

THE CITY OF CONTINUITY VERSUS THE CITY OF CONTRASTS: NEW URBANISM AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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ABSTRACT:

New Urbanism and historic preservation share many values but both fields also struggle with how best to incorporate the lessons of the historic built environment. Modern preservation policies emphasize “differentiation” between historic and new construction, often resulting in visual dissonance; New Urbanists debate the merits of modernist and traditional design for buildings rising on a traditional urban plan. The recovery of traditional practice in architecture and urban design prompts reconsideration of how preservation and New Urbanism can work together to promote the pedestrian-oriented, harmonious environment called for by the Charter of the New Urbanism.

“Preservation and renewal of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes affirm the continuity and evolution of urban society.”

--Charter of the New Urbanism, 1996

Perhaps the most pressing concern for New Urbanism today is the re-compaction and re-urbanization of existing cities and suburbs, promoting denser new development that weaves together new construction and existing buildings, transforming places without destroying their valued character. (1) Working in existing cities naturally brings urbanists and preservationists together, but while one might expect the two groups to be close allies, they are often not on the same page regarding what and how we should preserve, the value of historic architecture and urbanism as models for contemporary design, and how structures and districts currently under preservation protection might be developed in the future. In this paper I will suggest some areas where urbanists and preservationists have common interests as well as areas where a change in attitude may be appropriate to bring the two fields into closer harmony.

New Urbanism and preservation find common ground, firstly, in the built heritage they share. How many plans for Traditional Neighborhood Developments and form-based codes for new and

existing neighborhoods have been inspired by beloved historic districts—for example, Greenwich Village, the Vieux Carré, Williamsburg, and Charleston? (2) While these represent preservation victories of the past, some preservationists today, seeing their work as a value-free process of cultural documentation, view not only such older sites but *suburban sprawl itself* as worthy of preservation. Confusion prevails about the value of “historical”, if noxious, recent environments. Consider two publications of the National Trust for Historic Preservation: one raising the challenge of combating sprawl (3) and another advocating preservation of what is now termed the “recent past,” including early strip malls. (4) (Figure 1) The prototypical suburban subdivision, Levittown, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, has been proposed for historic district designation. (Figure 2) Might a “suburban repair kit” project be opposed by preservationists who declare a failed shopping center or subdivision eligible for landmark designation? This paradox arises from preserving buildings “as they have come down to us in history” (as a federal preservation official once expressed it to me), confusing the “historic” with the merely “historical.” In my view, we preserve not simply to document the past, but *to learn how to build*. Therefore, *appropriateness* must be the guiding criterion, by which I mean the *fitting* and the *exemplary*. Judgments about what and how to preserve are inescapable.

Another common interest is methodological: For decades preservationists have used the tool of the field survey to evaluate the historic character of proposed districts. Detailed records of building types, styles, materials, construction, and significant details are made, supported by documentation of the site’s history. Nomination forms for properties placed on the National Register of Historic Places typically define the “character-defining elements” that make the buildings or districts eligible for regulation. Similar techniques have been used to produce the now familiar New Urbanist “pattern book”: a survey of desirable urbanistic and architectural features serving as guidance for new construction--a kind of preservation in reverse.

The objective of these pattern books is straightforward: discover what makes the place work and make more of it. Accordingly, the recent development of Nantucket, Massachusetts has been governed by *Building with Nantucket in Mind*. (5) (Figure 3) Pattern books created by Urban Design Associates, such as those for Norfolk, Virginia and the Mississippi Coast, or the master plan for Downcity in Providence, Rhode Island by DPZ similarly draw together urban design and

preservation components. (6) (Figure 4) In these cases, the master plan seeks continuity with the historic setting, evoking visual harmony through the addition of new elements that recontextualize historic structures and allow the whole ensemble to “become more itself” as Andres Duany has remarked. (7)

But this search for continuity in preservation and urban design has encountered resistance on stylistic grounds. Some of our colleagues have conceded the errors of modernist urbanism yet embrace a modernist aesthetic for the individual building and criticize what they see as a “nostalgic” reliance on historical styles. But how can a new neighborhood plan based on models of the traditional city be realized harmoniously at the scale of the individual building if the architectural language employed is not sympathetic? The now mature build-out of Seaside and Battery Park City reveal tensions between the vision of the original planners and the continuing efforts of contemporary architects to push the stylistic envelope in a dissonant direction. (Figure 5) In my view, when the urban and architectural scales exhibit antithetical conceptions of space, structure, composition, proportion, ornament, and character, the resulting contradiction undermines the effort to create the pedestrian-oriented, harmonious environment called for by the Charter of the New Urbanism. (8)

Preservationists confront a similar contradiction. While they are dedicated to the care of historic buildings and districts, they often oppose using these same models to inform the design of new elements. We often find an insistence on fidelity to the smallest details of historical precedent in restoration along with equal insistence that added elements be conspicuously modernist or, in the current parlance, “of our time.” (Figure 6) But why would one work to conserve examples of a traditional architectural culture only to deny their validity as models for the design of new structures in their midst? How does surrounding historic structures with alien forms help us to understand and value either the historic structure itself or the now-vanished urban context that originally gave it meaning? It seems that the current stylistic debate prevents many architects, urbanists, and preservationists from drawing together the urban scale and the individual building scale, historic structures and new ones, into a vision of the city as a place of continuity and harmony, instead of contrast and disruption. (Figure 7)

Prior to the ascendancy of the Modern Movement, such an integrated and interdisciplinary vision was the norm, but afterward architecture, urbanism, and preservation drifted apart, assuming their current defensive positions. This evolution is visible in twentieth-century Italy, where the principal pre-war figure was Gustavo Giovannoni (1873–1947), a brilliant architect, urban designer and restorer of monuments. His new buildings are fresh essays in an eclectic but classical style now labeled “barocchetto Romano,” as in his church of the Guardian Angel just outside Rome. (Figure 8) He master-planned dozens of new neighborhoods near Rome that draw together Italian traditions and the ideas of Camillo Sitte and the Garden City movement. His restoration work was “philological,” proceeding as if editing a text and filling gaps based on the surrounding language. At the Church of Sant’Andrea in Orvieto (1928–30), the upper parts of the bell tower and the main façade and the entirety of the flanking loggia are new work. (Figure 9) While some of the new elements and details are clearly of Giovannoni’s invention, they are modest and consistent with the structure’s overall character, reinforcing the monument’s role in the ensemble around the piazza, with its multiplicity of periods and styles.

The urban interventions of the Fascist regime pursued antithetical principles, isolating ancient monuments in vast new open spaces. “The immemorial monuments of our history must loom gigantic in their necessary solitude,” Mussolini declared in 1925. (9) The Fascist urban vision precisely mirrored Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin of the same year, in which vestigial monuments like Notre-Dame and the Louvre appear as isolated artifacts in a field of skyscrapers and highways replacing most of central Paris. (10) (Figure 10) In contrast, Giovannoni argued that monuments derive their authority and scale from coexistence with the more modest construction surrounding them, and that historic centers should continue to change and grow as they always had, to accommodate modern life without sacrificing their distinctive character. (11) (Figure 11) Here we have two irreconcilable models of the city that still divide the ranks of urbanists and preservationists alike: On one side, Giovannoni, Sitte, and their descendants value the city in its layered historical accumulations; on the other, Mussolini, Le Corbusier, and their descendants envision a kind of *architectural zoo* in which isolated specimens gesture to one another across impassable barriers. The first model weaves past and present together; the second only juxtaposes. (Figure 12)

After the Second World War, the victors rehabilitated modernist urbanism and condemned traditional design as Fascist, a judgment that cynically disregarded historical reality. Following the painstaking rebuilding of destroyed monuments like San Lorenzo fuori le Mura in Rome, the Abbey of Montecassino, and the bridges over the Arno in Florence, (Figure 13) some younger Italian conservationists of modernist bent condemned such reconstructions as “fakes” and managed to institutionalize their views in the Venice Charter of 1964, the founding document of modern preservation practice enforced internationally by UNESCO. (12)

While much of the Charter is unexceptionable, key provisions declare that restoration “must stop at the point where conjecture begins” and that additions to historic settings “must be distinct from the architectural composition *and must bear a contemporary stamp.*” Reconstruction is ruled out a priori and parts added to monuments are to “integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time *must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.*”

The charter authors drew inspiration from Cesare Brandi’s 1963 book *Teoria del Restauro*, which condemned as “falsification” replication of existing works, new construction in historical styles, and reconstruction of destroyed monuments. (13) Brandi saw such practices as “offenses against History,” and so Giovannoni’s restoration in Orvieto or Perry Shaw & Hepburn’s contemporaneous work at Williamsburg were tantamount to forgery. Only the frank expression of the style of one’s own moment would preserve the authenticity of the new object and clearly identify its provenance. (Figure 14) This is the basis for the counterintuitive but now conventional belief that new construction in historic settings should represent “the architecture of our time”—conceived, it goes without saying, in terms conspicuously different from previous times. (14)

On a philosophical level, Brandi’s theory simply does not bear close scrutiny, but the consequences of its application are visible everywhere. New construction in historic settings typically affects a contrived visual dissonance underscoring the rupture between the past and the present. Additions to historic structures reveal aesthetic principles conspicuously different from those operative in the historic fabric. At an urban scale, physical segregation by “period” is

enforced by restrictive preservation ordinances in the old centers and sprawl-generating zoning ordinances in the periphery. The resulting City of Contrasts is now enforced by a network of local, national, and international regulations whose underlying assumptions, until recently, have rarely been questioned.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, first published in 1977 and most recently revised in 1995, were based on the Venice Charter but were more moderate. (15) The Standards, written for a federal matching grant program administered by the National Park Service to encourage preservation of National Register properties, soon became the de facto preservation policy for the entire United States. Standard Nine has proved the most problematic: "The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment." While the Standards do not call for new additions to be contrasting or in a modernist style, they do require new construction to be "differentiated" without defining how or to what degree, and to be "compatible" without offering criteria for achieving this objective. This ambiguity has produced confusion and widely divergent interpretations in practice.

Typically, differentiation is achieved by employing a readily identifiable modernist style for the new work; compatibility is satisfied by relying on abstract relationships like size, massing, and horizontal façade alignments to relate new and old. (Figure 15) This approach was reinforced by examples illustrated in the NPS Guidelines: only modernist additions to traditional buildings (and extraordinarily banal ones at that) were included. Not without reason, local officials often interpreted the *Standards* as mandating modernist and prohibiting traditional design in historic settings. Traditional designs were often rejected because it was felt that any design in a recognizable historical style would be insufficiently "differentiated" from the historic resource.

Since the Charter and Standards were written, modernist architecture has become increasingly transgressive in its attitude toward traditional environments. Modernist architects, unable to remove historic landmarks entirely, seem driven to put their "contemporary stamp" on every one they can find. Andres Duany has characterized this compulsion as essentially *parasitic*, seeking to compensate for the semantic emptiness of the new work by juxtaposition with older buildings

whose visual richness acts as a “foil” for forms which, if placed on a suburban lot, would be far less impressive. (16) But an architectural culture dedicated to producing unique gestures that refuse to form relationships with surrounding buildings on any basis other than confrontation is antithetical to the objectives of both preservation and New Urbanism.

Despite continuing resistance from the academic and professional mainstream, the emergence over the last three decades of a revived practice of traditional architecture and urbanism reestablishes continuity with historic models and building cultures. (Figure 16) It is now possible to reconceptualize the practice of architecture, urban design, and preservation in a way that brings these three fields together again into a single discipline—as the projects I cited earlier begin to do. Recently, students in my architectural design studio proposed the reconstruction of an urban quarter demolished by Mussolini in 1939 on the historic Via Giulia in Rome—not as it was before, but respecting the urbanistic, typological, and linguistic models of the place, as Govannoni might have done and, naturally, in opposition to current orthodoxy. (17) (Figure 17) The requisite knowledge and skills to carry out such acts of urban recovery are now available, public dissatisfaction with established policies and official taste is increasing, and changes to the regulatory framework of the Standards and the policies of UNESCO are already under discussion. (18) Ultimately, the City of Contrasts will give way to the City of Continuity—a city in which the present and the past, and the urban and building scales, are partners instead of antagonists—as envisioned by the Charter of the New Urbanism. With a few judicious adjustments to current attitudes in their respective fields, New Urbanists and historic preservationists can lead the way together.

ENDNOTES

1. A need well-recognized among New Urbanists and addressed in an increasing volume of planning work in existing cities and towns.
2. Congress for the New Urbanism (Leccese, Michael and Kathleen McCormick eds.). *Charter of the New Urbanism*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000, pp. 173-175.
3. Beaumont, Constance E. (ed.). *Challenging Sprawl: Organizational Responses to a National Problem*. Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1999.
4. Lambin, Jeanne. *Preserving Resources from the Recent Past*. Washington, DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2007.
5. Lang, Christopher J. and Kate Stout. *Building with Nantucket in Mind*. Nantucket (Mass.): Nantucket Historic District Commission, 1995.
6. See Urban Design Associates. *A Pattern Book for the Mississippi Coast*. Pittsburgh: Urban Design Associates, 2005. A preservation component is increasingly part of any New Urbanist master plan for existing urban neighborhoods, from the massive Miami 21 to proposals for small towns and rural villages.
7. Duany, Andres. In conversation with author.
8. Congress for the New Urbanism, pp. 127-132.
9. Fried, Robert C. *Planning the Eternal City: Roman Politics and Planning Since World War II*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973, pp. 31-32.
10. Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret). *Oeuvre Complete*, (BIBLIO INFO TO BE ADDED).
11. Giovannoni, Gustavo. *Vecchie città, edilizia nuova*. Torino: Unione Tipografico Editrice Torinese, 1931.
12. International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). *Venice Charter: International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*. Venice: 1964. (available online at: www.icomos.org/venice_charter.html.)
13. Brandi, Cesare. *Teoria del Restauro*. Torino: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2000 (originally published 1964).
14. Conventional contemporary preservation philosophy is well represented by Byard, Paul Spencer. *The Architecture of Additions*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998.

15. National Park Service. *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*. Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1995. (Available online at www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/rhb/stand.htm.)
16. Duany, Andres. "Modernist Buildings out of Place," *Charleston Post-Courier*, November 8, 2005.
17. For an alternative approach in contemporary Italy, see Marconi, Paolo. *Il recupero della bellezza*. Milan: Skira Editore, 2003.
18. International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture, and Urbanism (INTBAU). *The INTBAU Venice Declaration on the Conservation of Monuments and Sites in the 21st Century*, November 2007. (Available online at: www.intbau.org/venicedeclaration.htm)