

preserving: the late colonial and Revolutionary years in New England, the brief episode of pioneering in the forested interior, the antebellum days in the South, the period of exploration and cattle raising on the Great Plains (which passed so quickly), the mining era in the Western mountains, the years of the Spanish colonies in the Southwest, and, of course, the undefined background of the scattered and “timeless” Indian. Preservation has usually been the work of established middle- and upper-class citizens. The history enshrined in museums is chosen and interpreted by those who give the dollars.

Environments rich in historic remains often follow a particular pattern: once markedly prosperous, they then suffered a rapid economic decline and remained stagnant for long periods, though continuing to be occupied and at least partially maintained. Many now charming New England towns and farming areas were well-to-do in the early 1800s but in the later years of the century sank into the trough of the westward wave of national expansion. This stagnation must then be followed by a second period of wealth (whether belonging to the region itself or brought in by visitors) that can bear the costs of preservation.

The pattern can be seen not only in those small towns and rural regions that have decayed and then revived but also in the inner parts of large cities that have stagnated while the total urban region continued to prosper. Boston’s Back Bay is one example of many. Natural decay is destructive of unoccupied old environment, but active development by subsequent generations is a far more rapid agent of disposal. And since if anything is preserved it tends to be the most expensive or most imposing or most symbolic of some classic period, the preserved environments tend to be very limited in extent. They represent the continuum of time in a spasmodic way and give a distorted view of the past since they are composed of the buildings of prosperous classes in prosperous times—times, furthermore, that quickly passed away. Such remains only reinforce that misguided view of history which sees it as consisting of sharp peaks of achievement separated by long, empty durations.

Preservation battle lines

There are several ways of dealing with a valued piece of an old environment.² What remains can simply be saved from destruction, perhaps by moving it away from danger. It can be restored by minor repairs and refurbishings. Or it can be rebuilt in as careful a copy of its “original” state as is currently known. This may

be done with original material, judiciously pieced out and refinished, or with covert new material, or even with obviously new material. Put another way, the patina of time may be retained, imitated, or removed. When there is a frank and complete reconstruction, using new material, on a new site, the aim may be an appearance of having just been built, an aim that may be carried out even to the details of equipment and perhaps the use of costumed actors. Such a reconstruction will often shock contemporary taste (Greek temples were gaudily painted in their day), and sometimes it will be made ridiculous by subsequent scholarship. But it can be a strong evocation of the past for a general audience.

The official priority rankings of historical societies usually range from the least to the most disturbance, that is, from preservation through restoration, reconstitution, and relocation to complete reconstruction. But this simple formula cloaks many subtleties and invites controversies. What, for example, happens to later historical additions to the original structure? Since historic structures are thought of as having been built all at one time and then potentially eternal, but have actually undergone a continuous process of physical change and human occupation, and since our view of history itself changes constantly, the controversies may be heated and scholastic. Robert Scott’s Antarctic hut, unused since his fatal expedition sixty years ago, survives intact in the polar cold: papers, food, and equipment are just as they were. The effect is powerful—it corresponds to our wish to arrest the past—but we cannot easily reproduce the circumstances that created it.

Sometimes the historical object is reconstructed at regular intervals, preserving not the old materials but rather the ancient form. The 2000-year outline of the White Horse of Uffington is still visible on the downs because it is renewed by its annual “scouring.” The temple at Ise, completely rebuilt with new material on a new site every twenty years, conserves the most primitive form of any building in Japan. Such periodic reconstructions, because they do not depend on a single effort, evade some of the issues posed here.

According to another doctrine, only the external historical shell need be preserved or reconstructed. It can then shelter current, active uses, and internal physical modifications suitable to those new uses are allowable. “Outsides” are public, historic, and regulated, while “insides” are private, fluid, and free. An aversion to an unused or “museum” environment is connected with this doctrine. Even then, there are difficult decisions to be made: the interior-exterior dichotomy is a convenient distinction to make, but