

Historic Preservation - Designing for Potential

Nan Liang

The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 48109-2069, USA

nanliang@umich.edu

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Abstract: Historic preservation is a relatively new concept and topic in the architecture and urban design fields, playing a vital role in the historic heritage of ancient buildings and urban renewal. The continuation of city/place memory is a design challenge for both Eastern and Western cities: the coexistence of old and new constructions, spatial identity, and placemaking.

Introduction

Historic Preservation expressly refers to the conservation of the built environment through protecting buildings, landscapes, and artifacts of historical significance.

This concept originated in the middle of the 17th century in the United Kingdom. At that time, people began to pursue historical relics — with the spread of railroads and technologies through cities, heritages were eroded [12]. When English Heritage was formed as a registered charity in 1983, historic conservation practices in England manifested themselves in conserving historical sites and important buildings to maintain diversities of architectural style/era and place identity.[1] In Europe, for many years, the prevailing historical conservation was to keep the original expression of heritages as much as possible. Separating heritages and new inventions in the urban fabric caused the solitary performance of the heritage, which provokes the ancient city to become a museum frozen [7].

Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, a French architect who restored lots of prominent medieval landmarks, such as Notre Dame de Paries, wrote for the architectural form and function highlighted the essence of historic conservation:

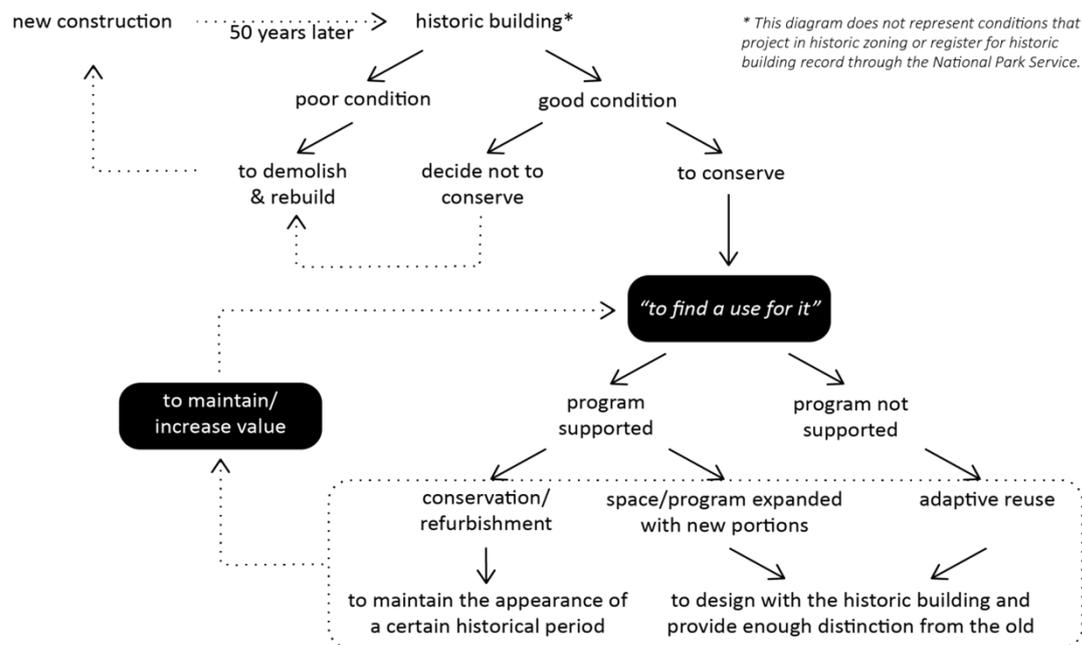


Figure 1. Historic Preservation processes and methods

"The fact is that the best of all ways of preserving a building is to find a use for it, and then to satisfy so well the needs dictated by that use that there will never be any further need to make any further changes in the building [11]."

Hence, historic preservation practices expand the original substance from protecting the primeval expression to searching values and uses (Figure 1). This paper aims to analyze the potential for historic preservation combined with advancements and innovations for unique urban, cultural, and historical experiences through three lenses: neighborhood/community scale, district scale, and urban landscape.

1. Neighborhood/Community Scale

Hopkins Burns Design Studio is an Ann Arbor-based architectural firm with seven members focusing on historic preservation practices. Unlike many architectural firms/studios having specific preferences/authority for programs, Hopkins Burns does not limit itself by project types. Instead, their design philosophy seeks the potential from the existing buildings and places, either expanding or adapting to the current situation to maintain or increase historic buildings' values and provide a unique living experience for the community. Depending on the varied conditions of the historic building, preferences of the community, and site potential, Hopkins Burns treats projects uniquely. Yet, the purport is constantly "to find a use" of the old building [2].

Elk Rapids District Library is a tiny dwelling since 1948 located in Elk Rapids, MI. As the icon of the local community, the space is too limited to serve additional social activities.[2] Comparing to many other buildings that lack proper functions, the design challenges from this library come from needs for the public. To align the library with local expectations, Hopkins Burns spent three days in the field studying stakeholder types, documenting participants' reactions to the library, and presenting proposals to get public feedback. In the interview, Tarama Burns said it is crucial to acknowledge their needs for a historic building expansion. Then, in collaboration with Daniels & Zermack Architects and the Elk Rapids District Library, the design team reflected on community interviews and public presentations to create new spaces and programs for the extension design [3].

As the final product, the expansion doesn't provide tremendous contrast from the historical portion. Two sections gently wave together by utilizing similar architectural form, facade color, and texture as the original. Although Burns said the intervention ought to have enough distinction from the old pieces in historic preservation practice [2], the actual design decision-making has to balance the innovation and regulations, code, and clients' preferences and budget. It seems that there are lots of restrictions from building codes, community agreements, zoning regulations, historic preservation guidelines, etc. Nevertheless, the reality of architectural practice is to search for the potential and possibilities for better design solutions.

2. District Scale

If the Hopkins Burns' practices are usually small-scale for communities, historic preservation projects in China happen on a district scale. One thing to recognize here is that many historical architectures in China have more distant historical backgrounds. Especially since most cities in China are high-density, it is not practical to establish museums to protect ancient buildings all the time. Besides, cities want to preserve diversity through constructions in different eras for unique urban experiences, built and cultural environments. Therefore, in cities with enormous historical localities, a mutually beneficial development method combining culture and commerce is usually adopted for high-value land. Yet, it must be noted that there are two general strifes with this method: 1. imitation of ancient architecture form and style falsifying/distorting history, and 2. visual and spatial competitions between the proposed volumes and ancient architectures. Two design considerations then unfold: which traditional architectural form is appropriate for the proposed building program and, how to avoid discordant visual and spatial conflicts with the heritage buildings while allowing innovations to complement the heritage.

Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li Chengdu, co-developed by Swire Properties Limited and Sino-ocean

Land Holdings Limited, is an open-plan, low-rise walkable mixed-use district-scale project containing retails and heritage at the urban heart in Chengdu, Sichuan. As the master planner and architect, the Oval Partnership spent six years until 2014 cooperating with various design institutions and consultants to complete this 114,000 square meters project [6]. Taikoo Li integrating architecture and urban design accomplishes the dynamism and long-term viability of the city and combines heritage with commercial and social development, creating human experience and place story through heritage preservation [8].

The proposed walkable cultural-commercial district adopted six preserved ancient private dwellings plus Daci Temple as the regeneration foundation applied both adaptive reuse and expansion.[9] While introducing new volumes to expand the site as a commercial hub, some dwellings' facades are transformed into windows for luxury shops that blend ancient and contemporary materials. Because these private dwellings are one to two floors in height with black bricks and pitched roofs, innovations keep dark gray sloping rooftops for uniformity but utilizing glazing to reduce the sense of heaviness and provide distinct variation from ancient constructions. In addition, since Taikoo Li chose to represent the traditional Chinese courtyard dwellings with modern construction methods, the small-massing building groups have more spatial flexibility and urban permeability in terms of the overall space construction. Furthermore, to attract and retain customers and visitors, the design team introduce a Fast-and-Slow-Two-Lane concept into retail planning, with all luxury brands and fashion stores belonging to the "fast lane", while the "slow lane" mainly serves restaurants, cafes, lifestyle shops, etc [9]. Besides, except for regular mixed-use programs, mixed retail types and customer/visitor groups further strengthen the economic capital to ensure long-term value and livability.

Compared with other famous historical sites in Chengdu, the Taikoo Li area locates in a relatively high commercial value urban area. However, unlike traditional protection methods such as migrating historical residences to the suburbs and forming collective protection museums, Taikoo Li invisibly brings the historical and cultural atmosphere into modernization. The renovation of these dwellings reduces the inherent energy associated with demolition/transportation and redevelopment. More importantly, Taikoo Li leverages the potential of the ancient residential volume to form a low-density urban breathing space in the high-density urban center.

3. Urban Landscape

Although the two projects analyzed above are distinct in design and context, HopkinBurns and Oval Partnership attempt to insert appropriate uses/functions into historic buildings/sites for appreciation. Yet, Gas Works Park, designed by Richard Haag in Seattle, WA, takes a seemingly opposite approach - "to take functions off" - as the method "to find a use." Gas Works Park is the remnants of the Seattle Gas Light Company gasification plant that caused severe pollution to the natural environment since the gas work plant started to supply gas to the city in 1906. Until 1956, the gasification plant closed, but the industrial contamination remained in the soil. The original renovation plan for this industrial site alone Lake Union was to remove all the toxic substances and convert the site to a public park, visioned by Myrtle Edwards, a Seattle City Council member, in 1962 [10].

By October 1962, landscape architect Haag who realized "that the city had the wrong intention of razing the land [4]" came out with the master site plan with conservation of the industrial structure relics on site. Haag's proposal dovetailing with Jonathan Hill's ruin theory - as a celebration/document of the industrial age through the ever-expanding imagination and potential of broken bodies[5] - which contains more profound meanings than Edwards's public park vision. Seattle has been able to preserve a historic and life-sustaining urban landscape through Haag's vigorous debate on the importance of maintaining old industrial structures and the equal importance of public art and sanitation to the city. Haag argued that demolishing the plant and completely landscaping it would be impractical because of soil contamination. Rather than demolishing the entire locality and filling it with leveled sites, it would be cheaper and better to recycle old parts of the gas plant and reuse them to create an urban park that reflects the city's history [10].

When the Gas Work Park's Great Mound opened to the public in 1973, visitors were already able to observe the entire abandoned gasification plant transformed into a healthy, green park. In the whole process of cleaning and remediation, the classification treatment and landfill of pollutants, drainage irrigation, soil improvement, and plant suitability are involved. Gas Work Park officially opened in 1976. Although industrial pollution continued to contaminate the lake and soil, and environmental assessments and cleanup efforts continued in 2000, the transformation of the industrial site into an urban ecological design caused the project to become both a Seattle landmark and an American historical record [10]. On the other hand, the gasification plant remains a part of the city's history after its life has ended.

4. Conclusion

Regularly, historic preservation is recognized for seeking potentials and uses of historic buildings to preserve their value and remain for care. Rather, it is also a way of maintaining the sustainable character and identities of streets, communities, cities, and historical and cultural environments. Historic preservation is not simply a matter of recycling and sustaining old architectural works. Yet, above all, this type of architectural practice and theory requires architects to be passionate about the human environment, urban narrative, and spatial atmosphere. Secondly, it challenges the designer's keen vision and rich creativity, ingeniously combining historic buildings and sites with the contemporary urban dynamics to fit people's lifestyles for new possibilities. Last but not least, as the other kinds of architectural practices and design works, historical preservation as appropriating heritage buildings and sites as the creative background also pursues the aesthetics of space, form, and atmosphere. People are always proceeding history and depend on communities and cities, whose context is expressed through the medium - historical buildings. Design for potential in historic preservation becomes a connection from the past to the future, accumulating history to further forming a sense of culture.

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