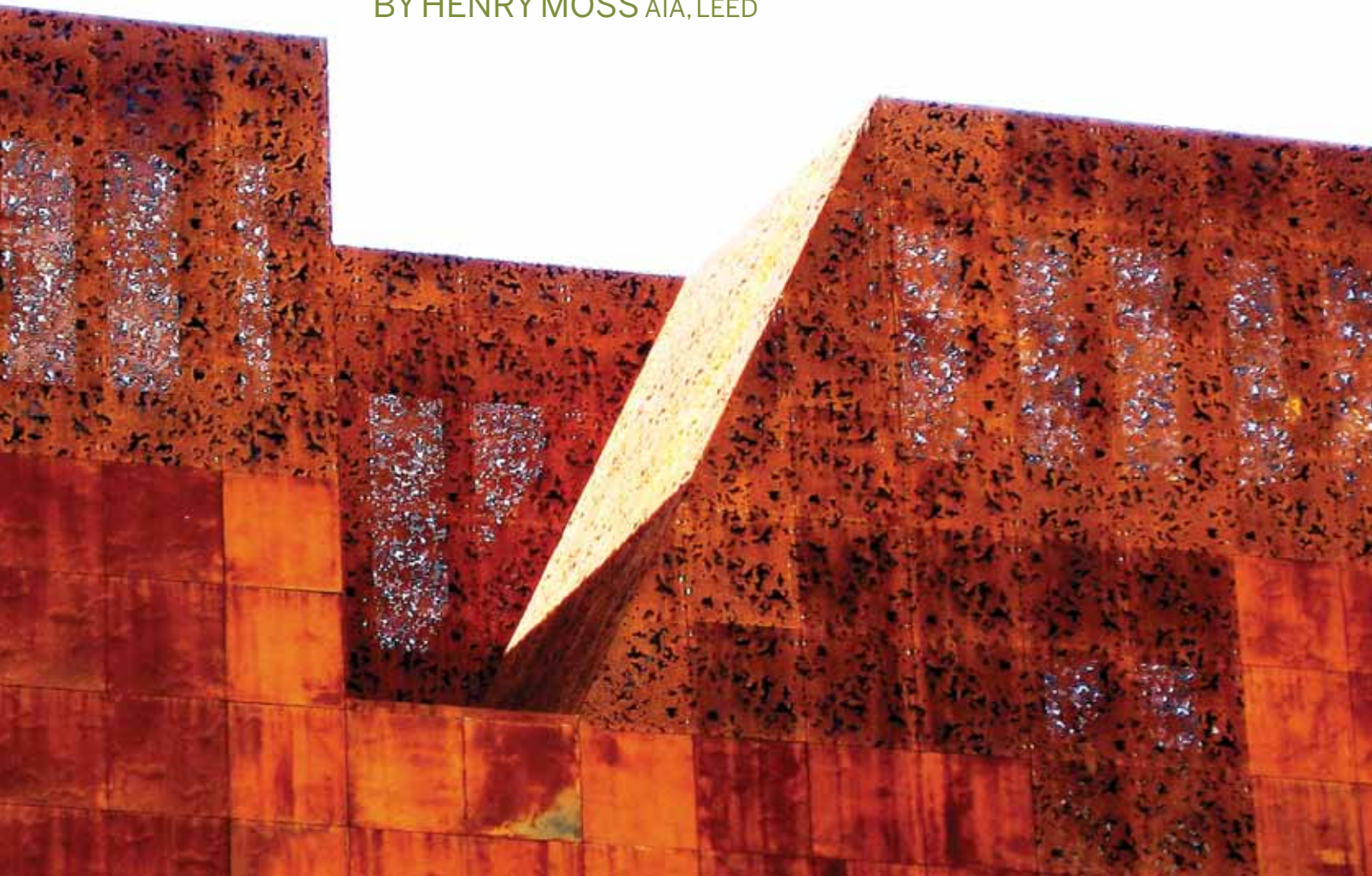


POLE  
THE CO-DEPENDENCY OF MODERNISM  
DANCING  
AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION IS  
AROUND  
IN NEED OF AN INTERVENTION.  
THE PAST

BY HENRY MOSS AIA, LEED



**Pre-modern, Modern/anti-Modern, Postmodern, and now, perhaps, Un-Modern** — there is a lot of cultural space out there. So why don't we move through it more freely?

Parsing these categories may expose our unrecognized prejudices and reveal new opportunities. The pre-modern world recognized no separation of nature and society as drastic as our own, instead devising complex cultural boundary systems enforced through pollution control — taboos, ritual cleansing, and ritual punishments — that made possible a cultural stasis inconceivable to ourselves. The modern world brought with it an anxiety about the past that has taken a few centuries to unfold. Postmodernism in architecture recognized the significance of the symbolic content of buildings to ordinary people but foundered, unable to engage the seriousness of either Modern or anti-Modern cultural forces.

The failure of Postmodernism returned us to the Modern and its anti-Modern doppelgänger, both of which fetishized our physical endowment from the past — first as antiquities, then as architectural icons, and now as the embodiment of previous social forms. The schism between new and old energized a strong reactionary movement with a love of traditional forms and an equally strong avant-garde dedicated to a frantic, continuous artistic revolution. In a culture that shuttles from one to the other, we have systemically prohibited a third possibility: an equivalent release of creativity if radical hybrids of old and new could become a major cultural objective.

The bureaucracies of historic preservation operate effectively at many scales of the built environment, but their operating tools and philosophical precepts are derived from the curatorial practices of fine-art conservation — retentive, technical, a-stylistic, and allegedly immune to subjectivity. Implicitly, the path to success in architectural design is through formal invention. Subjectivity is necessary to establish a discernible break with the past. When the underlying client of each new design is the author's conjectural future for architectural history, and *not* Edgar Kaufman, Dr. Farnsworth, or the town librarian of Vipuri, the replication of traditional forms is simply taboo — maybe not as strong as the prohibition against incest, but similar. Historic preservation is about managing change to minimize its psychological impact. Modernism in architecture is about iconoclasm. With their lack of affect, played to attentive audiences, both pole dance around the past.

“Where the old historicism seeks, finally, out of admiration, or at least out of hope, to salvage and recuperate the past, the new historicism seeks out of something closer to suspicion and disillusionment to demystify the past. These are not mere differences of emphasis; they take in and reflect an entire realignment of sensibility, a major alteration in the structure of intellectual desire ...”

— Giles Gunn, *Thinking Across the American Grain: Ideology, Intellect and the New Pragmatism*

There is plenty of historicism to go around. Modernism is full of the stuff, although Gunn's “new historicism” is more likely to survive our reflexive castigation of nostalgia. But the historic preservation ethic that we know today in the United States could



not exist with such entrenched political backing and emotive force outside the modern world. Modernism emerged as an object of hope, a world change worthy of Copernicus. Near-catastrophic upheavals that marked discontinuity with the past were themselves to be eradicated along with the continuation of the past itself — the incursions of satanic mills, world wars, global economic collapse, and new levels of secular centralization through fascism and communism.

“As Nietzsche observed long ago, the moderns suffer from the illness of historicism. They want to keep everything, date everything, because they think they have definitively broken with their past. The more they accumulate revolutions, the more they save; the more they capitalize, the more they put on display in museums. Maniacal destruction is counterbalanced by maniacal conservation ... Historical reconstitution and archaism are two symptoms of the moderns' incapacity to eliminate what they nevertheless have to eliminate in order to retain the impression that time passes.”

— Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*

The radical phase of historic preservation ended in the United States in 1976 when the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program created the need for guidelines to ensure that taxpayers' dollars would not underwrite destructive alterations to historic buildings. A smart, flexible document, *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation* has helped a generation of planning boards, town managers, and ordinary citizens to protect historic buildings and cultural landscapes that are familiar, beloved, and legible. At the same time, the document and the agencies that interpret and apply it have helped developers, designers, building owners, and historic commissions avoid thoughtless or expedient changes at the expense of architectural character (if not quality). The effect on individual buildings and the older parts of towns and cities has been profound. The document's guidelines remain a significant force within planning as historic preservation increasingly connects to environmentalism, to an emerging tolerance for increasing densities, and to more sensitive juxtapositions or interweaving of different land uses.

Nevertheless, in its own recent past, historic preservation, once a resistance movement against urban renewal and anodyne new construction, is now institutionalized — even bureaucratized. This political success has moved it outside the world of design. Its thought structure has been marginalized by the architectural



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profession and almost completely suppressed within design studios and theory courses by our schools. Typically, preservation is relegated to some worthy but repressive role within the vast battery of building codes and zoning restrictions. At the same time, local historic commissions increasingly act as design review boards for new architecture that is proposed in contexts dominated by older buildings.


Alongside this development, the language of *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards* has become increasingly prescriptive. The design professions acquiesce — and the architecture schools don't know and don't care. Practitioners with a particular love of historic buildings can specialize and pursue the intricate combination of technical and visual problem-solving skills necessary to comply, but they learn this through practice. The rest may freely embark on a quest to resolve today's design challenges by the invention of new forms conceived *in vitro*.

The sad result of this division into two compartments is that little imaginative design emerges through the transformation of existing buildings where curatorial angst is unmerited. Equally, too little sensitivity may be shown by contemporary designers when they seek to alter and add to significant historic structures.

An “Un-Modern” approach would heighten the design potential of adaptive-reuse projects in the thousands of existing buildings that have little historic significance and little architectural quality, but nevertheless excite curatorial responses and are often enlisted in the effort to thwart large-scale redevelopment, stop the erasure of visual heterogeneity, or simply to slow the pace of change.

After the rush to reconstruct old city centers demolished by Allied bombing, Europeans seemed more open to the potential for vigorous combinations of new and old that do not depend on a mechanistic deference to existing building fabric. Carlo Scarpa's Castelvecchio conversion of ruin to museum might not have been approved by our National Park Service. In the United States, cultural conservatism uses a single word in *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards* as a fulcrum to leverage new architectural moves toward some degree of replication and clear deference. That word is “compatible.” In the most interesting additions and adaptive-reuse strategies from abroad, incompatibility is a key component. (For many fine examples, see *Build-On: Converted Architecture and Transformed Buildings*, edited by Robert Klanten and Lukas Feireiss, Gestalten, 2009.)

There are signs that young architects are moving against received wisdom and beginning to attack or ignore the curatorial approach exemplified by *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards*. Paul Byard made wonderfully thoughtful arguments in favor of contrast (as well as complementarity) in his book *The Architecture of Additions*. As director of Columbia's Historic Preservation Program, Byard encouraged his students to



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participate in architectural design studios and was often aghast at their timidity.

Rem Koolhaas recognized the potential for poetic provocation years ago when exploring criteria for preservation policy in Beijing that focused on the vitality of local street life rather than the sanctity of individual historic buildings or parks. He and his colleagues speculated about urban overlays that would preserve *everything* in randomly applied bands while designating others as free-fire zones. This aleatory approach is the opposite of “urban design” and dismissive of the concept of “contributing buildings” in historic districts. A component of his argument (which has the additional benefit of detaching preservation from gentrification) was that preservation in the West had accelerated to the point where no elapsed time is necessary before portions of the built environment are immobilized by preservation agencies.

More recently, Koolhaas and AMO have tackled the modernization of Leo von Klenze’s vast Neo-Classical museum complex in St. Petersburg, Russia, through their Hermitage 2014 Masterplan. More than 800 rooms, 3,000,000 artifacts, and 2,000,000 visitors make up the problem set, and AMO sought to supplant the imposition of a “curatorial path” through the museum with an approach that establishes the freedom to move through the museum spaces (including service tunnels) without didactic obligations, encountering collisions of content where *vitrines* in one room might coexist with unimproved storage spaces that hold collapsing Czarist carriages, World War II hospital beds, or shrapnel-torn archival cabinets. Koolhaas

characterizes this approach, essentially avoiding new construction, as “the luxury of nondesign.”

It is worth recalling that Michelangelo never designed a new building. It may take some extreme examples of design with existing buildings to make alternative approaches worthy of the Campidoglio imaginable to us. Herzog & de Meuron’s CaixaForum in Madrid is an excellent candidate. It represents an exuberant inversion of the preservation ethic — but less a self-conscious escape than an exploitation of our visceral response to heavy masonry buildings and our ingrained allegiance to Beaux Arts classical details. The designers levitate a massive 1910 power plant, brick-up its windows, and apply a multi-story lacework of rusting cast-iron above its stone cornice and pediments. Around the corner from the Prado, it is expensive, perverse, glorious — *haute couture* certainly, and with similar intent. Both Koolhaas and Herzog & de Meuron have the stature to grasp and hold our attention. Neither the Hermitage 2014 Masterplan nor CaixaForum flows sweetly out of the historicisms that are central to the Modern/anti-Modern co-dependency. There is little danger that radical reuse and its architectural expression will damage important historic buildings. But an Un-Modern shift in expectations encompassing both old buildings and new may fruitfully reorient our mind and eyes. ■

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