Preservation vs. Historicism: Postmodernism and the Theme Park
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It is a romantic proposition to insist that the historic building, once having been saved from the bulldozer, must be preserved in exactly the state in which it was received. It is quite true that any old building, like old artifacts generally, shows signs of all the blows of outrageous fortune to which it has been subjected. And this patina of use may be helpful in reconstructing the actual life-history of the artifact. But they have not necessarily enhanced its artistic integrity. Quite the contrary is too often the case, so that the intentions of the original artist and the client who commissioned the artifact are quite obscured by subsequent interventions in the corpus. This is clearer in a painting than in a building, since our relationship to the one is much simpler and more linear than to the second. In fact, one might say that anything that has happened to a painting since it was first made has altered its artistic integrity. Almost certainly, it will also have been diminished by environmental agents: the chemical action of sunlight, moisture, dust, candle smoke, polluted air; the soaps of cleaners and the waxes of restorers-not to mention well intentioned in-painting by subsequent artists to "improve" it. Thus the modern conservator of painting takes as his task the return of the historic painting as nearly as possible to its original condition. Using the best of modern science and technology, the art conservator undertakes that 1) nothing of the original fabric is to be removed; 2) nothing new is to be added which cannot be justified by rigorous archival and laboratory research which 3) cannot be subsequently removed without damage to the original fabric.

In old paintings, we might invariably wish to return the conserved canvas to its pristine state. Our prime motivation would be to enjoy it in such a condition. But this is seldom the case in old architecture. More often, our motive is to celebrate or memorialize an event or an individual such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, or the Battlefield at Gettysburg. In this case, the
objective is by common agreement to return the building or site to its exact condition on that exact historic date. Mount Vernon and Monticello happen also to have been extremely handsome houses, elegantly furnished with eighteenth-century antiques, but the reason they have been initially singled out is historic, not esthetic. And the dates to which they have been returned are not those of their own completion but of the deaths of their owners.

The recent history of the preservation movement has been one of steady increase in professionalism, including closer contacts with the adjacent fields of archaeology, art history, and art conservation. It has also been marked by the appearance of university programs in historic preservation (beginning with Columbia's in 1964); the forming of professional societies such as the Association for Preservation Technology and the National Center for Preservation Education; and publications such as the National Trust's *Preservation APT Bulletin* and *Technology and Preservation*. The net effect of these developments has been to greatly increase the expertise and precision of the preservation and physical conservation of historic buildings, as well as to suggest new and more sophisticated methods of interpreting them to the public. In more general terms, the effect has been to establish a new climate of American public opinion in which the prestige of the past has attained unprecedented heights. And it is precisely this new climate which has, in turn, made possible the appearance of two new phenomena which the preservationists could never have anticipated: the postmodern architectural movement and the "Theme Park."

In their never-ending struggle to save historic structures from the savage spread of modern urbanism across long-settled landscapes, the preservationist turned to another type of project—the use of the outdoor museum village as a curatorial methodology. Sometimes these museum villages are simply collections of disparate artifacts, reflecting an individual collector's whims, as Mr. and Mrs. J. Watson Webb's collection of buildings at Shelburne, near Burlington, Vermont, or Henry Ford's Greenfield Village outside Detroit. But sometimes these museum collections are more coherent collections with a common provenance and point of origin. These have been organized into landscapes of great verisimilitude: early nineteenth-century villages in the case of Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts and Old Bethpage Village on Long Island; early nineteenth-century
agriculture in the case of Old World Wisconsin. Many of these outdoor museums now have sophisticated educational programs in which old artifacts are used to explicate old processes water-powered sawmills/dimensioned lumbers, churns/butter, blacksmithing/hardware). Their verisimilitude is often astonishing-as is their fascination for modern Americans, who seldom have any idea of how anything is made.

The preservation movement, always amateur and populist in posture, was to grow immensely in size and influence in the years after World War II. Though in the process it attracted increasing support from professionals-architects, landscapists, planners, art and architectural historians-its membership has remained overwhelmingly a party of lay persons. (And, it must be added, overwhelmingly feminine for reasons which so far no one has undertaken to explain.) This lay membership has been cool if not actually hostile to its new allies from the professions, a distrust which undoubtedly sprang from the fact that the preservationists have all too often seen architects, engineers, and planners as the principal spokesmen for the very forces of self-styled "progress" which threatened the historic structures in their communities which they were fighting to preserve. This tension has tended to abate somewhat in recent years, largely because of change in the perception of the design professionals themselves. In any case, it is the preservationists who must be credited with a radical change in the climate of American opinion towards historic buildings and, indeed, towards the past itself. If there is one point about which preservationists have always been united it is on the absolute uniqueness of the original artifacts. If they sometimes have mistaken the identity or provenance of the artifact they venerated, it was always due to faulty scholarship or flawed research, never to malice or mendacity. The local battles of the preservationist have always been to save the actual: the bed in which Lincoln died, the tree beneath which Washington saw the battle of Stony Point, the pond beside which Thoreau wrote his essays. They have seldom accepted a facsimile as an acceptable surrogate for the real thing. Sometimes the only way to save the historic building has been to move it to another less perilous site. Or to move selected rooms of the historic house being threatened with demolition to the controlled climate of a museum. But there are few instances indeed where preservationists have erected three-dimensional facsimiles on the site of vanished originals-if for no other reason than that such replicas were beyond their means. Thus the Williamsburg reconstruction of the
long-vanished Capitol and Governor's Place or the lavish reconstruction of Boscobel by Lila Acheson Wallace, twenty-five miles up the Hudson River from its site must be seen as the exception, not the rule, to preservation practice.

One broad result of all preservationist and restoration activities has been to alter radically the climate of public opinion whereby the sheer prestige of the historic past has been raised to unparalleled heights. And this new climate has made possible the florescence of new phenomena in fields adjacent to the preservationists proper: e.g., the theme park and postmodernist architecture. What these two movements had in common was the re-introduction of the historicizing architectural facsimile into everyday architectural practice, something which functionalist modernism had brought into discredit in the half century since the early days of Mies, Le Corbusier, and the Bauhaus. Nominally, the motivation for the return was different. That of the Theme Park was avowedly playful and make-believe; the historicity of Disneyland and Busch Gardens was transparently frivolous and paper-thin. The pretensions of the Post Modern architects, on the other hand, were much more serious and included an elaborate philosophical apparatus. Their projects were correspondingly portentous, as exemplified by Philip Johnson's black Gothic office complex for Pittsburgh Glass or Michael Graves's City Hall for Portland, Oregon.

The fundamental kinship of theme park and postmodern monument is clear at EuroDisney, the vast new playground that opened in the spring of 1992, some 25 miles east of Paris. For in this giant park of the make-believe, we find a thin pastiche of historically derivative facadism covering all the structures, "serious" and playful alike. And though the serious projects of famous postmodernist architects may be more literate archaeologically than those from the play pens of the anonymous Disney staff designers, all of them display the esthetic and ethical bankruptcy of the duplicate, the replica, the facsimile, the fake.

Whatever one may think of the ethical or esthetic quality of EuroDisney, it is preposterous to describe the theme park as being the direct progeny of the preservationist movement. As we have seen, they [proponents of the theme park] represent attitudes towards the past antithetical to those held by preservationists. There may indeed be
contradictions inherent in the simultaneous restoration along Williamsburg's Duke of Gloucester Street of houses which are a century or more apart in age. But such contradictions are inherent in the American experience, not the invention of curators. If our new-found interest in preserving or displaying them is somehow "unnatural" or "artificial," then so is the museum; so, too for that matter, is culture itself. For nothing is less natural or more artificial than a concert or a doctoral dissertation or a formula in nuclear physics. The essential cultural dimension which distinguishes the preserved street in Charleston or Savannah from a street in Disneyland is not visual but cognitive: we know that one is the original, the other the fake. To abandon the ability to discriminate between the two is to abandon culture itself. If preservationists can quite properly disclaim any responsibility for the creation of either the theme park or postmodern architectural eclecticism, they can (and should) claim credit for the rejuvenation of the historic cores of many American cities. For it is here that the preservation ethos has succeeded while that of the urban planner has failed. The preservationist has been site and time specific in his understanding of the cityscape as being a habitat, marked with the rich pattern-of use both visible and invisible. The planner has seen a field of action in largely abstract terms, as an open and featureless plain merely awaiting his touch. The urban consequences of these two attitudes can be seen everywhere. For example, in Boston, where the planner's urban renewal swept way the old town and replaced it with acres of shadeless asphalt in front of a new City Hall. In Savannah, on the other hand, where the planners argued that, to save the City-to solve the traffic problem-it would be necessary to extend the downtown streets through all eighteen of the little tree-shaded squares for which the town is famous. In Boston, the preservationists mobilized their forces time to save the old city behind the City Hall, whereas in Savannah, they organized in time to save the entire historic core.

In recent decades, we have seen the contest played out between the planners and preservationists in many cities: Portland, Lowell, Providence, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans. Where a battle was lost to preservation, the climate of opinion in which the next would take place has been altered. Even in those areas where urban renewal came close to totally eviscerating the city center (Albany, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Denver), we have more recently seen the
healing powers of the preservation ethos beginning to repair the damaged urban fabric. And this process has turned out to be not merely one in which a few old buildings were saved, but rather of the regeneration of entire historic districts—viz., Boston around Quincy Market, Philadelphia for many blocks east and west of the restored City Hall. If any analogue were possible, it would be to the technique of skin grafts in the treatment of severe burn cases: healthy new tissue spreads out from the site of the graft. Precisely why this process works on the damaged tissue of American cities remains to be determined. But it is undoubtedly related to our need for the familiar cityscape in a world of violent and unpredictable change.