Preservation today is primarily focused on two areas: the regulatory process, which develops the rules of engagement for dealing with historic properties, and materials conservation, which focuses on stabilizing and maximizing the longevity of original building fabric. A primary concern of both endeavors is the retention, to the greatest degree possible, of what is perceived as the authenticity of an original work through the process of rehabilitation. As preservation broadens its reach to include cultural landscapes, industrial sites, and modern architecture, it is fair to ask whether traditional notions of authenticity remain relevant to preservation today; whether it is more important to address what impact the act of intervention will have on the meaning of a historic structure; and what “authentic” aspects of the original work should inform the design of interventions.

It is my contention that the heritage of the modern movement calls into question the traditional linkage of the concept of authenticity with the conservation of original materials. The modern movement often used materials that were experimental and ephemeral; they are difficult if not impossible to restore and therefore cannot in themselves be used to sustain the authenticity of a particular work. To elucidate some of the ways in which the debate about authenticity is affecting contemporary preservation practice, I will briefly discuss two of my projects relative to Jack Quinan’s musings on the recent restoration and reconstruction of the Darwin Martin estate in Buffalo, one of Wright’s largest and most complex early works.

Quinan takes an incisive look at the state of preservation practice as it applies to what is in essence a large work of art whose primary—if not sole—purpose is pedagogic rather than functional in any larger sense. The team of scholars that set the tone for the Martin House restoration based their preservation philosophy on a designated period of significance that seeks to maximize the interpretation of Wright’s original idea to the exclusion of subsequent changes, including those dictated by the owner in order to create a more livable house. In this context the decision was to foreground the artistic authority of Wright as the sole determining factor of authenticity and to ignore (to make use of Wright’s own terminology) the organic evolution of the site in the course of it subsequent long history.

While there is no argument that Wright’s should be the privileged position, Quinan is rightfully uneasy about denying the passage of time subsequent to the date of Wright’s original design. He notes that there is no unequivocally correct path, even in a project where the team is given the time and budget to apply everything in the professional’s power to a work of the highest order and narrowest focus. The crisis these choices induce expose the inadequacy of the notion of a unique and correct interpretation and calls into question whether any re-creation, no matter how skillfully executed, can in fact be considered authentic. When there can be doubt about the authenticity of even a well-documented, museum-quality restoration project, it is clear that, short of jettisoning the concept in its entirety, we must allow some flexibility in applying any notion of authenticity to the interpretation and re-presentation of a cultural resource.

The larger question concerns the applicability of the concept of authenticity to buildings that have to remain functional in the real world. As the process of rehabilitation alters the perception and meaning of the resource, what may have been considered authentic about a structure prior to its modification will inevitably have to change based upon the synthesis of form, space, material, time, and use that have newly defined the work through an intervention that expresses and sustains the philosophical authenticity of the essential architectural idea.

Modernity, it may be argued, gave us the concept of authenticity as a means of affirming the reality of historical consciousness, but it conjures particularly fluid notions of authenticity relative to its own heritage. While industrial materials were celebrated by many architects of the modern movement, in general the materiality of a structure was of secondary importance to underlying ideas such as abstraction, impermanence, or dynamism that conveyed meaning in a work. John Allan states that “spiritual authenticity” is critical.
in a work of the modern movement as a measure of its representation of the core social, technical, and aesthetic principles of modernism and its “commitment to change.” Another critical aspect of authenticity in modern architecture is Alois Riegl’s concept of the “newness” value of the modern artifact that in “our modern view . . . requires flawless integrity of form” to retain both its appeal and modernity. As many modern materials cannot be restored, only their replacement—often with a new material that improves on the durability of the original—would enable the work to retain its newness value. Evolving strategies for the conservation and adaptation of modern buildings and sites acknowledge that the application of these principles of spiritual authenticity, commitment to change, and newness, which defer at least as much to idea and intent as to material, lead perhaps to a more postmodern understanding of authenticity that approaches Quinan’s own call for “a new paradigm [for preservation that] must be flexible, inclusive, and multivalent.”

Obstacles are immediately placed in our path: how do we square a “commitment to change” with Joshua Glenn’s observation, in his essay “Fake Authenticity,” that “authenticity is a reality-label from the art world and as such it cannot be fixed to anything living and vital?” These statements, both of which cite authenticity to validate opposing concepts, help to frame the parameters of the dilemma of the search for authenticity within the broader range of preservation practice—from the interpretation and presentation of a signature work of great artistry to the far more common and robust practice of trying to sustain original character while keeping a resource in active, functional use.

The examples from my own practice, one modest and one very large, are vignettes of how the analysis of intent, character, quality, and use of a modern building can color the approach to its renovation, and what these considerations add to the question of authenticity. The Hilles Library, designed in 1965 by Harrison and Abramovitz, was built as Radcliffe College’s functional complement to the Lamont Library in Harvard Yard. As Harvard University’s needs have changed in recent years, Hilles has evolved into a multifunctional student service facility, with a significant reduction in the amount of space devoted to the library itself. The building consists of a precast and cast-in-place concrete frame infilled with bays of stone panels and glass. The essential, character-defining feature of the architecture is its shallow repetitive vaulted floor system, which defines both the rhythm of the building’s exterior and its interior layout, where the vaults remain exposed and read continuously throughout each of the three primary floors. In devising an architectural strategy for the renovation, the changes in use and meaning of the building relative to its original use were not as important in this instance as the maintenance of this singular and very powerful architectural idea. The renovation faced two overriding aesthetic considerations: the retention of the open, minimalist mid-century modern space and the improvement of the lighting to enhance the essential character of the architecture.

The original lighting design by William Lam utilized two continuous linear indirect fluorescent fixtures that divided each bay into thirds, compromising the perception of the gentle rhythm of the shallow vaults by creating a staccato rhythm of boxes (each fixture had a square section) that picked up the line of the continuous dropped beams—also square in section—from which each vault springs. The renovation design developed a system utilizing a single direct-indirect linear lighting fixture per bay (cutting energy consumption by greater than 50 percent) that in both the form of the fixture—a shallow curved section—and the quality of its light better complements the architecture of the vaults (Figure 1).

The Lam lighting scheme was part of the original design for the building, and given its ubiquitous presence, it would normally be considered a character-defining feature of the work. In creating the new lighting scheme we made a conscious choice to instead mine the primal architectural idea to enhance its expression and provide a more economical and pragmatic solution to the fundamental task of illuminating the building. We have taken the stand that the authentic value worth sustaining in this building is Abramovitz’s essential idea, to which everything else is subservient, about the organizing power of the vaulted structural system as a means of achieving a universal space.

Once the concept of the renovation is reconciled with this idea, millwork, furniture, and the small things necessary to meet present standards and code—task lights, signage, fire alarm devices, and the like—are what reinforce and clarify the essential character of the intervention. There is a subtle change that occurs in the reading of the building, a shift in both aesthetic and meaning away from the elemental mid-century modern of the original to a more layered, complex, but still very simple contemporary design. The overlay clarifies the strength and meaning of the original architecture while at the same time acknowledging the modernist impetus toward continuous change, combining, in the words of Vittorio Gregotti, “the materials of memory, not nostalgically, but in terms of juxtaposition . . . forming new orders and groupings by shifting the context of those materials that belong to memory’s heritage.”

The renovation of the United Nations Headquarters (UNHQ) in New York will embody many of these same principles on a much larger scale. Designed by an international “Board of Design” (including Le Corbusier and...
Oscar Niemeyer) under the direction of Wallace Harrison, the UNHQ is the largest and most widely known mid-century modern complex in the world and a symbol of the power of progress—of which change is an essential component—to serve the improvement of the human condition. The preservation guidelines for the rehabilitation of the UNHQ embrace the notion that while the fabric of the UN is historic and merits treatment to the highest preservation standards, it is equally important that the design reflect progress made in areas like life safety, universal access, and especially sustainability in the fifty-five years since the complex opened. It is difficult, therefore, to divorce a concept of the authenticity of the UNHQ from its social purpose.

As the UN is dedicated to enabling progress in science and technology, it follows that its headquarters should reflect this continuing progress by incorporating innovations in building, systems, and information technologies that have occurred during the last half-century. In proposing form and language for these changes, the vocabulary of modernism, as it has evolved over the period, can appropriately be used to augment the prevailing mid-century modern aesthetic—the open flow of the primary public spaces, the straightforward but often innovative use of mid-century materials, and the minimalist articulation of surface and volume—providing an expression of current need and possibility through the best application of an internationally understood contemporary design idiom. Managed with deference and respect for the scale and palette of the original components, the modifications will create a subtle overlay adding richness and new meaning to the architecture of the complex.

As design professionals and historians, it is perhaps difficult to accept a notion of authenticity that is tied to concepts such as newness and social responsibility, but these were essential aspects of the rhetoric of the modern movement, and well-designed interventions that reinforce this connection arguably contribute to the philosophical authenticity of the resource—especially when the changes can manifest ideas that were latent within the work at its inception. In looking again at the broader spectrum of preservation, we must remember that preservation is itself a creation of modernism, and that as it evolves into a postmodern maturity, where absolutes are rare and viewed with dangerous skepticism, what is perhaps more important is to seek what is appropriate, as in the end this will also feel authentic. By acknowledging the possibility of both choice and change, a more practical, design-conscious, stabilizing, and sustainable position can be managed as we confront the scale and complexity of preservation practice in the twenty-first century.

Notes

Illustration Credit
Fig 1. Photograph by Woodruff Brown, 2006