

Preservation is Overtaking Us

We were lucky in 2002 to receive a commission from the Beijing government that enabled us to try to investigate and define for China a specific form of preservation. This is one of those unique moments in which we come closer, and maybe I should say in this case that I come closer, to one of my most intimate utopian dreams, which is to find an architecture that does nothing. I've always been appalled that abstinence is the one part of the architectural repertoire that is never considered. Perhaps in architecture, a profession that fundamentally is supposed to change things it encounters (usually before reflection), there ought to be an equally important arm of it which is concerned with not doing anything. To the extent that this may sound like I am coveting an appointment in [Columbia's] historic preservation department, it may not be far off.

What we started to do is look at preservation in general and look at a little bit at the history of preservation. Now, the first law of preservation ever defined was in 1790, just a few years after the French Revolution. That is already an interesting idea, that at the moment in France when the past was basically being prepared for the rubbish dump, the issue of preserving monuments was raised for the first time. Another equally important moment was in 1877 where, in Victorian England in the most intense moment of civilization, there was the second preservation condition. If you look at inventions that were taking place between these two moments—cement, the spinning frame, the stethoscope, anesthesia, photography, blueprint, etc.—you slowly realize that preservation is not the enemy of modernity but actually one of its inventions. That makes perfect sense because clearly the whole idea of modernization raises either latently or overtly the issue of what to keep.

We then looked at the history of preservation in terms of what was being preserved, and it started logically enough with ancient monuments, then religious buildings, etc. Later, structures with more and more (and also less and less) sacred substance and more and more sociological substance were preserved, to the point that we now preserve concentration camps, department stores, factories and amusement rides. In other words, everything we inhabit is potentially susceptible to preservation. That was another important discovery: the

3. With an enforcement of a “bar code” upon the center of Beijing, one can argue that the bands in the “bar code” can either be preserved for eternity or razed. (Courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture)



certainly that you preserved everything in a very democratic, dispassionate way—highways, Chinese monuments, bad things, good things, ugly things, mediocre things—and therefore really maintained an authentic condition. Also, you could begin to plan the city in terms of a kind of phasing. In all the cities that now are almost suffocatingly stable in the center and alarmingly unstable in the periphery, you could introduce a new condition of phasing where sooner or later any part of the city would be eliminated to be replaced by other stuff. You could project and plan over almost millennia to generate a situation in which each part of the city would always confront its opposite in a kind of complementary condition.

Editor's note

This article is the transcription of part of a talk delivered by Rem Koolhaas at Columbia University on September 17th, 2004. The editors would like to thank Mr. Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture for the permission to print it.

Author biography

Rem Koolhaas teaches the course “Practice of Architecture and Urban Design” at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design. He is a world-renowned architect in practice since 1975, when he founded the now-legendary Office for Metropolitan Architecture. His projects include civic, governmental, and residential work in Europe, North America, and Asia. More recently, Koolhaas started a company called AMO, which is dedicated to the application of architectural thinking to questions of organization, identity, and culture.



1. Wayne Thiebaud's "Potrero Hill," 1976. (Courtesy of the artist)