

Fragmentary reminders

Where old structures cannot support present functions without impairing those functions, and unless they are of exceptional didactic or esthetic value, they can be cleared away, although their fragments may be used to enhance new buildings. We need not be so concerned about perfect conformity to past form but ought rather to seek to use remains to enhance the complexity and significance of the present scene. The contrast of old and new, the accumulated concentration of the most significant elements of the various periods gone by, even if they are only fragmentary reminders of them, will in time produce a landscape whose depth no one period can equal, although such time-deep areas may be achieved only in some parts of the city. The esthetic aim is to heighten contrast and complexity, to make visible the process of change. The achievement of the aim requires creative and skillful demolition, just as much as skillful new design.

We look for a setting that, rather than simply being a facsimile of the past, seems to open outward in time. To quote Vladimir Nabokov,¹⁰ in his description of his years in Cambridge, England:

Nothing one looked at was shut off in terms of time, everything was a natural opening into it, so that one's mind grew accustomed to work in a particularly pure and ample environment, and because, in terms of space, the narrow lane, the cloistered lawn, the dark archway hampered one physically, that yielding diaphanous texture of time was, by contrast, especially welcome to the mind, just as a sea view from a window exhilarates one hugely, even though one does not care for sailing.

Our new suburbs and new towns, on the other hand, seem all begun yesterday and completely finished then. There is no crevice through which one can venture back or forward.

We could enjoy these qualities even in the most ordinary areas, where there may be little of real distinction to be saved. Everywhere, even in regions to be swept clean for rebuilding, we can retain some environmental memories that go back at least to the first reminiscences of the living generation, say for sixty years. But since the generations overlap endlessly, and since current needs may require more or less demolition in any small region, it will be impossible to preserve a whole context. We then resort to saving symbols and fragments of a demolished

environment, embedded in the new context for another generation.

Saved elements could be of many kinds, though they should not be random or trivial. Haphazard exhibits will create a sense of the past as chaos. Where possible, it is best to save something indicative of the old ambience: its scale, its spaces or pathways, its plantings. Where this is not possible, it is desirable to seek to keep things of high symbolic meaning or things that were directly connected with the actions of remembered people: crosses, seats, steps. But what is saved must be based on what users wish to remember or can connect with themselves. The implication is that the planner will seek to learn what inhabitants remember and wish to remember. Furthermore, since new urban development is almost always somehow constrained by previous patterns, we ought to make clear this influence of the past, marking the history of an environment on itself. Such patterns can be woven into a new design with little of the difficulty ordinarily associated with area-wide preservation. They could be part of our habitual concern for the character of a site.

Personal connection

If we examine the feelings that accompany daily life, we find that historic monuments occupy a small place. Our strongest emotions concern our own lives and the lives of our family or friends because we have known them personally. The crucial reminders of the past are therefore those connected with our own childhood, or with our parents' or perhaps our grandparents' lives. Remarkable things are directly associated with memorable events in those lives: births, deaths, marriages, partings, graduations. To live in the same surroundings that one recalls from earliest memories is a satisfaction denied to most Americans today. The continuity of kin lacks a corresponding continuity of place. We are interested in a street on which our father may have lived as a boy; it helps to explain him to us and strengthens our own sense of identity. But our grandfather or great-grandfather, whom we never knew, is already in the remote past; his house is "historical."

Most historical preservation, focused as it is on the classic past, moves people only momentarily, at a point remote from their vital concerns. It is impersonal as well as ancient. Near continuity is emotionally more important than remote time, although the distant past may seem nobler, more mysterious or intriguing to us. There is a spatial simile: feeling locally connected where we customarily range is more important than our position at a national scale,