PRESERVING THE RECENT PAST

Working to preserve heritage of the recent past (buildings less than 80 years old) is quite different from preserving older buildings.

WHY IS THE RECENT PAST DIFFERENT?

The attitude of members of the public to the idea of saving buildings which are from the period of living memory is affected by a number of prejudices:

- People will accept that really old buildings are worth saving, whether they like them or not, but with newer buildings, their taste affects their judgement. If they don't like a particular style, and people almost universally dislike the styles of 20 - 40 years ago, they usually consider it to be of no value, either now or in the future.
- People often have a view that only 'great' (meaning important, expensive or large) buildings are worth saving. This view is more prevalent with more recent buildings. If a pioneer hut has survived, they will consider that it has some value. But they can't see the value of an ordinary 50 year old house because there are still many of them and because they have never looked at them critically and evaluated their qualities.
- People will assume that certain types of building have no value. A state house, a McDonald's restaurant or a petrol station seem to them to be worthless as objects of preservation. Yet the first represents an important development in our social history, and the second and third represent sweeping changes in the way our world was changed by the motorcar. Are these important historical events or developments not worthy of interpretation through actual examples of the building type?

The esteem in which buildings of the recent past are held has also been affected by the changes in taste created by the arrival of the 'Modern Movement' which arrive in New Zealand in the mid-1930s. From this time until the 1970s, design schools, and in particular architectural schools, preached the view that most of the styles of the past were worthless and should be replaced, ruthlessly if necessary, by 'modern' functional design. This view has now softened, but although Victorian and earlier styles have now regained acceptance, the styles which were popular while the Modern Movement was in its heyday - Art Deco and 1950s style - tend to be seen as of little worth. Opinion is divided amongst architects as to the value of many buildings of the mid-20th century. Often an architect, or even a preservationist, will appear for a developer in a court hearing and recommend that a building be demolished.

Another factor affecting attitudes to recent buildings is their commercial value. Older buildings are often situated in areas which time has passed by. They have little commercial value, and so no-one but the preservationists are interested in them. But a building of more recent age is likely to be on a valuable commercial site. The owner may want to alter it to make it work more efficiently, to modernise it to replace its dated appearance with a more trendy image for his business, or he may want to demolish it and use its commercially valuable site for a new operation. This view can be applied to a whole community. Residents of a town may take the view that if its centre looks dated, people will see it as stagnating and won't want to do business there or live there any more.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES

Efforts to persuade authorities to protect such buildings will usually be greeted with disbelief. If the building cannot be portrayed as a great example of architecture (and in New Zealand, our cultural cringe will almost always guarantee that no local building will be seen that way), the reaction will be "I can't see what's so great about that" or "Why on earth would anyone want to save that?" Such a reaction was well illustrated when the New Zealand Historic Places Trust put forward the suggestion that the Napier Wool Exchange was important and worth preserving.

Usually, efforts to promote the preservation of building of the recent past is greeted with dismissal and a shrug of the shoulders. But opposition to preservation can take a less gentle form. When money is at stake, a developer can justify spending considerable sums of money to fight a preservation case. Battles may be fought in the courts. The personal reputations of preservationists can be discredited or permanently destroyed by ruthless opponents, although in New Zealand, where the financial stakes are not so high, that is not a likelihood.

To many people, 50 or 60 years ago is too recent to be "history". But history is happening today. No-one suggests that the events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe of the late 1980s are not history. The fall of the Berlin Wall was historic even as it happened. In the same way, our own way of life, using buildings and environments today, will very soon become history, especially if some change happens quickly, such as the advances in communications of recent years, with cell phones and the Internet. And of course we accept that cars of the 1950s are now historic, and just as interesting in their way as those of the 1920s and 1930s. Why not buildings, then?

One argument that is often used against preservation is that no research has been done on the style or on the building in question, or that there are no scholarly credentials to support its preservation. That will make it easier to claim that the building should not be saved because - it is less than 50 years old; it is not an architectural masterwork; it is not the first example of its kind; it is not the only example of its kind; it is not the best example of its kind; it is merely an ordinary building; it is merely an obsolete building with no redeeming features of significance.

Some buildings erected in the 1950s and 1960s may themselves have been criticized when they were new for being ugly, and for being unsympathetic to their environment. It's a moment of great irony when a building which was once derided for being unsympathetic to the heritage around it is itself being defended as heritage.

Preservationists are often criticized for being unrealistic, and wanting to save buildings for their own enjoyment while ignoring the realities of the market place. It is much easier to criticise them for trying to preserve a more recent building than a really old one, for which there is wider support.

"As for this Art Deco business – deco maybe, art – oh my! There's nothing like getting on a bandwagon".

"I suggest that the sooner the bulldozers push over the UFS the better. Let's have something modern and bright to uplift Emerson Street."

"All the brouhaha about the UFS is just another intrusion into the rights of owners to do whatever they think fit with their own property."
Letters to the Editor at the time of the campaign to save the UFS Dispensary building in Napier in1986.

WHY PRESERVE THE PAST?

Preservationists believe that each generation has a duty to pass on significant evidence of our history. We save historic places not only because we like them, because they are fine examples of architecture or because they were associated with famous people, but because they were important to large numbers of ordinary people, or because they reflect an aspect of the way of life of ordinary people in the past. And as the pace of change constantly accelerates, buildings – artefacts, in other words, which just happen to be large and fixed in place – more quickly than ever become historic. They become historic so quickly, in fact, that they can easily be demolished before anyone realises that.

Preservation has often provided the incentive for urban renewal and economic revitalisation. Miami Beach is an excellent example of this. South Beach was developed in the late 1930s and early 1940s as a tourist area with many small hotels and apartments, but in the 1950s it had been overtaken by development to the north, with the huge hotels complexes which were popular then. By the 1970s, it had become a decaying area with its hotels used as cheap accommodation for retired people. In the early
1980s, the Miami Design Preservation League succeeded giving it a new image, and today it is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the United States, and a desirable place to live.

In many other cities in America, the National Trust's Mainstreets programme has revitalised the business areas of small towns through preservation and shrewd marketing, in the face of competition from shopping malls and the freeway system which diverts traffic away from small towns and cities. Suburban areas too, such as in Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia and in countless other cities have been converted from decaying slums into high-value residential areas.

TOURISM

As the tourism industry has boomed in recent decades, the commercial value of heritage has begun to be recognised. As tourists explored more and more of the world, the value to a city of having a unique character became all-important, especially in new world countries like the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where cities tend to look more or less the same. Those cities which had a distinct character, usually because of collections of Victorian and Edwardian buildings, began to emphasise and promote their competitive advantage. Those cities with newer townscapes have had to look deeper to find a heritage character which is marketable, and haven't always been successful. But sometimes they have been able to identify a style of the mid-20th century which can be promoted to the city's advantage, and in rare cases, such as in Napier, they have identified and promoted a character with more potential for promotion and marketing than older cities have.

THE PRESERVATION MOVEMENT

In some countries, the buildings and places associated with the nation's history were recognised at an early stage. In the United States for example, the state of Illinois took responsibility for the preservation of the home of Abraham Lincoln in Springfield in 1887, only 22 years after Lincoln's assassination. But in New Zealand, we have been slow to recognise our history. It wasn't until 1934 that Governor General Lord Bledisloe purchased the Treaty House at Waitangi for the nation, nearly 100 years after it was built. For many years it had been used as a barn, and was in a poor state of repair. Now it seems inconceivable that it wasn't always seen as both an important and a beautiful building.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the historic preservation movement began to strengthen world-wide. Recognition grew of commercial and industrial heritage, and buildings of the recent past began to assume more importance. In the early 1980s, in Florida, USA, the Miami Design Preservation League was formed to fight for the salvation of a huge group of Art Deco hotels, apartments and commercial buildings in south Miami Beach, part of Greater Miami. They succeeded in having the Art Deco District designated a National Register Historic District. This was a milestone for preservation in the USA.

By the 1990s, attention was turning to the Modern Movement itself. The Thirties Society in Britain, formed to study and preserve Art Deco buildings, renamed itself the 20th Century Society and extended its period of interest up to the end of the 1960s. In the Netherlands, the international society DOCOMOMO was formed (DOcumentation and COnservation of Buildings of the MOdern MOvement). The International Coalition of Art Deco Societies was also formed, a loose federation of the many organizations, mainly in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, which were established mostly during the mid-to-late1980s to study and fight for the survival of Art Deco buildings.

PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

There are a number of strategies which can be used to counter the arguments made in favour of demolition of a building of the recent past. It can be pointed out that:

- Some of our most treasured landmarks were once universally reviled. The Waitangi Treaty House is an obvious example.
- Some of the design movements which we now hold in high regard were once held in contempt. From the turn of the 20th century until the 1950s, Victorian design was held to have no merit.
- Humble cottages built by early settlers in New Zealand are without question deemed to be worthy of preservation.
- There may be no scholarly credentials to support the claim that the building has value, but nor do credentials exist to support the demolition.
- History is happening today, and a building or a precinct doesn't have to be 100 years old to be historical.
- And of course – demolition is forever. Once a building has been demolished, it can never be replaced. And a fake replica cannot tell the story that the original can.

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Art Deco Trust (Inc) • Deco Centre, 163 Tennyson Street • P O Box 133, Napier NZ
Tel (06) 835 0022 • Fax (06) 835 1912
Email trust@artdeconapier.com Web Site www.artdeconapier.com