

TIME TO REFORM HISTORIC PRESERVATION.

DAVID BRUSSAT
The Providence Journal
October 19, 2012

The Providence Preservation Society's annual symposium, titled "Not Always Pretty," begins today, and addresses what is "behind the façade of historic preservation." Last year's symposium considered the Route 195 Commission in light of the experience of the Capital Center Commission. Next year it ought to consider whether preservation has lost its way.

Preservationists still labor effectively to save beautiful or historic buildings at risk of demolition. Thanks to half a century of good work, these are increasingly rare. Preservationists teach the owners of historic properties how to maintain their buildings and teach school children why their neighborhoods should be preserved. Preservationists perform a host of other useful technical and scholarly tasks.

And yet, the attention of many professional preservationists has strayed, focusing on how to preserve buildings few people care about.

For example, the society has worked to save a local example of Brutalism, a style of modern architecture that features rough concrete forms. The John E. Fogarty Memorial Social Welfare Center (1967, Castellucci, Galla & Planka), long empty, is downtown, next to The Journal.

It should have fought harder to preserve the Providence National Bank (1929, addition 1950), demolished in 2005 except for a single façade, and the Providence Police and Fire Headquarters (1940), razed in 2007. Why aren't preservationists fighting to reopen the original doors of the Providence Public Library?

I wrote in a brief preview with my Oct. 4 column that Brutalism "is best preserved with the tools of scholarship, photography and bulldozers." That is, just put the Fogarty in a book, and shelve the book in libraries for scholars interested in the architectural curiosities of the past. Spend the energy instead to make the case for replacing it with a new building that will caress the soul rather than lacerate the eye.

In fact, at 1 p.m. tomorrow a symposium lecture will address saving Brutalist buildings like the Fogarty. "Not Always Pretty" - get it?

Well, even if you do, they don't.

Preservationists argue that saving the Fogarty and other aging modernist buildings of the past serves a curatorial function - as if cities and buildings were museums rather than real places where real people live and work.

The crusade by professional preservationists to rescue modernist buildings puts preservation's accomplishments at risk by creating a pseudo-scholarly undertow against efforts to revive pre-war

planning and design that made places that people love. After all, a historic district is nothing but a place built before (often long before) World War II, using longstanding practices now illegal under most zoning.

The high cost of housing in historic districts arises from the plain fact that demand for it is high and the supply is low. And yet there is no magic in creating them. It is not rocket science. Models of how to do it are everywhere, thanks to preservationists. But preservationists at the national level have crawled into bed with modern architecture to ensure that the rules still tilt against tradition. "Save the Fogarty!" is how local societies' boards distract membership from what the members certainly would prefer.

Instead of trying to save Brutalist buildings, preservationists should be fighting to resume the practice of designing buildings and cities in the way that we think of as "old" but which always adopted stylistic and technological innovations, as modernism supposedly does. Modernism's revolt a century ago was a terrible mistake, the result of incoherent ideas. Only where bad practices are entrenched is revolution preferable to evolution. Indeed, architecture should always be evolving, not revolting.

The role of preservation is vitally important, but it would be more effective if preservationists understood that the reason we want to preserve old buildings and places is the same as why we should want to promote new buildings and places that we will love just as much and fight just as hard, someday, to preserve.

Saving the Fogarty is small beer, and works against preserving and regenerating the parts of the built environment we love. Preservationists should seek a vibrant and ennobling world of public and private places that, through beauty, make life better for all.

*David Brussat is on The Journal's editorial board (dbrussat@providencejournal.com). This column, with more illustrations, is also on his blog *Architecture Here and There* at <http://architecturehereandthere.com/>*

LONG MARCH OF THE PRESERVATIONISTS

DAVID BRUSSAT

The Providence Journal

November 29, 2012

The long march through the bureaucracy for common sense in preservation may not have reached the beginning of the end, but surely the end of the beginning - to paraphrase Winston Churchill - can be seen in an important article by Ronald Lee Fleming in *Planning*, the journal of the American Planning Association.

A planner who has written many books on place-making, Fleming begins "Preserve and Protect," in the November issue, by asking, "Context or contrast - which is more appropriate for new construction in historic districts?"

In a historic district of buildings whose classical features transform a variety of styles into a variation on a theme - intrinsic to architectural no less than musical beauty - a building that has slice-and-dice windows and pooper-scooper balconies would disrupt the symphonic rhythm of the existing streetscape.

It's not that those who have proposed such a building (above) in the Tribeca district of Manhattan think a wider definition of what fits is necessary. They know it does not fit. For it to fit is the last thing they want. So they were not surprised that it was approved unanimously by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The cries of outrage from neighbors watching their property values fall are icing on their cake.

But, in fact, the reason why the commission okayed the building - and the reason why professional preservationists favor contrast over context - is more modest and defensible.

The idea is to protect the "integrity" of historic buildings and districts by using contrast to assure that new buildings are not mistaken for old ones. This supposedly respects old buildings even more than new buildings that fit in.

But historic districts and the buildings within do not need their integrity so much as their context preserved. The purpose of architecture worthy of preservation is primarily to manifest the beauty that warrants their protection in the first place. Historic districts are valued because they are nice places to live, work and play. Sympathetic new buildings strengthen context. A city is not a museum to be curated for the satisfaction of professionals. Preservation is a means to an end greater than preservation itself.

Fleming fondly recalls a symposium in 2011 that challenged this notion that "sympathetic new buildings falsify the past."

Fleming chaired the event, sponsored by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Experts on panels pitched proposals to clarify federal regulations on putting new buildings and additions in historic districts. The relevant "standards," especially Standard No. 9, demand that the new be

"differentiated" from the old but still "compatible" with it.

Fleming notes that the regulations don't require the sort of sharp contrast that only modern architecture can achieve, adding that local preservation officials often interpret the regulations as they wish. That is certainly true in Rhode Island, where the preservation bureaucracy has supported many new buildings or additions - such as the Chace Center addition to the Rhode Island School of Design's Museum of Art (2008) - that must be ignored if one is to enjoy the lovely streetscape they have defaced. But officials in Rhode Island are generally more sensible, and more willing to abide by local taste, than officials elsewhere. After all, they agreed to the sympathetic 1990 addition to the John Carter Brown Library.

Fleming describes the proposals of Notre Dame Professor Steven Semes, who was on the ICOMOS panel, to clarify the regulations - though I would argue that they would not need to be clarified if they were not so frequently misinterpreted. Semes's book "The Future of the Past" is a must-read for preservationists.

Fleming also notes that John Sandor, of the Technical Preservation Services Branch of the National Park Service (which administers the regulations), announced the latest in the series of guidelines for applying the regulations. It is illustrated more even-handedly, curtailing the series' longstanding bias toward contrast.

Writes Fleming: "The modernist assumption of heroic stylistic change can also be seen as reactionary in a time when the damage of contrast is more clearly understood. For the visually challenged, put a date on the new work."

I love it! Plaques, which I've been pushing as the obvious answer to this "problem" for ages (see "Number 9, number 9, number 9," Commentary, April 13, 1995), are quite inexpensive.

It's good, finally, to see common sense acknowledged and even promoted by the nation's top official preservationists. Let the long march through the bureaucracy continue.