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Robert E. Stipe

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WHY PRESERVE?*

ROBERT E. STIPE

At a time when our attention is turned to legal sharp-shooting to help preserve endangered species of our historic structures, it is possible to become so engrossed in detail that we run a real risk of losing sight of what it is that we are trying to achieve in the first place. Why seek to conserve historic resources at all?

First, we seek to preserve because our historic resources are all that physically link us to our past. Some portion of that patrimony must be preserved if we are to recognize who we are, how we became so and, most important, how we differ from others of our species. Archives and photographs and books are not sufficient to impart the warmth and life of a physical heritage. The shadow simply does not capture the essence of the object.

Second, we strive to save our historic and architectural heritage simply because we have lived with it and it has become part of us. The presence of our physical past creates expectations and anticipations that are important parts of our daily lives. We tend to replace them only when they no longer have meaning, when other needs are more pressing, and we do so only with caution, understanding how our environment creates us, as well as how we create our environment.

Third, we save our physical heritage partly because we live in an age of frightening communication and other technological abilities, as well as in an era of increasing cultural homogeneity. In such a situation we subconsciously reach out for any opportunity to maintain difference and uniqueness.

Fourth, we preserve historic sites and structures because of their relation to past events, eras, movements and persons that we feel are important to honor and understand. Preservation of many structures and sites is an outgrowth of our respect for the past, which created our today; in making them accessible we are sometimes able to have the past live for us as it cannot when viewed as a printed page or a piece of celluloid. Nostalgia and patriotism are important human emotions for preservation, and important human emotions must be served. But the important point is that the historic associations inherent in preserved structures and sites should encourage much more than mere nostalgia

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and patriotism. They are potential sources of imagination and creativity in our attempts to understand and appreciate the past—a past distant from us, but a time that can still offer much to guide us.

Fifth, we seek to preserve the architecture and landscapes of the past simply because of their intrinsic value as art. These structures and areas were designed by some of America's greatest artists. They are as important to our artistic heritage as our decorative arts, our painting and sculpture. If we accept the philosophy of architect Walter Gropius, we should give greater consideration to the preservation of architecture than to that of other artistic objects because, in his view, architecture is a synthesis and culmination of artistic endeavor and the supreme medium of human expression. We cannot prove such an opinion, of course, but the thought does express the importance of architecture to our artistic tradition. If we were to value historic structures as we honor other works of art, much wanton destruction might be prevented.

Sixth, we seek to preserve our past because we believe in the right of our cities and countryside to be beautiful. Here, with much regret, we must recognize the essential tawdryness of much contemporary design and construction. Much of it is junk; it assaults our senses. We seek to preserve the past, not only because it is unique, exceptional, architecturally significant or historically important, but also because in most cases what replaces it will be inhuman and grotesque. Potentially, of course, many old buildings could be demolished and replaced with contemporary structures of equal functional or aesthetic value. Yet, recent experience has shown that this is not likely, and until it is we shall preserve our past in order to preserve what is left of our pleasing and humane urban and rural landscape.

Finally, and most important of all, we seek to preserve because we have discovered—all too belatedly—that preservation can serve an important human and social purpose in our society. Ancestor worship and aesthetic motivations are no longer enough; our traditional concern with great events, great people and great architects will not serve society in any full measure.

The problem now is to acknowledge that historic conservation is but one aspect of the much larger problem, basically an environmental one, of enhancing, or perhaps providing for the first time, a quality of human life. Especially is this so for that growing number of people who struggle daily to justify an increasingly dismal existence in a rapidly deteriorating urban environment. No one needs to be reminded that our cities are falling apart. If preservation is not to fall into the trap of total irrelevance, we must learn to look beyond our traditional preoccupation with architecture and history, to break out of our traditionally elitist intellectual and aesthetic mold and to turn our preserva-

tion energies to a broader and more constructive social purpose. We must look beyond the problems of saving architectural artifacts and begin to think about how we can conserve urban neighborhoods for human purposes. This is particularly urgent at a time when some special interest and ethnic groups, in an effort to discover their own heritages, have begun to isolate themselves even more, rejecting the notion of a common heritage for all Americans and substituting a new emphasis on social differences and social conflicts. Success in preservation in this day and age requires that we give as much of our attention to such problems as bathrooms, kitchens, schools, garbage collection, employment and racial conflict as we have traditionally given to architecture and history. The importance of our nostalgic, patriotic and intellectual impulses cannot be denied, but they are no longer a wholly sufficient motivation for what we are about.

Basically, it is the saving of people and lives and cities—not just buildings—that are important to all of us. We have before us an unparalleled opportunity, if we are sufficiently determined, to contribute significantly to the upgrading of the quality of human existence. If we can achieve this, to some extent at least, the architecture and the history will fall into place.