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formerly  
known as  
**'what  
is this?'**

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Notes:

[1] Koolhaas, Rem, and Jorge Otero-Pailos. *Preservation Is Overtaking Us*. New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2014. Print.

[2] In 2014, the Williams and Tsien-designed the former American Folk Art Museum in New York was demolished to make room for an extension to the neighboring Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, despite an outcry from architects, conservationists and critics.

[3] Nabokov, Vladimir. *Collected Stories*. London: Penguin Books, Limited, 2001. Print.

[4] Jill Liddington, "What is Public History? Publics and their Past, Meanings and Practices," *Oral History Journal*, 30:1. Print.

[5] Rollyson, Carl. *Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner*. Lincoln: iUniverse, 2007. Print.

# Past vs. Present

## One Part Preservation,

## Two Parts Logic

It was an iconic building. A building in the heart of New York City. A building erected in the dust of a national tragedy in 2001. A building that brought promises of recovery, of larger, bolder reconstructions. A building that presented itself to the world through an intricate bronze patina depicting the ancient, the alchemic, the timeless. But buildings are not timeless. They grow old, they deteriorate, and they die. We, as architects, memorialize them if they resonate with the thoughtfulness that we associate with “good” architecture. We protect them from brutal translations of administrative efficiency and the cruel syllogisms of public indecision - in part, because we understand the significance of their realization in history, and in part, because the absolute responsibility of actively participating in this very history, terrifies us.

2014. The moment of confusion comes to an end. Why so? Well, as of 2014, we can definitively conclude that the end of Preservation without architectural logic, has finally begun. Preservation has always been somewhat of a relative concept anyway, subjectively supposed in its time, and rarely analyzed in any other. A bamboozling phase in our combined socio-urban lives, it has been, for years, “overtaking us”<sup>[1]</sup>. In its wake, 2014 marks a powerful realization. Even as the application of architectural rationale sees its ultimate public demise in the widespread opposition to the proposed demolition of the American Folk Art Museum in New York, a new era is born from the ashes.<sup>[2]</sup> Did I just say that ‘preservation’, whatever we knew of it, no longer lives? You seem aghast. But, you are not the only one. If there is one question that confuses, upsets, angers, exhausts, contaminates, even disgusts many architects, it is the strict definition of what should and should not be preserved. And yet, properly comprehended, Preservation can be intelligent, protective, sensitive, supportive, even enriching. But the criticism faced by the progressive leaders in this possible movement, and the subsequent decision to proceed with the demolition in spite of this extensive criticism, show that the period of blind preservation without architectural relevance in the current day, is de facto over. And now that it has been pronounced dead, we can pay our respects (or the lack of it) with a moment of silence, and finally move on.

In retrospect, one is forced to consider the underlying causes for such a rational gesture being considered as drastic and erroneous. As logic banishes the aspirations of nostalgia in a fairly young nation, we realize that facts do not add up to history - something that is only understood through emotion anyway. Preservation for the sake of it only creates

irrelevant public narrative, a collective history of weak moments assembled with obscure reasoning, in a fog of rhetoric. Attempting to accommodate the memories and nostalgia of every individual, is not only stagnating but simply impractical. One can only imagine what architectural history would be like - circumambulations around artifacts and spaces for popular resonance, rather than actual architectural significance. No doubt, intangibility is significant to the memory of a place. But, it is here that Preservation, as a field of study, needs to ‘critically’ segregate what deserves to be physically preserved and what can exist as text documents and museum exhibits. For, although history is an infinite space, the same cannot be concluded about land. How many such personal museums can the planet accommodate before consumerist sprawl is forced into yet another desperate stint of vertical development, and the marginally poor slip a point lower in terms of their basic quality of life and per capita square footage consumption? Are we merely a part of a profession that employs preservation as a shield against the real problems that we fail to tackle? National Registers cannot be treated as Personal Diaries. We are at a point where the question is no longer that of sensitivity. It is about logic. It is about the history of architecture in the purest, one that we hope to leave behind to the profession, and the world, as a legacy. A building that does not work for the current time, must step back and make way for the new.

Stuck in an era of almost-limbo, where technology is increasingly challenging the agency of the profession, Preservation becomes a farce, an exaggerated attempt to keep a field, possibly redundant to its context, alive. One recalls the concerns amongst the likes of John Ruskin, William Morris and others, that brought together the field of Preservation in the first place. It brings us back to the fundamental questions: What deserves preservation? Who decides on what deserves preservation? We contest that, surely, it is the professionals - the architects, and more so, the logical and established ones, who hold the ability to subtract personal subjectivity from the architectural object. If we are to attempt, with an obsessive narrative, to freeze every existing situation in time, we are also freezing with it, the urban problems that accompany that situation - increasing populations, mounting pressures on land, automobile congestions, socio-economic cycles, infrastructural breakdowns, restricted technology and the list goes on. Stagnation. Decline. Yes, it was indeed a simpler time in Jane Jacobs’ imagination, where no high-rises dominated downtown skylines and no traffic crowded

multi-lane highways. That was also a time when a memory could, perhaps, live forever. But the Robert Moseses are the power-brokers of the world today. Memories have changed prerogatives. The city needs to be saved from becoming a stagnant museum, an entombment of the past, attempting to keep that past alive, only to paradoxically collapse into itself - it is beautiful to look at, impossible to live in!

“Alas, it was not the Russia I remembered, but the factual Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, but hopelessly my own native land”<sup>[3]</sup>. History is, both, the past and the perception of the past. It is contextual. It has an objective, knowable reality - physical and tangible. The intangible aspect associated with it is only of the imagination. If historical facts come before their interpretation in the physical realm, and historic facts can themselves be contested, then, is not a place or event of fiction worthy for preservation just as rightfully? But, it is not imagined realities that should dictate what must be preserved, it is the ground realities. “History is malleable: it can be rewritten, rethought, reinterpreted, reinvigorated, and resuscitated to illuminate contemporary challenges”<sup>[4]</sup>. In such a scenario, distortion of memory becomes important; for it validates and affirms authorized versions of the past, contributing to the institutionalization of official national memory. This may harshly reek of professional dictatorship. But better us than them! Perhaps, architectural preservation should not be contaminated by public opinion or policy after all. Social and political histories have their own place, and they should not be confused with architectural history. Distorted memory, no doubt, becomes a site of contention where national histories and personal memories are often at odds. But the negotiation is vital to the construction and reinforcement of a collective identity; a type of socio-political institution, in which the totality of truth only exists in the manner the institution allows it to, and concerns can be identified from this point of divergence alone. If there is no disturbance to the flow, the narrative will continue unchallenged, to become metaphors of something that no longer is, and probably even never was in its entirety. “The actual past is gone; and the world of history is an intangible world, recreated imaginatively”<sup>[5]</sup>. It would be easy to just save it all and never build anything. But defeating the problems of modernity in the midst of the natural evolution of cities is another thing entirely.