

# The Architect's Point of View

Wyck is a museum. The buildings are museum buildings and are also historic buildings. The focus of this article is the philosophical basis for the conservation and restoration of historic museum buildings. As objects that are presented and interpreted to the public, there is difference between historic museum buildings and other historic buildings. The historic museum building has been removed from the standard history and aging process and is theoretically set aside as an example of something. Other historic buildings, while none the less cultural artifacts, are still acquiring an ongoing history of use. While they must be respected for what they are, the compatible alteration necessary for them to continue to be useful is ultimately what causes them to be preserved. For them, what is necessary is acceptance that in the future unsympathetic changes and unnecessary butchery will be viewed as just that. An architect's record lives on and one is remembered by one's works. Above all, Historic museum buildings require an honest presentation and a preservation of the most historic fabric that can be achieved.

My personal recommendations to other architects are as follows:

- The Architect's Responsibility
- The Building as "Museum Object"
- Assembling the Team
- Importance of Documenting the Process

## The Architect's Responsibility

An architect honored by a commission to work on an historic building, must recognize that an historic building is a cultural artifact and as such **the architect's responsibility to that artifact and to society supercede their primary responsibility to their client.** Another way to look at it is that the artifact is the client and the owner is a trustee.

That **the health and welfare of society comes before the wishes and dictates of the owner has been long established.** This concept has generally been supported relative to code and other statutory requirements even with new construction to protect society from irresponsible and dangerous constructions.

While there is no specific statute or standard contract language requiring an architect to accept this responsibility for historic structures; courts have generally accepted that historic structures are the visual moorings for a stable society. This along with the recognition of historic structures and other museum objects as the defining elements of our culture, place the preservation of them within the health and welfare of society established within the U.S. Constitution [this is the legal basis for historic district regulations etc.]

The protection of the health and welfare of society is also the basis for the licensing of architects and as such, architects **are** legally required to protect it.

Thus an architect is at least morally obliged to educate a client who requests an action that would significantly and irreparably damage a cultural artifact, and if the client cannot be dissuaded, resign from the project. This is similar to the legally required actions of an architect toward a client's request for a design that is in violation of the existing building codes.

While this is currently an ethical question rather than a legal question for the architect, the time is not far off that an architect may be sued by a client for not taking adequate measures to insure the preservation of the historic integrity of a building entrusted to him. The client has a right to claim that they were looking to the architect for expert advice in that area. It is presupposed that an architect will not accept a commission that he is not qualified to undertake. Thus if an architect accepts a commission to work on an historic building, he/she must be presumed to be an expert in that area of practice. This is not a presumption to take lightly and I would beg architects who have little or no experience with historic buildings to turn down offers of commissions that require that expertise. There is a significant difference in the construction practices of the past and most modern practices; quite a number of them are sufficiently incompatible to cause damage when interspersed.

## **The Building as "Museum Object"**

### Historic Structures are Museum Objects

Historic Buildings and other structures placed in the stewardship of a museum **ARE**, by definition, museum objects. The current approach of many historic museum professionals is a policy of separate but equal status: Historic Museum Buildings vs. All Other Museum Collections. Separate but equal has not worked within society and it will remain an unnecessary segregation which requires a separate set of standards for buildings as if they are to be treated differently from other museum objects. It will only prolong the assimilation of buildings into the museum collections management mainstream.

We as architects [conservators, curators, museum trustees, etc.]; we as a society have grown up too closely to buildings. This familiarity breeds a form of contempt or at least a lack of respect for buildings. We are all so used to treating buildings as consumable vessels to be altered at will for the current set of perceived requirements that we are almost incapable of stepping back and philosophically changing our entire approach to this category of museum object. It will likely take several generations to affect this societal conditioning. We have a mind-set to overcome and it will take conscious reprogramming. We shall start with you today.

Please repeat ten times:

Historic Buildings are Museum Objects  
Historic Buildings are Museum Objects  
Historic Buildings are Museum Objects  
Historic Buildings.....

**Historic Buildings held by museums are museum artifacts. Treat them that way.**

This philosophy is neither new, nor radical. What is new and radical is that we in the museum community should actually attempt to act upon it. There have recently been a rash of lectures and symposia on Buildings vs. Objects. This is a false dichotomy. However, for the sake of argument, let us consider ~ **Architecture is a fine art along with painting, sculpture, and music, and as such, takes precedence over the rest of the decorative arts clutter in museum collections.** This view is as patently unacceptable as the reverse. Reason dictates that Buildings are Objects; even sites are objects within the larger context of civilization. There is no gulf, no divide, just one body of artistic works; artifacts which define our civilization.

Those artifacts in formal collections [public and private] receive a different standard of care than those in the general public domain. The treatment of museum artifacts tends to be the standard that trickles down to less and less formal collections and eventually to the uncollected artifacts in common usage. Thus, it is the philosophy of building conservation in the museum context that is to be discussed.

Unfortunately, there are not unlimited resources to tend to the preservation of our cultural artifacts. Conservation must adapt, and is evolving from a strictly Damage Control mode to a Risk Management mode to cope with reality. Collections management considers various functions as they relate to the artifacts within a collection. What items should be collected? How should artifacts be maintained? Under what conditions or circumstances should artifacts be restored, or have remedial work undertaken? How should artifacts be exhibited or stored? Risk management is an aspect of each of these considerations. Risk management takes into account the relative value of the artifact as well as, the likelihood and magnitude of potential damage over time which must be viewed a reduction of value. In other words, what is the rate of value loss under various conditions. For instance: value loss of an artifact from theft is 100% and instantaneous, from fire is also likely to be 100% and not much slower, while value loss for many artifacts from inappropriate humidity [short of growing fungus or condensation] is probably 10% in 25 years. This assists in assigning resources to achieve the greatest reduction in value loss over time.

Where an artifact falls within the importance of a collection is based on a number of value judgments, hopefully based on knowledge. To value every artifact as equal is absurd. The real world has scarce resources, and just as an emergency room must implement triage in cases of overcrowding of people who were philosophically created equal, so must collections management deem some objects more valuable and potentially more threatened. Unfortunately there is no uniform scale and each museum must value its own collection.

**A building should be valued and treated according to the same conceptual standards applied to**

**the treatment of all other artifacts within a museum. No better, and no worse.**

Within the conservation field, conservators for many collection types are approaching consensus about treatment standards within their specialty. But, others such as musical instruments have two as yet unresolved camps [those that would recondition the instruments to be played as they were intended and those who would preserve them in unplayable condition because playing not only wears out parts but often requires replacement of original fabric and construction details which may be unique.] Does this sound like a dialogue that should also be taking place in building conservation? Absolutely! However, architectural conservators and preservationists are still fighting more fundamental battles with a culture that is trained to disregard, devalue, and destroy these artifacts, much less know how to properly manage the preservation of these artifacts.

We have become accustomed to using buildings - abusing and consuming them. Typically they are treated as a back drop for other exhibits, like a packing crate, or a picture frame. As the packing crate, we mold and adapt the building to house the exhibits and protect them from external damage - considering the building and its various parts as expendable or consumable, possibly as a sacrificial layer of protection. As the picture frame, we have at least begun to recognize that the intrinsic value of both the painting and the frame are greater when the two are historically related. The whole is more than the sum of the parts, but the building is usually presumed to be sacrificial and therefore secondary to the primary contents. This bigotry must end, but it will require generations of re-learning. It is one thing to agree intellectually; it is another to practice it. It is only when it becomes accepted culture - wide and no longer requires conscious action to treat buildings as artifacts in the same way that paintings, chairs, rare manuscripts, or vases are treated, that equality will be achieved.

This non-status is so ingrained that even within the architectural conservation community, wholesale replacement of damaged or defaced elements that have no artistic value tends to be the norm rather than even considering conservation of the original fabric. For example, even on the most sympathetic projects, only rarely are damaged/deteriorated plain stucco or flat plaster considered for conservation rather than replacement. Never to my knowledge, has non-decorative exterior paint been conserved rather than scraped and repainted. How much of a building's original [historic] fabric is it justifiable to destroy in order to install a temporary [30 year] mechanical system? How many new holes to wire up the display lighting for a three week show? How much new paint to make it look fresh for the directors' next meeting?

This may now sound extreme, but there was a time, not long ago, when the background of paintings were routinely re-painted and other areas over-painted, not just inpainting the actual loss. How long ago did we begin preserving original finishes on furniture rather than refinishing? Buildings are larger, more complex, and generally more exposed to the elements than most artifacts. For the most part, the technology and methodology of application have not yet been established for buildings, but it must start with attempts and some failures before it becomes common practice. If material that is practiced upon would normally be replaced in the process of repair, there has been no cultural loss, if a reasoned attempt at conservation fails. On the contrary a lot will be learned. The owner/client must understand however that a non-standard treatment is being proposed to attempt to preserve more of the original fabric and that failure within that

portion of the work is more likely than with typical replacement. Thus, it will take the education of the clients/patrons as well as the conservators.

**Where to start?** Since this is a mind-set that is to be reprogrammed, start with the basics.

## Basic Collections Management

### Registration

**All historic buildings controlled by museums should be accessioned.** If and when elements are removed due to wear or damage, or to provide greater protection, the removed elements should be catalogued, accessioned, and provided proper storage.

### Philosophy, Mission Statement, and Collection Policy

**One artifact should not be compromised or damaged to facilitate the exhibition or storage of another.**

Within the category of historic buildings controlled by museums there are two groups.

1. Historic Buildings which house collections unrelated to the building.
2. Historic Buildings which house related collections.

Museums with this first group of buildings must make a difficult decision. Which is more important to the mission of the museum: the building or the collections within? If the collections within the building are more important to the museum and the building will be compromised if the museum carries out its mission and responsibilities to the housed collections, the museum should de-accession the building to a responsible party which will appropriately preserve the artifact. The museum would then undertake the construction of an appropriate building to house their collection. To do otherwise would be the functional equivalent of a museum remodeling a chest-on-chest into a glass fronted case to exhibit a collection of fine porcelain figurines. This just would not be done ~ even to a very plain chest.

If the building is the significant artifact to the museum, it should be obvious that the housed collections should be managed in a manner which does not compromise the building. No ifs, no equivocations. Artifacts which would be damaged by exhibition in the ambient environment of the building as maintained for the building should be moved within the building [if necessary to another building] to an area with an appropriate environment or housed in a separate environment [display case] within the building. If the location is critical for interpretation, a reproduction should be exhibited in that location and the original put on display elsewhere. The public should be informed of the policy and the public is generally accepting if the removed items are still available for viewing in another location.

In most house museums, the building is the reason for the museum and the furnishings have been gathered to assist with interpretation. A few artifacts may be site specific, but not many. The building is site specific and cannot be replaced. Thus one original floor board or square inch of plaster is more irreplaceable than the finest artifact housed within.

If the building and the housed collections are equally site specific and significant to the museum, it should still be obvious that the housed collections should be managed in a manner which does not compromise or damage the building and vice versa. However, since the building is not as mobile as the housed collections, it is the collection that should be relocated when necessary to avoid either artifact being compromised for the other.

## Collections Care

Expert, trained experienced conservators are available for all aspects of conservation. Museums have learned the hard way not to turn their Dutch Masters over to a local portrait painter for repair or conservation. Likewise their furniture is not generally conserved by a modern cabinetmaker.

Historic museum buildings should likewise be conserved by conservators expert in their specialty. Furthermore the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works [AIC] recognizes that no one can be expert in all aspects of conservation. Conservators should ask for assistance from other conservators who are more expert than themselves in various aspects of conservation when necessary. Just as medical doctors refer their patients to specialists.

Buildings are large complex artifacts, made of a combination of many elements.

- **Wood** ~ framing members to carved details which are sometimes gessoed and gilded...
- **Masonry** ~ stone, brick, adobe, concrete, marble, limestone, field stone, ashlar, carved ...
- **Metals** ~ iron, copper, lead...
- **Glass** ~ window and decorative...
- **Paper** ~ wall papers, papier-mache...
- **Paint and Finishes** ~ wall paint, decorative paint, varnishes etc.
- **Mechanical items** ~ Dumb-waiters, door bells, call bells, plumbing, electrical, heating, venting...
- **Landscapes** ~ historic archaeology, garden archaeology, historic landscape gardeners...

This wide spectrum could require: Architectural Conservators, Objects Conservators, Wooden Object and Furniture Conservators, Paper Conservators, Painting Conservators, Archaeological Conservators, etc. not to mention Historical Architects, Scientists, and Engineers.

Many treatments for one material may have adverse affects on another material within the building system. A multi-disciplinary approach is often needed to stay out of trouble. The same is true about the selection of appropriate environmental conditions. What is appropriate for metals is not necessarily good for wood, etc. whether one is considering varied collections or parts of a building. What is best for the collections is often not what is acceptable or comfortable for the people in proximity to the collection. Often the visitor is made the scapegoat, but is the environment truly being selected for the comfort of the visitor? Most often it is the comfort of the staff that is chosen over the suffering of collections and visitors alike.

## Collection Storage

As with any collection **not all of a collection is likely to be on display**. As time goes on, different aspects of a collection may be of more current interest. Special exhibits will be developed.

Those portions of an historic building which are not currently open to the public/on exhibition are not any more available for trashing, remodeling, gutting, etc. than the unexhibited artifacts of any other collection. Basements, kitchens, pantries, attics, slave quarters, etc. which were often uninterpreted in previous decades are now being carefully researched and elements that were removed, often in recent years, are being painstakingly reproduced. What have **we** removed that the next generation will attempt to restore? It is much easier to intellectualize and write a piece such as this than it is to continuously remember to treat a building as a museum artifact.

## Exhibition

Exhibition often means restoration. It should always mean research. Exhibition can often be damaging to artifacts. Over illumination can bleach and destroy some objects like pastels or wallpaper. Handling of objects wears them out. Most museum artifacts are not allowed to be handled without gloves. How do we have the public handle our buildings, especially the floors of these historic artifacts?

## Assembling the Team

Some large museums have a great deal of in-house talent, but usually the architect is faced with the task of assembling the team of experts to guide the project, and if anything is learned by the museum in the course of the project, it will be an ongoing process. Mother nature does not stop and neither does maintenance and conservation.

Assume that you as an architect have been given the responsibility for storing the Magna Carta in an Eighteenth Century High Chest with black and gilt Japanning ~ outside in the weather that is.

**Work on historic buildings is only different in scale ~ it is generally larger and more complex.**

The New Orleans Charter was initially a joint construct of AIC [American Institute of Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works - the conservator's AIA] and APT [Association for Preservation Technology]. It has now been indorsed by the Historic Resources Committee of the AIA and AAM [The American Association of Museums]. This document was initially drafted to deal with the conflicts that develop when trying to accommodate the environmental needs of diverse museum collections, especially those that include buildings. The final document goes beyond that to deal with any actions that physically impact museum collections. The import of the document is to place experts within the cultural artifact community on notice that there is a great deal of interconnectedness within this system and that it requires a multidisciplinary approach to attempt to avoid negative results when posing a treatment. To use a medical analogy: the medicine that is used to treat the finger may have an adverse affect on the heart. In architectural terms, the relative humidity needs of a panel painting may cause condensation in the building walls, or the vapors escaping from the glue in many plywoods can cause significant damage to many museum objects; or the vapors from the glue and plexiglass used to assemble a case might cause a 1920's plastic radio to melt if placed within. Architects, especially historical architects may well find themselves on such a team, and if they find themselves alone, they should not presume themselves to be expert in all things and create a multidisciplinary team to guide the work.

This is not entirely new to architects. They often find themselves in the role of Team Leader. This is a role with which most architects are comfortable. They have for years relied on engineering specialists/consultants, for structural engineering, mechanical engineering, plumbing, soils engineering, and occasionally lighting and security. **They are not however accustomed to having conservators or scientists on the team, and the concept of how to integrate them into the construction process has not been well established.**

No one person can be expected to be sufficiently expert in enough of the complex aspects of Museology to be the sole consultant. Historic Buildings, especially museums, require Historians and Conservators and often Exhibit designers and Archaeologists. **Seldom is a significant building project satisfied with just one of each.** Archaeologists, Historians and Conservators like engineers come in various flavors. Most architects are sufficiently astute not to let a structural engineer handle the electrical or HVAC. Likewise, there are Social Historians, Architectural Historians, Interior Historians, Wallpaper Historians, etc. Conservators as well, come with varying skills, some are expert in general areas, and some in very narrow fields.

**Assembling the appropriate team is a science unto itself.** Developing a network and searching out those who are respected as being at the top of their field while still being able to work as a team in the real world is a challenge for the team leader and absolutely essential to the execution of the work.

**If an Architect is to manage a large team of sometimes prima donnas he must not underprice his own services and he must adequately budget for an adequate amount of theirs.**

With resources always restricted and the desire to put as much of the budget into treatment as possible, it is essential to create a lean but extremely capable team. However, if one is to err it should be on the side of too much capability. If they are truly real-world good they will more than make up for their expense.

After the team is assembled how are they to be used?

If one does not have the expertise to ask the questions, design the tests, write the specifications, and design the missing elements, one probably is not equipped to handle the site inspection of that aspect of the work as even more questions will arise as the work progresses. Tests and specifications are undertaken for the typical areas based on a sampling (scientific or random), what is to be done with all of the spaces in between the samples? The Conservators and the majority of the other consultants should be retained for the entire project and used in many ways like engineering consultants. Whatever a consultant is responsible for, they should oversee on a frequent enough basis to catch everything that tries to fall through the cracks. In historic buildings, the cracks are often wider than the spaces between. Not infrequently, the conservators must train the crews that will undertake the work.

The architect must also recognize the special place of the conservator. Like doctors and engineers, they have ethical considerations and must insure that they have the informed permission of the owner to undertake treatments of the cultural artifact. The AIC **Code of Ethics** requires that a Conservator must retain the right of direct communication with the owner of an object who must approve of treatment proposals. This is not to say that the conservator can go behind the architect's back but that **the architect cannot ethically interfere with a conservator who feels that their concerns for an object are not being given sufficient weight in the process of coming to a consensus of action.** Allowing this hearing is actually very beneficial from a liability standpoint. The pros and cons are discussed with the client and the client must accept the ultimate responsibility for the final decision. **It is the architect's responsibility to insure that in such cases all parties with significant information and input are heard.**

## Importance of Documenting the Process

There are many reasons to document the process, but it is the aspect of the work that is most often overlooked or given lip service. It is very important that this too must change. It is not just the as-builts of preservation projects, it is also the how we got there and why.

To quote from the New Orleans Charter: [This is the why, and the what, and to a certain extent, the how.]

Recognizing that those involved in preservation are part of a continuum, and are neither the first nor the last to affect the preservation of historic structures and artifacts...

8. Appropriate documentation of all stages of a project is essential, and should be readily accessible and preserved for the future.

The following bullets are some things to remember when undertaking documentation. A full discussion of documentation of historic building projects would be a volume unto itself.

- Virtually no decision is entirely right or wrong. No decision is made in a vacuum without outside influences.
- Negative results and rejected options are often as important to be documented as the final action.
- Hindsight is not 20/20. It is easy to judge an action as inappropriate when the facts are not known. It is also easy to not know what exactly was done, and how negative aspects were mitigated and positive aspects enhanced.

This documentation can save your neck if a new regime takes over a museum and starts looking for justification to bring in their own new team. It is too easy to ignore the reasons and rational justifications for decisions and just focus on the compromises. It may not keep you employed but can prevent a law suit that is a no win proposition.

- All that you wished might be in the files before you began the project, would be a good starting point for what to leave behind.

## Conclusion

Why should we treat historic buildings differently from a high chest ~ for some buildings let's make that a hairy paw foot, block front, japanned and gilded high chest? Because we do!

An historic building is in many ways like a rare manuscript volume. A connoisseur can enjoy it on a number of different levels. It can be appreciated for its artisanry~ the quality of its bindings, the graphic organization of its pages, its illustrations and illuminations, but also for the words, the text, the beauty of the phraseology and the knowledge contained therein. Unfortunately very few are literate, much less, fluent in *old building*. Because of this, few people including museum personnel really understand the true value of historic fabric in buildings. It is only this historic fabric that contains the historic text. The new work is like a graphic designers mock-up ~ Rhe lsdk sldkfjse, lsdfl elrhjas!~ with little to tell us about the history of the building. One is constantly asked, "Why save so much? Wouldn't a few representative examples be sufficient?" What pages do you want from the book? A few plates? Why not splice in a few pages from this other book? They are the same size and paper, and the margins match. Or, "Can't you just document it?" Documentation can never be enough. It is like having a very interesting manuscript from which you are taking notes. The notes are about all of the aspects that interest you; but when you finish, the manuscript is destroyed. Even a full typescript is not an adequate substitute for an original document.

Furthermore, just because there is a need for offices, mechanical rooms, and chases do not let these temporary intrusions excuse the destruction of secondary spaces within the building. Some people like to see the sides and bottoms of drawers also. If the need is sufficient and the elements cannot

be built around, or built within, document it, dismantle it, and accession the pieces. If it requires more than a small hole to be drilled into it; take out the whole piece. Install a reproduction and then cut the reproduction to pieces as necessary to make the fit and detail needed. Also, if a building is analyzed and all of the alterations are recorded, the newest round of intrusions can be designed to avoid the undisturbed areas, reuse holes, disrupt relatively recent work and less significant alterations rather than continuing to waste and destroy the remaining historic fabric. Do not forget also, that mechanical systems can be historic in and of themselves.

Finally, document all changes, treatments, and decisions. In the future, that documentation will be considered insufficient by standards of the day; but it will be much appreciated none the less.

Buildings rightly deserve to be treated on the same conceptual level as other collected artifacts. The philosophy of building conservation should not be that different from the philosophy of piano conservation. Many pianos have been updated to the point that little will be lost and much gained, if the mechanism is slipped out and carefully stored and a new mechanism is created and new strings are strung and the glorious instrument is allowed to sing. Some instruments however are so intact and unaltered that they should be kept as unusable hulks ~ archives to be studied for the information that they alone can provide of methods and materials which are no longer used. They could be copied but the only proof that the copies are correct lies in the unaltered, unrepaired original. Only they can answer questions yet unasked.