Architecture in Conservation

Managing Development at Historic Sites

James Strike

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One of the problems faced by museums and heritage organisations is adapting old buildings to their needs, or building new ones to fit in with historic sites. How exactly do you create a visitors' centre? How can a building be altered to accommodate a museum? The real difficulty lies where the budget is minimal and the potential damage to the environment or setting enormous.

Architecture in Conservation looks at the need to respond sensitively to the limitations or potentials of the environment. James Strike explains the strategies for producing new development at historic sites, examining the philosophy of conservation practice and stressing the importance of taking into account the characteristics of each individual site. He explains the way in which the methods of producing good developments relate to our very perception of history, and addresses the practical problems involved in developing appropriate sites. Case studies from around the world demonstrate the potential of each approach.

James Strike draws on his broad experience in architectural practice to show that a sensitive approach to these issues can unlock conservation problems and open up new opportunities for architectural expansion. *Architecture in Conservation* will be of considerable interest to site owners and architects responsible for site development, and to students of architecture and history.

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The Heritage: Care–Preservation–Management programme has been designed to serve the needs of the museum and heritage community worldwide. It publishes books and information services for professional museum and heritage workers, and for all the organisations that service the museum community.

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Introduction

1.1 The aim of the book

If there is one issue that is likely to stir up a debate, it is that new architecture can be built at historic sites; that new architecture can stand successfully cheek by jowl with historic buildings.

This book confronts the debate. It steps back from the emotive and polarised position so often represented as 'historicism versus modernism'; that is, 'venerable historical styles versus ugly and impractical glass boxes', or, seen from the other viewpoint, 'pastiche of the past versus a confident expression of our age'. The book seeks some form of rationale; it seeks common ground, moving, not towards dogmatic statements of right or wrong, nor even towards a set of specific rules, but to tease out conceptual ideas which can be tested through actual examples to provide a clearer understanding of the problems and solutions. The aim is to provide an awareness of the issues, so that design decisions may be taken from a less emotive and more conscious viewpoint.

The subject matter is, therefore, both history and architecture. The hypothesis is that the design of new architecture for historic areas can be analysed, that design issues can be identified and used, not only to stimulate new design, but also as a tool in the evaluation and criticism of proposed schemes and completed projects.

1.2 Identifying the problem

Historic areas are progressively coming under threat of new development, not only in conservation areas but also at historic houses, gardens, and archaeological sites. The impact of new building work is noticed, not only at nationally important sites, but also in small conservation areas and remote archaeological humps and bumps in the countryside. History now has a high profile in people's lives. Section 2.2 'Present attitudes' covers a profile of current opinions; suffice it to say here that the increase of interest in history has led to a growth in the number of visitors to these areas. This in itself has raised the need for new buildings, but the pressure is compounded by other factors: we now have more leisure time and visitors expect to find better facilities at the sites; we have higher

expectations for comfort, interpretation, education, cafés, and retail outlets. All of this has made historic areas a commercial commodity. Financiers realise the potential of investment in history, not only through visitor numbers and retail profits, but also through an increase in rent returns for commercial developments located amongst attractive old buildings and historic alleyways.

Building work is also needed in historic areas to protect the existing fabric of the sites and monuments. An array of techniques is available to consolidate and protect the old and fragile fabric (see section 7.3, 'Preservation or restoration'). However, such consolidation is not always practical, and a new protective building or a form of permanent cover may be necessary.

Finance, of course, plays an important part in the decision-making process (see section 8.2, 'Market forces'). This is an important element in the number of historic buildings which are 'at risk' through neglect. A survey by English Heritage[1] identified that some 7.3 per cent of historic buildings are at risk, and that these may be lost, and with them much of England's familiar historic townscape. Some of these buildings could be saved by the use of new building work. It is necessary to recognise the opportunities that could be opened up for a more economic use, or a change of use, through additional accommodation sensitively built alongside the existing buildings. This approach requires, amongst other things, a clear understanding of the design criteria involved. An awareness of design parameters allows for lateral thinking to unlock such schemes.

We need a method of controlling the pressure of new buildings at historic areas. We have in Great Britain one of the oldest and most developed systems of statutory planning control, and there are similar, yet interestingly different, systems in most other countries. There are also advisory bodies and preservation societies which work at both regional and international levels (see section 2.4, 'Guides and regulations'). These systems of influence have specific characteristics, that is, they are concerned predominantly with categories of use, volumetric size, and preservation of the status quo; they tend to pull back from aesthetics and the philosophy of conservation. Those who work in such bodies as English Heritage have a great wealth of historical knowledge and considerable experience in those technical and craft skills needed for repairs; what has been missing is the debate on the aesthetics of conservation. It is only recently that the role of new architecture has been considered as a possible option for conserving our past.

We now hear such phrases as 'architecture must be sympathetic to its surroundings' or 'the need for a sensitive approach'. What do these phrases mean? What do the adjectives 'sympathetic' and 'sensitive' connote? There is surely more to these words than personal likes and dislikes.

Such expressions are frequently used in a generalist way, giving the impression that the design qualities referred to are instinctive, that they are innate, involuntary, produced from some sort of genetic inheritance. If this is so, then design decisions are taken subconsciously, without forethought or appraisal. Surely

there is more to this: surely the ability to make good design decisions can be acquired, taught, learnt, stimulated, and improved? The process can be developed into part of our conscious and cognitive system.

The words 'sympathetic' and 'sensitive' are terms of reference; they refer to some form of connection being made between the new architecture and the existing historic site; they ask for this connection to be of a certain quality. These connections are created by the designer; it is the role of the designer to see the opportunities and to bring them to reality. What are the characteristics of such connections? What are the similarities being created between the new and the old? How are they realised? What are their physical forms, their built reality, their architectural details? Is it possible to classify these attributes?

This book confronts such questions. Each chapter focuses on a separate approach and uses examples to illustrate the specific concept. The aim is to set up a framework, a media for design decisions taken clearly and consciously, a catalyst for informed debate.

1.3 The conservation field

The theme of the book, 'new architecture for conservation projects', needs to be seen as part of the whole field of conservation studies. It is a wide subject. If, however, it is seen to be divided into 'technical' aspects (mortar mixes, timber treatment, structural stability, etc.) and 'philosophical' aspects (selling history, archaeological excavations through layers of history, speculative reconstruction, etc.), then this book relates more to the latter.

It is only in the last thirty years that the 'philosophical' aspects of preservation have entered into the conservation debate. The debate is an on-going process which is now leading us to recognise that the philosophical aspects form an important part of the decisions that have to be made in the field of conservation. Issues such as the marketing of history, the control of visitor numbers, recognition of the special characteristics of each site, whether to preserve as found or restore to a specific period, all these need to be grasped and resolved for each site before any of the technical decisions can be taken. The physical questions – Should the ivy be stripped from the masonry walls? Should the nineteenth-century timber floor to be taken out of a medieval hall? Should the friable stone detail be treated with an alkoxysilane consolidant[2] or capped with a lead apron? – all depend on the overall philosophical strategy adopted for the specific site.

There are numerous books and articles on the technical aspects of conservation, and an excellent starting point for those unfamiliar with the subject would be *Conservation of Historic Buildings* by Sir Bernard Feilden (Feilden 1982).[3] Relatively few books have been published on the wider aspect of conservation and these are referred to in the text. However, it is useful to refer here to certain of these key texts to identify the conservation scene for this book.

First, the *ICOMOS Charter of 1966*.[4] ICOMOS (the International Council on

Monuments and Sites), is the principal organisation dealing with conservation on a worldwide basis. Representatives from many countries met in Venice in 1964 to set down 'the principles guiding the preservation and restoration of ancient buildings'.[5] These principles became the 1966 Charter. Several of the Articles form a useful base for the ideas explored in this book:

Article 1   The concept of an historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilisation, a significant development or an historic event . . .

Article 3   The intention in conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than historical evidence.

Article 9   The process of restoration is a highly specialised operation. Its aim is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument and is based on respect for the original material and authentic documents. It must stop at the point where conjecture begins, and in this case, moreover, any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp . . .

Article 12 Replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time, must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.

Article 13 Additions cannot be allowed except in so far as they do not detract from the interesting parts of the building, its traditional setting, the balance of its composition, and its relation with its surroundings.

The second publication, *Conservation Today*, was written by David Pearce[6] to accompany an exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1989 (Pearce 1989). Pearce argues that conservation should be a creative process and considers how legislation and finance can be used by public bodies, developers and amenity groups to stimulate attractive and sensitive schemes to save buildings at risk.

A third key text is *Re-Architecture, Old Buildings/New Uses*, written by Sherban Cantacuzino,[7] in which case studies show how the adaptation of redundant buildings, frequently incorporating the use of new architecture, can be handled with care and sensitivity (Cantacuzino 1989).

1.4 The scope of study

This book is concerned with the relationship between architecture and history. It is concerned with the role that architecture can play in preserving our heritage, and equally, it is concerned with the role that history can play in the generation of this new architecture needed to preserve our heritage. It is thus a two-way process, a symbiotic relationship between the new and the old.

What do we mean by 'new architecture'? For the purposes of this book there is no intention, or need, to provide a specific definition. However, in general terms, it considers cases where either additional accommodation is formed at the

historic site, or where a new visual design statement is created amongst the existing fabric.

It considers this relationship between the new architecture and the existing fabric through an analysis of the design concepts involved. In doing so it acknowledges that this approach has to be seen in parallel with the pragmatic requirements of space, warmth, dryness, finance, and time. The art critic Umberto Eco, now known more for his historical novels, reminds us in *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Eco 1986) that the philosophy of aesthetics must not be allowed to become metaphysical but has to be related and tested through the reality of actual use.[8] Architecture for conservation has to be both functional and historically appropriate.

Finally, and confronting the paradox, the fact that the subject of this book is new architecture should not be construed as a wish to promote a bloom of new buildings at historic sites. On the contrary, all avenues have to be explored before action is taken. There will, however, be occasions where it is appropriate to introduce new architecture and the intention of this book is to stimulate an improvement of the quality of such architectural statements.

2

The field of study

We are dealing with a subject which is difficult to pin down, that is full of nuance and facets. Questions in conservation seem to change like the mood of light in the countryside; the facts and details may remain the same but our perspective, our interpretation, our light on the subject may well adjust. We are reminded of Claude Monet's thirty canvases of the west end of Rouen Cathedral; each covers the same subject, but each depicts a separate atmosphere, the light ranges from cool blues and greys to reflective white and burnt browns. As Monet wrote, 'tout change, quoique pierre'.[1]

The problem is that attitudes towards conservation vary, the pecking order of importance gets adjusted; adjusted over a period of time, and adjusted according to philosophical, political, and religious beliefs. Yet in spite of this, the subject still holds a solid core of identifiable aspects which can be studied. The art of architecture for conservation is not all subjective; much is objective, not necessarily in a modern quantifiable way, but nevertheless, assessable within specific criteria. The art historian E. H. Gombrich, in *Art and Illusion* (Gombrich 1960), clarifies how it is that the position of the observer related to a historical period may affect their point of view although the criteria available for making judgement remain the same.

We need to be able to recognise, and to justify, our position. Recognition of our own point of view is difficult enough, but to put these thoughts succinctly across to others requires a particularly clear understanding of the criteria. It is no longer acceptable to rely on outdated ideas of professionalism: 'I am a professional, therefore what I say is correct.' Obviously, the well-trained and experienced person will have a valuable contribution to make, but opinions now need to be explained, propositions have to be justified.

To do this we have to recognise not only the criteria of criticism, and these are explored in the following chapters, but also that conservation is not a static, deterministic commodity. We need to see our point of view as part of a maturing process, a reasoned response to change. This is needed to assist in the way we react to other people's points of view, and also to help us to cope with their adjustments to change.

It is necessary to consider these adjustments of attitude, not only to grasp a

better perspective of our own opinions, but also to gain a clearer significance of the 'spirit of the age': that is, the idea that at any period of time there is a common belief. It was the philosopher Hegel who, in the early nineteenth century, proposed the idea of *Zeitgeist*, that is, that the *Geist*, or spirit, or 'mind' is manifested in everything at that particular time.[2] The proposition of a 'spirit of the times' indicates that this may vary from one time to another. Hegel refers to this change, this development, as 'the dialectical process' which he attributes to evolution of individual thought and the inherent conflicts that exist within individual issues.[3]

2.1 Views of history

Thus it is important to draw some form of perspective on the *Zeitgeist* of today. To arrive at this it is necessary to establish the evolution of events leading up to our present time: the spirit of the age needs to be seen not only as a single link in the chain of evolution, but also as a growth pattern where each period has an effect on the next. Each age may attempt to annihilate the opinions of its predecessors but, in spite of this, there is always some form of evolutionary influence. Opinions come round again after a period of time to form the growth pattern into a type of reiterative loop.

The following is a review of the evolution of attitudes towards conservation; it places particular emphasis on the ideas and opinions about the art of architecture within the field of conservation. It must be stressed that the study of conservation as a specific discipline is a relatively new subject; its origins stem from the birth of history as a separate subject, whence came the study of architectural and social history. The following observations are listed chronologically to trace this process of change.

It was common practice during the early centuries for building materials, especially stone, to be salvaged from disused buildings and redundant fortifications to construct new projects. The Anglo-Saxons and the Norman invaders made good use of the Roman sites as sources of building materials: where, for example, are the stones taken from London's Roman wall?[4] This is not to say that there was no duty of care by monarch or Church, but that the concern at that time was not to conserve buildings as a means of preserving history, but to conserve and embellish them as symbols of wealth, or to sanctify and glorify places of religious importance. Examples of deliberate demolition are commonplace, the destruction went on for centuries. What happened to the home of the Lancastrian monarchs at Richmond, Surrey?[5] Or to the fine ashlar taken as late as the 1830s from the buildings of the Blackfriars in Gloucester.[6]

Examples of new architecture constructed at historic sites during the medieval period are plentiful. The evidence is seen primarily in our cathedrals and large fortified houses. At Winchester in the fourteenth century, for example, Bishops Edington and William of Wykeham completely modernised the nave: the Norman structure was remodelled into the contemporary style of late Gothic.[7]