Forum Journal

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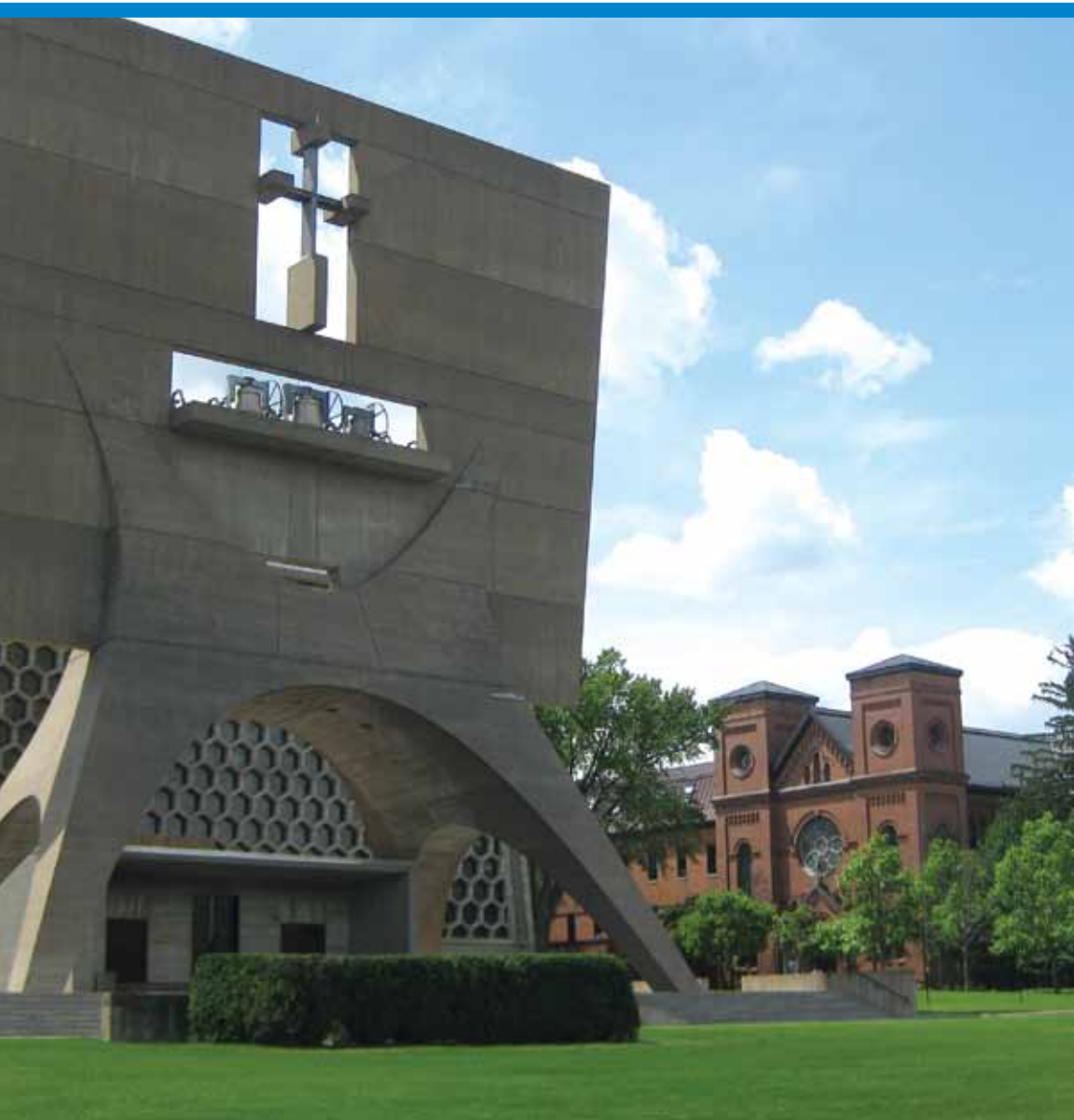
Modernism + the Recent Past



Introduction

CHRISTINE MADRID FRENCH

Over the past several years, preservationists have finally begun to devote serious attention to the immense challenge of documenting, evaluating, and conserving cultural resources from the twentieth century. This attention occurs not a moment too soon: it is clear that these are the issues that preservation professionals will be grappling with for the remainder of this century and well into the next millennia.

H. WARD JANDL, 1995

In 1995 the National Trust for Historic Preservation published its first *Forum Journal* dedicated solely to the issue of "Preserving the Recent Past." In his introduction, Jandl, deputy chief of the Preservation Assistance Division at the National Park Service, made the prescient observation inscribed above. Indeed, as he predicted, preservationists continue to debate the merits of saving buildings and landscapes less than 50 years old, and argue over the historic significance of modernist designs, some dating from as early as the late 1920s.

Yet Jandl also noted that "the serious study of the recent past is a relatively new phenomenon; there have been few scholarly books on the subject, and articles in professional journals are few and far between." That, fortunately, is no longer the case. A proliferation of articles, in popular news outlets such as *USA Today* and professional journals from organizations such as the Society of Architectural Historians, have provided both the scholarly information that is needed to prove significance and the public exposure required for successful historic preservation efforts.

In the 15 years since that first *Forum Journal* focusing on preserving modernism and the recent past, the National Trust has followed up with two more journals dedicated to the same topic, in 2000 and 2005. In that tradition, the National Trust is honored to produce the fourth journal exploring this concern. It expands upon the work featured previously while focusing on new ideas that will influence preservation policy today and in the upcoming years. All told, the four journals include the writings of nearly 40 prominent scholars, activists, architects, and practitioners, in essays discussing strategy, evaluation, and preservation of a diverse mix of American resources whose historical associations range from the Cold War to hip-hop culture to the internet age.

THE CHALLENGES TODAY

In theory, saving modern and recent past resources should be no different than preserving architecture from an older era, but persistent challenges exist. As architect Theo Prudon asserts in his essay, the critical markers and baseline information that preservationists have used for decades are losing relevance for our time. He notes that "shifting environmental, technical, and economic expectations," are rapidly compressing the cycle of design, construction, and demolition. The end result is

a marked loss of our modern architectural heritage and a chronological imbalance in the cultural landscape that we present to succeeding generations.

The first hurdle to accurately documenting and preserving architecture of the recent past is a proliferation of temporal guidelines (at federal, state, and local levels) that hinder the designation and protection of buildings and landscapes less than a certain age. These time-sensitive policies have produced a distortion in our national list of significant structures and also obstruct grassroots efforts.

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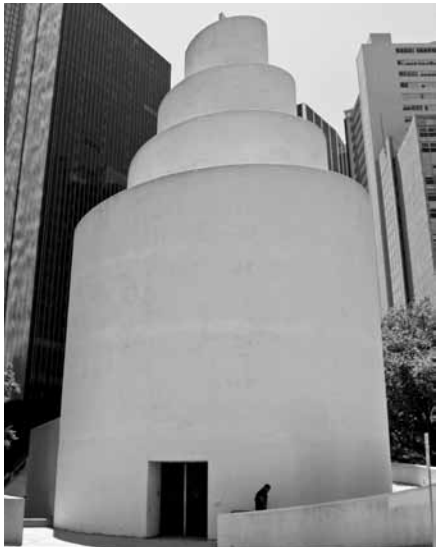
Elaine Stiles investigates the origins of the "50-year rule" and determines that, despite the assertions of critics, a revision of the age criteria for determining historic significance will not result in the wholesale inclusion of sites of mediocre importance, but will more effectively acknowledge the wonderfully diverse architectural and social legacy of the U.S. Her essay ends with a challenge to preservationists: We must "confront controversy" and question the validity of these restrictions. Doing so will realign current guidelines to ensure the equitability of eligibility standards throughout the country.

A persistent public reluctance to acknowledge buildings, landscapes, and structures from the previous generation as historic is an equally difficult issue that must be addressed. Selectively excising parts of our built environment obscures historic context and damages our long-term memories of a site. In some cases, subjective aesthetic arguments, rather than objective analyses, guide preliminary evaluations of a resource's significance. Those buildings and landscapes that do not appear consistent with a community's currently favored image are marginalized, their historic context ignored, and their architects' motives questioned.



Thanksgiving Chapel designed by Johnson/Burgee in Dallas, Tex., in 1977.

PHOTO BY CHRISTINE MADRID FRENCH

Two types of landscapes are frequently targeted under these arguments: the spaces that resulted from urban renewal, and suburbia. Alan Hess addresses our cultural ambivalence when discussing these sites, often regarded as the "most unsettling specters of 1960s architecture." He argues for the continued relevance of mid-century suburbs and dismisses the deceptive generalizations of these landscapes as "unplanned automobile wastelands." Coming to terms with our own past and conveying that knowledge to others is one of the valuable results of preservation; the

thoughtful evaluation of resources helps to dissolve preconceived assumptions and leads toward a more integrated knowledge of history.

Similarly, David Gest reveals the underlying historic significance of a 1969 urban renewal housing complex. In traditional preservation terms, the plain brick, unornamented 18-story building in the Bronx would not immediately stand out. Yet, Gest proved—and the New York State Historic Preservation Office agreed—that the site "contributed to the broad patterns" of American history as the birthplace of hip-hop music and dancing in the 1970s. The apartment complex was recently determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Although it is one of only a small number of sites recognized for its association with African American history and urban culture, there are concerns about its future. Securing the protection of unusual, large-scale historic resources is not exclusive to recent past preservation efforts, but will require the development of specialized solutions.

Paul Goldberger details one such exploration in re-use at the original Getty Museum, a "Roman" villa built at the height of 1970s exuberance above the beaches of Malibu, Calif. Like many institutions, the Getty Trust eventually outgrew its first home—once the pride of Los Angeles residents—and moved its operations to the custom-designed Getty Center, a thoroughly modern design by Richard Meier that rendered the old building extinct. Yet, rather than de-accession the structure and move on, the Getty Trust dedicated its considerable might to reinvigorating the old building. New structures were added and a respectful renovation ensued. In an inspired move, the villa was repurposed as a gallery for

Author's mother, Diane Madrid, standing in front of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion at the downtown Los Angeles Music Center in the mid 1960s.

PHOTO BY RUBEN MADRID

antiquities, thereby fulfilling the design intent hinted at by its architect and easing the landscape into the 21st century.

Preserving the resources of the recent past entails expecting the unexpected in other ways as well. The 1965 La Laguna playground in California, remarkable for its fanciful concrete sculptures in the shape of dinosaurs and sea creatures, nearly met its end before community activists rallied to the cause. Senya Lubisich details the grassroots efforts to save the park, which required both creative community approaches and strategic maneuvers at the local and state level to address historic integrity within contemporary playground safety standards.

As former National Trust President Richard Moe noted in a recent speech, "Our history is a continuum, and our heritage is constantly expanding to incorporate recent eras, new technologies, and new ways of looking at the world." The City of Kent, in Washington, addressed these concerns as stewards of a number of significant "earthworks" sites dating from the 1970s. Cheryl dos Remédios writes about advocating for and preserving these innovative art and landscape creations, and the necessity of cooperating with federal

agencies—FEMA and the Corps of Engineers in this case—to achieve successful conservation of public spaces and ensure continued good stewardship practices.

NEXT STEPS

Keeping up with the concurrent cycles of history is a difficult endeavor, and there is no way to predict the direction of the next preservation challenge. Issues such as the long-term sustainability of restoration projects, modern materials conservation, and public safety in historic civic facilities require additional research and a coordinated effort between partners and advocates. Whatever the resource in question, preservationists must be prepared to work in tandem with a variety of groups and accept new perspectives to remain generationally relevant and continue in our leadership role as considerate community planners.

Now fully ensconced in the 21st century—closer to 2050 than 1950—preservationists cannot afford to alienate emerging constituencies that are passionate about saving buildings and landscapes, whether the rallying cry is for a suburban ranch house, a post office constructed of poured concrete, or a humble roadside motel aspiring to look like Mount Vernon.

With these essays, we hope to engage more people in these conversations and begin a series of focused discussions centered on the development of preservation practice in the 21st century.

TRUSTMODERN

As an advocate for saving modern and recent past resources, I am often confronted with misguided generalizations regarding the history and significance of 20th-century American architecture. Yet this challenge is also an opportunity: The debate about how to effectively steward our own architectural legacy is a chance to both broaden the preservation conversation and bring new people into the discussion.

To address what many consider to be a continuing crisis in historic preservation, the National Trust inaugurated the Modernism + Recent Past Program (also known as TrustModern) in 2009, funded in large part by a two-year start-up grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. With the official launch of the project last April, the National Trust is working to secure its position as the leader in an ongoing and ever expanding movement.

Headquartered at the Western Office of the National Trust in San Francisco, TrustModern seeks to reacquaint Americans with their living history by reframing public perceptions about American modern and recent past resources; creating stronger federal, state, and local policies to protect our modern architectural heritage; and fostering an action network of individuals and organizations interested in modern and recent past resource preservation and rehabilitation. The National Trust moves forward on these issues with the firm conviction that these places matter and that if we do not preserve the significant buildings, landscapes, and sites of the 20th century, our nation stands to lose a vital aspect of its architectural and cultural heritage.

Join us in this conversation and demonstrate the value of the resources that matter to you. TrustModern posts daily to Twitter and Facebook and maintains a comprehensive website with information that you need to protect and save buildings and landscapes. Visit www.PreservationNation.org/trustmodern. **FJ**

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