

Building on the Past: Landmarks Policy and Urban Development
University of Chicago, April 19, 2003
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Why preserve? There are many answers to this question, many of which have great merit: old buildings can be beautiful, they have financial value, they serve as reminders of the past. All of this is received knowledge. Many people in this room--panelists and audience members alike--have labored in their own ways to uphold versions of these arguments, to shelter historic, and beautiful, and otherwise valuable buildings against the storm that Walter Benjamin called progress.

There are equally familiar arguments against preservation: property values diminish; perceptions of beauty change; history gets rewritten. Ultimately, however, it is progress, unwavering, sometimes unthinking, and undeniably American, that has provided the most dangerous and compelling traditional argument against preservation. Progress holds forth the promise that if memory, beauty, and profit are rewards of building, the construction of a new building in the place of an old one will offer still greater memories, and beauty, and profit. No longer.

When William LeBaron Jenney's structurally pioneering Home Insurance Building of 1885 was demolished in 1931 to make way for Graham, Anderson, Probst & White's fabulously art deco Field Building, it is reasonable to say that Chicago gained as much, if not more, than it lost in the transaction. Was Henry Ives Cobb's classical, domed Federal Building of 1905 (demolished in 1966) a fair trade for Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's regulation modernist Federal Center of 1974? In this case I think it's fair to say that popular opinion would be divided. And as for the expansion of Holabird & Roche's 1926 Soldier Field by Boston architect Carlos Zapata, well, "outrage" is one way to describe the general reaction.

Which brings me to my point. From my perspective, as a writer, editor, and curator who has devoted his career to advocating “progressive” architecture, the answer to the question “Why preserve?” is easy: They don’t build ’em like they used to. There is a profound lack of public trust in the capacity of contemporary architects and developers to meet or exceed the value of buildings of the past, no matter how you define value--and no matter how many talented architects and civic-minded developers a city may possess.

The problem is partly historical: Beginning in the 1960s, there came to be a belief that buildings were built not so much in the public interest as in the corporate interest, or to gratify an architect’s personal ego. Fairly or not, architects took much of the blame for the disastrous effects of urban renewal on so many provincial American cities in the 1960s and 1970s. Just read Tom Wolfe’s *From Bauhaus to Our House* to get a taste of the bile that rose in the collective American throat, in reaction to the modernist experiment.

The situation isn’t necessarily improving, either: In January of this year, the *Reader*, Chicago’s alternative weekly, spanked the city’s current architects, developers, and elected officials for failing to meet the high architectural standards of the city’s past:

Chicago—a city at the center of world architecture for over a century—could be closing out a building boom that won’t produce a single structure of international significance...

Author Lynn Becker goes on to fault Lucien Lagrange, a local architect she describes as “the reigning monarch of Chicago architecture,” for specializing in

a Disney-like denial that the 20th century ever took place... He can be depended on not to challenge or offend: to have his name on a luxury high-rise is an insurance policy that nothing will be seen that hasn’t been seen a thousand times before.

If neo-traditional architecture won’t do, try this missive from the architect of the new campus center at the Illinois Institute of Technology, one of the few buildings of “international significance” underway in Chicago:

Modernization had a rational program: to share the blessings of science, universally. Junkspace is its apotheosis, or meltdown... Junkspace is the sum total of our current achievement; we have built more than did all previous generations put together, but somehow we do not register on the same scales. We do not leave pyramids... It was a mistake to invent modern architecture for the twentieth century; we have been reading a footnote under a microscope hoping it would turn into a novel... Junkspace seems an aberration, but it is the essence, the main thing...the product of an encounter between escalator and air-conditioning, conceived in an incubator of sheetrock.

So much for modernism. So much for the hope that the architecture profession would point our way out of this mess.

One month after the *Reader* article came out, Chicago's Mayor Richard M. Daley posted a response on the front page of the *Chicago Sun-Times*: "Daley: 'No More Ugly Buildings'," read the headline. So there we have it, straight from the top. But before breathing a collective sigh of relief, one should ask, as no doubt Chicago's architects are doing, "How, exactly, does the mayor define 'ugly'?"

Before giving up hope, however, perhaps one can find solace in this quote from Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, in which Jack Nicholson's character, the detective Jake Gittes, confronts the octogenarian LA businessman, Noah Cross (played by John Huston):

Noah Cross Exactly what do you know about me? Sit down.

Jake Gittes Mainly that you're rich, and too respectable to want your name in the newspapers.

Noah Cross Of course I'm respectable. I'm old. Politicians, ugly buildings, and whores all get respectable if they last long enough.

Chicago should be so lucky.