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# Classicism and Conservation: A Celebration of Roman Architecture

Rome has inspired the world's architecture for more than two millennia, but not just in building designs. The city's most important lesson is that today's Rome is a living, working city, by no means frozen in time. It has reached a balance between past and present where new and old live comfortably side by side. Though American cities might measure their age in centuries rather than millennia, we can apply Rome's lesson at home and seek that same balance.

Rome's strongest characteristic is the layering of time and the persistence of the past in urban patterns and the footprints, fabric and form of buildings new and old. It is a vast palimpsest, readable by anyone willing to observe how it has been built, literally and figuratively, on the fragments, ideas and impressions of the past, yet it functions as a livable and vibrant world capital.

The AIA Historic Resources Committee visit to Rome last spring offered lectures, seminars and visits to

sites of preservation and archaeological significance, and took up three questions: What role does classicism have in an age of cutting-edge design? How do we express our own time in a historic environment without diluting the significance and integrity of that environment? Can architecture continue to evolve—borrowing from the past as it has done over thousands of years—or must it continuously revolt and re-invent itself, as it often does today?

The first session explored the relevance of the classical tradition at a time in which avant-garde design seeks a break with tradition and architecture must respond to demands of communication, transportation and sustainability that never influenced classical design.

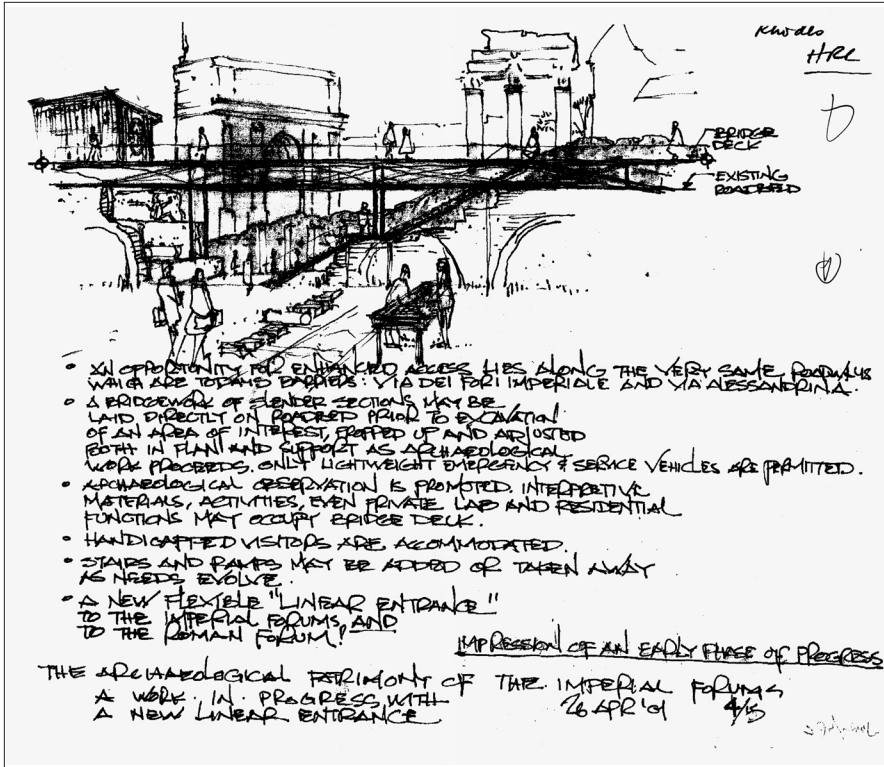
The most powerful lingering image of Rome is of the layering of time and history so evident everywhere in the city. Photos courtesy Jeffrey T. Darbee



These forum pages are produced under an agreement between Places/Design History Foundation and the American Institute of Architects. This article reports on the AIA Committee on Design's visit to Rome, April 21–26, 2001. The conference chair was Carol Rusche Bentel, AIA, and last year's committee chair was Wendy Evans Joseph, AIA.

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During the Rome conference, Historic Resources Committee members were invited to participate in a sketch competition in the Imperial Fora along with the Committee on Design.

In 1932 a new road, the Via dell' Impero (Via dei Fori Imperiali), was constructed to connect Piazza Venezia to the Colosseum. This thoroughfare crossed over the Imperial Fora and its removal is part of discussions today in order to reconnect the monuments of the Fora to surrounding artifacts and to the urban fabric.

Participants were charged with the creation of a new entry and interpretive boundaries for the archaeological zone of the Imperial Fora. The competition sketches were displayed at the American Academy in Rome and were judged by noted Italian architects Roberto Einaudi and Laura Thermes.

James W. Rhodes, FAIA (Historic Resources Committee)

Bill Westfall, chairman of the School of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame, defined classicism as “the best dynamic balance between the changing and the enduring.” He invoked Vitruvius’s “Trilogy of Well Building,” which held that buildings must possess firmness, commodity and delight. Of these, the first two were straightforward: A building must be built of sound, appropriate materials and must accommodate the planned use.

The question of delight, however, moved the topic of discussion from mere construction into the realm of architecture. Vitruvius defined delight as “reciprocity between context and building” and in this phrase evoked the essence of classicism: all things are part of an interrelated whole and good architecture must connect past and present. Vitruvius called this symme-

tria, which meant not simply a visual symmetry, but a balance of interrelated parts. Westfall described classicism as striking this balance, a state of dynamic tension leading to an architectural equilibrium and the classical city as an organic entity composed of interdependent parts.

Returning to the first question—what role does Classicism have in an age of cutting-edge design—it is clear that learning the lessons of classicism is essential if we are to have architecture and cities that have delight as well as firmness and commodity. Classicism is more a philosophy than a set of formal visual properties; one does not have to design Roman temples in order to practice its principles. To have real value for our cities, contemporary design must help us to build on what has come before, enable us to respect the physical context within which new buildings are placed, and contribute only our best work to a continuing evolution of that context.

This is where historic preservation is an essential component of modern city-building. Preservation’s focus has moved far beyond an initial concern for individual landmarks to a broad concern for quality of life, sustainable urban development and a sensitive blend of old and new as our cities grow and change. Preservation and contemporary architectural practice can and do work well together. Preservationists embrace change when it results in real improvement of the built environment and does not result in the loss of high-quality older structures for low-quality replacements. Rome proved an ideal laboratory for exploration of these issues.

The project at the Ara Pacis, for example, is currently the subject of much debate, involving both preserva-



tion of classical remains and contemporary urban design issues. The Ara Pacis (“Altar of Peace”) was erected in Augustan times at an entrance to Rome and all arriving travelers had to leave their weapons there. By the 1930s the surrounding area had declined and, under Mussolini, what was left of the original altar was moved to its current site, just west of the Mausoleum of Augustus along the east bank of the Tiber, and enclosed in a masonry, glass and metal building in a Socialist Deco design typical of the period. That building had, in turn, deteriorated (conferees saw its demolition in progress), the Ara Pacis within having been carefully wrapped in protective coverings and surrounded by layers of scaffolding.

Left: Conferees stood down at original street level from Classical times as they visited the Mausoleum of Augustus. This site was close to a river landing where stone for the Pantheon was unloaded from boats. Incised into the stone paving here was a building pediment design described as the “working drawings for the Pantheon.”

Right: The ruins of Hadrian’s Villa have been reconstructed and stabilized in a condition that communicates the scale and grandeur of the place.



Richard Meier’s design for a replacement building is the source of the controversy. It is clearly contemporary but also harkens back to its 1938 predecessor. Even as its construction proceeds, however, supporters and opponents of the project, both among the public and within the Italian government, are at loggerheads. Some appear to bemoan the loss of a structure that served as a document of its time; others object to the creation of a new building that draws little from the classical landmarks of the surrounding urban fabric.

Other lectures on preservation issues were given by Roberto Einaudi, principal of Studio Einaudi in Rome, and Marco Dezzi Bardeschi, of the Politecnico di Milano. They dealt with current preservation philosophy and how to achieve the appropriate balance between intervention and conservation when dealing with historic structures.

Using preservation of the Villa Aurelia as an example, Einaudi discussed the issues of appropriate restoration period and the fate of alterations and accretions that occurred after original construction. The act of intervention—whether restoring historic fabric, removing accretions or building new buildings—might be neces-

sary, for example, to correct structural deficiencies, accommodate modern programmatic needs or add needed new square footage. Sometimes it is required to correct physical damage and inappropriate work left over from past restorations. Such work must at the same time seek maximum preservation of significant historic fabric and compatibility with the design context that fabric has already established, he said.

Agreeing with Einaudi, Bardeschi expressed concern over well-meaning restorations that sacrifice the layers of history that historic buildings acquire. He defined conservation of a structure or a building element as fixing it in time, to “keep the historic document as it is.” He recognized that budget, programmatic and other considerations must be balanced against this aspect of preservation—sometimes requiring acts of intervention—but he still urged great care and sensitivity toward historic fabric. Bardeschi counseled architects to avoid destructive restoration work that uses false or ill-documented assumptions and results in a dishonest end product.

In answering the second question—how do we express our own time in a historic environment without diluting the significance and integrity of that environment—Einaudi firmly expressed both speakers’ philosophies: “Time has to be in some way recognized.” Both made it clear that intervention into older buildings and creation of new ones can complement and enhance conservation efforts but will be successful only if we keep intact the story of time’s passage embedded in the historic fabric.

In one of the last conference sessions, Jukka Jokilehto, President of the International Committee on Training



of ICOMOS (the International Committee on Monuments and Sites), noted that the idea of heritage, which has an intangible, spiritual component, has become an integral part of decision-making in both historic preservation projects and in new architecture in historic settings. Heritage has become one of several components—the others being the built, the natural and the cultural environments—that must work together in any site or setting. This incorporates the idea of building on what has come before that was such a strong theme throughout the conference.

Herb Stovel, director of the ICOMOS Heritage Settlements Programme, stated that “our job (as architects) is not to define cultural values within which we work. We don’t get to

Site visits included current archaeological digs in the Forum, where contemporary techniques take care to preserve Renaissance and medieval remains as well as those from the Classical period.

decide what’s important to keep.” He argued that most architects are trained to believe that it is their right to make such decisions; on the contrary, Stovel said, it is the culture’s right to do this and it is the architect’s job to learn the pertinent values before starting work.

In response to the third question—can architecture continue to evolve or must it continuously revolt and re-invent itself—both speakers made it clear that they think architecture must continue to evolve as it always has, by learning and borrowing from the past. There is room, at the same time, for revolution and re-invention, a testing of limits and assumptions, but ultimately this work is successful only if it does not abandon its roots in the past.

What did the conference give us to apply in American cities and towns?

By its nature, architecture is compelled to evolve continuously, because it is rooted in the technology, tastes, economics and arts of its period. As time goes on, architecture must

change as its cultural and social contexts change. This process is both destructive and creative, as new forms grow from old. We can see this in towns across our country, where styles succeeded one another all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As they did so, however, they drew forms and elements from earlier styles and they kept one foot firmly planted in the past even as they moved forward. Today our most livable cities remember this as they grow, establishing a lively balance between new and old much as Rome has done. This is how great cities have always grown and it is how we will create them in the future.

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