Building the Unbuilt: Authenticity and the Archive

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While the concept of authenticity in the commonly accepted sense of scrupulous fidelity to original fabric was rarely adhered to in nineteenth-century practices, it became an article of faith in the modern, twentieth-century discipline of preservation. Now, in self-professed reaction to the fundamentalism and purism of the modern movement, both Jack Quinan and David Fixler propose alternatives to the fetishization of the “architect’s original vision,” as Quinan describes the ideal state of a building at a determined “date of significance,” and the “traditional linkage of the concept of authenticity with the conservation of original materials,” as Fixler defines the urge to retain, at all costs, the original “materiality of a structure.”

From their very different positions—one is a scholar especially interested in matters of reception and interpretation, the other a preservation architect focusing on nuts-and-bolts questions—both Quinan and Fixler agree that the idea of authenticity must be expanded, relativized, and made more flexible in order to accommodate present-day conditions and needs. Both also pose the issue almost exclusively in terms of individual buildings by named architects that are considered worthy of preservation in large part because of those very architects’ names. I say “almost exclusively” because Quinan alludes to a broader question, which is the one I want to address here.

In remarking on the direct link, even comparability in terms of authenticity, between the effort in Buffalo to restore the Martin House and the related one to construct designs of Wright not built in the architect’s lifetime, Quinan exposes one of the most tortuous, intensifying, and underexplored fault lines in the contemporary preservation/restoration story. Assessing the authenticity of a posthumous work of architecture can have no recourse to a comparison between present and past. Instead, there is only the present simulacrum of a past that never was, an architectural phenomenon that some might say gives new meaning to the term “Disneyfication.”

While the posthumous production of a building may at first seem to bear little or no relationship to the field of preservation, one has only to think of its effect on the archive to begin to appreciate the significance of the connection. If the ultimate purpose of preservation is the passing on to later generations of architectural ideas and forms that represent meaningful expressions of, and contributions to, cultural history, then the status of the archive is profoundly embedded in how one conceives and constitutes such a legacy and thus demands that we fold into the usual conception of the physical, built record a parallel one of drawings and documents. Indeed, this record can prove to be the more authentic of the two since it is usually immune to the kinds of large-scale and often radical restorative and reconstructive interventions that buildings undergo, whether for reasons of neglect, destruction, or adaptive reuse.

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Let me start with a couple of obvious points: 1) the word “preservation” is a misnomer and what we usually mean by the term is something more like restoration, reconstruction, or re-creation; and 2) these different types of intervention constitute a sliding scale of reproduction of the past along which the building of the unbuilt recently has come to occupy a significant place, extreme as it is. It would be great if everyone could agree, either at the time things were built or shortly thereafter, that certain buildings were important enough to be maintained and preserved and that resources were put into that effort. Clearly such has rarely been the case, and buildings, no matter how valued, deteriorate over time. The question then becomes what to do short of merely preserving the remains. Two good examples of deterioration were the late fourteenth-early fifteenth-century Château of Pierrefonds, as it existed in a ruinous state by the 1850s, and the Oak Park house Frank Lloyd Wright built for himself in 1889–90, as it was later transformed into a multiunit rental property. Simply to preserve either Pierrefonds, a rare example of domestic architecture of the late Gothic period, or Wright’s house, his first notable building, in the condition they were in would have rendered imprespicuous what they stood for historically.

A fundamental goal of preservation has been to give to a building the appearance that made it seem valuable in the first place. Viollet-le-Duc, who restored Pierrefonds, was the
most important and prolific figure in the field of his time and arguably its first major theorist. In a celebrated article on the subject of restoration in his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*, he wrote that the issue was not merely to “maintain” or “repair” a building (meaning, in present-day terminology, to “preserve” or “conserve” it); rather, it was “to reestablish it in a state of completion that may never have existed at any given moment in the past.”

Even more radical than the idealized “date of significance” criticized by Quinan, Viollet was advocating a kind of abstract, transhistorical state of existence, which is precisely what he sought to achieve at Pierrefonds, Carcassonne, Notre-Dame in Paris, and so many other of his “restorations.”

Such a definition of preservation as creative restoration depends upon, and brings to the fore, three fundamental issues. The first calls into question the relationship between idea and reality: Which is to predominate—historical fabric or transhistorical ideal? Clearly for Viollet, idea won out. The second point that his definition brings up is the problem of intentionality. Some assumption of knowledge about original intention is needed to reestablish a meaningful and coherent link between idea and reality. And third, since such creative reconstruction is of necessity always subjective, no matter how much physical evidence can be adduced, the question then becomes one of limits. In other words, how far can one extend the role of the conceptual or ideational in the process of re-creation of the past? Does one limit oneself to what once did exist, or at least what is thought to have existed? Or does one allow the realm of the ideational to take precedence and thus extend, as Viollet proposed, the possibilities for re-creation to that which may never have physically existed “at any given moment in time”?

In the nineteenth century, questions like these—revolving around the relation between idea and reality and the problem of intentionality—were fairly bounded by the historical limits of restoration and reconstruction and often resolved through a process of what might best be described as a channeling of the past: what would the builder of Pierrefonds, say, do now if he were in my shoes? While the architectural answer to the questions posed in this way often provoked great controversy, more recent expansions of preservation’s framework to encompass total creation or recreation of buildings that previously existed only in graphic form (either photographs or drawings) seem likely to eventuate in even greater historical questioning and confusion. Moreover, unlike the nineteenth century, when it was usually medieval ruins that were being restored, or the earlier twentieth century, when it was premodern ones, since the 1970s the past that is being resurrected is the much more recent, modern one. In effect, the contemporary preservation/restoration effort is now part and parcel of the postmodern construction of modernist history.

To chart more closely the relationship of idea to reality in the different types of reproductions of the past that have become common over the last thirty years or so, I will return to the notion of a sliding scale that I referred to earlier. At one end of the continuum, surely the one having the greatest claim on authenticity, is the reconstruction of works that once existed but disappeared entirely. Somewhere near the middle is the realization of designs that were more or less ready for construction during the architect’s lifetime, then abandoned, and then built after his death on the original site. And at the far end of the spectrum, the one most removed from any claim to authenticity but also the one that seems to constitute the biggest trend today, is the construction from scratch of buildings from designs originally intended for different clients, different sites, and even different programs.

A prime example of the first type is the Esprit Nouveau Pavilion by Le Corbusier. Originally built as a model apartment unit plus exhibition space for the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts held in Paris in 1925 and demolished after the fair closed, it was reconstructed in Bologna in the context of an international arts and crafts exhibition in 1977. Intended to reconstitute a missing document in the history of the modern movement, the pavilion was built under the direction of Giuliano Gresleri and José Oubrerie, who had worked for Le Corbusier in his final years, with the cooperation of the Le Corbusier Foundation. Shortly thereafter, one of the other icons of the modern movement that had met a similar fate was restored to its original physical splendor, but this time on its original site. The German Pavilion that Mies van der Rohe built for the International Exhibition in Barcelona in 1929, elements of which were apparently returned to Germany and then lost, was rebuilt by Ignasi de Solá-Morales, Cristian Cirici, and Fernando Ramos in the first half of the 1980s. For over fifty years, the Barcelona Pavilion had been for architects and historians a pure idea, indeed an embodiment of the very concept of architectural purity of form and design. Remembered essentially through two-dimensional black-and-white photographs, it achieved a kind of iconic status available perhaps only to things that exist exclusively in the realm of thought. Now it exists once again as a three-dimensional, experiential space, in color. Yet, should one really say, “once again”? A replica of the building has replaced the photograph as the agent of preservation. The question is whether “more” or “less” has been preserved.

These two structures will certainly not be the last of their type. A project to rebuild in Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, Le Corbusier’s Philips Pavilion from the 1958 Brussels...
World's Fair is now in the works. Because such buildings as fair pavilions were designed to be temporary, one could make a relatively strong case both for and against their reconstitution, even when the site is no longer the original one. The case for would certainly be bolstered by the existence of physical documentation, both in the form of photographs and working drawings. Things, however, appear more questionable when it comes to what I describe as the second level on the sliding scale of expanded preservation/ restoration practices. This has to do with the posthumous construction of a project for the same site and essentially the same client for which it was originally designed. In the news at the present moment are efforts to build Louis Kahn’s Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, designed for the southern tip of Roosevelt Island in New York’s East River in 1973–74, and Frederick Kiesler’s project for a “Grotto for Meditation” in New Harmony, Indiana, originally conceived in 1963.

A major example of a completed work of this type is Le Corbusier’s Church of St. Pierre at Firminy in southeastern France, designed in 1961–63 but only begun six years after the architect died, and then abandoned for almost thirty years before being revived and finally finished in the summer of 2006. As part of a local campaign to give an economic boost to the rather depressed industrial city by taking advantage of its other buildings by Le Corbusier and thus turning the place into an architectural destination point, work on the church was done under the direction of Oubrerie, Le Corbusier’s original assistant on the project, who made significant changes both in materials and methods of construction as well as accommodation to new programmatic requirements.

A slightly earlier example of this type of new construction, which has a similar history and underwent similar alterations, is the Monona Terrace Convention and Community Center in Madison, Wisconsin. Built in the 1990s, it was based on a design Wright had done for the same site, for a similar program, and for an earlier incarnation of the same client. Unlike the Firminy Church, however, the original design process stretched over many years and involved numerous changes by the architect himself. Wright first conceived the project in 1938, but redesigned it several times between then and 1959 when he died, just before the project was definitively put on hold. When it was resuscitated by the municipality in the early 1990s, Wright’s successor firm, under the direction of Anthony Puttnam, was asked to do the job. The final project of 1959 was followed, more or less, again with significant changes in materials, methods of construction, and program.

More than the Firminy church, the Monona Terrace project raises the question of choice, that is to say, what to do when a design grows out of a long creative process involving multiple schemes. Which design do you go back to—the initial one, which in the case of the Madison project was the best and historically most significant one, or later versions that may have aspects that are innovative and important in their own right? In Monona Terrace, the logical and, in the end most economical, solution was to go with Wright’s final design. The only problem was that it was neither fully developed nor detailed, thus leaving much up to its later interpreters.

The constant need to adapt to later conditions and requirements that result in changes in the form and function of the original design presents the greatest obstacle to authenticity in a posthumously built building. This is especially true when the architect is one like Le Corbusier, Wright, or Kahn who never stopped revising and redesigning until the work was handed over to the client. It is also patently true of designs that were never carried to the stage of working drawings, which has been the case with many, if not all, of the projects of my third type. One of the most celebrated of these is the House for an Art Lover, designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh with Margaret MacDonald for an ideas competition run by the German magazine Zeitschrift für Innen-Dekoration in 1901 and built between 1989 and 1996 as a showpiece of the new Bellahouston Art Park in Glasgow. Needless to say, given the purpose of the original design and the lack of detailed plans and drawings as well as the complete change in function, what exists today is the result of much “interpretation” on the part of those responsible for the construction.

Which brings me to back to Buffalo and the posthumous Wright buildings constructed in that city under the auspices of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. Of the three referred to by Quinan, two have now been finished. The first, the Blue Sky Mausoleum that Wright designed for the Martin family burial plot in Forest Lawn Cemetery in 1928–29, was constructed in 2004, but in a different area of the cemetery and as a commercial venture rather than for a single family. The second, just completed (2007), is the architect’s 1905 project for the Yahara River Boathouse in Madison, Wisconsin, retrieved from the Wright archives to become the new home of Buffalo’s West Side Rowing Club. The construction of the two buildings has been associated from the beginning with the restoration work at the 1903–7 Martin House in a campaign to make the city an architectural destination point, not unlike what Firminy had in mind. Fred R. Whaley Jr., former president of Forest Lawn Cemetery and the person whose idea it was to build the Blue Sky Mausoleum, stated that the concept developed in his mind while attending the 1993 scholars’ conference referred to by Quinan. “I can recall,” he said, “attending a symposium here in Buffalo with some Frank Lloyd Wright scholars, . . . listening to them and
thinking that the Blue-Sky Mausoleum ought to be built. The excitement and the energy created in our community because of the effort to restore the Darwin Martin House led the drive to get the Blue-Sky built."3 Indeed, one of the persons who spearheaded the boathouse venture was the executive director of the Martin House Restoration Corporation. While it is careful to note that the “new Wright structures [are] based on original designs,” the website of the Buffalo Niagara Convention & Visitors Center lists them along with the buildings constructed in the architect’s lifetime as constituting “Wright’s Buffalo Legacy” and refers to the cemetery structure as “Wright’s Blue Sky Mausoleum.”4 Who among the visitors to Buffalo to see Wright’s work will be aware of the difference between “based on” and “by”? Certainly not the average ones, I fear. They will get an impression of Wright’s architecture that cannot possibly be authentic in any meaningful sense of the word, and, in their confusion, may end up misunderstanding the restored “real” works they see. In adapting the mausoleum design to its new site and program, Puttnam changed the building material from marble to granite, altered the inscription and decoration of the stela, repositioned the benches to either side of it, and expanded the upper terrace to make it accessible to a general public. Even more critical is the fact that he followed Wright’s second design for the project and not the final one, which, like his initial scheme, had the benches contained within an exedra-like element, referencing Louis Sullivan’s Wainwright Tomb (1892) and providing an enclosed space from which to contemplate the sky.

One of the reasons the second design was chosen was that the remaining drawings for it were more detailed than those that could be found for the final project. The graphic basis for the boathouse was even more scant. Of the 1905 project, only four drawings remained. These did not include a ground-floor plan or section, were not dimensioned, and were highlighted, as in the brickwork of the Martin House pergola, a grounds for determining authenticity is established. While historical photographs and plans offer important means for judging the replica, like the Barcelona and Esprit Nouveau Pavilions, nothing of the sort exists for the posthumously built, like the Firminy church or the Monona Terrace project, and especially the simulacrum, like the House for an Art Lover or the Blue Sky Mausoleum.

The last group is certainly the most problematic and raises the most profound questions, for these buildings rely totally on the archive at the same time as they undermine and traduce its singular preservationist role. When a building is selected for some form of preservationist intervention, drawings are immediately consulted, if available. Yet, if there is a discrepancy between the working drawings and the building remains, the “as built” facts tend to predominate, the assumption being that the architect decided at the last moment to make “x” or “y” change. The existing House for an Art Lover, Blue Sky Mausoleum, and West Side Rowing Club now represent the “as built.” Will their presence come to stand for and replace the archival record that, for better or worse, generated them? In betraying the archive, the building of the unbuilt replaces its authentic record of the past with something that for many people will create not only a false impression of history but also ultimately debase the very legacy of the architect the building was meant to enhance.

And all this is not even to mention the funds that could have been better used in preserving and restoring what still exists.

**Notes**

1. As late as 1982, in his handbook Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World (New York, 1982), 44, 46–47, James Marston Fitch listed seven categories of “intervention,” including (from the least radical to the most) preservation, restoration, conservation and consolidation, reconstitution, adaptive reuse, reconstruction, and replication. While the last, replication, came close to what I am referring to, the phenomenon of building the unbuilt was not yet visible enough to be considered.

