One of the most hackneyed descriptions of preservation’s purpose is encapsulated in the phrase “saving the past for the future.” Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) delivered one of the most devastating critical blows to this cliché. Preservation, he argued, should serve the present. It can and should only be held accountable to the needs of contemporary society, not the dead or the unborn. To pretend otherwise was to skirt professional responsibility. The dead and the unborn cannot speak against the work that preservationists claim to be doing for them. Preservationists claim to serve an unborn constituency whose needs they also articulate, which is a covert way to avoid public scrutiny. Who knows what future generations will need or want to preserve? To act as if we can decide for them is to try imposing our view of the world upon them, which Mumford depicted as a misguided attempt to perpetuate ourselves. Mumford’s “The Death of the Monument” did not proclaim the destruction of monuments, rather it called for a new way of choosing what monuments to preserve and how to relate to them, not as objects to be revered but to be used for real social needs, such as education. What makes a building into a monument, he argued, is our collective decision to view it as such. We should feel free to discard buildings that don’t seem relevant to us, even if past generations chose to preserve them. That was their choice, not ours. His emphasis on the need for preservationists to make curatorial choices, hopefully the right choices for their generation, was also a call for a more ethically and socially minded professional ethos. However, it is important to note that Mumford saw a very limited social role for preservation, which had to do mostly with establishing and aestheticizing the boundary between useful (living) and obsolete (dead) buildings. He saw preservation as serving to “detach” buildings from historical associations so that they could be contemplated and re-appropriated as something new by contemporary viewers. He portrayed preservation as a paradoxical practice which could only turn buildings into dead monuments, but in so doing helped save the life of the remainder. It is telling that he used the analogy of the museum, which originated in the practice of moving artworks (e.g. church paintings) from their original historical setting, thereby decontextualizing them. Mumford was born in New York City, studied at the City College of New York and took courses at other New York institutions, but did not receive a formal degree. After serving as a radio operator in the Navy in World War I, he became an editor of the literary magazine The Dial, and soon embarked on a prolific career as a freelance writer about literature, architecture, urbanism, and technology, including more than three decades as architecture critic of the New Yorker. Among his many books are The Golden Day (1926), The City in History (1961), The Highway and the City (1963) and The Myth of the Machine (2 vols., 1967-70). Mumford died in 1990 in Amenia, New York, where he had lived since 1936.

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