

Spring 5-2016

# Modernity and the "History" of Historic Preservation

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## Recommended Citation

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MODERNITY AND THE “HISTORY” OF  
HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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LUCAS ANDERSON

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING HONORS PROGRAM

MAY 5, 2016

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## INTRODUCTION:

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The historic preservation movement in the United States was institutionalized in federal policy at the same time that Modern architecture was flourishing. In fact, many scholars will make the case that historic preservation formed its identity directly in response to the strengthening grip that Modern architecture on the American public. A logical assumption about the relationship between preservation and Modernism might be that the two are essentially opposites operating from entirely different value systems and perceptions of the past. I intend to argue that such a conclusion is premature. A movement that is perceived on the surface to be opposed to Modern architecture should not be assumed to be not modern itself, in an epistemological sense of the word. An analysis of the way the preservation movement understands the term “historic,” a term which is used ubiquitously without clear meaning, can illuminate a possible connection between historic preservation and modernity. After all, historicity is what differentiates historic preservation from other ideologies that attempt to shape and interpret the built environment.<sup>1</sup> It is the way that historicity is understood to function that reveals a buried ideological driver behind the movement. The way the American historic preservation movement understands history shares striking symmetries with modernity. Both historic preservation and modernity perceive various breaks between the past and the present. The accumulation of these breaks over time creates a series of periods of time progressing in a single general direction. The ephemeral nature of time progressing through distinct episodes, broken irreparably from the present, encourages a fixation on symbolic objects that represent the values of those periods.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Longstreth, “Taste versus History,” *Historic Preservation Forum*, Volume 8, May-June 1994, 45.

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## **PART I – CONTEXTS:**

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For the sake of clarity, Part I of this essay will be devoted to providing contextual backgrounds on both historic preservation and modernity. Successfully connecting historic preservation with modernity will be dependent in part upon the fact that historic preservation gained political steam in the specific time period of the mid-twentieth century; therefore, it is important to describe those conditions and why they matter. Based on a heritage of patriotism, American preservation found its identity as a resistance to Modern architecture. If historic preservation and Modern architecture share epistemological ties with modernity, it will also be imperative to be clear about how the term “modernity” is to be understood. I will be using the term “modern” with a small ‘m’ on a broad, epistemological scale, identified in part by industrialization, and scientific rationalism, and not as a marker of certain twentieth-century styles such as Modern art or Modern architecture. I do assume that Modern architecture is largely modern as well, but I won’t go so far in this paper as to claim they are synonyms. By using the broader meaning of “modern,” I can place both historic preservation and its opponent, Modern architecture, under the same ideological umbrella. After establishing the necessary contexts in Part I, historic preservation and modernity will be woven together in Part II.

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## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION:**

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The historic preservation movement in the United States is mostly embodied by one primary document: the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966. The NHPA was a culmination of a grassroots effort to save and preserve America’s cultural resources. By looking closely at the NHPA itself, the context of the movement leading up to its passing, and major ideas that have developed since then within the movement, a picture of the movement’s specific understanding of history begins to materialize. This section will provide a summary of the

background of the movement, the social contexts surrounding the passing of the NHPA, and the text of the Act itself.

Historic preservation in the United States has roots in the mid-nineteenth century. One day on a steamboat floating down the Potomac River, one particularly patriotic woman saw the crumbling condition of Mount Vernon, President George Washington's home. She wrote to her daughter, Ann Pamela Cunningham: "I was painfully distressed at the ruin and desolation of the home of Washington... It does seem such a blot on our country!"<sup>2</sup> A blot on the country! Cunningham's mother was acknowledging that the living memory of George Washington was embodied in his home well after his death. Somehow the decrepit state of Washington's home was an affront to both Washington's image as well as the United States as a whole. Thus Mount Vernon, a simple house, came to serve as a symbol for America. Ann Pamela Cunningham formed the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association in 1853, America's first preservation organization, to restore Mount Vernon, and served as its leader for over twenty years.<sup>3</sup> In its earliest inception in the United States, historic preservation was shaping up to be more than just a survey of the history of architecture or an inventory of the existing built environment. Instead, there was to be a particular *use* of the building – in the case of Mount Vernon, that use was to serve as a symbol of the United States. Preservation emerged from ideas of patriotism rather than romanticism often associated with the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted. in Kate Egner, "Ann Pamela Cunningham," *Mount Vernon Ladies' Association*, 2016, <http://www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/ann-pamela-cunningham/>.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Egner, "Ann Pamela Cunningham."

<sup>4</sup> Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 95.

The origins of historic preservation can be traced back to 1853, but the movement did not find its way into federal policy until the mid-twentieth century. In fact, over one hundred years passed between the creation of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and the passing of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966. To understand the time between the movement's origin and its institutionalization, it is critical to look more specifically at what was happening in architecture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The *École des Beaux-Arts* still largely had its grips on the architectural world throughout much of the nineteenth century, preaching the architectural values of classicism.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, daring architects like Le Corbusier challenged the Parisian school of fine arts by suggesting that architecture should embrace new technologies and express its structure.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the early twentieth century, Modern architecture found its way from Europe to the United States. The romanticism of technology and progress that many futurists of Modern architecture employed in their craft exploded in the second quarter of the twentieth century as the "machine aesthetic" of architects like Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe became more prominent.<sup>7</sup> Increasing consumerism and emphasis on technology, particularly after World War II, embodied architecturally in places like Levittown, New York, pushed the preservation movement to a brink. Modern philosopher and Marxist writer Marshall Berman said that "the modern work of art was said to 'molest' us with an aggressive absurdity. It seeks the violent overthrow of all our values, and cares little about reconstructing the world it destroys."<sup>8</sup> The historic preservation movement felt the heat of

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Denzer, "The French *École* System," lecture, *University of Wyoming*, October 30, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Denzer, "Modern Architecture: The Engineer's Aesthetic," lecture, *University of Wyoming*, November 23, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Modern architecture in the same way and felt that something had to be done to save the values that were being overthrown.

Why does it matter that Modern architecture was leaving the past behind as Berman suggests? One important thing to consider is that historic preservation made the nonmaterial “Spirit and Direction of the Nation” material by embodying it into architecture.<sup>9</sup> Suddenly, a crisis emerged. If architecture was to be serving as a material symbol of the nation, then what kinds of values should that symbol be expressing? If we take Marshall Berman’s statement to be true, then Modern architecture was essentially stripping the built environment of its traditional values and constructing a future based on an entirely different moral code with no attempt to retain any part of the values that were being left behind. As a result, the type of architecture that existed became of crucial importance. The preservation movement decided that Modern architecture was not the right type of building to adequately represent the spirit of the nation. Richard Longstreth and Stewart Brand, both influential scholars in the historic preservation discipline, both agree that the historic preservation movement exploded out of the mid-twentieth century in response to the encroachment of Modern architecture. Brand says in his book *How Buildings Learn* that “Modernist architecture, urban renewal, go-go real estate – all were suddenly treated as the enemy of civilization and beaten back.”<sup>10</sup> Thus it should come as no surprise that the National Historic Preservation Act was passed when the ideals of Modern architecture had such a major influence on economic development and public policy.<sup>11</sup> The designation of architecture to serve as symbol for the spirit of a nation caused a revolution

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<sup>9</sup> Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80.

<sup>10</sup> Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Longstreth, “I Can’t See It; I Don’t Understand It; And It Doesn’t Look Old to Me,” *Forum Journal*, Volume 27, No. 1, 2012, page 36.

against Modern architecture which ultimately manifested in the NHPA, a document that solidified a particular understanding of history in the preservation movement for years to follow.

The NHPA and the National Register of Historic Places that it created establish a precedent for preservation values and practices nationwide that are still used widely today. There are two important elements of the NHPA to consider when analyzing how the movement understands history: first, the NHPA sets an ideological foundation about the past that embodied the movement at the time and continues to inform it today; second, the NHPA implies that eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places is the primary determining factor for whether or not a building should be considered “historic.” To begin, the NHPA begins in Section 1 by identifying several purposes for the law. Remember that historic preservation merged architecture with the symbolic representation of the nation. Immediately, the Act states that “the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage.”<sup>12</sup> The NHPA establishes that an intangible, symbolic idea is rooted in physical objects. It goes on to state that those symbolic objects are becoming lost.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, the NHPA establishes that preservation of historic properties has public benefits. The Act proclaims that “the preservation of this irreplaceable heritage is in the public interest so that its ... benefits will be maintained and enriched for future generations of Americans.”<sup>14</sup> Such a declaration implies that the preservation of historic properties serves a specific purpose and is intended to be *useful* for the present and the future. If an old building is not perceived to be in the public interest, is it then not to be

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<sup>12</sup> *The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966*, Public Law Number 102-575, *U.S. Statutes at Large* (1966), <https://www.nps.gov/history/local-law/nhpa1966.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

considered “historic?” Already, there are hints of how the NHPA creates a specific understanding of how the past should be used by the present.

In addition to solidifying the idea that the spirit of the nation can be embodied by physical objects in the built environment, the National Historic Preservation Act firmly establishes that eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places is the primary determining factor for whether or not a building can be considered “historic.” The NHPA clearly defines a historic property as “any prehistoric or historic district, site, building, structure, or object included on, or eligible for inclusion on, the National Register.”<sup>15</sup> The criteria for listing on the National Register of Historic Places have become the unofficial standards for the consideration of a property as “historic.” Preservation scholar and critic Richard Longstreth humorously nicknames historic properties listed on the National Register as “some kind of breed raised in the darkest recesses of the Department of the Interior.”<sup>16</sup> My goal by the end of this paper is to figure out the characteristics of this breed.

Further evidence of the National Register’s hegemony over historic architecture can be found in privately published guides to listing a building on the National Register. Gail Greenberg’s 1996 book *A Comprehensive Guide For Listing A Building in the National Register of Historic Places* notes that “listing in the NRHP [National Register of Historic Places] conveys recognition of the property’s historic importance...”<sup>17</sup> Greenberg acknowledges that historical importance is dependence upon a property’s adherence to the National Register’s criteria for

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Richard Longstreth, “I Can’t See It; I Don’t Understand It; And It Doesn’t Look Old to Me,” 43.

<sup>17</sup> Gail Greenberg, *A Comprehensive Guide For Listing A Building in the National Register of Historic Places*, (Sausalito: Lucid Press, 1996), 1.

listing. The National Park Service manages the National Register and claims that the criteria for eligibility “are worded in a manner to provide for a wide diversity of resources.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, the criteria are actually worded to allow for more specific kinds of buildings that represent a certain understanding of history. Three of the four National Register criteria show how the historic preservation movement understands historical significance in symmetry with modernity: first, Criterion A allows for buildings to be eligible that are “associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;”<sup>19</sup> second, Criterion B includes buildings that are “associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;”<sup>20</sup> and lastly, Criterion C accounts for buildings that “embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction...”<sup>21</sup> Criteria A, B, and C all point to a history that is composed of momentous events, individuals, or transitions between distinct periods of time. For a property to be considered historic, the spirit that it embodies must be associated with a particular instance or a well-known person. Properties that are not connected to a significant event or individual can be left out, implying that places tied to the working class, the everyday individual, or the casual continuous flow of time are not historic. In American historic preservation, history is driven forward by a series of distinct periods, events, and influential individuals that construct broad patterns. Even before the introduction of the NHPA or the National Register, the National Park Service had established a sequence of so-called themes, deemed as “stages of American

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<sup>18</sup> “National Register of Historic Places Program: National Register Federal Program Regulations,” *National Park Service*, <http://www.nps.gov/nr/regulations.htm#603>, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

progress” to help identify and categorize potential historic sites.<sup>22</sup> The National Park Service set the precedence for the introduction into historic preservation policy of a history divided into periods through its identification of these stages of progress. After all, the National Park Service and the National Historic Preservation Act both exist under the same federal agency, the Department of the Interior.

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### MODERNITY:

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Historic preservation, with roots in patriotism, emerged in the United States as Modern architecture was tightening its influence on public policy and reshaping the built environment on a more regular basis. Such a development might indicate that the historic preservation movement and Modern architecture share fundamentally opposed ideological systems. However, although historic preservation revered the past and Modern architecture looked optimistically towards the future, historic preservation’s displeasure with Modern architecture should not be interpreted as being anti-modern. Instead, historic preservation’s disgust with Modern architecture is actually an indicator of historic preservation’s own relationship with modernity. As philosopher Alain de Botton wrote in *The Architecture of Happiness*, Modern architects, despite their “claims to a purely scientific and reasoned approach, the relationship ... to their work remained at base a romantic one: they looked to architecture to support a way of life that appealed to them.”<sup>23</sup> It turns out Modern architecture can be seen just as romantically as historic preservation often is assumed to be. At the heart of romanticism is modernity. In this section, I will break down some of the key characteristics of modernity that will be used later to identify the symmetries between

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<sup>22</sup> John H. Sprinkle Jr., “‘Of Exceptional Importance’: The Origins of the ‘Fifty-Year Rule’ in Historic Preservation,” *The Public Historian*, Volume 29, number 2, 2007, 83.

<sup>23</sup> Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 63.

historic preservation and modernity. For the context of this argument, modernity's understanding of the role of history will be crucial to understand. Modernity's version of history can be broken into three key processes: first, modernity experiences a tangible break with the past; second, such breaks support the development of episodic time that combine to form a general path of progression; and third, the tendency to break with the past to form distinct episodes creates an emphasis on the physical objects that are created by those episodes.

Modernity experiences a sensible disconnection from the past. Simply by using the term "modern," an opposite is created, known as the past, through a process of othering. French philosopher Bruno Latour wrote in his book *We Have Never Been Modern* that "when the word 'modern', 'modernization', or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past."<sup>24</sup> More importantly, once that archaic and stable past has been identified, a tangible break emerges between the modern era and the past. Mexican modernist poet Octavio Paz vividly describes how modernity is "cut off from the past and continually hurtling forward at such a dizzy pace that it cannot take root, and it merely survives from one day to the next."<sup>25</sup> The broken past still exists, but its accessibility becomes limited. Bruno Latour thinks that "a past from which we are forever separated by radical epistemological breaks cannot be sorted out again by anyone at all."<sup>26</sup> What would an attempt to sort out an epistemologically broken past look like? At this point, two divergent schools of thought are created from a sense of a disconnected past. To Modern architects, there was no attempt to reconnect with what had already passed. The past was, as Richard Longstreth describes it, "a closed book whose chapters

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<sup>24</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Octavio Paz, quoted in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 125.

had mercifully ended with little bearing upon the present.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, early Modern architect Le Corbusier even proposed burning down the Baroque and Second Empire era buildings of old Paris in the 1920s in order to be rebuilt with the understanding that the forms and materials of Modern architecture could better represent the city and its values.<sup>28</sup> Historic preservation has a different philosophy concerning the value that old buildings could still have to the present. The movement attempts to sort out and understand the past that has been broken from the present and to use it in a meaningful way. Here, it is beginning to become clear how two conceivably opposite ideologies share a major common assumption about the relationship between the past and the present. Modern architecture and preservation may disagree about the value of the past and its objects, but they both share the underlying modern perception that the past and the present are somehow discontinuous.

The break with the past is a smaller condition of a larger trend in the modern philosophy of history. Each break with the past results in the creation of two distinct periods: the one that came before the break and the one that follows the break. The moderns experience numerous breaks with history, which produce a form of history that is subdivided into multiple distinct fragments. A second primary characteristic of modernity that should be considered in this context is the understanding of the flow of history to be both periodical and progressive. History progresses chronologically in stages with distinct moments of transition. Bruno Latour wrote that the term “modern” indicates a “break in the regular passage of time.”<sup>29</sup> Latour’s statement

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Longstreth, “I Can’t See It; I Don’t Understand It; And It Doesn’t Look Old to Me,” 36.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert Muschamp, “The New Paris: Growing Accustomed to Its Face,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/18/arts/architecture-view-the-new-paris-growing-accustomed-to-its-face.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>29</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 10.

implies two ideas: first, it supports the claim that the moderns feel broken from the past; second, it suggests that there exists some sort of “regular” quality to the flow of history interspersed with various breaks. What exactly is the “regular passage of time”? In modern thought, the regular passage of historical time is progressive.<sup>30</sup> The concept of progressive time is based on the idea that history builds on itself in a way that can be identified by a pattern. The Enlightenment introduced the belief that civilization could identify a sense of direction in history by learning about its own past.<sup>31</sup> In such a context, history would have to serve as a reminder to the present to how things used to be in order to be improved upon in order to stay aligned with a specific direction of progress.

However, history does not progress without interruption, according to the moderns. The breaks with the past associated with modernism create stages of history which, as a whole, combine to define the progressive direction of history. As philosophy of history scholar Lynn Hunt wrote in her book *Measuring Time, Making History*: “the labels for the specific stages varied from author to author, but the idea of development through stages over time was fundamentally the same.”<sup>32</sup> Voltaire, writing during the early development of modern thought, believed that progress was focused almost entirely within the moments of transition between stages of history, and that it happened in very specific places and specific moments in time.<sup>33</sup> The duration of each period and relative location of each moment of change within the greater passage of history varies within modernity. For example, Europeans, with relatively longer

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<sup>30</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

national histories compared to the United States, tend to think in terms of generations, whereas Americans are still stuck thinking in terms of decades.<sup>34</sup> Despite the differences in length of stage, both ways of thinking involve distinct periods with identifiable characteristics. Each generation and each decade builds upon the one that came before it, and the times of most significant change are located at the moments of transition between them.

In modern thought, each period of progress leaves behind material relics – objects embedded with the respective ideas, beliefs, and values of each stage. According to Karl Marx, “not criticism but revolution is the driving force, of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other types of theory.”<sup>35</sup> The revolutions to which Marx refers can be interpreted as moments of transition between two successive stages. Marx continues by noting that revolution “shows that history does not end by being resolved into ‘self-consciousness as ‘spirit of the spirit,’ but that in it at each stage there is found a material result: ... a historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor.”<sup>36</sup> Not only does Marx present the idea that individual stages of history produce symbolic objects, but he also suggests that those objects don’t simply exist in a vacuum of their own respective historical period. This should not be interpreted to contradict my earlier claim that modernity has broken with the past. In fact, it serves to do quite the opposite. Intermittent breaks with the past are necessary in order for symbolic objects of generations to exist at all.

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<sup>34</sup> Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, 113.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Marx, “The Materialist Conception of History,” compilation found in *Philosophy of History*, Edited by Alan Donagan and Barbara Donagan, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), 68.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* 68.

Romanticism is an example of how objects and ideas assigned to a certain period of the past by modernity do not exist merely within their period of inception. Romanticism, which thrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, emerged in part as a resistance to the rationalism of the Enlightenment.<sup>37</sup> Among the many subjects Romanticism glorified and made transcendental was the past. Romanticism's understanding of the past is still a broken one under the general tenets of modernism. While architects like Le Corbusier wanted to burn down the past, Romantics like French painter Ernest Meissonier, who depicted Napoleon Bonaparte's victory at Friedland in 1807, understand the value of the past differently. Meissonier's painting *1807, Friedland* was completed in 1875, over six decades after Napoleon's actual victory. The powerful, expressive painting suggests that Napoleon, who had died years before, still had some kind of significance to the present. To the Romantic artist Meissonier, an event from the past was still important to his own present. Today, common romanticism and sentimentalism save relics, such as a grandmother's ring or a grandfather's bolo tie, because they are also perceived to be important to the present. They may be understood to be valuable because the objects are intrinsically associated with an ideologically different time period with different ways of thinking and different values. Even though romanticism gives the past relevance to the present, those ideas and objects of the past are necessarily created through modern breaks in history and the symbolic application of values consistent with their respective time periods to those objects.

One possible explanation for the transference of objects from stage to stage can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of historicism. Bruno Latour describes the German philosopher's take on modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern*: "As Nietzsche observed long ago, the moderns suffer from the illness of historicism. They want to keep everything, date

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<sup>37</sup> "Romanticism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, [www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism](http://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism).

everything, because they think they have definitively broken with their past.”<sup>38</sup> Historicism puts an immediate pressure on the role of history and sets a precedent for preserving historic artifacts. If the past is forever broken, then objects are the last resort to validate historicism, a mode of thinking that supposes history is best embodied by a specific context such as an event or historical period. Objects are relatively easy to classify and organize, so symbolic objects associated with periods of history are essential tools in historicism. Sociologist Diane Barthel adds that events come and go so quickly that “we are not even sure whether it really happened. We are even less sure if our perceptions of events are shared, a collective phenomenon, or purely individual sensations.”<sup>39</sup> If history feels so fleeting, objects that give some sort of permanence to ephemeral moments become increasingly important.

Modernity was struggling to work through a paradox. The past was broken from the present, yet the “illness of historicism” required the past to be useful in some way. Historical development through distinct periods of time was still the archetype for history. Modernity was in desperate need of some sort of alignment with history in order to reunite the paradoxical present with the past.<sup>40</sup> The solution to realignment with history came in the form of historical objects. The ephemeral nature of history, combined with the sense of loss associated with the definitive break from the past, produced what Marshall Berman termed as “nihilistic depths” and an ultimate “longing to create and hold on to something real even as everything melts.”<sup>41</sup> Berman was suggesting that the molestation of contemporary values and destruction of the past by

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<sup>38</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996) 151.

<sup>40</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 13-14.

Modern artists threatened to result in a liquid sea of meaninglessness with no tangible roots in history. As history was melting into such a sea of nothingness, objects served as the real that provided some sort of anchor in the turbulence that was modernity. During the transition from Part I to Part II where the contexts of historic preservation and modernity will be connected, there should be some symmetry starting to emerge. Modern breaks with the past created the precedent for progressive history divided into periodical stages. With each stage came material products in the form of symbolic objects. The modern emphasis on historicism increased the importance of those objects and forced them to exist across independent stages. The end result, as Diane Barthel suggests, is a form of history that “is not treated as past actuality, but as present possibility – raw material to be shaped by contemporary exigencies.”<sup>42</sup> Historical objects have become less representative of history as it may have actually happened. Instead, they serve as building blocks to be used by present and future generations to build new and better societies for the sake of progress.

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<sup>42</sup> Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity*, 51.

## **PART II – HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND MODERNITY:**

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Part I showed that historic preservation formed its identity largely in what seems as a response to Modern architecture. The National Historic Preservation Act gave the National Register of Historic Places considerable influence over what was to be considered historic. Reflected in the criteria for eligibility for listing on the National Register is a very specific understanding of how history functions. Modernity's understanding of history identifies a fundamental break with the past that is exacerbated by a view of history that consistently divides it into distinct periods of progress. Thus objects that serve as relics of the disconnected past become things of great value. What I hope is starting to emerge at this point is that there are key symmetries between historic preservation and modernity. Part II will argue the main thesis of this paper: the American historic preservation movement and modernity share key symmetries in their respective understandings of history. Historic preservation aims to save physical artifacts of a broken and periodical past.

### **AN ISOLATED AND DISAPPEARING PAST:**

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By analyzing the different ways that historic preservation understands what is meant by the term "historic," it can be argued that historic preservation and modernity experience the flow of history in a very similar way. This section will address the break felt by preservation between the present and the past, subdivided into two parts: first, I will explore how the movement emphasizes the preservation of material objects that are disappearing; second, I will analyze how the movement goes a step further to construct history into distinct, progressive episodes.

Motivation for the preservation movement came as reaction to the encroaching influence of Modern architecture on the American built environment. It was not only the mere design

principles of Modernism that historic preservation objected to but also its replacement of the existing built environment. Many preservationists were even more afraid of an undesirable new building being built in the place of an old one rather than simply losing the old building itself.<sup>43</sup> The threat of new Modern buildings being built in the place of old ones levied even more emphasis on the remaining objects from the past. Richard Longstreth hypothesizes that this development is intimately related to the integral belief in historic preservation that “‘old’ is inherently better than ‘new.’”<sup>44</sup> If old is better than new, then any action taken by preservationists would be to save what is old in fear of it being lost forever, particularly in the circumstance where what is old might be replaced by something new that is perceived to be inferior. It wasn’t only Modern architecture that posed a threat to the destruction of old buildings. The twentieth century was turbulent worldwide. The United States had survived two world wars that had mobilized great numbers of people and resulted in substantial reorganizations of the built environment. An influx of people coming back from war pushed housing to its tipping point. Vast suburbias like Levittown<sup>45</sup> grew like annual tree rings around urban centers. Public housing projects like Pruitt-Igoe<sup>46</sup> in St. Louis sprouted out of the American landscape. The rapid changes that occurred after World War II were reflected in the

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<sup>43</sup> Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, 92-93.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Longstreth, “Taste Versus History,” *Historic Preservation Forum*, Volume 8, May-June 1994, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Levittown was constructed in 1947, less than two years after World War II ended.

Bruce Lambert, “At 50, Levittown Contends With Its Legacy of Bias,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/28/nyregion/at-50-levittown-contends-with-its-legacy-of-bias.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>46</sup> Pruitt-Igoe went up from 1954-1956.

Colin Marshall, “Pruitt-Igoe: the troubled high-rise that came to define urban America – a history of cities in 50 buildings, day 21,” *The Guardian*, April 22, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/apr/22/pruitt-igoe-high-rise-urban-america-history-cities>.

built environment and embodied a sense of instability in cultural identity and collective memory. As sociologist Diane Barthel notes: “the sense that all known patterns of social life were being swept away encouraged early preservationists to . . . protect historic structures still sacred to the collective memory.”<sup>47</sup> The perceived failures of Modern architecture to adequately deal with the increasing chaos in American social stability may have only added fuel to the preservationists’ fire. Due to its many issues surrounding class and race, Pruitt-Igoe was demolished in 1972, an event that made many architectural historians proclaim it to be the “day [M]odern architecture died.”<sup>48</sup> If Modern architecture failed to rectify post-war social problems, then perhaps old buildings from the past could encourage a more inclusive and democratic undertone in the built environment.

In addition to social turmoil, citizens of the mid-twentieth century were also facing the looming threat of physical destruction. One preservationist writing during the heat of the Cold War noted that “especially since World War II, we now run the literal risk of losing *all* the past, man-made and natural – either piecemeal, to the bulldozer, or instantaneously, to nuclear weapons.”<sup>49</sup> With current events being as uncertain as they were, coupled with rapidly changing patterns of social life, historical objects in the form of old buildings were the logical solution to redefining a nation for the future, especially after 1972 and the death of Modern architecture. To refer back to Marshal Berman, historic places embodied the “real” as everything around them “melted.” Thus the National Historic Preservation Act was passed and the National Register of

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<sup>47</sup> Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity*, 152.

<sup>48</sup> Colin Marshall, “Pruitt-Igoe: the troubled high-rise that came to define urban America – a history of cities in 50 buildings, day 21.”

<sup>49</sup> James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), 23.

Historic Places was born. Its sole duty is to inventory “the Nation’s historic places worthy of preservation.”<sup>50</sup> The National Register solidifies the belief that objects should be preserved in the face of uncertainty, and establishes that not all old objects are “worthy” of preservation. The specific wording in the phrase “worthy of preservation” sets the precedent for an institutional program of preserving historic places in a meaningful way to protect them from loss. Inserting the word “worthy” into the mix further allows the preservation movement to filter which types of buildings get preserved. If historic buildings are the objects that are real as everything else melts, then those buildings that are preserved should logically embody the values of a preferred state of society compared to the existing state of social turbulence. The retention of the historical object is of such transcendent importance to the preservation movement that there is no expectation for a building listed on the National Register to ever be used or investigated any further after listing. According to Donald Hardesty and Barbara J. Little in their book *Assessing Site Significance*, sites that are eligible for listing on the National Register “may not in fact yield the information they have been judged capable of yielding.”<sup>51</sup> A listed historic site may never produce any significant information about the past or provide any tangible contribution to the future even if its National Register nomination claims it has the ability to do so. In fact, the fourth criterion for listing allows a property to be eligible if it “may be likely to yield ... information important in history or prehistory.”<sup>52</sup> As Hardesty and Little show, however, there is no requirement to ever

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<sup>50</sup> “National Register of Historic Places Program: National Register Federal Program Regulations,” *National Park Service*.

<sup>51</sup> Donald L. Hardesty and Barbara J. Little, *Assessing Site Significance*, (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>52</sup> “National Register of Historic Places Program: National Register Federal Program Regulations,” *National Park Service*, 5.

do anything with this criterion for eligibility. But those buildings are saved anyway. Just knowing that the historical object still exists seems to be enough for American preservation.

The historic preservation movement's emphasis on historical objects comes from its tendency to organize time progressively and periodically, just like the moderns. Part I described how modernity understands history to flow in the generation direction of progress, subdivided into numerous sequential chapters. Each chapter builds on the last one towards some ultimate goal. In historic preservation, the modern break with the past is felt by the tendency to assign periods or moments of significance to a property rather than valuing its development over its entire lifetime. To elaborate on this concept, Stewart Brand discusses the notions of synchronous versus diachronic time in his book *How Buildings Learn*. Synchronous and diachronic time were originally used as methods for studying the history of languages, but Brand applies them to architecture. Synchronous time studies the way elements of an entity "fit together at one point in time," whereas diachronic time studies "the way it developed over time."<sup>53</sup> Preservation understands the history of architecture synchronically. A manager of a historic property or someone writing a National Register nomination needs only to choose one instance of authenticity in a building's history which may not even be the most historically important.<sup>54</sup> The nominator only needs to locate one instance in a building's lifetime that is consistent with one of the National Register criteria for listing.

Historic Preservation is obsessed with synchronous time; so obsessed even, that during the early stages of the institutionalization of historic preservation in federal policy, even before

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<sup>53</sup> Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, 210.

<sup>54</sup> Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity*, 9.

the NHPA and the National Register, the National Park Service created a compilation of themes called “Stages of American Progress” in order to more efficiently categorize potential historic sites.<sup>55</sup> Such an interpretation that historical significance that can be lumped into periodical stages was absorbed into policy when the National Register was formed. In a guide published to help citizens list properties on the National Register, the historic context of a site is suggested to be interpreted as “patterns or trends by which a specific occurrence, property, or site is understood.”<sup>56</sup> If a property doesn’t conform to a “pattern” or “trend” associated with a particular stage of history then the site may be less likely to be considered “historic.” The significance of the material qualities associated with properties that embody a pattern or trend should also not be forgotten at this point. In a different guide for listing properties on the National Register, Gail Greenberg stresses that “the physical characteristics that existed during the property’s period of importance should remain mostly unaltered.”<sup>57</sup> The material traits of the moment in the past that the building embodies are of utmost importance for listing on the National Register. At this point we can now see how the historic preservation movement has internalized the ethic that a building’s history is not embodied by its change or development over time but by short-term events that stand for a particular stage of history.

Progressive and periodical time are not only evident in the ideologies laid out in the National Historic Preservation Act. They are also prevalent in common preservation practice. Remember that the National Register of Historic Places has significant influence over the

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<sup>55</sup> John H. Sprinkle, Jr., “‘Of Exceptional Importance’: The Origins of the ‘Fifty-Year Rule’ in Historic Preservation,” 83.

<sup>56</sup> Donald L. Hardesty and Barbara J. Little, *Assessing Site Significance*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Gail Greenberg, *A Comprehensive Guide For Listing A Building in the National Register of Historic Places*, 3.

classification of historic. Since its creation, the National Register has racked up over 90,000 listings across the country. Listing on the National Register is often the ultimate endpoint for whether or not a historic preservation project is successful, which just goes to show how much credence private preservationists give the National Register. As a result, the criteria for eligibility for listing on the National Register are very often employed in common practice. The criteria emphasize the importance of significant events and individuals play in making a site historic. There is also a subtle promotion of sites that represent some form of innovation or origin. Finally, the historic preservation movement's tendency to divide time into progressive periods can most clearly be seen in the movement's use of an architectural history that is categorized into specific periods of styles.

Criteria A and B of the National Register point toward progressive, periodical time through the significance of individual events and people. Criterion A makes properties eligible for listing that “are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.”<sup>58</sup> Criterion B makes eligible those properties that “are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.”<sup>59</sup> The key terms to take from Criteria A and B are “events” and “persons,” which both immediately imply significances of a singular nature. Can one event or one person really stand for the entire lifespan of a building? The National Register nomination for the Ivinson mansion in Laramie, Wyoming is a perfect example. According to the author who wrote the nomination, the Ivinson mansion “stands as a monument of local historic significance in that it reflects the careers of two of the most prominent citizens in the history of

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<sup>58</sup> “National Register of Historic Places Program: National Register Federal Program Regulations,”

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

Laramie.”<sup>60</sup> The Ivinson mansion was listed on the Register in 1972 for the individual family who built the house. Historic preservation scholar Richard Longstreth laments that a neighborhood “may be dismissed as less ‘historically’ significant because no individuals of note lived there.”<sup>61</sup> The same would likely be true for a neighborhood that experienced no significant events. If history according to the historic preservation movement is composed only of significant individuals and events, then history runs the risk of ignoring the billions of “non-significant” individuals that operate and contribute to history on a much smaller scale. Where do the working class and the general population fit in historic preservation? Longstreth continues:

Exceptional things certainly deserve attention, but it can be just as important to protect broad patterns of development that are salient distinguishing features of place; more than anything else, these broad patterns frequently afford a sense of continuity with the past and provide the essential context within which the individual landmarks derive meaning.<sup>62</sup>

Richard Longstreth is really talking about the symmetry between historic preservation and modernity. He is identifying that both Criteria A and B are examples of synchronous time, where the entire history of a place is understood by how it came together at one instance in time. According to Criteria A and B, that one instance can take the form of a single event, or the relatively short lifespan of a single person.

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<sup>60</sup> “Ivinson Mansion,” *National Register of Historic Places Inventory Form, National Park Service*, February 23, 1972, <http://focus.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/nrhp/text/72001295.PDF>.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Longstreth, “Taste versus History,” 43.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid* 41.

The National Register criteria speak to Nietzsche's "illness of historicism" in which human objects from the past are crucial to identifying trends to apply to the present and future. In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour writes: "calendar time may well situate events with respect to a regulated series of dates, but historicity situates the same events with respect to their intensity."<sup>63</sup> Using Latour's terminology, significant events or individuals are to be understood as relatively intense instances in the general flow of time. Such a historical model would be consistent with the modern philosophies of Marx and Berman in which revolutions and transitions between periods – intense moments of changes – are the underlying driving forces of history. The National Register nomination for Old Main, the University of Wyoming's oldest building, shows how the historic preservation movement also moments of transition between periods to be important. The nomination concludes: "Old Main ... remain[s] as Wyoming's best example of those early years when Wyomingites sought to transform a vast wilderness into a state."<sup>64</sup> Old Main symbolizes the transformation of Wyoming from a period of uncivilized wilderness into a period of civilized statehood.

A second example of the manifestation of progressive time in popular preservation beliefs is the role played by innovation. Gail Greenberg's guide for listing buildings on the National Register interestingly admits that mere "age is not the most important factor in determining whether a building is 'historic.'"<sup>65</sup> Age is not the most important factor! This may seem a bit counter-intuitive for a movement that associates itself with old things. In what cases

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<sup>63</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 68.

<sup>64</sup> "Old Main," *National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form*, National Park Service, July 11, 1986, <http://focus.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/nrhp/text/86001536.PDF>.

<sup>65</sup> Gail Greenberg, *A Comprehensive Guide For Listing A Building in the National Register of Historic Places*, 3.

might a building be old but not historic? Keep in mind the basic assumption that historic preservation is antithetical to Modern architecture. Modern architecture embraced the newest technologies and believed that structural rationalism was the future of the built environment. Working with that assumption, the opposite of new technology and structural rationalism would likely be an affinity for traditional methods of construction and passé building technologies. However, many nominations for the National Register include the argument that the property is historic because it was the “first” of something: the first example of a certain type of construction; the first example of a new style; the first example of a use of a new material. Lynn Hunt identifies a trend in modernity to lose sight of prehistory and focus increasingly on the “excessive concern for innovation.”<sup>66</sup> Again, we can see the symmetry between historic preservation and modernity. Despite the expected love of tradition and aversion to new technology, historic preservation exists in many cases in a world of firsts. Does historic preservation contradict itself?

The apparent contradiction speaks less to hypocrisy of historic preservation and more to the modern condition as a whole. Marshall Berman’s modernity is “a life of paradox and contradiction.”<sup>67</sup> The contradiction reveals the parallels between modernity of historic preservation and their mutual reliance upon progressive time. Each innovation is an instance of transition between independent periods of historical progress. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc’s application of Darwinian evolutionary theory to architecture in the nineteenth century can be applied to historic preservation as well. Viollet-le-Duc was attempting to follow architecture

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<sup>66</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History*, 82.

<sup>67</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 13.

back to its historic and prehistoric roots.<sup>68</sup> Historic preservation is identifying the first instances of new evolutionary iterations of architecture through its use of innovation as a criterion for eligibility on the National Register. To refer back to Gail Greenberg and the admission that age is not the most important factor in grading a property's historic qualities, a building may be one hundred years old or more, but may not be considered historic because it is not an example of an innovation or a new technology.

Perhaps the most pervasive example of the American historic preservation movement's perception of periodical time is its use of architectural styles as a classification tool. In order to discuss the meaning of style in historic preservation, it will be useful to refer back to the modern tendency to create symbolic objects associated with a particular episode of history. Styles in architectural history, used by historic preservation as a classification tool, are embodiments in physical objects of a certain period corresponding to a certain set of values. The prototype is a helpful concept in understanding the role of style in preservation thought. According to scholar James Marston Fitch, "the prototype is simultaneously a function of our individual sensuous perception of the artifact itself *and* the intellectual understanding of its provenience which we bring to that experience."<sup>69</sup> The prototype's image comes from our individual experiences with the object itself, thus forming the symbolic association of values with them. For a contemporary example, a new wave of younger generations may associate Gothic architecture with magic and the mystical due to a fascination with the fictional world of *Harry Potter*, a franchise that relies heavily upon Gothic imagery.

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<sup>68</sup> James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World*, 20.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

Furthermore, the modern understanding of the prototype speaks to the importance modernity places on origins. Evidence for this can be found in modernity's conception of periodical time with breaks with the past. Each break with the past is followed by a new origin. Take the emphasis on innovation, for example. An object that is representative of an innovation embodies an origin and becomes a prototype. And because of the veneration of innovation in historic preservation, the prototype then becomes an archetype against which all subsequent symbolic objects of the same period are judged. The prototype may become, as Richard Longstreth suggests, a "test of 'purity.'"<sup>70</sup>

The next question to ask, then, is how does the prototype model become indoctrinated into the historic preservation consciousness? James Marston Fitch documents two possible ways in which that might occur: first, the prototype itself is defended; second, the artist or craftsman that invented the prototype is defended.<sup>71</sup> Fitch's insight explains a distinguishing factor between the disciplines of historic preservation and history. Instead of defending mere ideas and stories, as history does, historic preservation intervenes on behalf of the objects themselves. Additionally, Fitch's idea also explains the importance of significant individuals – particularly architects – in the National Register criteria. Remember that Criterion B justifies that properties associated with important individuals are eligible for listing. Buildings by significant architects that get listed typically have a distinct style associated with them – they have invented something new and distinct. Hence, like Fitch said, the artist, in this case understood to be the architect, is defended by the National Register for the prototype or the style that he or she created. The National Register nomination for the Union Pacific depot in Cheyenne, Wyoming is an excellent

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Longstreth, "I Can't See It; I Don't Understand It; And It Doesn't Look Old to Me," 44.

<sup>71</sup> James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World*, 11.

example of how a prototype functions in historic preservation. The nomination calls the depot a “landmark structure among Henry Van Brunt’s commissions . . . among Richardsonian Romanesque buildings” and “one of the most architecturally distinguished buildings designed by one of America's most important architects.”<sup>72</sup> The nomination identifies the depot’s significance according to its embodiment of the Richardsonian Romanesque archetype, as well as the significant architect that designed it. Just like Fitch said, in order to eternalize Cheyenne’s Union Pacific depot, the Richardsonian Romanesque prototype is defended as well as Henry Van Brunt, artist with which the prototype is associated.<sup>73</sup> We are now seeing how the precedent for an organizational system based on style is rooted in the symmetry between modernity and historic preservation. The prototype is important in modernity because it is a symbolic object that represents an origin, an innovation, or a transition between two periods of history.

The evolution of the use of styles in historic preservation may have originated in part out of a simple need for easy classification. Viollet-le-Duc applied emerging nineteenth-century scientific ideas to architecture. Architecture was to be seen as an iterative process in which each stage was an improvement on the last, collectively moving toward some unspecified ideal architecture. The Aristotelian classification system that had been the norm for thousands of years suddenly became obsolete and was replaced with the Linnaeus’s new system of taxonomy, which was developed in the eighteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Classification is an important component to modernity’s relationship with the past. Swiss philosopher Alain de Botton queries in his book

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<sup>72</sup> “Union Pacific Railroad Depot,” *National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, National Park Service*, original text published January 29, 1973, revised for National Historic Landmark nomination February 15, 2006, <https://www.nps.gov/nhl/find/statelists/wy/UnionPacific.pdf>, 30.

<sup>73</sup> Henry Van Brunt was not actually the inventor of the Richardsonian Romanesque style, but he was a well-known American architect who built often in the style.

<sup>74</sup> A.J. Cain, “Taxonomy,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/science/taxonomy>.

*The Architecture of Happiness*: “what is a beautiful building? To be modern is to experience this as an awkward and possibly unanswerable question, the very notion of beauty having come to seem like a concept doomed to ignite unfruitful and childish argument.”<sup>75</sup> To Botton, the very notion of beauty is so broad and so personal that peaceful consensus may be generally unachievable. To make a statistical analogy, architectural style preference is a conceptual example of continuous data. In a continuous data set, the odds of a data point falling on a specific value are one in infinity, or zero, because there are an infinite number of possible data points. In a discrete data set, on the other hand, the nature of the data requires the value of a given data point must be an integer. There are limited outcomes, so the odds of a data point falling on a specific value are much higher than zero. Alain de Botton’s conclusion that there can never be a collective answer to the question “what is a beautiful building?” seems to me to be analogous to continuous data. Perceptions of beauty are so broad and personal that there are infinite quantities of possible responses. In order to graphically represent continuous data in a histogram, data points must be grouped into bins. Bins are groups of data points that have been organized into a series of ranges. That way, all the data points will fall within some defined range, and the graph will represent the frequency of certain ranges of values. Styles play a similar role to bins by grouping the infinite distribution of architectural beauty preferences in historic preservation into an organized model. While everyone may have slightly different specific views regarding beautiful architecture, or in this case the most historic architecture, binning architecture into general groups based off of a period of style helps to make sense out of some of the muddle and reduce “childish argument.”

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<sup>75</sup> Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, 28.

The use of architectural styles in historic preservation is symmetrical with modernity because they act as symbolic objects of historical periods. Styles are innovative prototypes that act as baselines to which the historic character of buildings may be compared. Styles also help simplify the discussion by creating an ordered classification system out of the infinite continuous data of personal preferences. Richard Longstreth agrees. He says that “style is not a thing; it is comprised of ideas developed to facilitate the interpretation of physical qualities.”<sup>76</sup> Style functions as a system of semi-arbitrary bins in which to classify differing perceptions of physical objects. Just as the scientific idea of evolution from the nineteenth century found its way into architectural philosophy, so did a scientific method of classification find its way into a budding preservation ethic. The idea to divide buildings into styles based on prototypes is a fairly recent phenomenon, emerging only in the 1930s, that came from classification methods used by the physical and social sciences.<sup>77</sup> Once again, some basic similarities exist between the technological innovations of modernism and the perceived archaic historical romanticism of historic preservation.

The American historic preservation movement has an internalized sense of style thanks to its symmetries with modern periodicity and classification. The National Register of Historic Places, created by the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966, cemented style into official preservation policy in the same way it promotes the importance of individuals and events. Criterion C for listing on the National Register states that properties are eligible for listing “that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Longstreth, “The Problem with ‘Style,’” *Forum: bulletin of the Committee on Preservation*, Volume 6, December 1984.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values...”<sup>78</sup> Thus, to be considered historic according to National Register standards, a property must only embody the “distinctive characteristics of a type.” These distinctive characteristics can be essentially understood as the distinguishing qualities of the pure prototype. Criterion C shows up quite often in common preservation practice. When determining a historic context for a building, Donald Hardesty instructs the potential assessor to look for “patterns or trends by which a specific occurrence, property, or site is understood.”<sup>79</sup> The entire historic context for a property can come from a particular trend. Imagine, the entire life of a structure understood by a trend, or by a style!

When a building is defined by a singular quality like a style, history is bound to be left out. Donald Hardesty also mentions how the idea of periodical history and style can lead to the qualification of anything that falls outside of a certain period of significance as non-historic. Hardesty gives the example of a historic district that has been labeled with a period of significance from 1835 to 1860. Only sites within that district that fit within that temporal window would be considered as contributing structures.<sup>80</sup> In that district, any building that did not match the period of significance, or any building that has a style that falls out of the one from the nineteenth century deemed most important by the managers, would be considered non-historic in the context of that place. Sociologist Diane Barthel has identified a potential problem with such an approach:

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<sup>78</sup> “National Register of Historic Places Program: National Register Federal Program Regulations,” *National Park Service*.

<sup>79</sup> Donald L. Hardesty, *Assessing Site Significance*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

[C]urators may choose one authentic moment in a structure's history over other possible moments. The moment chosen may not necessarily be the most historically significant. It may instead be the moment for which the most extensive and attractive furnishings are available, or the moment which provides the most appealing tourist narrative.<sup>81</sup>

Barthel's insight helps explain Hardesty's approach to assessing site significance. By identifying the period from 1835-1860 as the period of significance for a place, the rest of the actual history of the place can be forgotten. Barthel also explains Criterion C of the National Register of Historic Places. Criterion C makes it easy to preserve a property for its historical significance according only to its style. A building may have an undiscovered or unknown historical significance that may be overshadowed by its embodiment of "distinctive characteristics of a type" according to the National Register. Criterion C represents the most material of all the possible considerations. Because style is material, it may be easiest for a curator to list a building according to Criterion C because it is the simplest way to represent the historic context of the building through its material qualities. The availability of furnishings associated with a particular style are often much easier to come by than authentic artifacts from the actual place itself. For example, the Ivinson Mansion in Laramie, Wyoming has very few original furnishings owned by the Ivinson family who built it in the late nineteenth century. Instead, it is bursting its seams with furniture from the style of Victorian nineteenth century family life. Like Barthel says, it provides an attractive tourist narrative, and visitors don't seem to mind that there are few objects actually owned by the Ivinsons. The mansion instead is a museum of Victorian America.

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<sup>81</sup> Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity*, 9.

Style has become so prevalent in historic preservation's understanding of architectural history that some members of the movement have started to push back against it. Some critics have suggested that the fascination with style is purifying the true history of the built environment too much. Richard Longstreth notes that the emphasis on style in historic preservation and architectural history can lead to inferences that "a place is architecturally impoverished if it is not well represented by a large number of 'styles.'"<sup>82</sup> If an area does not possess architecture representative of predetermined styles, then it is supposedly not accurately representative of American history. Longstreth continues his lament by proclaiming that "the reliance on simplistic categories presented in guides ... is antithetical to what is taught in serious programs of history."<sup>83</sup> The intellectual trap that interprets a place to be valuably architecturally and historically only if it has a certain number of styles represented runs the risk of burying the real histories that may actually drive that place. Even buildings that do fit an archetype of a style are not given historic status because they don't fit the archetype well enough. Oftentimes, those buildings that are determined to be the most representative of the style's archetype are given precedence for National Register listing.<sup>84</sup> Generally, style can serve as a material exterior that discourages further examination of the complexities of time and history that are inherent in every building. Longstreth soberly concludes: "style as ornament, style as motifs, style as fashion, style as *materials* [emphasis added] – all suggest that style is but a garnish, applied independent of any underlying thought or order."<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, style can be useful as an organizational tool, but relying upon it too heavily creates an alternative history in which the underlying thought, order,

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<sup>82</sup> Richard Longstreth, "The Problem with 'Style.'"

<sup>83</sup> Richard Longstreth, "I Can't See It; I Don't Understand It; And It Doesn't Look Old to Me," 44.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Longstreth, "Taste versus History," 41.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Longstreth, "The Problem with 'Style,'" no page number.

and complex history of the built environment becomes lost in the muddle that makes a building valuable simply for adhering to an archetype.

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## CONCLUSION:

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In the same way that historic preservation is symmetrical with modernity, historic preservation is equally symmetrical with Modern architecture in their respective understanding of how history progresses. Where they deviate from that shared symmetry is in their specific ideas regarding how the built environment should embody the spirit of the nation. Ideas in historic preservation such as the so-called “fifty-year rule,” which dictates that properties less than fifty years old cannot be considered historic, exist largely because the fifty years prior to the present are still too close to the present to have been broken with yet. In American historic preservation, the past fifty years are still considered to be part of the present and thus cannot be historic because they can’t be classified in a specific historical episode other than the present. Dell Upton wrote in his survey of American architecture: “the historian’s challenge is to choose which of many possible stories to tell.”<sup>86</sup> Upton poses it as a statement, but to me, it feels more like a question. Does the preservationist serve the same purpose as a historian? And if so, what is the preservationist’s responsibility to tell the right story? And which story is the right one to tell? Upton was right – it really is a challenge. I hope that at this point, it is clear that modernity has a prominent role to play in Upton’s challenge. The possible stories to tell are numerous, and modernity’s forms of history, mirrored by the American historic preservation movement, help to decide which of those stories are worth telling.

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<sup>86</sup> Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States*, 11.

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