Moving Forward: The Future of History

We know about context, we know about history. But do we know when enough is enough?

Elizabeth Padjen: Let’s start with an overview of the evolution of preservation in Boston, starting in the ’60s. How have our attitudes about historic buildings changed?

Albert Rex: Boston established its first historic district, on Beacon Hill, in the 1950s, but it wasn’t until the 1970s that we started to see real grassroots preservation activity. The City Conservation League, which doesn’t exist anymore, was formed in the late 1960s and was concerned with issues affecting the downtown. A good early example was the Jordan Marsh controversy in the early 1970s. Jordan Marsh decided to replace its downtown department store, and suddenly we had people cutting up Jordan Marsh cards and standing in picket lines to protest the loss of that building. I think that may have been the first real step toward the grassroots activism we know today. It was formalized in Boston with the establishment of the Landmarks Commission in 1976, which provided a sounding board for preservation discussions. Then the grassroots organizations that had sprung up banded together to form the Boston Preservation Alliance in 1978. Of course, other groups had been around for a while, like Historic Boston, which was formed to save the Globe Corner Bookstore back in the ’60s. But most preservation prior to the ’70s had happened on a neighborhood scale as civic associations or historical societies tried to save individual structures. With each battle, the groups became more effective and more professional. At the same time, we started to see a growth in preservation programs; today, there are approximately 20 graduate-level preservation programs in the country. Most preservation organizations today are staffed by people who went to school to become preservationists.

Pamela Hawkes: The Jordan Marsh controversy was also significant because it was one of the first times that people didn’t associate a building’s importance with particular person or historic event. Boston has an incredible legacy of preservation dating to the 19th century, but its focus until recently was on the landmarks, the buildings where something famous happened or someone famous lived. Jordan Marsh was the beginning of an understanding that the real importance can be the context—that important buildings are not necessarily architectural markers but sometimes are part of a heritage that represents everyday life and everyday people.

Charles Sullivan: That was a major cultural shift. The demolition of the West End in 1959 generated a huge amount of anger. But it was anger in the neighborhoods. It wasn’t anger in the preservation community, because there wasn’t such a thing as a preservationist in the 1950s. As an avocation, maybe, but not as a profession. The...
real estate. The only limitations on the development of cities come from the preservation movement and the environmentalist movement. They’re the only shared non-market values that we seem to have codified. Preservation and historical authenticity have emerged as the default expressions of shared meaning, because we don’t have any focused criteria for evaluating newer buildings, other than to say they’re too small or too big or too shiny.

Albert Rex: That didn’t happen until relatively recently. When the Boston Preservation Alliance was formed in the 1970s, our mission was very clear: we focused on the buildings that were being lost.

We didn’t really think about the impacts of newer construction. It wasn’t until later, when people started looking for sites for very large new buildings, that we started to think more broadly. We made a deliberate change and said we can’t look only at saving the old; we have to understand the impacts of the new on the old.

Pamela Hawkes: It’s also interesting to trace a parallel development and look at what the architectural profession was doing. In the 19th century, architects were totally involved in preservation, which they saw as a tremendous resource for design. When Modernism came in, things changed. The last thing architects wanted to do was something that related to the past. If anything has happened in the last 20 years, it is that once more it’s OK to consider that the historic context might contribute to your design.

Tim Love: The transformation of the preservation movement from the famous-men-and-events phase to a general interest in preserving almost anything old is an important cultural watershed that also reflects on the profession in other ways. Those old buildings had a material quality that suddenly was worth saving. By say, 1973, we began to realize that the old buildings were actually better built than anything we were building; the materials and craftsmanship were better. It’s a little bit like the problem with the American car industry in the ’70s, when everybody in the know bought foreign cars because the Buicks in 1973 were so tinny. I think that the preservation movement owes as much to the quality of the building fabric as it does to urban-design issues or the idea of heritage. With a few exceptions — maybe a couple of Lou Kahn and Gordon Bunshaft buildings — most American postwar buildings are pretty dismal affairs. And the American consumer is actually very perceptive about issues of material quality. Look at architects themselves. If you’re an architect, unless you’re very rich, you live in an old house and restore it. You don’t design a house for yourself, because you can’t achieve the same level of gravitas and luxury as you can living in an old house. It has to do with the perceived quality of things as much as ideology and reverence for the past.

Elizabeth Padjen: You’re getting back to an idea that George introduced earlier: values. We’ve seen changing values on the part of both the public and the profession over the last 40 years. I recently heard an NPR interview with a Middle Eastern ambassador who said, “We want to be seen as tolerant and progressive.” The interviewer responded with the appropriate positive murmurings. Tolerant and progressive. If you think about it, those are the buzzwords for our cultural values right now. And that ambassador was smart enough to recognize that. One wants to be tolerant and progressive. A century ago, maybe one wanted to be honorable and chaste, I don’t know. But we are obviously seeing shifts. I wonder if we are seeing something in the built environment that reflects broader cultural values that permeate other aspects of our society.

Charles Sullivan: I think that’s exactly right. A lot of the move toward preservation in the ’70s and ’80s was a reaction to the Corbusian movement that began in the 1920s, when fascism was taking root. Le Corbusier basically, in his concept of isolated towers surrounded by green spaces, as much of a social engineer as the fascist were. We now see that as a very anti-human value, as our thinking about cities changed following Jane Jacobs’ lead in the 1960s. Like anything, architecture and planning follow cycles. American cities in the postwar period were desperate for investment. All the growth was taking place elsewhere, outside the cities. Federally subsidized urban renewal programs came along, and the Corbusian approach to planning was what was available. So we ended up with the West End and Government Center, where the Boston Redevelopment Authority did things on the model of Le Corbusier. Then, in the late 1960s, the cycle began to change and the design professions are trying to move away from contextualism.

Tim Love: I think most of the battles today are fought on a different level: new building versus old building. Not new urban design versus old urban design, because that isn’t a battle any more. We’re beyond that, because 99 percent of the architects practicing today, across the ideological spectrum, understand how cities work, understand that streets are important, and understand that we need buildings that are active at the street level. The battles now are more specifically around languages and ideology, and around this question of quality and value of the old relative to the new. The Hans Hollein proposal for Harvard Square [see page 13] is a good example — that’s the kind of battle we will see more of.

Charles Sullivan: I’m delighted the Hollein project did not get approved, but I’m horrified that that is the one that’s going to become the poster child for anti-preservationists. Harvard University finally put forward a Modern building, and unfortunately that was the one that they presented. To those of us who look at these issues every day and care about them, it created a preposterous and maddening situation. People hated it or loved it; you were automatically a Modernist or an anti-Modernist, and there could be no middle ground.

Tim Love: I agree with you. We’ve just finished the Allston library, which is maybe two miles from the Hollein site. It was a very lengthy, difficult, consensus-building approval process, working with a building committee appointed by the mayor. The day we first walked in, they said, “We want a red-brick building with a gable end and green shutters.” We said, “Can we try something else? Give us a chance.” So we worked with that group, which included a
Charles Sullivan:

Hollein is one of a number of European architects who seem to have moved away from contextualism in a very radical way. Harvard, under President Rudenstine, had the idea that Harvard should once again find cutting-edge architects to do radical and uncompromising buildings that would advance the state of the art. One of them is Machado and Silvetti’s dormitory in Allston, which is under construction; Hollein’s project was another one. It certainly was an extreme exercise, as anti-contextual as it could be. And it’s the context, I think, that did it in, not the design. It was very hard to understand the impact of the building because the design caught your eye and distracted you from all the other issues. But once we figured out, for example, that there were more than 40 feet in a series of six blocks all of which had low-rise, residential-scale buildings, we realized that this was literally a blockbuster because of its scale. That’s why the Cambridge Historical Commission turned it down. I’ve told Harvard that a design that’s in scale with its surroundings could be as extreme as Hollein’s.

Elizabeth Padjen:

That story also represents a fundamental shift in the way the public looks at old buildings, and consequently, the way architects design for them. That building committee, like the public in general, was looking at old buildings as objects of quality that they would aspire to. There was a time when attitudes were completely different — get rid of that old stuff, because we deserve something new and shiny. Now we see that attitude in developing countries and, perhaps condescendingly, despair of such backward thinking. But we didn’t blow out the West End for no reason.

Pamela Hawkes:

It’s not an attitude that has completely died. We have neighborhoods with historic buildings and residents who say, “Listen, these things have been sitting around for years with bum’s hanging out in them. Get them out of our neighborhood.” They don’t see the possibilities, that these buildings could be wonderful housing. They want to demolish them because they feel they deserve something new and better.

Charles Sullivan:

But don’t you think what we all have to do is what Tim did with his building committee? People in general don’t have any sense of architectural values. We certainly see this in Harvard Square, where developers learned in the 1970s that all they had to do to satisfy the community was to put in red brick — better still, Kane Gothic red brick — and it would fly. And that’s in a sophisticated community.

Pamela Hawkes:

What I think we need is a television program called “This New House,” that talks about the craft of modern construction.

George Thrush:

I totally agree. Most people take for granted the advances in building technology that are now part of our normal lives. We expect a lot, but we don’t know how to articulate our criteria. We need to define public values other than simple preservation.

Albert Rex:

But it’s also a question of who’s making the design decisions. Architects come in to see us all the time with their proposals. We tell them, “We want to see something that people will want to preserve in future years.” And they say, “Well, the developer wants to expend ‘x’ number of dollars, so we’re only allowed to do ‘y,’ ” and the BRA is telling us this but the community says that, and now you folks are telling us something else.” We end up with this design-by-committee process with a constant struggle over who really has the most influential voice.

Elizabeth Padjen:

So is it even possible to get that maybe-mythic structure that we all have in mind when we say we want a fabulous new building in Boston?

Albert Rex:

I don’t think we even know how to first answer the question, What is a great building?

Tim Love:

What Boston doesn’t need is a Bilbao. Boston needs good background buildings that are of a quality that equals the good background buildings that the preservation movement is concerned with saving. The maybe-mythic buildings that you’re talking about are the famous-men-and-events kind of buildings. Maybe the new ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] will be one of those. Or the addition to the Museum of Fine Arts.

Pamela Hawkes:

They happen to be sited in places that can take them.

Elizabeth Padjen:

It’s interesting to consider where we allow those kinds of experiments to occur: college campuses, museums, the cultural icons. [Boston Globe architecture critic] Bob Campbell made the point that the Hollein proposal was for an office building, that there was a mismatch between the energy of the façade and the fairly banal internal functions. If the proposed use had been something else, would we have thought of it differently?

Charles Sullivan:

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and still be approved, because one of the commission's goals in Harvard Square is to support contemporary architecture when it's appropriate.

**Albert Rex:** Scale and mass make a huge difference, both in the preservation community and with the public, in how people accept buildings. You can do all kinds of things with materials if you respect the scale.

**Tim Love:** That building had a responsibility to the street that it wasn't respecting at all.

**Peter Rose:** Hollein was probably just the wrong choice for this project. This whole episode points to the fact that architecture is very hard to understand, whether you're a public activist, someone running a company, or someone on a municipal review board. We don't support architecture as a culture. We don't teach it to kids in schools. Our museums don't have architecture exhibitions. There are all kinds of things that affect the decision-making process. One is the fear of making a mistake — and architecture sets you up big time for a big mistake, because you can know almost nothing from the drawings and the models unless you're fairly sophisticated, and laypeople usually find out how bad or brilliant it is after it's built and in use. And the other is the fear of the unknown. The reason that historicist buildings are so easy to sell is that they are familiar. This is not a culture that embraces the unknown. And there is no ingrained history of doing well by taking risks. So it's a very complex cultural, psychological, and educational problem, made worse by the fact that there is no public support for architecture here. The important public projects are always shunted into the private domain. A developer then builds these projects on a for-profit basis with the often modest requirement of providing some public amenity, such as housing or a park.

**George Thrush:** At some level, it grieves me to hear Charlie say that the commission has made the decision to endorse Modern architecture. It wasn't even a question of appearing more Modern than the neighbors. The building failed on more straightforward compositional terms.

**Peter Rose:** I agree that the notion that Modern buildings are going to be supported by the commission is an encouraging one. The downside is that it's actually even more difficult to understand what constitutes a good Modern building than it is to understand what constitutes a good restoration.

**Tim Love:** As a citizen, I would rather have a mediocre background building on those sites than a bad try at an exuberant Modern building.

**Peter Rose:** Maybe the issue is not Modern versus historicist but, rather, the degree to which a building should be part of the background or, on certain rare occasions, be more student and be part of the foreground. There are some fabulous Modern buildings that know when to pull back and be an integral part of a larger ensemble.

**Charles Sullivan:** You can start with urban-design criteria. The story in Harvard Square goes on with the proposal we received recently for a site that's not far from the Hollein site. The proponent wanted to build an office building in the form of a perfect Second Empire, two-story house with a mansard roof, much more elaborately detailed than any Second Empire house you ever saw in Cambridge. It would put San Francisco to shame. Perfectly historically correct in a place where nothing like that ever appeared. The Historical Commission's reaction was, "Wouldn't this be easier if this were a contemporary design?" Then we'd have something to say about it." But how do you criticize a perfect historicist exercise in 19th-century architecture? Once again, context is the most important factor.

**George Thrush:** The problem is that if we use historic authenticity as the only criterion for approval, this kind of Frankenstein becomes not only possible, but likely.

**Tim Love:** This raises a very interesting issue, though, because if it were inappropriate urbanistically, then you'd have a great case against it. We're doing a project at the University of Virginia, which is like working on Beacon Hill. And the best new buildings there are actually precise reproductions of 19th-century Georgian architecture. There's good contemporary architecture — a Todd Williams Billie Tissen building — and there are some very good Hartman-Cox buildings that are right out of the 1932 playbook. The worst are the half-traditional Postmodern buildings, with their cheap Mullions, cheap aluminum awnings, and cheap Aldo Rossi windows that look like they're drawn on with white Chartpak tape. They're the sleaziest-looking buildings there.

**Albert Rex:** We've been talking about new construction and its relationship to existing fabric, but I have to say that my job still focuses a lot on saving existing buildings — battles over demolition. What's going to go up once a building is demolished is one of the issues. But should it come down in the first place?

**George Thrush:** What are some of the criteria that you use to make a decision like that?

**Albert Rex:** One is to look at the context. If there are other examples of similar buildings, you can at least compare their individual value. Sometimes you don't have that context or it's changed. The Hillel house at Northeastern University was recently demolished to create greenspace for the campus. It was a pretty, Georgian-style building, and it represented the last piece of the former neighborhood. It was not landmark quality. But the neighbors felt very strongly about it. They felt it added context. The core of that debate was whether to save that building because it's the last representation of the neighborhood that had been there, or to demolish it to allow the site to be part of a whole new neighborhood.

**Pamela Hawkes:** The Landmarks Commission had a similar discussion about Connolly's, which had been a jazz club. We sat for two hours one night and heard people talk about their childhoods, going with their dads to hear jazz for the first time, performing there. It was incredibly emotional. But the existing building had no relation to that history. It's that kind of intangible quality that's very hard to deal with. The difficulty I see these days with preservation is that we've already dealt with all the easy projects — the buildings that are unquestionable landmarks, because of the context, their quality, their history. It's the tough ones that are left. And those buildings get caught up in a lot of other things that have more to do with people's sense of powerlessness — issues that architectural preservation can't resolve.

**George Thrush:** That's too true. Preservation has become a stand-in for politics, a way of addressing the economic forces at work. I live in Cambridgeport, where my sense is that most folks' ideal date is something like 1977. That's the moment at which many of my neighbors wish the world had stopped evolving, the time that best represents the community they bought into. I am familiar with the Hillel building at Northeastern — it was a nice building, but tearing it down was the right decision. That neighborhood had changed, and in any case it was never very coherent. One. Choosing not to save it shouldn't have been very difficult; especially considering the much more coherent vision that has replaced it. Preserving an existing neighborhood is much trickier. The neighbors resist change at the same time that they lack a voice in the larger interests of the city and metro area.

**Pamela Hawkes:** Someone once said that preservation is really about managing change. Not about forbidding it entirely, but letting it happen in ways that we can all feel comfortable with. And I think our comfort level with whatever scale of change is very much dependent on the scale of the building. If you have a two-story house and you change the door, people notice. But if you have a huge factory building, you can do something pretty radical, and the overall sense of that building remains the same.

**George Thrush:** But that still reflects a fear of change and the desirability of things remaining the same.

**Albert Rex:** Is preservation becoming a substitute for planning? Unfortunately, we have seen that happen in Boston.

**Tim Love:** Zoning in Boston has no teeth.

**Peter Rose:** Boston, an FAR approach means that it is impossible to predict the success of a building's massing. Boston needs a new paradigm that combines preservation and urban design and a single set of guidelines.
George Thrush: Visual guidelines would jibe better with historical contexts. What if, in addition to preservation and environmentalism, we had some word like “legibility” or “imagability”?

Tim Love: But that’s already happened in the marketplace. Every new large project uses that kind of language — they all talk about creating a “real city,” and providing a pedestrian scale.

Albert Rex: You can see the change in marketing materials. In the 1980s, they showed you brochures with pictures of the building. Now, if you go to Millennium Place, they’ll show you pictures of the Common and Back Bay.

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Peter Rose: I think the issue of scale points to one of the differences between European cities and American cities — that is the way the American business ethos percolates into architecture and planning. No CEO worth his or her salt can run a company without growing it by some percent a year, typically by making and selling more product, or acquiring other companies. The business culture is almost always focused on making things bigger. There’s hardly a building in most major European cities, Rome for example, that hasn’t been renovated multiple times, gutted even. They are rebuilt, generation by generation — nobody thinks that you need to knock them down. People love the way the streets work, the way the public domain works. But that model doesn’t serve us, because we eagerly take buildings down, hoping to put much larger structures in their place.

Elizabeth Padjen: Let’s talk about that. With the sudden influx of European designers practicing in our midst, there is a sense afoot that the European use of history is far more sophisticated than ours own. Is that true? Does their experience transfer to this place? And can it transfer to large-scale American cities as well as to individual buildings?

George Thrush: There are some fundamental differences between Europe and the US. Their cities represent entire cultures, as much as any commercial purpose. I love all the conversations decrying the fact that in Germany or France the expenditures on the arts or on you-name-the-public-issue are 10 times what they are here. Yes, of course that’s true. But to imagine that it’s a management error that makes Berlin different from New York, or Atlanta different from Paris, misses the fact those cities are stewarded differently. Because it’s understood that they represent a national culture.

Albert Rex: We’re a country built on the concept of Manifest Destiny. We had lots of land, and we just kept moving out. We’ve always been a culture based on the idea of growing bigger.

Pamela Hawkes: Europeans have a legacy of reuse — they do something once, knowing that 30 years later they will do it again. We don’t have their layers of history, and we haven’t embraced their way of reusing things. Albert is right — our culture is much more about moving on to better pastures when we’ve used up the resources at home. And so we tear down rather than recycle.

Elizabeth Padjen: But I sense that we were once much more inventive about reusing old buildings than we are now. Look back to the 1960s when Carl Koch started turning old warehouses on the waterfront into housing. It was a brave thing. And I might be one of the last lonely defenders of Graham Gund’s ICA building because I remember what it was in its time. It was extraordinary because it showed people what they could do with old buildings, and it was published everywhere. Sure, we all went to openings and got squeezed by that little corner in the atrium. But it was a landmark that made people think about possibilities. Similarly, I think Quincy Market could not be done today because of a much more conservative approach to the way we think about preservation. It was a time when the possibilities seemed greater. So what has happened? Should we blame the process, the layers of regulation? Or have we changed as a people?

Albert Rex: Cultures change. Our minds change. My office is in Old City Hall. Would we do a rehab like Old City Hall today, where they totally gutted the entire interior and added floors to make it work financially? We probably wouldn’t be terribly supportive.

Elizabeth Padjen: And yet that’s a great building.

Albert Rex: It is a great building. It’s a great place to work.

Pamela Hawkes: It’s probably only still there because the developers were allowed to do that.

George Thrush: And that goes back to the fact that we depend on the private sector to provide stewardship. When we look at European examples, we’re looking at places where the government spends much more money on many, many buildings. But if architects in Boston went to Chicago half as many times as they do to Europe, they would at least balance their point of view. Because Chicago is a city that is among the most American of places. It tears things down and rebuilds. Chicagoans have a much more forward-looking attitude than Bostonians do. They’ve always viewed the best use of the Loop as the one that’s coming. That doesn’t mean they don’t mess up from time to time. They do. But it offers an alternative model of a place in the United States that operates under the same economic and social framework, that shares the fact that we don’t have the same cultural or aesthetic agenda that Paris and Berlin have.

George Thrush: But even if Boston isn’t physically as big, it is comparable on other levels. Boston generates enormous financial energy. It produces the fourth largest metropolitan domestic product, after Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles.

Peter Rose: There is at least one thing that we can learn from Europe. The distinction between “preservation architects” and “contemporary architects” doesn’t exist there. European architects do not even imagine that they’re going to build a brand new building without considering the landscape, the weather, the context — they understand the notion that these things are all interconnected. They try to weave in old pieces to make something that’s contemporary at the same time. We have these categories, these distinctions, which hurt us. We should not decide either to preserve something perfectly or to knock it down. It is part of the memory of a place, which, when erased, is gone forever. It is much better to try to weave the old with the new. It is the layers that make life richer and more interesting and more poetic.

Tim Love: I share the suspicion that the current architectural debate in Boston is starting to create an ideological divide between people who “design in brick” and people who don’t — between contemporary architecture and architecture that is contextual. That’s ultimately an unhealthy debate. Our firm has no problem designing in red brick if it’s appropriate for the project. Even so, I find the level of debate and the architectural climate in Boston much more invigorating than elsewhere because so many issues are at stake. People deal with these issues seriously on an intellectual level. It’s not like other places that

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might let you do whatever you want. You have to persuade people, very intelligent people, to your viewpoint in a very complex setting. And everybody’s very smart here — even the people who think that new buildings should look like old buildings. When you work on these things through an intellectual process, everybody ends up at a slightly different place from what you imagined when you started. So I’ve placed my bets on Boston. In the long run, say over the next 10 years, Boston is going to be a much more vital architectural community than New York or any other American city.

Peter Rose: You may be more hopeful than I am.

Tim Love: I’ll admit that there is a problem in the architectural culture in Boston — which is the decision of some very good architects to drop out and not get their hands dirty, to work only within the culture of the avant garde. They aren’t optimistic or maybe aren’t confident that they can wade into the pool successfully. And so they find clients outside the city or teach or look for other ways to get recognition.

Peter Rose: But this is not a place that is easy to break into. Most developers work with firms that are in effect house architects. And let’s face it, developers drive the market and they end up driving the architecture. The experience that stunned me more than anything in my travels was going to the most intact city in Europe, which is Venice, and seeing the work of Carlo Scarpa. Scarpa was conservative in his own way, but seeing those buildings, which did not look a bit like anything against which they were placed, was extraordinary. You didn’t need to know how to read them to know intuitively that they were fabulous. But we can’t mandate that kind of work. It happens only by nurturing architecture and supporting architects who are serious, good designers.

Tim Love: Scarpa is a reminder that the best relationship between old and new is a subtle one, the quiet voice. The Austrian architect Hermann Czech, whom I worked for, is another such voice, a highly respected architect before Coop Himmelbau took over Vienna. He has done very contemporary work that subtly draws from Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner. Álvaro Siza in Portugal in another. They are all examples of contemporary architects who take the context and history and culture of a place very seriously. I don’t think that American culture can support architecture like that. Except maybe in Boston. It’s the only place.