

PRESERVING MODERNISM: A RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE SYMPOSIUM

Richard Ingersoll

*We may live without her, and
worship without her, but we
cannot remember without her.*

— John Ruskin on architecture

The first public awareness that historic buildings should be saved for their cultural significance — however hostile the prevailing mood may be to their style or prior purpose — arose during the early years of the French Revolution. After the demise of Robespierre and the Terror, intellectuals and artists, disturbed by the vandalism of religious and monarchical monuments, sought to neutralize the odious associations of these buildings and reinterpret them as objective witnesses to history and repositories of national artistic traditions. It is a lesson that apparently needs to be relearned every generation. For example, not until the late 1950s was there much consciousness of 19th-century Victorian buildings as “historic.” Once reviled by both classicists and modernists, they are now revered. The preservation and restoration of Victorian buildings has not only become economically viable but has even led (unfortunately in my opinion) to neo-historical revivals.

What could be said of Victorian buildings 40 years ago can be said of Modernist works today. A great many buildings of the period stretching roughly from 1930 to 1970 are being eliminated without the slightest consideration of their value as cultural artifacts, a course of destruction that can seem almost as vindictive as the assault on the symbols of the *ancien régime* in 1789. One particularly sorry example that comes to mind is the demolition of painter Robert Motherwell’s house and studio in Amagansett, Long Island, designed by Pierre Chareau — one of the few buildings of that gifted designer’s career. Other examples, such as the “classical” remodeling of one of Craig Ellwood’s skin-and-bones Case Study Houses in Los Angeles, are legion. Could it be that there is a conspiracy to erase all traces of Modernism from society now that the Cold War is over?

Of course, in a city such as Houston, which has quite an obvious commitment to the culture of oblivion, the idea of preserving buildings of any historical period has been anathema. The Rice Hotel remains only by a miracle, a testament to what was once a lively downtown with a street life facilitated by the hotel’s armature of marvelous, shady



A controversy arose in Savannah, Georgia, about whether to preserve this 1950s Modernist building or refashion it with a more historically compatible façade. The preservation review board rejected the redesign.

cast-iron colonnades. Almost every other remnant of this time — really not so long ago — has been generously offered to the wrecking ball. The city that refuses to be zoned only reluctantly adopted a preservation ordinance in February 1995. The Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, while it has done much to educate the public, functions mostly as a condolence society. As with the issue of zoning in Houston, one has to ask about preservation: Why ruin a perfect record? If the true character of the city is oblivion, isn’t it best to forget?

Just in case there are some brave souls who would dare challenge this *Zeitgeist* of collective amnesia, on 25 January 1995 the Rice Design Alliance sponsored the symposium *Modern Preservation: Back to the Future*, held in the Jones Auditorium of the classically Modernist University of St. Thomas, one of Philip Johnson’s most disciplined and unpretentious works in that style. Moderated with charm by Houston architect Rafael Longoria, the symposium presented three speakers from different parts of the country testifying to the difficulty of getting Modernist buildings recognized as “historic.”

First to speak was Ellen Beasley, who has worked in preservation throughout the South and West and is currently a member of the city of Houston’s Archeological and Historical Commission. Beasley described the struggle in Savannah, Georgia, to preserve a Modernist bank built in the 1950s in

what is now the downtown historic district. Although Savannah has one of the oldest preservation movements in the country and the degree of public awareness is high, many there have strong reservations about whether any structure built after World War II is worth saving. The bank building was designed with innovative brise-soleil louvers and planes of unrendered granite. The building was taken over by the city for offices; during

necessity of the legal authority of preservation ordinances, as well as fiscal incentives. He chose as a positive example the preservation of the Greyhound Bus Station in Washington, D.C., a 1930s Streamline Moderne building, which required ten years of battles. Behind the rehabilitated station is a multistory office tower, installed to generate revenue.



Architect’s proposed remodeling of the building at left.

The last speaker, Diane Wray, founded the Modern Architecture Preservation League in Denver to avert the impending destruction of Denver’s Civic Center Library and I. M. Pei’s Zeckendorf Plaza. Wray succeeded in saving the library (which had a subsequent addition by Michael Graves), but failed to save Zeckendorf Plaza, which is currently slated for massive reconfiguration, which will “completely destroy the composition,” according to Wray. The Preservation League is currently working to catalogue modern buildings throughout Colorado, anticipate which can be saved, and proceed to obtain landmark status for them. Wray’s successful strategy has been to focus on buildings that are occupied by people sympathetic to the authenticity of Modernist architecture or to select such public buildings as schools, libraries, and power stations, where there is a public obligation to recognize the issue.

All of the speakers agreed that Houston needs to initiate a similar survey of buildings built since 1950, perhaps under the aegis of the Rice Design Alliance. For oblivious Houston, the Menil Collection offers an intriguing example of how to proceed in a city with an underdeveloped sense of public life, in this case by subtly preserving through camouflage. The 40 bungalows surrounding the museum building, painted a uniform gray with white trim, have given a neutral, uncanny unity to a neighborhood that otherwise lacks distinctiveness, preserving the scale and type of the buildings while giving them a new look and function. More important to the process of preservation is the creative reprogramming of these spaces as new sites of production: they serve as offices for museum personnel, studios for artists, display spaces, and nonluxury, moderate-income family housing. Preservation of these buildings has not entailed freezing them in time. Rather, it has allowed them to evolve gracefully into an urban amenity — a goal that is certainly appropriate for preservation efforts throughout the city. ■

one remodeling, a well-intentioned architect proposed refashioning the bank’s exterior in a more historically compatible skin. The new façade would have had a further drawback of being much less energy efficient, eliminating the thermal mass of the stone elevations and the greater cooling capacity of the shades and replacing them with poorly insulated synthetic materials. While Savannah’s preservation ordinance wisely states that buildings should not be given a falsely historic appearance, public sentiment about the original modern elevation was ambivalent, and the proposed remodeling found considerable support. Savannah’s preservation review board nevertheless turned it down.

Next, Richard Longstreth, an architectural historian and director of the historical preservation program at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., summarized the national situation since the formulation of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Longstreth led controversial campaigns to save such modern commercial artifacts as Shoppers World in Framingham, Massachusetts, one of the first regional shopping malls, which was demolished last year. In his presentation he went so far as to proclaim that “someday soon we will have to start thinking about saving urban sprawl.” His point is that to allow the wholesale elimination of what a historical period produced is to deny that period’s historical validity and the individual’s participation in a historical continuum. Longstreth emphasized the importance of grassroots movements but insisted on the