-create the people who lived in the society that built a building. Preservation is one matter; restoration is something totally different. The museum psychology would have you believe that you can take buildings and freeze them in time. But we all know you can’t do that. You can reveal the interventions, making clear that this is something new. The opposite approach is that it should be sympathetic. If you can’t tell, if it’s seamless, that’s fakery.

BYARD: It’s very interesting that one has to be convinced of the only thing that is an inescapable truth: Change is simply one of the things about us. But it’s still a way of going at the same set of issues.

What new technologies do you find most useful in historic preservation?

RHODES: I see computers and digital media affecting all levels, from documentation through building maintenance and operations. At St. Thomas Church in New York, we recently coupled the latest digital camera and notebook computer technologies with old-fashioned steeplejacking—jumping off buildings. Workers jumped off the steeples on a rope armed with a camera and we sat up in the bell tower to see the flaws of the building without having to erect expensive scaffolding. The documents for that building were scanned in New York and drafted by skilled persons in Europe, who sent us back digital files.

BYARD: My eyes have just been opened to the benefits of radar, which we’ve been using on the restoration of Cooper Union. It is absolutely magical that it can tell you the location of every anchor.

RHODES: The computer has allowed us to develop a system of keynoting digital drawings and scanned photographs that creates stronger document sets. That allows us to go from the field, where we can apply keynotes to the documents, to
translating them into remedial drawings and, after scanning historical details and documents, to seeing what lies behind a wall.

**Skarmes:** We have to use technology appropriately, as in the medical profession. I just hope we don’t go through the same process that physicians went through where they started prescribing MRIs [magnetic-resonance imaging] for every patient. We’ve got data loggers now, but do we need to monitor every building and become saturated with a lot of information? New technology will add a cost to our services that, at some level, may create problems with clients.

**Milner:** I lament the loss of the skill of hand-drafting. A lot of the projects we do are very individual and require hand-drafting. It’s difficult nowadays to interview potential employees and find any but a few who have hand-drafting skills, particularly younger ones.

**Westlake:** Photography can capture many aspects of restoration work far better than drawings. So the application of digital photography to the final contract documents is a great tool. It saves us from trying to look at fairly complex things and figure out how to draw them just to make a few simple notes on selected areas. The same details can be captured very well in photographs.

Are there new players on the design team? Do they have changing roles and new responsibilities?

**Skarmes:** There’s an interesting situation we’re facing at the University of Pennsylvania. The school dismantled the physical-plant department and hired property manager Trammell Crow. This is a new reality—a developer who thinks in terms of a building’s depreciation cycles and return on investment, not years of history. Trammell Crow has become the lead in everything that happens on Penn’s campus.

**Westlake:** Design-build changes the makeup of teams. We have done restoration and preservation design-build projects where clients let you negotiate relationships with artisans, for example, so you can work together closely. You can select teams and put them on board in the beginning—within a negotiated framework. That is a major change in the way we work and the way we interact with trades.

**Rhodes:** Preservation is drawing the architect back to the field. Most contemporary architects trust the construction managers to do their bidding. At most, the architect checks shop drawings.

**Westlake:** The way we’re forming teams in the restoration and preservation projects we do is very different from our new work. Our preservation clients demand that we function more in the role that architects did when the buildings were created—as generalists with some broad control, which is pretty healthy. They’re often seeking—and we’re seeking, too—negotiated relationships with teams of artisans, for example.
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On the Barricades

James Marston Fitch reflects on 40 years of preservation. Interview by Michael Cannell

Few professions owe as much to a single man. James Marston Fitch has been the preservation movement's foremost educator, editor, theoretician, critic, historian, and author since the movement's inception. Over the course of more than 40 years, he has evolved from upstart, to guiding spirit, to outspoken elder statesman. As head of the preservation program at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation through 1977, he trained and inspired a generation of preservationists who now fill the upper ranks of landmarks and conservancy groups around the world. He was an activist academic who bolted the leafy campus like a tweedy superhero to rescue inner-city neighborhoods and misunderstood landmarks long before preservation became the chic cause of the monied and influential. He was practically alone, for example, in defending the cast-iron architecture in New York's SoHo district. As director of preservation in the New York firm of Beyer Blinder Belle from 1979 to 1995, he played a critical role in preserving historic buildings at South Street Seaport and Ellis Island, among others.


Architecture: Historic preservation is everywhere. It's a household word. Do you feel vindicated?
Fitch: Oh, completely. Modern architecture has displayed all sorts of virtues, including an increased appreciation of science and technology. But it has also demonstrated a brutal attitude toward history. Like all revolutionary movements, it swept everything out. Fortunately, we're past that phase in this country. Interests seem to skip a generation. Grandchildren are determined to learn from their grandparents, not their parents. Young architects today are more sensitive to historicism than their parents were. They know that landmarks are good for our well-being. They know that "progress" is the biggest threat to the physical world.

Has preservation's success bred complacency?
On the contrary, preservation is one of the vital forces that compels architects today. It has shifted our perspective and understanding of what we're doing. All kinds of new science and technology have fueled the process. For example, paint colors have been of great interest to preservationists for decades. A lot of intelligent people worked on the problem, but they had very little knowledge of how colors failed and how they soiled over time in the real world. Consequently, we spent a lot of time trying to replicate colors that never existed. Science shattered all that. Williamsburg, Virginia, was the first programmed effort to reconstruct a whole palette of colors that would be historically accurate. So now we're dealing with the past in a much more intelligent way. Architects today are much better informed. They know a lot more about art history and archeology than we ever did.

Is there too much preservation, too much nostalgia?
There are so many buildings in this country in need of protective preservation that to worry about doing too much
"Interests seem to skip a generation. Grandchildren are determined to learn from their grandparents, not their parents. Young architects today are more sensitive to historicism than their parents were."

preservation strikes me as ludicrous. On the other hand, there's certainly too much false historicism. The dominant style among developers is big-roofed buildings and three-car garages designed to look Egyptian or Elizabethan. It's an incredibly shallow perspective, and it can't possibly produce viable architecture. A few misguided architects around the fringes are dabbling with subjective historic forms. Some of them are quite talented, and no doubt well-intentioned, but they're mad as hatters. It's pathetic what Prince Charles is trying to purvey.

The New Urbanism—friend or foe?
I suppose they're a foe. But the whole discussion strikes me as so dated. It's a pretentious name for a form of urban design which actually dates back to men like Clarence S. Stein and Henry Wright who addressed the problems of automobile-free design after World War I. It's unfortunate that the true innovators haven't gotten credit.

You argued against protecting the Kodak sign when Grand Central Terminal underwent its recent renovation. Is there no place for colorful cultural relics?
That project was a prisoner of all kinds of contradictions. It could easily have been ruined by bad solutions. In our modern world, there's fantastic pressure to change, modify, and alter in favor of somebody's program of activity. It's especially true of esthetic matters. Everybody has their own vantage point. That's the danger of architecture and democracy: Too many people can ruin the broth. There's always a tendency in discussions like this to imagine some state in which competing pressures balance out. But right now we're in serious danger of allowing prosperity to have a ruinous effect—especially here in America.

Yes, different consistencies can coexist within the same structure. Initially nobody objected to the Kodak sign, but it got to the point where it threatened the visual integrity of the building. We gave them an inch, and they took a mile. Little by little, we all came to agree this was the case.

What's the next frontier?
Preservation is now an international movement. The new attitude toward the past, which we've long since accepted in the West, is spreading all over the world. The past is now open to young architects in regions like Indonesia and Micronesia in a way that it never has been before. It has been 200 years since architects in Brazil and other developing countries have been permitted to deal exclusively with what we now call their indigenous culture. They think their own traditional architecture constitutes the soundest basis for whatever work they do tomorrow. Modern and functional are different sides of the same coin. They can converge—brilliantly, of course, in the case of Japan. This is an area of profound significance that all architects must understand.

Who inherits the preservation movement?
It's fascinating for me to see how strongly committed the youngest generation has become. They see the issues confronting the physical world in clear holistic terms, and they're not easily dismayed.

In 1964, I started the first academic program in historic preservation at Columbia University. It was the first in this country, and the second in the world. A similar program started in Turkey the same year. We haven't developed any especially visible personalities to shepherd this process, but we've sure developed a lot of them.