Memory's Anchor: The Recycling Phenomenon

Scarce a major city in the United States has not been touched — in some cases considerably transformed — by the preservation movement. The impulse to save the gabled old house on Main Street from deterioration or the Beaux Arts rail terminal from the wrecker's ball is manifest in countless smaller cities and towns and villages as well.

Several years ago, preservation meant restoration — making the old mansion into a museum, a monument to the past. Today preservation does not, and emphatically should not, mean merely restoration. An important aspect of the preservation movement at present is the recycling of old buildings — adapting them to uses different from the ones for which they were originally intended. By infusing an old building with new economic and social life, imaginative recyclers often have an impact that reaches far beyond the original project to affect the future of a neighborhood, a district, and entire city.

This exhibition illustrates fifty-three such projects, from San Francisco to New York. Some involved major political struggle or major expense; others required minimal investments of time and money. Some are highly professional; others are first-time, volunteer efforts. The same is true of the documentation, which was contributed by the architects, developers, preservationists, citizen activists, owners, tenants or photographers of the buildings. Some of the photographs were snapshots taken by the proud inhabitants; others are studies by the best architectural photographers in the business. All, I think, were taken with the special feeling that people develop for the buildings in which they spend their lives.

What has happened to set off such a far-reaching, varied movement? Adaptive re-use can only be explained as part of a more general social re-evaluation occurring in the United States. This includes an awareness of our historic past, a realization that new need not mean better, a reconsideration of the meaning of progress, a respect for conservation, an appreciation of the hand-made object, a susceptibility to nostalgia, and the political and economic sophistication to make these values into forces of reform in many aspects of our lives.

The work of historic preservation in the U.S. is hardly begun, and the process of adaptive re-use is never-ending. We must survey our successes — and failures — in order to approach the work ahead of us more knowingly, for in this field mistakes tend to be irreparable.

Since the National Register of Historic Properties was created in 1966, it has designated some 15,000 landmarks. Some 3,000 of these have already been destroyed. We need a national policy on redundant buildings so that salvation is not ad hoc, nor is it simply local. Schools, churches, police and fire stations, libraries, city halls, railway terminals, hospitals, mills, barns, industrial and commercial buildings, stately old houses are threatened by incremental decay or by developers all over the country. Not all can, or should, be saved. Architecture is called the inescapable art, but many of our proudest old buildings escape from us every year. That doesn’t have to happen. Here are examples to prove it.
Credits

Concern for our built environment and for the need to preserve at least portions of it is, as yet, shared by too few Americans. But the number is growing, as is progress toward making our surroundings more livable without either destroying the past or denying the future.

This exhibition was made possible by men and women who welcomed me into the buildings that they helped to adapt, patiently discussed them and offered both information and encouragement. To compile the list from which the final choice of projects was made, landmark commissions, planning commissions, historical societies, state historical preservation officers, architectural society preservation officials, state and local arts councils, individual architects, politicians, preservation activists, and concerned citizens all over the United States, were consulted.

More than 7,000 inquiries went out. Many responses came from people who felt strongly that the subject was sufficiently important for them to collect dates, anecdotes, and photographs.

These are men and women who have chosen to rescue and restore, to give their time, energy and money to the imaginative conversion of buildings that might otherwise have been lost to us and who have thereby added to the architectural flavor and vitality of countless communities — all deserve praise as environmental pioneers.

There were others, but space prevents giving individual thanks to each of those who furnished photographs, information and suggestions, and from singling out contributions by the staffs of preservation groups, historical agencies and private firms. To all of them we are deeply grateful.

Barbara Lee Diamonstein

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