William Morris was born in 1834 in Walthamstow, England. At Exeter College of Oxford University, he befriended the artist Edward Burne-Jones and, influenced by Thomas Carlyle’s invocation of traditional craft as a critique of Victorian notions of progress, and John Ruskin’s writings on preservation and Gothic architecture, shifted his studies from religion to art and architecture. He learned restoration as an apprentice to architect George E. Street, restorer of York Minster, but then abandoned his training as an architect to focus on design and writing. He collaborated Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti on Red House in London, a residence and showcase of art and design. In 1861, Morris co-founded a design firm that fabricated decorative arts in neo-Gothic designs and later Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau styles. The firm became known for its fine stained glass, and survived mostly through its use in restorations and new Gothic Revival churches. Later, Morris became concerned about the quality of restorations and refused to put new glass in old buildings, jeopardizing the survival of his company. His intimate involvement in restoration also led him to believe that it was motivated more by capitalist profit than by any real desire to preserve historic buildings. In the 1870s he became involved in socialist politics, and, aghast at restorations carried out on medieval British churches, he founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. The society’s manifesto is considered the birth certificate of the conservation movement, even though the name given on the document is “protection.” It called for a new mode of preservation aimed at maintaining historic buildings in their as found state, and at protecting them, not against time or neglect, but against over-zealous architects, whom he accused of really only looking after their own self-importance and their client’s pockets. It was a highly polemical document because it tried to unseat architects from the hegemonic position they held in everything concerning interventions in old buildings. Instead, Morris proposed to grant oversight to a private society of concerned citizens from all walks of life, who as activists would watch over the public’s interest. Significantly, Morris did not want oversight in the hands of a government bureaucracy, in the model of the French Commission des Monuments Historiques, for he feared it would be dominated by architects. Morris believed art and architecture belonged to everyone, not just the elite, and his manifesto gave legitimacy to non-experts within preservation. Morris died in London in 1896.

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