MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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The philosophy of history, which concerns itself with the larger patterns and meaning of historical change, is an idle backwater in the academic world, something that is studied, but no longer taken very seriously by historians or philosophers. It is too complicated here to get into the reasons why this is so. It will suffice to say that the more professional historians and philosophers have come to emulate the methods of science, focusing on the collection and analysis of data, the less interest has been shown in the philosophy of history, searching for predictive patterns.

I mention this because the philosophy of history bears directly upon my topic: the preservation of Modern architecture. Almost from its beginning, the preservation movement in this country has defined itself in opposition to Modern architecture and urbanism. Preservationists have consistently fought, at the urban scale, against the modernist penchant for clearing sites, leveling buildings, and altering traditional street patterns, and, at the architectural scale, against the modernist dislike of ornament and disregard for history. Even today, there is considerable disagreement within the preservation community about whether Modern buildings should be saved and about how that should be done.

The reason for this disagreement, I think, centers around fundamental and rarely discussed differences in our philosophy of history, in how we view change. In very broad terms, most modernist architects have held a progressive view of history, one that sees the past as moving ever forward toward a better future. A common position among medieval philosophers such as Saint Augustine, this progressive view of history emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries in the work of thinkers such as Georg Wilhelm Hegel, whose ideas had a strong influence on modernist architects.

Preservationists, in contrast, often view history as having declined from some previous golden age, typically a time before the advent of Modernism in the early 20th century. This belief in a golden age and in contemporary decline was common among the thinkers of the Renaissance and reappeared in the 19th and 20th centuries in the work of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the historian Oswald Spengler.

The modernists' apparent lack of concern about old buildings or existing urban patterns arose not from some maliciousness on their part, but from a firm belief that the evolution of history had made the remains of our past obsolete, and indeed an obstacle to a more perfect future. Likewise, the preservationist's desire to save old
buildings or urban settings stems not from nostalgia, but from an equally firm belief that earlier structures and cities were often better built and more beautiful than what we construct today. There are, of course, exceptions to these positions. Not every modernist is as idealistic as Hegel, nor is every preservationist as pessimistic about the modern age as Spengler. But these views of history have affected the actions of modernists and preservationists alike, and may help us understand and perhaps even resolve some of their differences.

The philosophical conflict between these two camps emerges most strongly when we face the question of whether or not to preserve Modern architecture. A true modernist, who believes in progress and views history as nonrepetitive, would, ironically, see little value in preserving Modern buildings from the past. With similar irony, a true preservationist, who sees the past more favorably than the present, must admit the value of preserving Modern architecture, even if those structures embody a view antithetical to preservation.

But ironies aside, the time has come to decide if modernist buildings should be preserved and how that should be done, for important landmarks from the Modern movement in architecture are being lost or threatened with increasing frequency. In Cleveland, some notable examples include:

- the Park Synagogue by the noted German expressionist architect, Erich Mendelsohn, which is currently sitting underused since its congregation moved to Pepper Pike,
- the Lakeview Terrace apartment, one of the early and most enlightened efforts at public housing in this country, which is now badly maintained and severely vandalized,
- the Greyhound bus terminal, one of the better Art Deco terminals in the country, which its owner has threatened to vacate and sell to developers.

If we assume, for the moment, that such structures are worth saving, the question then arises of how we should go about their preservation. Here too, the ironies abound. For example, in preserving Modernist buildings that embodied a vision of the new—of the machine—does one follow normal preservation practice and accept the signs of age and wear, or should one remove those signs, which is more in keeping with the spirit of the original? The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities wrestled with this question when attempting to preserve the Lincoln, Massachusetts, house of Walter Gropius, former dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Design and one of the most influential modernist architects in the United States. SPENA initially wanted to maintain the house in the condition they received it, with the wear-and-tear of use left intact. This obviously had the practical
advantage of being less costly, as well as a philosophical motive of recognizing the age of the house. But, they were forced to replace whole sections of the interior, such as the industrially produced cork floor which could not be repaired or patched. And they finally decided to have the metal furniture in the house rechromed, as Gropius himself did on occasion to remove the patina of age. Making an old house look like new is not accepted preservation practice, but when dealing with a Modern structure, it can be the most appropriate tack.

A related question has to do with preserving changes that have occurred in buildings over time. Accepted preservation practice is to leave such changes as a document of the history of a place, but that runs against the modernist view that a work of architecture should have a unity and integrity of form. The restoration of R.M. Schindler's house in Los Angeles underscores that conflict. Schindler, another early modernist in this country, had lived in the house for years and made many changes to it. What they arrived at was a compromise that removed most, but not all of the changes, taking the house back to a time soon after Schindler moved in. While this compromise satisfied the restoration committee, it probably would not have pleased Schindler, for it did not capture the integrity of his original design. Nor did this solution satisfy many preservationists who felt that the changes Schindler himself had made to the house should have been maintained. If there is a lesson here, it is the compromise between two opposed positions is rarely a success.

Another widely used practice in preservation is to replace materials that are no longer available with substitutes that look the same. This, however, runs counter to the modernist belief in the honesty of materials— that one material should not be made to look like another. During the restoration of the lobby of Pietro Belluschi's Commonwealth or Equitable Building in Portland, Oregon, one of the first post-war skyscrapers in the U.S., the architects decided to replace the riveted aluminum ceiling with suspended panels bearing fake rivets. The ceiling looks the same as the original. But it would probably have been more faithful to Belluschi's intent to have installed some type of riveted metal ceiling, even if it did not match the original exactly. To a true modernist, honesty comes before flattery.

That applies to the treatment of an entire building as well. Louis Sullivan, who coined the term "form follows function," designed a residence in Chicago called the Charnley House, which was recently rehabilitated for use as a foundation's offices. The architects of this rehabilitation followed the accepted preservation practice of fitting the function of the offices to the form of the house, without moving walls or altering the structure in any major way.
This shows a respect for the Charnley House, but ironically not for the principle upon which it was built. Accepting Sullivan's precept that form should follow function, the architects should have felt free to alter the form of the house to accommodate the office functions more comfortably, not the other way around.

While modernists and preservationists may differ on the fine points of philosophy and of preservation practice, they oddly enough tend to agree on how to handle additions to buildings. Both groups generally believe that a new addition to an old building should be of its own time, not a copy or replica. This suggests that there is a common ground, philosophically, upon which they can meet.

Although modernists and preservationists may view historical change differently, both groups generally believe in historicism, an idea which emerged in the 18th century. Historicism marked an important change in the way we now think about the past, turning what had been seen as a continuous tradition into something made up of distinct periods that followed one upon the other. Modernists took that to mean that the modern, machine age was, itself, a distinct period that required its own style, separate from what had come before. But preservationists are not very different in viewing the past as a series of styles, each with its own unique character that should be respected. With additions, both groups want, for somewhat different reasons, to be true to their own time. Modernists and preservationists, in other words, have a common intellectual origin in historicist thought, and thus a common ground upon which to get on with the increasingly urgent business of preserving Modern architecture.