

August 12, 2001

## Ideas & Trends: Modern Preservation; It's Still All About Form and Function

By ANTHONY VIDLER

THE word "preservation" evokes images of cathedrals and chateaus, colonial homes and Civil War sites, historic monuments that have a fixed place in the local or national heritage. But as historical research and shifting public tastes identify more and more recent buildings as worthy of conservation, the public is being asked to weigh the intrinsic cultural value of somewhat more ephemeral structures, built for commercial or public use over the last century and now threatened by pressures on real estate and changing business practices.

The current debate about proposed alterations to Eero Saarinen's dramatic icon of 1960's aesthetics, the Trans World Airlines Flight Center at Kennedy International Airport, with a public review set for Tuesday, points to an increasing problem in our culture of obsolescence: what to do with buildings that have outlived their original purposes.

Thus neighborhoods like the meat-packing district on the West Side of Manhattan, office buildings like Gordon Bunshaft's elegant Lever House on Park Avenue and not-so-old structures like Edward Durrell Stone's museum for Huntington Hartford at the southwest corner of Central Park, join the T.W.A. terminal as environments radically different in form but with the same interest in survival. All are at the center of battles over preservation, restoration or adaptive re-use now common in urban politics.

As increasing numbers of relatively recent buildings are seen to have historic and aesthetic value, these battles will only intensify. The organization Docomomo, established in 1990 for the worldwide "Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement," has brought to public attention structures from Brazil to Sweden that, 10 years ago, were not thought worthy of preservation yet represent the heritage of modernist design.

Preservation is not a new issue. It has been a battle cry in expanding metropolitan areas since the early 19th century, when lovers of Gothic architecture were angered by the perceived "vandalism" of the French Revolution.

But the recent cases refocus the issue in two new ways. First, these are buildings designed in an era when "modern" architecture was seen as the ultimate answer to the

problems of technological society -- when architecture proclaimed itself free of the burden of history. The aim was not to design monuments, but "machines" for living and working, mass-produced for mass society. The shock is realizing even modernity has a history with its own monuments. Second, the special nature of functionalist designs -- "form follows function," as modernists kept repeating -- often created buildings that seem resistant to change.

The problem is compounded when opinion is divided over a building's merits. The lattice-facaded museum by Stone is a good example of a work derided from the outset, but that many historians now feel warrants preservation. Or consider if Walter Gropius's Pan Am Building, now the MetLife Building, atop Grand Central were at risk. How to evaluate a building castigated at its inception for blocking the vista of Park Avenue, but that remains a significant work of an important architect? Like the T.W.A. terminal, it represents a historic moment in the aspirations for flight as an aid to global communication. What criteria -- aesthetic, historical, functional -- are to be used for so recent a monument?

What Victor Hugo called "The War of the Demolishers" in 1832, is still without clear issue. Indeed, it has become evident that there are no real winners in these preservation debates. Wholesale preservation and restoration of buildings and districts has tended to turn them into species of theme parks, where the activity of looking has replaced the activity of original use. "Adaptive reuse" often destroys a building's original character. Comprehensive demolition and redevelopment usually wipe out all traces of a district's historic past.

The issue seems divided into two opposing solutions. Should we adopt the premise that nothing should alter an architect's original intention, even if it means preserving a structure no longer useful save as a large museum object? Or should we be blind to historic value, transform at will, and let later generations sort out what was good, bad or indifferent in modern architecture?

The discussion of the T.W.A. terminal poses the problem starkly. Its dynamically sculptural form, inside and out, where the curves of the roof shells merge gently into the walls, and smoothly join with the floors and ramped levels, and these again into the building's very furnishings -- benches, ticket counters and information stands -- seems to have been cast from a single mold. Such total unity calls for total preservation. The terminal is a perfectly self-contained object -- anything subtracted or added necessarily "spoils" this perfection. To cut off one of the access tubes that once led to the planes would be like cutting off an arm from a sculpture of a figure.

Here, perhaps the solution is not to transform the building to fit new functions but rather to reverse the process, and imagine new functions for the old form. Where one activity has ceased to inform a space, another might give it new meaning. This epitome of 60's symbolic modernism, once the expression-filled instrument of seamless flow between curb and aircraft, may take on new significance as the iconic anchor to the new high-tech

hangars for the masses. As a center of business exchange and elegant restaurant service, it could serve today's travelers.

What is needed is less a costing out of one obsolete structure against its apparently more efficient replacement; less the measuring of an old form against new demands; less even the fierce debates over the aesthetic worth of older buildings, than a creative assessment of a building's formal values and spatial qualities, in relation to a gamut of possible new uses, followed by a reshaping of these uses themselves. After all, even a new building like Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, has demonstrated that buildings alone can provoke significant economic and cultural renewal. The concept of "adaptive reuse" might then be applied to function, not to form.

BUT even with inventive solutions, the basic question remains. To what extent should cities or areas become "museums" of their own past, set in amber for the delight of future generations, as opposed to dynamic centers of growth?

The answer will affect economic development, but will also reflect the shifting values of communities with changing ethnic and cultural identities. It will bring many new kinds of structures -- everything from freeway intersections to industrial constructions -- within the purview of preservationists.

How to manage this heterogeneous heritage without indiscriminately subjecting it to the wrecker's ball or blocking needed development is a problem of public policy that requires an equally heterogeneous range of solutions. The outcome of the T.W.A. terminal debate will, in this sense, be a measure of our society's ability to confront its history.

*Anthony Vidler, just named dean of the Cooper Union School of Architecture, is author of "Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture."*