Nineteenth century industrialization helped to lift millions of people from poverty, famine, and un-sanitary living conditions. But did it make everyone happier? This question haunted Max Dvořák. He was born in Raudnitz, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (now Roudnice, Czech Republic) in 1874, and lived through a period of massive industrialization leading up to WWI. He embraced industrialization but remained critical of its costs, and in particular of the modernization of cities, which he believed to be often ideologically driven, rather than based on real needs. He puzzled over why beautiful medieval battlements and houses were torn down to widen roads in towns without significant car traffic. Dvořák believed beauty to be a common good which added pleasure and a sense of belonging to people’s lives. So he felt it was wrongheaded to pursue urban modernization that destroyed the beauty and character of historic places. There had to be other ways of being modern; other ways to improve and modernize urban centers. Dvořák’s search for answers led him to study first in Prague and then Vienna, where he received his doctorate in Art History from the Austrian Institute for Historical Research in 1897. He became an assistant to art historian Franz Wickhoff, and in 1902 an instructor at the University of Vienna. Through Wickhoff, Dvořák came into contact with other members of the Vienna School of Art History, especially Aloïs Riegl, who was especially influential in shaping his thinking. Riegl had established that the criterion for preserving a building should be whether it is historic or not, that is, whether it contributed to the historical evolution of architecture or of the nation. Riegl insisted that preservation decisions should not be based on whether contemporary society considered a building beautiful or not, because taste judgments fluctuated with time, and one preserved for future generations whose taste was uncertain. Upon the death of Aloïs Riegl in 1905, Dvořák succeed him as President of the Austro-Hungarian Royal and Imperial Central Commission for the Study and Preservation of Monuments. In 1907, he started the inventory of Austro-Hungarian monuments, emulating Dehio’s documentation of the German Empire. He quickly became a public figure, defending his views on preservation in countless debates in the press. While upholding the core of Riegl’s teachings, Dvořák struggled with the idea that the cultural perception of beauty should be left out of preservation decisions. Preservation was also done by and for contemporary society, so it inevitably also expressed present ideas—about beauty, scientific objectivity, etc. It was not entirely realistic to think that preservationists could expunge their intellectual culture (their prejudices, if you will) from their judgments. Art historians could decide whether something was historic or not, and regulate architectural expression. But, preservation remained an aesthetic expression. His Preservation Catechism (1916) was richly illustrated with image comparisons showing buildings, towns and landscapes before and after being preserved. It was as much an intellectual as an aesthetic argument for conserving, rather than restoring, the built environment. This overlap between the intellectual and the aesthetic realms is essential to Dvořák’s thinking. He developed a method for studying historical artworks in relation to the history of ideas that his students called “art history as intellectual history.” He established that, within one historical period, the same idea could be expressed artistically in many different ways. This led him to think that the idea of modernity could be expressed in the built environment through new construction but also through preservation. While often misinterpreted as an anti-modernist, Dvořák employed preservation to advance what he thought was a better expression of modernity. He died in Hrušovany nad Jevišovkou, Czechoslovakia, in 1921.

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