

Lecture 11: Reflections on Contemporary Preservation Debates: The World Trade Center and New Orleans after Katrina

The final lecture and discussion class of the semester covered three preservation challenges: modern architecture, the mega-city, and the post-disaster context. Students were reminded that they should be prepared to present to the class next week and that final papers will be due Monday, May 21st.

Class Outline

Review last week's discussion of modern architecture
Discuss the "megacity," as presented in this week's readings
Discuss the World Trade Center and New Orleans

Discussion

The class briefly discussed why the preservation of modern architecture might be significant for the field of historic preservation. The professor asked students to consider why this new activity represents a potential transformation.

Students responded with three different ideas:

changing trends and styles in architecture are now being re-evaluated
the materials used in modern architecture present new challenges for preservationists concerned with their maintenance and continued use
considering modern architecture forces preservationists to think of the past in terms of a progression, a line from the past to the present

Next, the professor asked students to consider the question: Why does it matter? Why, for instance, do preservationists concern themselves with the minute details of the materials used in a restoration project? Students replied that such decisions matter to architects and architectural historians because the building represents an object of study. Rather than just see Baker House or Lever House in a book, we can see the spaces and materials of the building. The discussion then returned to a theme from previous weeks' conversations: (1) how to make sense of the connection between modern architecture and urban renewal and (2) how do people see beauty differently.

Professor's Comment: David Fixler, last week's guest speaker, described how experimentation was an important concept for modernist architects like Aalto and how it is an important part of the buildings themselves. He suggests that what should be "saved" by preservation activity is not the artifact, but the process. The design was not intended to be fixed in stone; it is not perfect. The building can be considered an evolutionary process- as new materials and technologies became available, the building would change, not be fixed in time.

Students added that architecture (rather than association with historic events) occupies the attention of many preservationists interested in modern resources or the recent past. Also, the power of the owner to make changes to buildings is not often considered in these discussions; the owner usually retains the power to make whatever changes he or she sees fit. Finally, students discussed Baker House as a dormitory and how it may reflect ideas of the design of the campus environment, group residential living, and college life in the 1940s. Several students brought up the newly constructed Simmons Hall as a point of comparison.

Slide Lecture: Mega-Cities

[Map, Gottman's "megalopolis," 1961, followed by images of mega-cities]

Beginning with the industrial revolution, there has been a fear and a prediction of growing cities. This development began in the industrial revolution and accelerated after World War II. But in the United States cities tended to increase in their reach, rather than density. However, in other places in the world cities have increased in their density as well. They are drawing more and more people. Within the past few decades, scholars have begun to discuss the emergence of mega-cities. Initially, 20 to 30, then 40, "world cities" were identified.

In 1920, the U.S. Census first determined that more Americans lived in urban places than rural ones. Recently, within the past few years, the world population has been determined to be a majority urban for the first time. In this sense, we are living in a new era: an urban age.

Many of these new mega-cities have a core of skyscrapers ringed by shantytowns. Mike Davis recently explored this topic in the book *Planet of Slums*. In a typical image one might see the skyscraper as the future city and the slum as the left over from an earlier pre-modern era. However, these two physical forms, the skyscraper and the slum, tend to grow up together. A push factor as well as a pull factor has created the increase in urban populations around the world. Policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have in many cases accelerated urbanization and the growth of slums.

Three factors characterize this development as different from previous patterns of urbanization: (1) scale (many of these cities are larger than 5 million in population), (2) the speed of the increase, and (3) the rise of these cities in the so-called third world.

Discussion

Students discussed the factors contributing to the deterioration and destruction of historic resources in Cairo, as described in one of the readings by Anthony Tung.

Slide Lecture: The Post-Disaster Context

[Images of San Francisco, Hiroshima, New Orleans, Warsaw, Berlin, Dresden, Oklahoma City, New York, and other cities]

The tsunami, the flooding of New Orleans, and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center provide unique challenges for historic preservation and memorial-making. As discussed in a recent lecture series here at MIT, and in the book *The Resilient City* by Vale and Campanella, modern cities almost always get rebuilt in the wake of disaster. Previously disasters were considered the punishment of the gods, not as "natural disasters." *The Resilient City* offers twelve axioms of resilience:

Narratives of Resilience are a Political Necessity
Disasters Reveal the Resilience of Governments
Narratives of Resilience are Always Contested
Local Resilience is Linked to National Renewal
Resilience is Underwritten by Outsiders
Urban Rebuilding Symbolizes Human Resilience
Remembrance Drives Resilience
Resilience Benefits from the Inertia of Prior Investment
Resilience Exploits the Power of Place
Resilience Casts Opportunism as Opportunity
Resilience, Like Disaster, is Site-Specific
Resilience Entails More than Rebuilding

Discussion

The class ended with a discussion of the role of historic preservation in rebuilding New Orleans and the efforts at memorializing the events of September 11th.